

A Different Kind of Hero

by scaranda

Even when the war is won, for some men the peace is lost.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 4

Even when the war is won, for some men the peace is lost.

SIRIUS

I'd been at dinner in the Great Hall with Remus and Harry and Ron, bravely trying to enjoy the bubbling sense of freedom and victory that was washing over the battle weary occupants. We were all trying to get used to the idea that the Dark Forces were at last gone: not just banished; this time they were gone and they weren't coming back.

Our young hero sat quietly at my side, valiantly trying to deflect the glory onto broader shoulders. So few of us had known the sacrifices that had been laid down here, the way in which our black-garbed lure had used himself as bait to allow Harry the room to manoeuvre in our most desperate hour.

I felt humbled by the pride I felt in Harry, more proud than I would have felt if he'd defeated Voldemort on his own, on the back of a flaming dragon with the Sword of Godric Gryffindor, proud that he'd born witness to the fact that he'd almost sneaked up on him unaware... because he was otherwise occupied by another. Of course, it had been written in the stars that Harry would be the one to deal the Dark Lord's last hand, but blind luck wasn't going to show him the way; there had only ever been one person who could map out that path. I felt Harry look at me again, and I knew he recognised that the price was almost more than I could bear.

'You're really upset about Snape, aren't you?' he asked in a moment of quiet between pudding and coffee.

I found that I couldn't even speak, and I couldn't think why. It wasn't as though I hadn't hated him, hated everything about him, but... Merlin, what was wrong with me to make me grieve the loss of the one man I hated above all others, amongst the uncounted number of fallen? Why did his sacrifice mean so much to me? But I knew the answer.

Remus touched my arm. 'We've got men looking at every haunt the length and breadth of the country.' He gave me an odd look, the kind of look one gives to a grieving widow when words will not suffice, like a mental laying of hands.

I remember thinking about that, about what Remus said, about how they could possibly begin to know where to look, thinking about the very hopelessness of the task. Harry hadn't known where they had been during that final encounter: some forlorn place or other, some forgotten outpost on the road to hell. Somehow Severus had Apparated Harry to his side when he had Voldemort alone and cut off, and Harry had used a Portkey to get back after the Dark Lord had howled himself out of existence, with his arms around Severus. Harry had only the vaguest clues as to where we could begin looking, and for what, I wondered; I could do without going through the charade of the burial of some charred and doubtful remains. I shook my head slowly and caught the questioning look that Harry gave to Remus, wanting to scream denial of what the black space in my heart told me was true. Severus was gone, and I'd never get the chance now: the chance to hear the balm of that vicious tongue again, to bask under that black glare, to heal the hurts or right the wrongs.

'Sirius?' Harry said urgently.

I found myself looking blankly at him. I had to shake off this feeling; this was nonsense, the Dark Lord was gone, we were free, everything we had striven for had come to pass, and now we had to come to terms with the prices we had paid. Others had lost, countless others: wives, husbands, lovers, sons... all I had lost was hope, for something which I had long ago denied myself by my own actions. I made the effort, and gave him the best imitation of my Gryffindor grin that I could conjure up.

'What?'

I could see Harry trying to gather his courage, this mighty champion who had just slain the Dark Lord. 'I think... I think he tried to give me something,' he said. 'A... a letter, just before... you know.' He gave me that look of his.

Harry hadn't talked much to me about those final moments, and I'd left him to it, assuming the coward's way out, that it was better he should come to terms with it in his own time. I couldn't think what he was talking about. 'A letter?' I asked. 'Voldemort tried to give you a letter?'

'No, not Voldemort,' he replied with a frown. 'Severus.'

'What kind of letter?'

'It was addressed to you.'

I know I closed my eyes at that point. I had to get out of there; I couldn't sit amongst that raucous, celebrating crowd any longer. I couldn't pretend anymore.

HARRY

I had killed before, of course; after all, we had been fighting this war for two years, but I was having trouble dealing with what had happened, not just the fact that I had killed a defenceless, unarmed, injured man, even if that man was Voldemort, but with having my biggest prejudice overturned. Snape had been coming back and forward to me for a few days before he managed to get the situation right for me to go in for the final kill; he'd said that he suspected no one else would be able to do it. I know now that if there had been any way for him to spare me that final action, he would have done so. I don't know where I would have found the courage if he hadn't been at my side in those last days, where I would have found the strength to do what I knew I must, what only I could do.

The burden of my shame lay heavily on me; even in those darkest days I'd given him no quarter, no sign that I believed him to be anything but what I'd always known him for: Voldemort's right hand man. And now... now he was gone, and had handed us all the freedom we had so desperately wanted, freedom from the yoke of the persecutions, with his last thankless task of the thankless silent war he'd waged his whole adult life.

I knew I had only been a vessel. I was the tool Snape had used, and now all I could do in his memory was make sure that everyone else knew that too; that much I could do. None of us had taken the time, or had the chance, to even say thank you when he was here; at least this way I would make damn sure it was etched on his gravestone... and on mine.

'What's wrong with him?' I asked, as I watched Lupin make a hand-rolled cigarette.

He didn't say anything for a few long moments, arranging the already arranged tobacco, and moistening the seal on the fine paper with the tip of his tongue, as though he were trying to put his thoughts together with his smoke. 'Battle weary. Even victory takes its toll, Harry ...' He trailed off as though he expected me to believe him.

'It's more than that. We've all been fighting. It's Snape, isn't it?'

He tried to avoid my eyes as he replied. 'Life's not kind, Harry. We're dealt the cards young, and if we don't know how to play the hand, sometimes we make a mess of the whole game... and sometimes it's easier just not to bother.'

'Sirius and Snape?' I really did need to know now, and if anyone knew the truth, it would be Remus. I tried to pick at the edges.

'Truth is... I don't know.'

'But you suspect?' I pressed him.

'Look, Harry, if there's anything to be known, ask Sirius. It's not my place to speculate. Give him a while though; he's sore just now, I know that much.'

'What happened? The bits you do know. The Shack and all that stuff... all the hate, what was it all about?' I persisted; I knew I sounded like an annoying fly.

He gave me that look, the one that said, "You're not old enough", and then seemed to relent, as though he'd just realised I was twenty. 'It was all so stupid and so long ago,' he said tiredly.

'My father was involved, wasn't he?'

Remus nodded; he seemed to accept that I wouldn't let go. 'Yes... but only very loosely, in much the same way as we were all dragged into it.'

He told me what had happened in that mad year, how the rivalries of Gryffindor and Slytherin reached epidemic proportions, at a time when the Dark Lord's teachings were stirring those inclined to his way of thinking, how all the hate and fear suddenly had a focus, when Sirius and Snape entered into what had seemed a harmless private bet over a game of cards, how it had roller-coasted out of control until the whole school was waiting for the outcome, and how Snape and Sirius had fallen for each other whilst each was still the champion of his House's cause.

He told me how the rival factions had begun to suspect that their heroes were conducting a clandestine relationship, and how the two house prefects had plotted together, differences laid aside, to defeat this common enemy of unholy inter-House communion. I listened in fascination as he searched his memories, and could see too clearly how it had happened; after all, it had almost happened to me. I put that thought away; Draco was lost now, and my heart still screamed its silent outrage that I had not had the chance to heal the rift, or close the gap which had grown since we had left Hogwarts.

I dragged myself back to Lupin's story; I could see he was winding up. 'Anyway, Sirius never meant to kill Severus, of course. He was sure that he could control me. He'd always managed when it was him and Peter and your dad... but Severus had no Animagus form at that time in his life... and...'

I could see it was still hard for him, even after all that time. 'Leave that bit, I know that bit,' I said.

He raised the remnants of a second cigarette to his lips, and gave me his little smile. 'Dumbledore went mad. He made sure he found out who was behind it, but short of expelling the whole of Gryffindor and Slytherin there was little he could do... and it wasn't worth expelling the two prefects who had been behind the latter stages, when it all got nasty; they were just about to leave school.'

'Did they never get back together again?'

'I doubt it, Harry; remember they were only boys, only sixteen. Left to run its course, it would have been over in a few weeks anyway, most likely.' He smiled again; this time a little ruefully. 'And then other events overtook their lives. The rest, as they say, is history.'

'Who were the prefects?' I asked, harking back to the story, not really knowing why, the names would likely mean little to me.

'The Gryffindor prefect was a boy called Aurelius Meadowmarch.'

I frowned. I suspected I knew the name, but it didn't matter; they had only been boys too, and it was so long ago. I'd had enough of grudges to last my lifetime anyway. 'And the Slytherin one?' I asked, just to round off the story, to put it back in its mental box.

Lupin gave me a look that made his answer unnecessary. 'Lucius Malfoy.'

My stomach turned in hate. Lucius Malfoy. It had been Lucius who had driven me and Draco apart, Lucius who had dragged him kicking and screaming to join the Death Eaters, and I hadn't understood, hadn't tried to understand how he couldn't resist. And then he'd been killed when he tried to leave, just like Sirius's brother; history liked to repeat itself, and it seemed to want Lucius Malfoy starring in all performances. I stared at Lupin's outstretched hand and blinked. 'What?' I asked, pretending I hadn't guessed.

'The letter, Harry... the letter you told Sirius that Severus tried to give you.' He smiled in understanding.

'I... I thought it was just his usual insults, just a last swipe that he didn't think he'd be able to deliver.' I stumbled on under his gaze. 'And now, now when I look back I can see it for what it was. I mean, the insults, the sparring matches, it all just covered what they really felt for one another.' I dipped into my pocket. 'I wasn't even going to read it. I... I was just going to throw it away...'

SEVERUS

I knew it wouldn't be long. I had no strength, nothing left to replenish my magic. The staunching of what looked like mortal wounds had taken everything I had left, and I suspected that all I had succeeded in doing was prolonging the agony. I hoped dying would be easier than living had been. I dared not move; I knew if I did, whatever was left of my lifeblood would leak through my scant repairs, like water running through a sieve. I wondered how long it had been, this forever that I had found myself in: two days, I suspected, maybe three; it had been pointless to try to keep track.

I tried not to think of all of the "might have beens" which had littered my path through life, all of the "what ifs", but I found myself examining them in every conscious moment. What if I had ever managed to untie my tongue in the way I had managed to untie my memory? I wanted to hope this one last time in this place of my most desperate hour, where even the darkness of the night seemed to cower in fear... but what was the point?

SIRIUS

For three nights I'd crawled into my bed drunk and maudlin; at least that way I slept, and woke un-refreshed to the next empty day stretching accusingly before me. I lit a cigarette, and decided today was the day I'd put it away; I'd start my life again and try to make some type of meaning of it. Harry didn't need me now; at twenty he was already as much a man as he ever would be, and whilst I'd had no input in the early years, I took some pride that he'd become the man he was.

As for me, I was a soldier without a cause now; what was left for me? I supposed Dumbledore would offer me a post, the way he always tried to put a roof over the heads of the unemployable; it was a wonder anyone learnt anything at Hogwarts, staffed as it had been in recent years. Maybe Kingsley would offer me something at the Ministry; he was strongly tipped as the next Minister now that Fudge had announced his retirement. The war had not dealt kindly with Cornelius; he wasn't the man of strength we'd needed a few years back. Perhaps if he had been, the other side would never have had the credibility to gather the power it had, but he'd been easily dazzled by men like Lucius Malfoy.

I mused to myself while I shaved. We had a meeting this morning; we had to try to put our shattered world back together now. Hogsmeade was still housing St Mungo's, and every day the bleeding were being brought in from the furthest outposts of our resistance. Kingsley had put himself in charge of deploying troops to look for the injured and frightened, and I was pleased to see Ron and Harry and Seamus working so tirelessly to ease his burden. We still had our own Infirmary at Hogwarts; Dumbledore hadn't wanted anyone from his inner circle housed anywhere but Hogwarts if they were injured, and he'd placed Hermione and Ginny there to aid Neville Longbottom and the aging Madam Pomfrey.

As much as I'd tried, I hadn't managed to spin my thoughts out for long enough; the ones I shied away from were vying for attention now. I resisted the urge to turn to my old friend; he stood empty on the table anyway, beside the upturned glass. I let it wash over me, and let myself wonder what his final epistle had held; had it even been a letter to me? What mad horrors had those last moments held? I made up my mind at last. I needed to talk it out, and I suspected Harry would too. I needed to know what had happened; I needed to let it go and let myself admit what I'd lost, and maybe, maybe then I could find a path to follow.

REMUS

I folded the letter again, as I'd done several times, re-reading it again and again, wondering why I hadn't given it to Sirius. Probably cowardice on my part, it was my strong suit. I'd have been better leaving it with Harry; he'd have found a way, a right moment.

I knew even Albus was losing hope now. It had been too long, almost a week. I knew if he were alive he'd have found some way to contact us. Only the Mortiscope that sat now in the middle of Dumbledore's desk refused to accept what we all knew to be the truth; Severus Snape was dead. Maybe somewhere his heart still fluttered, or his blood still crept through his veins, but he was dead to us.

I was worried about Sirius. He'd spent a lot of time drinking, but not the drinking which the rest of us were doing in celebration; he was drinking to blot out reality. He wouldn't speak to me about his thoughts. Even Harry had said that he couldn't get much sense out of him; he was a man with his own ghosts to confront anyway. I wasn't much help there either.

I found myself walking towards Sirius's rooms. We had a meeting this morning; I hoped he would be sober enough to attend. We may not have had any fighting left to do, but we had a pile of work to do in putting the peace together.

Sirius answered the door on my first knock. I was surprised; he seemed fresh and sober and a bit more like himself, maybe I'd just been melodramatic. I was crossing the threshold of his rooms when I saw Harry running up the stairs, two at a time, the way he always did. He flashed me a smile that I suspected was at least half relief that he didn't need to face his godfather alone.

Sirius gave what seemed his first genuine smile for a while. 'Do I sense that neither of you expected me at the meeting?'

I laughed at Harry's denial, and nodded. 'You suspect right.'

HARRY

I had so much to get off my chest that I was all but suffocating under the weight, and yet I still needed an opening, someone to ask me, drag it all out of me. It was predictably Remus who came to my aid.

'I think we all need to air things,' the werewolf began. 'It's been a long hard struggle, and it's only when that's over that a man gets the chance to think about the things in his own heart.' He pulled out his tobacco pouch and his packet of papers, and began the little ritual of rolling his smoke. I suspected he enjoyed that more than the act of smoking; it had to be better than the awful cigarettes he produced. I pinched one of Sirius's, and lit it from the candle on his table, half smiling at the thought of how Snape's slim black cigarettes always lit themselves between his packet and his mouth; I'd forgotten to ask him how to do that.

'What happened, Harry... at the end?' Sirius asked quietly. 'I need to know.'

I realised I'd been avoiding his look; I needed this too, and I couldn't wait now. 'Well, you know now that Dumbledore had pulled me off the front line to isolation in Grimmauld Place, when he knew the time was drawing near. He told me that someone would come to me when it was time... and that it would be soon; he'd known that. You'd pinned the Dark Forces back to Hangdon Moor, and Kingsley had engaged them in the north. Dumbledore told me that it was someone I knew, but he couldn't tell me who... and that none of the Order Members knew who it was, in case their minds were probed by the enemy.'

They nodded at that; both Sirius and Remus had just thought that Snape was spying for Dumbledore, but I know they'd had their own doubts about his allegiance, we all had. 'I suppose I guessed at that point who it would be,' I went on. 'I know I hoped it wouldn't be Lucius Malfoy; if it had been, I suspect I wouldn't have gone.'

I hated this, but I had to say it all, tell it all. 'Anyway, he came to me about a week before, and began to tell me what to do, what to expect and... well... I wasn't very nice to him. He didn't care of course, or maybe he did, maybe he'd just got tired of the mistrust, and couldn't be bothered to let it affect him anymore. The week went on, and he came a few times. I'd never have had the courage to do what needed done, if he hadn't spent that time with me, so I must have listened to him... and at the end... I think he knew.' I was crying, damnit. I couldn't help it; I was twenty years old, a hardened soldier, and I had just killed our mortal enemy... and I was bubbling like a baby. 'I think he knew I trusted him, and the words just didn't matter anymore. We'd all got used to the way we spoke to one another, about one another... but I think he knew I believed in him.'

I could feel Remus sitting on one side of me, and Sirius on the other; I don't know when they'd moved, but they were there, just as they'd always been, just as he had been. I took another of Sirius's cigarettes, and composed myself a little in the time it took to light it. 'On the last day, he came early. He looked awful; I hadn't noticed before. He was pale and haggard looking, and Merlin alone knows what strain he was under. At least I took the time to ask him if he was all right... what was going to become of him, how I was going to get him away too.'

Sirius couldn't contain himself any longer; I could feel him tensing at my side. 'Was he injured? What did he say?'

'You know what he's like.' I shook my head slowly. 'He was still his testy old self... He said something like, "Just carry out your part, Potter, and leave me to mine", something like that.' I dared a look at Sirius. He was smiling, not grinning his daft Gryffindor flashing-teeth grin, just a little smile. 'Anyway, he didn't fool me. I could see he was nervous; he knew we'd have one shot at it, and we had to get it right. He stayed with me for a while... I don't know, maybe we gathered some type of strength from one another. He... he touched my shoulder as he left me, and I felt something pass between us...' I could hardly speak, as the things I'd forgotten to remember washed from the furthest shores of my mind. I could almost feel that touch on my shoulder, see the look in his black eyes. 'I think... I think that somehow at last we accepted one another. He left me then, and it was quite a while before he Apparated me to his side.'

I let the silence draw out. I needed to get this right; I only wanted to tell it once. 'He had his back to me when I got there. He'd told me how to close my mind down to Voldemort, while still leaving it open to him. It was quite easy... all those Occlumency lessons in fifth year, I suppose... I must have learnt something. Whatever it was, Voldemort didn't know I was there... but Severus did. He was standing close to Voldemort, and he took his time in turning round.'

'Was anyone else there?' Sirius asked, but I quieted him.

'Please... please let me tell it how it happened. It was just the three of us. It was a rough-walled place, some sort of cellar or something; I didn't take the time to take much stock of my surroundings. There was too much at stake... everything was at stake. I had my wand in my hand, and he just widened his eyes, and I could feel his command. He said nothing, but even in my partially closed mind I could feel the power of his; Merlin alone knows how much strength he used to do that. He pulled Voldemort to him, roughly grabbed his arms, the way you would grab someone when you want them to listen to you... if it's urgent. He began to tell him they had to get out of there... I could see Voldemort was surprised, off balance, and he seemed to be injured in some way; I don't know what it was. He didn't know what Severus was on about... it was my cue.'

'As I raised my wand Severus pulled him again, talking to him, keeping his mind engaged. He took the letter I told you about from his pocket, and looked at me... and gave that little twist of his mouth, the one which he pretends is a smile... and he held the letter out... and I did it,' I whispered. My throat had almost closed again, and I paid no attention to the tears now; they just didn't matter, and I let them rest where they fell. 'I let loose my Curse... and I must have really meant it. Voldemort seemed to swell for a second... and I was so fucking scared I couldn't think. He'd grabbed Severus... fell on him, and grabbed his waist for support... he was making this awful noise... like air being released slowly from the stretched neck of a balloon... and he began to crack, and he just disappeared ...' I know I closed my eyes at that, closed my eyes to try to blot out the picture of Severus's shock at realising he was being dragged away with him, the last image of the letter falling from the hand that had already disappeared. '...And I had to get out of there. I had Dumbledore's Portkey, and I knew if I were found there I would be killed myself for no good reason.'

'Was Severus still alive?' Sirius's voice was a whisper too.

I could only nod, and for minutes none of us said anything. I knew what I had to do, knew Sirius had rights. I caught Remus's eyes; they were sad and misty. 'Yes... he was alive,' I said at last. 'Sirius, forgive me... I think I know what he meant to you... but there was nothing I could do. I've looked back a million times, and I don't think there was anything I could do.' I could feel Remus tuck the letter down between my leg and his, and I pulled it out. 'And I lied to you... I lied, and I won't even ask your forgiveness for that... but when he disappeared, the letter I told you about dropped from his hand. I opened it because I thought it was just a swipe at you, to hurt you... something like that... and by the time I understood, it was too late... and I didn't know how to turn to clock back.'

I handed the letter to Sirius and met his eyes; expecting fury, hurt, disappointment... and wondered why we always underestimate the ones we love most. His smile of sympathy made me more humble than I ever hope to feel in my life again... and made me swear to myself that if I had to take the world apart brick by brick, we would find Severus; dead or alive, we would find him.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 4

Beliefs grow as hopes fade.

DUMBLEDORE

I tapped the Mortiscope. For a moment I thought I'd seen the greyish mist that filled it swirl a little, but perhaps it had been the torchlight behind me flicker in an errant draught; whatever it was, it wasn't swirling now. I looked across to the faces, all waiting for me to point them in the directions in which they had to go. I cannot remember ever feeling so alone. I had had Minerva at one side and Severus at the other for so long now that they had become part of me, and it would be several days still before Minerva would be fit again, but, thank Merlin, she would make it... and Severus... my heart refused to contemplate the possibility that he was lost to us.

Arthur and Molly had just finished going over their plans to convert the Burrow into an orphanage. Word had come through yesterday that the whole project was going to be funded by the Ministry, and they certainly hadn't wasted any time in putting their scheme together. I suspected it was held together much the way the Burrow was, with a few quick spells, a helping of love, and not much in the way of glue; that thought warmed my heart a little, it would be wonderful. Molly's home, so used to the bickering laughter of children, had mourned their loss to their adult lives, and there were no better two people fitted to the daunting task of caring for those whose parents had fallen in our struggle.

Arthur had left the Ministry a few months ago when his situation became untenable. Lucius Malfoy knew Arthur was my man, and he had made sure Fudge shoved him into a small corner where he could do no damage to his plans. Arthur had no heart to go back, despite the fact that Malfoy had toppled from his position of power, and seemed to have fled. I was considering giving Arthur the post of teacher of Muggle Studies; he'd do well in all respects, and it would keep him from under Molly's feet.

I shied away from thinking who would teach Potions; Severus had held the post for so long, even in his absence over the months when he was at Voldemort's side, laying his plans and plotting his downfall. To hand the post to anyone for next term would be admission of what I was beginning to dread. Again the Mortiscope seemed to flutter; I saw Sirius watching it closely.

'Albus... what does it mean when it does that?' he asked.

'For the love of Merlin... we're not still banging on about bloody Snape are we?' Moody growled from his chair. 'We've got more important things to worry about than the whereabouts of one traitor who eventually turned tail when he was cornered.'

'Why can't you shut up and recognise what's in front of your nose, you... you tired old has been. No one here is ever going to give up hope of finding him while he's still alive... just like he never gave up even when we all believed he was a traitor... just... just shut up...' Neville Longbottom trailed off, either having run out of steam, or in the realisation that everyone was looking at him.

I confess I don't know if I were the most surprised person in room when Neville stood up from where he'd placed himself between Ginny and Hermione. He was still as timid as he'd ever been, but he had developed a passion for the potions that he had always made a mess of under Severus's relentless scrutiny. When he found what they could do when applied to the wounded, it had so fascinated him that he had decided to make it his life's work. We all watched him in open-mouthed admiration.

I went back to Sirius's question; now I knew I hadn't been imagining it, the smoke had moved. 'It means he is alive, Sirius. I cannot tell you any more, except that wherever he is, he is very weak and... his wounds may well be mortal. It is longer and longer between the movements in the Mortiscope now. I fear if we do not find him very soon it may be too late to save him.'

'What will it do when... if he dies?' Harry asked quietly.

I knew he was feeling Severus's absence as keenly as most of us, just as I knew that something had happened between them. I prayed again that Severus would live to see the faith in him, in this room alone. 'The Mortiscope will die too, Harry.' I watched him frown. 'It will cease to exist. When a Mortiscope is linked for so long to one man, as this one has been linked to Severus, it becomes part of him in some obscure way, and cannot exist without his life... if Severus were to die, it would simply disappear.'

I watched the flicker of hope rise in Sirius's eyes, replacing the dead flat blue they had been when he'd come in. 'Are you saying he's definitely alive?'

I had to be careful. I knew what I believed. I knew the Mortiscope was probably right... but I'd had one linked to Voldemort when he had been banished by Harry when he was an infant... that one had disappeared, but I'd known even then that Voldemort wasn't dead. 'I'm as sure as I can be.' I explained my doubts to them, and the reasoning behind them. It was Neville again who seemed to find a way of explaining that, which I confess had never occurred to me; he was turning out to be a bit of a star turn.

'But... but when Harry destroyed Voldemort when he was a baby... he did destroy what was his body then, didn't he? I mean he had to live off others until he got a new body... I... em.' He looked around helplessly for someone to explain what he seemed to understand.

'Go on, Neville,' Hermione urged him. 'Please... this is really important.'

'It's just that... well, Voldemort and his body were never really one thing, his mind went from body to body. Maybe your Mortiscope at that time was attached to whatever body he had, but not his mind... but Severus's, I mean Professor Snape's... well, he's only ever had one body and one mind... so... I think... erm...'

He trailed away, red-faced and gasping into the profound silence that was broken after a few long moments by Hermione. 'That is quite brilliant, Neville. Why didn't I think of that?'

'Maybe you're not as smart as he is,' young Ron snorted from Harry's side.

Just then Kingsley burst in the door; he was out of breath too, and agitated. 'We've hit a pocket of resistance on the moor beside Little Hangleton,' he said. 'The place is swarming with the remnants of the Death Eaters. They're under the control of Lucius Malfoy. I need soldiers... something's going on and I don't know what it is.'

SIRIUS

I don't even remember standing, but I do remember realising why the Mortiscope on Dumbledore's desk kept swirling. Whatever was going on in Little Hangleton was to do with Voldemort's remains being there. Tom Riddle had gone home to die, and wherever his remains were, Snape was too... and I was suddenly sure that the swirling mist in Dumbledore's Mortiscope was his way of trying to reach us. He was in danger, which was laughable for a man whom we'd almost assumed dead... or would have been if it hadn't been so fucking unfunny.

'What are we waiting for?' I said to no one in particular; they'd all stood up anyway. I chafed as Dumbledore issued his instructions; I could never get used to the fact that it wasn't Snape who was doing that. I think that was what I'd found most difficult in the last months when he'd been away with Voldemort... just the fact that he wasn't there.

I flung orders over my shoulder as we clattered down the stone steps and out into the courtyard. I had Harry at my side, and Bill and Remus; Kingsley had Ron and Charlie and Hestia. We'd always fought like this, this unspoken chain; each knew the others' actions: what to do, how to deploy, what to do for one another in certain situations; we were soldiers. I saw Hermione, Neville and Ginny rushing across the lawn. 'No... You can't come.' I shook my head; none of them was battle trained, I had enough blood on my hands.

'Stop fussing like an old woman, Sirius. We have to come. He'll need help which you aren't able to give him...' Hermione gave me her "I know-it-all" look. 'Unless you were going for a fight, and not Professor Snape, after all.'

SEVERUS

I wondered if this were what happened when one died. Did we just lie in whatever gutter our body had picked, and watch in detachment as that vessel for our hearts and minds fell away to dust? I wanted my heart to feel freedom now, in case tomorrow it was gone and I never knew its taste. My thinking had become unclear, disjointed; sometimes I remembered being a small boy, I remembered running and falling into the river, and then I found myself thinking about yellow... maybe it was the great fields of sunflowers that grew near my childhood home.

I knew it had been days since I had moved, since I had flexed any of my muscles; they would have begun to waste already, a fickle thing this body. I felt no pain; for long periods I felt no pain, my thinking times, they were. I began to think of blue; I'd think of blue for while... until the pain returned. It was a good colour; it was the colour of the sky and cornflowers and peace... and Sirius Black's eyes... a different kind of pain.

My breathing had become very slow, very thin, as though the air mattered little to my body, as though it were dying bit by bit and didn't need the pitiful reward of each grudging gasp. From somewhere the idea that I had forgotten to repent came to me, repent my deeds of blood, regret my forlorn hopes, and all the battles lost. The cold and the pain and the hunger refused to rush me to my end; it tarried cruelly and let me count the cost. Even now I lay in death as I had in life, trapped between hopeless ambition and helpless folly, with only the blinding faith that what I had done was somehow right providing that last frontier around my fading heart. I had not surrendered, and I would not now. It would have to do; I had no more left to offer. Perhaps I would sleep for a while; that would be good, I wondered if it would be possible. I began to think of red; red was the colour of blood, the colour of danger.

HARRY

It was still daylight when we began to Apparate to Little Hangleton. Kingsley and I both had an idea of the layout of the place; I'd been here with Cedric Diggory... a lifetime ago, and he'd been here an hour or so ago. I suspected little had changed. I knew the spot the Death Eaters would be defending; I'd met Lucius Malfoy here in another life. I smiled grimly to myself; I'd met my mother and father here too, and I knew James and Lily would approve of what we'd come here for.

We assembled about a half a mile from the graveyard, where Kingsley's men had reported sighting the Death Eaters. They would think Voldemort was there, and hence, Severus would also be there; I thought I knew differently.

I knew the mechanics of Legilimency, although I'd never tried it before; I'd been too busy closing my mind down. I knew Voldemort was dead though, there was no need now, and if we found anything of him, which I doubted, it would only be earthly remains, broken reminders of where we should never be allowed to be led again. Best they found nothing, I thought, best no relics remained on this earth for some other warped mind to seize upon, and build a mental shrine to, as Riddle had built one to Salazar Slytherin. But we weren't here for Voldemort; he was as much history as he was dust, we were here for the man I knew in my heart was still alive.

I began to try to cast my mind out in a kind of equal and opposite Occlumency; I knew I would recognise his if I came across it. I knew the others could feel me becoming remote; they left me to it, perhaps mistaking it for something else. The nearer we got to the graveyard the more I tried to concentrate, and I caught Ginny giving me sidelong looks.

'Can you feel him?' she asked me with a frown.

'You know what I'm doing?'

She nodded and gave me her little smile. 'I'm trying too, Harry... I'm trying as hard as I know how.'

Sirius came over to my side. 'The main force is heading in just now,' he said. 'Is there anywhere around here you think he'd be?' He had his wand drawn, and his face was grim and set; I knew what price he wanted to extract.

'I don't think he's here,' I said. 'I think he'll be up at the manor.' I nodded up to where the Riddle family home sat in brooding ruins. 'Ginny and I are going to see if we can find his awareness.'

His eyebrow rose to her. 'I didn't know you were Legilimens.'

She smiled back at him. 'I think I'd prefer if you kept it a secret... from my brothers at any rate.'

'I think that's very wise. I'm not sure any of them could bear that knowledge,' I said, as I felt myself grin back at her. I realised how much I liked Ginny, how much I'd always liked her. She was everything all of the Weasleys were, but she had a little bit of icing. She had a wonderful wit, dry and subtle, and had always been at least three steps ahead of her brothers in everything; I began to understand why. I turned to Sirius. 'Either you take Malfoy or I do... but I want it to be one of us. He's got debts to square.'

Sirius's eyes had gone that flat cold blue they went when he was angry. 'He's mine, Harry. I owe him; I've owed him for a very long time. I'm going to drag him back alive to stand trial.' He gave a cold smile, and I knew he was thinking about the public humiliation of one of his oldest adversaries, and about the thought of him rotting in the horrors of Azkaban as Sirius himself had done. I owed Malfoy too; he'd stolen Draco back from me, but I left Sirius to it. He nodded to the shell of the house. 'Go and find Severus,' he said. 'We'll deal with this lot.'

REMUS

There were so many emotions running high in that place. Sirius was like a spring coiled too tightly. I heard him gasp as we caught sight of Lucius. 'Not yet... not yet,' I hissed, pulling at his arm.

We waited until we saw Kingsley's men line up on the other side of the graveyard. There were about fifteen Death Eaters; the only ones I knew were Malfoy and Rookwood. We numbered twenty, with surprise adding another five to our number. I knew Hermione, Ginny and Neville had gone up to the ruin that sat on the hill, with Harry; they seemed to think if Snape were alive, he would be there. I was glad, this was going to be ugly... short but ugly.

Malfoy looked a mess; gone was the debonair façade of the gentleman he'd always pretended to be, and all that was left was the hard-faced bullying thug he really was. He seemed to have the Death Eaters searching the place for Severus, as though he could lead them ultimately to Voldemort; they'd even begun to desecrate some of the graves. Malfoy's desperation was showing as he screamed orders to troops who appeared not to owe him any allegiance.

Kingsley gave his signal, and we advanced.

HARRY

I began to despair of finding him; we'd crossed and re-crossed that ruin a dozen times, crossed the grounds and the surrounding field, and found nothing. I'd been so sure... and now it looked as though I were wrong. Maybe he was down in that graveyard. Had I just been too cowardly to start there; had that place had too many bad associations for me? I didn't think so. I paused for a moment, and drew my mind back as I watched our troops form a guard around the Death Eaters' last stand. Four lay dead, and the rest were bound and unconscious. Only Lucius Malfoy was awake; Sirius had obviously wanted him to witness his final defeat. I shook my head at the futility of it all; Malfoy would go to his grave believing himself to be wronged. I suspected even Azkaban would not rob him of that.

I turned away; I had seen enough... and then I felt it. I saw Ginny had stopped in her tracks, and my heart leapt as I realised she'd felt it too. I walked slowly to her, trying to cast my mind before me, not even knowing what I was doing... and then I saw it. Merlin help us all, we must have walked past where he was at least a dozen times. My heart didn't know whether to sing for joy, or drop in despair. I moved closer... he couldn't possibly be alive, not lying here for days in the open. 'Please...' I heard myself whisper, as Neville and Hermione realised what the bundle of charred cloth and rubbish lying against the back wall of the ruined garden was. 'Please... please...' I breathed.

SEVERUS

I felt them. I had been thinking about green at the time, struggling to remember what it looked like, what it smelt like, when I felt the tiny push against my mind. I knew what it was; it started me back to something approaching full consciousness. It was the push of an inexperienced Legilimens, and even as unskilled as it was, I had no defence left, no way of closing my own mind down. Let them come and destroy what was left of me... I would welcome the release.

Again I felt it... someone different: female, young, more subtle... then the first person again. I didn't dare believe; I couldn't bear to find I was wrong. They were closing in on me from different directions.

I heard a voice. It rose above the ragged sighing of my pitiful breath. 'Get Sirius... get him quickly.' I dared not believe Harry Potter had come back for me. Potter had come for me, and he'd brought Sirius. It was too much for my tired heart; maybe a day or two ago... maybe if I'd been a little stronger I could have waited... waited to die in the way every man dreams of, in the arms of his beloved... but now, now it was too much. I felt myself slipping away, as someone touched what had once been me.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 4

When hope is lost, still love remains.

SIRIUS

I Disappeared in the ruin and looked around, my heart in my mouth, and my stomach flooded with trepidation. The youngsters were standing in the corner of the garden behind the remains of the house, at the tumbled back wall. Neville and Hermione were bent over, looking at something on the ground, talking urgently with one another, and Ginny was on her knees in the muck, holding something. I couldn't understand why they had called me so urgently, not until I realised just what Ginny was holding... it looked like a dirt and blood streaked hand. I found I couldn't move; after all this, all my longing, I found I didn't even have the bottle to face what was left of him.

Harry was walking the short space to where I stood frozen in some sort of terror; his eyes were troubled behind his glasses, his face was white. 'He's in very bad shape... Merlin alone knows how he's alive.' He touched my arm. 'I don't know, Sirius... I don't know if he can make it.'

Alive. The word slammed home as I felt Remus arrive at my side.

'Come on, Sirius,' he said, seeming to understand my fear, my inability to move forward; he took my arm and guided me the short distance.

I have to admit I'd never have recognised what was lying there as being a man, far less the man that Snape had been. He was curled tightly, and what had been his black clothes were charred and wet and torn, like so many discarded rags caught on a boulder. He must have been lying there for days: broken, injured, cold, wet... alone, and all I could do was stare. Merlin alone knew what Hermione and Neville were doing, but they were working frantically, saying nothing apart from the few uttered commands to Ginny, who was assisting them. I knew it was pointless to suggest that we try to get him to Hogwarts; he'd never make it.

His hair covered his face, like a wet black curtain hiding something from view, something that should not be shown. I didn't want that; I wanted to see it... him, see this shattered thing for what he was, but I suppose mostly I just desperately wanted him to know that we were there for him. I don't know when my thoughts became actions, or when I moved across the short space and knelt at his other side, careful not to get in the way of Neville and Hermione. I brushed the hair aside... and felt my heart plunge; he was so cold that I doubted he could possibly be alive. His skin was clammy but icy, if that makes sense, like a fish newly landed from a cold river.

'Don't you dare die on me now, Severus,' I whispered. 'Don't you dare die.'

Neville stood up at last, and started barking orders, reminding me of the way he had spoken to Moody in Dumbledore's office. 'Get a fire lit now, Harry,' he demanded in a way that was so unlike him, that I almost thought someone else had taken Polyjuice and tied the real Neville up in a cupboard in Hogwarts. He'd dropped back down to his haunches, and looked up for a moment. 'Now, Potter,' he snarled. 'We need to get heat into him. I want an inferno to heat up that wall, from the other side, and I don't care if you've got to get it from hell.'

'Ginny, give me the water bottle,' Hermione said, quietly and calmly, as Harry's fire took hold. She took the bottle, and I lifted his head slightly as she nodded to me. I watched as she heated the water a little with a muttered spell, and began to tilt tiny drops into his mouth as Neville held it open. 'Enough,' she murmured, as Neville began to massage his throat.

'Do you think we should try to get these clothes off him?' Ginny asked doubtfully, as she touched the wet cloth.

'Not yet,' Neville said, 'he's not strong enough. Heat and water... that's all we can do just now... Dumbledore will be here soon.' Neville looked up at Harry again. 'You have sent for him, Potter, haven't you?'

'Of course he has,' Dumbledore murmured back, as he appeared with Fawkes on his shoulder. The bird lifted itself into the air, and circled above us for a few moments, keening a song that sounded uncomfortably mournful.

Albus bent down to Severus, and he seemed to probe his body with his mind for a long few moments, as Hermione and Neville sat back to give him space. He nodded gravely to them. 'You have done everything that can be done for now,' he said, and then looked at me. 'Do not ask me, Sirius... I just do not know. I do not know if we can save him.'

REMUS

Dumbledore had sent for Flitwick, and he'd cast Charms around the entire area to give us peace from the Muggle interest that had begun to spring up at the sight of fire at night. Kingsley had all of the prisoners back at Hogwarts, in cells in the Dark Tower. By all accounts Lucius Malfoy wasn't taking too well to incarceration; I could live with that knowledge.

Madam Pomfrey made the journey to the ruin of the Riddle house, and tutted in approval of what Hermione and Neville and Ginny had done, but it wasn't looking good, I knew that much. He'd really been dead when we got here; he just hadn't had the strength to let go. Neville was by far and away the star of this show; even Hermione had retreated to allow him centre stage. I wished for nothing more than to be there if Severus were ever presented with the irony of that.

Neville had stabilised Severus's body heat, and Hermione had raised his fluid levels before they began to seal some of the more gaping wounds on his body. Ginny had managed to straighten him out a bit, and get most of his clothes off now, and we could see the extent of the flesh damage was huge. He had been ravaged by insects and small animals... it was like looking at an exhumed corpse. Nobody was making any predictions; all they had succeeded in doing so far was to arrest the external damage, to stop the deterioration.

As the night wore on, more and more people arrived. It was amazing, heart-warming, it was as though they were making some sort of pilgrimage; of course, I realise now that that was exactly what they were doing. Molly and Arthur spent some time talking with Dumbledore, and I found I was smiling to myself, imagining their conversation. She was probably making some arrangement to spirit Severus off to the Burrow to recuperate; I could just about imagine his face if that one were a starter, and that made me think that I was beginning to hope. Our inner circle was almost all there. Apparently Dumbledore had sealed Hogwarts to Filch and Flitwick for the night; it was nearly empty anyway. I saw with little surprise that Minerva had roused herself from her recuperation to be here. She kind of summed it all up.

'How are you feeling?' I asked a little guiltily. I hadn't even been to see her since she'd been brought in injured, just before Harry had rid us of Voldemort.

'Oh, I am fine.' She cast a glance to where Severus lay: Sirius still at his side, Neville and Hermione quietly conferring with Ginny and Harry, Ron talking with Dumbledore and Kingsley, even Moody had made the trip. All around the quiet chatter of old acquaintance. She gave a little sniff; perhaps it was the cold night air, but I don't think so. 'Maybe he can't go to Hogwarts, Remus... but it doesn't matter for now. Hogwarts has come to him.'

SEVERUS

Every time I tried to recoil in some sort of self-preservation, something dragged me back: not forward, just back to the unendurable status quo in which I had... to say lived would be an exaggeration, but it was back to where I had teetered these last days on the edge of existence, as though looking over my shoulder to check that nothing was there to hold me back from the ultimate journey we all make. And every time I saw my way clear at last to wander that final path, I felt him, and felt the vague tugs of regret that make we mortals cling to our final breaths, as though our very souls can keep our hearts beating and the blood flowing through our veins, as though it had ever mattered, as though what I had felt had ever mattered to anyone but me.

I wearied now, perhaps in some odd way even more than when I had been alone, as though I had been, even in that most pitiable of states, still the final master of my destination. I wished they would leave me now, while I could still remember what way I had been going. At first I had been sure I had finally passed from the disappointments of life to something kinder, to a place where someone cared, where he cared as much as I had done, and then as the pain gripped me again, sharpening my mind and reminding me of mortal flesh, I understood that what I had mistaken for care was just concern, the primary aid any decent soul would give to an injured dog, or even a dying Death Eater, as the case was. I had thought I had been struggling to live, and now I finally understood that I had been struggling to die.

Why, I wondered, could I not let go? I had it in my grasp now, at long last; I could pass from this world with him at my side, I could even pretend to myself that he would mourn my loss as I had mourned his since I had been a schoolboy, when our paths had met, and we each had turned aside as our lives had beckoned with lying promises and hidden price tags. And at long last, as the warmth from somewhere seeped into my body along with the pain, I felt myself slip, and this time nothing called me back, and the murmuring voices faded, and I knew they had left me, given up on me as I had long ago given up on myself.

And then I heard him, the answer to a dying man's dying wish.

'Severus, please, please hang on,' he whispered, and I knew the others were not at my side any longer; I knew it was just me and him. 'Not just for you, Severus, hang on for me too, I beg you.'

I could go now; I had everything I had ever wanted, I could leave now without regret.

HARRY

It was sometime in the middle of that surreal night that Hermione left his side for a while. Sirius was still sitting beside him, and I could only imagine the emotions that were running through his mind: that awful feeling of helplessness when you watch someone you love dying in front of your eyes, as Draco had died in front of mine; that outrage that death recognises no power but its own, and refuses to let anyone stand in its way. I turned back to Hermione, and looked at her face; it was etched with fatigue, streaked with mud and blood.

'Will you get someone to go to Hogwarts?' she asked me.

I could see Neville talking to Madam Pomfrey; he was trying to explain something to her, she looked doubtful, but Dumbledore was nodding to him. She seemed to back down with what I mistook for bad grace, and gave Neville a look; for a moment I thought she was angry. She turned and muttered something to McGonagall, and the two older women looked back at him in what I now recognised as respect; I saw a glint of pride in our old Scottish lioness as well.

'Of course, what for?' I didn't even dare ask how he was. There was only one consolation for us; he couldn't be any worse than he was when we'd found him.

'Neville has a list, and we need a silver cauldron with a copper base. It must be silver, Harry, not just shiny metal.' She handed me the note of the things Neville wanted, without bothering to tell me I was going to have to smash through the wards of Snape's office to get them.

'Okay, silver with a copper base. Hermione,' I asked, 'what's happening? Is he... is he even alive?'

She sighed. 'We're trying so hard. He's just not responding... I think he's just so tired. He waited so long and... and I just don't know.'

I wished I hadn't asked. I decided to go to Hogwarts myself so there was no mistake about what Neville needed; maybe Remus would come with me.

REMUS

It took us damn near fifteen minutes to slice through Snape's wards, even with Flitwick's help. Argus Filch hovered over us as we collected the stuff on Harry's list; anyone would have thought we were going to make off with the family heirlooms.

'Some of this stuff's really dangerous, Harry,' I said. 'Are you sure Neville knows what he's doing?'

'Hope so... let's face it, he can't do much damage to him, can he?'

I watched as Harry gave Filch a list of the hardware he wanted, and I sat at Snape's table as he checked it all over. I chafed at the time we were taking, almost wondering if they had got us out of the way to let Severus die in some sort of peace. Eventually Harry satisfied himself that everything was right. I was glad, feeling, as I had, like a trespasser; Snape's rooms without Snape glowering from the corner seemed cold and damp and empty.

Filch stood at the door as Flitwick sealed the rooms again with a fresh ward of his own; he had his scrawny cat clutched to his scrawny chest. 'Potter,' he rasped, as we moved away, 'let the Professor know we was asking... me and Mrs Norris.'

I felt the humility scald the back of my throat as the old caretaker turned and shuffled away.

SIRIUS

I was frightened to look at any of them, frightened for the moment when they drew back, when they could do no more. I'll never know where Neville and Hermione and Ginny found the skill to do whatever they were trying to do, what well of knowledge they seemed to be tapping; perhaps it was the confidence of youth, I just don't know.

Ginny had managed to straighten his limbs now; it had taken her ages, easing his cramped arms and legs, and stripping the clothing away to allow herself the access to do her surface repairs. If nothing else, at least he began to look human again.

The heat was stifling now; Neville hadn't been exaggerating about the ferocity of the fire he needed to keep that stone wall, against which he rested, warm. Dumbledore had conjured up fur rugs from somewhere, and they were packed about him. It had been painfully slow to levitate him a tiny bit at a time, to clear the damp soil and rubbish underneath, and spread fur for him to lie on.

I watched on, aware of my helplessness, as Neville slowly but surely took total control of what was happening. Everyone here now deferred to him; somewhere through the long night this little mouse had grown to a true Gryffindor lion, or maybe he always had been.

Harry and Remus arrived back from Hogwarts with whatever it was that Neville had wanted. My muscles screamed in protest as I stood up, shooting pins and needles through my limbs.

'I... I think we should let him rest for a while... I, erm, I know it doesn't look like he's doing anything,' Neville stammered on, 'but I think we should let him rest. The next bit will need whatever strength he's got.'

'Strength?' I gawped at him. 'Neville... he hasn't got any strength; he's hardly even breathing.'

He drew himself up, and gave me a look. 'Of course he has... what do you think has kept him alive? Now stop fussing over him, and give him peace.'

I had no answer. I moved away from everyone, sat on part of the back wall, and took his letter from my pocket. I'd only read it once, couldn't bear to read it again; I would now, I owed him that much.

It started without preamble, no "Dear Sirius", not even "Dear Sir".

"I don't know if I shall be dead or alive when you receive this, or even if you will read it. I know I have no right to expect you to read on, but for what it is worth I ask that you do. Maybe you will delight in this tortuous admission; perhaps it may disgust you. I set it down on parchment in the hope that you understand and forgive.

I shall let others bear testament to the fact that I have never betrayed our cause; it is not politics that burden me now. I know you have never known nor wanted to know how I feel about you; Merlin knows, I tried to hide it from myself for long enough. Perhaps it is vanity which now overcomes caution in this bitter confession of my innermost longing.

I have few misgivings. I have lived my life as I saw fit, and make no apology for that; we all have had our crosses to bear, and have all staggered under the weight of our self-inflicted burdens. Maybe we could never have been friends, far less lovers, but the one regret I cannot bear, the one which grinds me to a lower place, is that we had not at least been kinder enemies. It remains my deepest sorrow.

I have come this far, and if you have stayed with me this long I arrive at last at my point, the declaration of my yearning for that which I could never have. I often think of long ago and better days, when our blood ran hot and our hearts overflowed, when hope still lived to dash itself against the rocks. Then youthful folly laid her unforgiving path, and set my heart aside to lie forever wasting, untried and alone."

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 4

The end of a long night, and a longer journey.

DUMBLEDORE

I was so proud of them, all of them. I thanked Merlin that these children, for they were still children in my mind, had been the ones to find him. They had looked at the impossible, and had seen no barriers; they had sifted through the debris of what had been Severus Snape, and poked among the dross until they found some tiny anchor on which to hitch our slim hopes.

Neville and Ron were taking turns to stir the ghastly contents of the silver cauldron. I had approved the ingredients, and I confess I did that more in faith than knowledge. It could do no harm, and we were so far out of the parameters of recorded healings that, if this worked, I suspected that young Neville Longbottom could retire before he reached the age of thirty on the proceeds of any book on healing that he might care to write. But that was where it all fell apart, that "if", because I could see no improvement, save for the straightening of his cramped limbs, and the surface cleansing of wounds that were, to my eye, already putrefying. I could not feel him, and he had never been closed to me; that, above all else, frightened me, and made me search my heart to see if I had been right in allowing them to come so far.

'It's ready, Professor,' Harry said as he crossed the clearing to me.

We both turned to where Fawkes sat on a large smooth boulder, keening softly to himself in a way I had never heard before. He lifted himself into the air, and hovered over Neville's brew for a moment, before he dipped his wings and wept four pearly tears into the cauldron. It hissed and roiled and gave off a purple mist. I nodded to Neville; this was his show, I could not help until I was asked.

SIRIUS

We had all eaten. Minerva and Kingsley had produced a wonderful stew, and I have to admit that I felt better, better equipped physically to see out however long it would be. I wondered what I meant by that: how long until he rallied, perhaps? How long until he died? I stayed out of the way this time, to give them room, all the time desperately trying to stifle the hope that was trying to rise in me. I knew Dumbledore wouldn't have let them drag this out if he didn't think there was some type of chance; he wouldn't have been so cruel to them. I noticed that everyone had stopped asking what was happening, stopped crossing the clearing to see what Neville and Hermione and Ginny were doing, standing in unlikely little clusters instead: Mad-Eye and Remus and Ron; Harry and Albus and Poppy; all the others who had come and gone, as though wanting to steal a piece of this night for their own memories of him.

There was a kind of fretful restless hush hanging over us, broken only by Neville and Hermione's voices, and the odd comment from Ginny, and the crackling of the blaze on the other side of the wall against which he lay. I caught Dumbledore's eye as he watched Fawkes fly back to his boulder to begin his pitiful song again, but the old man looked away, and my heart fell lower still.

I began to worry almost as much for Neville as I did for Severus; I hoped it wouldn't destroy the man we all saw he could be if... well, if it didn't work.

HARRY

Total silence had dropped over the dozen or so people who had chosen to stay the night. Hermione was kneeling with her ear to Severus's chest, and talking to Poppy Pomfrey at the same time, as Neville put a finger on the pulse point at his throat, and Ginny sat back on her heels, holding one of his white hands in hers. That touched me somehow, that simple act of comfort. Remus had crossed to sit on the back wall with Sirius; I left him to it, he had known Sirius for a lot longer than I had, and if, well... if the unthinkable happened, I suspected Lupin was better equipped to deal with Sirius than I was.

I felt so helpless. Why couldn't I have been the one to sit at his side, and hold his hand the way Ginny did? Why hadn't I had the courage to tell him I believed in him, on that dreadful day I had seen him last? Why did I feel the crushing weight of responsibility for something that was not my fault?

I watched as Neville un-stoppered a small flask, and conferred in a whisper to Poppy Pomfrey; she nodded and helped Ginny lift his head and open his mouth. I held my breath as Neville put a few drops of something onto Severus's tongue, and he and Dumbledore began to chant; Merlin alone knew what it was.

Ginny began to work with the cauldron, pouring small amounts of the purple liquid into little beakers which she sat in a row; every couple of moments she handed one to Neville, and he poured the potion into Snape's mouth while Ginny massaged his throat. I could scarcely believe this was the same Neville I'd shared a dorm with for seven years; our world had so many more heroes than I'd ever thought. I could feel Sirius and Remus move to just beside me, as we all watched on in silence.

It seemed like hours later that Hermione lifted her head away from his chest; a weary little smile touched her lovely face, and I could see a muscle jump in her jaw, as my breath caught in my chest, and Lupin put his hand on Sirius's arm.

'I can hear his heartbeat now,' Hermione said, and she began to cry.

SEVERUS

Something was different; everything was different, but I couldn't seem to stay conscious for long enough to grasp what it was. At first I thought I had moved, or been moved, but I doubted either was possible; perhaps I had just moved on. And each time the pain returned, it came from a different part of me, and then I would sink back into blessed oblivion. I didn't know when it was that I fully realised I was at Hogwarts, how many times I had wakened, confused and in agony, only to be sent straight back to sleep until both my mind and my body could support the notion of life.

I became aware bit by bit, anchoring onto different voices: Dumbledore, Pomfrey, Longbottom, Merlin help me, Granger, even worse, and possibly Ginny Weasley, and I began to wonder if I were being used as some sort of guinea pig for the apprentices to practise on, presumably being not much use for anything else. I know it was a couple of days before the full impact of humility, that would haunt me for many years to come, manifested itself in my awareness, as I finally understood just who had saved my life. There was one voice I didn't hear though, and save for the fact that I seemed to recall Potter saying to someone to call Sirius, when I had been at the old Riddle House, I would perhaps have thought that he had not survived the final outcome.

I was just drifting off when I heard voices again, and decided to pretend I was already asleep. Truth be told I didn't know how to handle all the attention; I found it uncomfortable, stifling, and didn't know how I would find my way back to my familiar isolation, my exalted position of pariah, my sanctum sanctorum.

'I think he's asleep.' Granger's voice.

'Doubt it.' Potter.

'It doesn't matter anyway.' Granger again.

'You'll wake him with that.' Ronald Weasley.

'Let me assure you, Ronald, that I can give the best and least disturbing blanket bath in the known world.'

'Let me assure you, Miss Granger,' I snapped back, without opening my eyes, 'that if you make any attempt to touch my nether regions with a sponge, or anything else, for that matter, that I shall blast your former house to negative points in your memory.'

'I told you he was awake.' Potter's voice.

'Right, you lot, buggor off.' Sirius Black.

My heart turned over.

NEVILLE

I had been a bit scared as I walked along the dungeon corridor that first time. Dumbledore had asked me to take the first and second year Potions class for a couple of weeks until everything got sorted out. I had doubted I'd manage, but it had gone quite well. No one had blown the classroom up, and there was no one as terrified of me as I had been of Professor Snape; that made me smile a little to myself in some sort of reflection at memories which, whilst not quite happy, weren't really sad either.

I went up for lunch that day and sat with Harry and Hermione, and Ron and Ginny. We were all staying in guest rooms at Hogwarts; there was a lot still to do and we all had adjustments to make to the differences in our lives. I was taking Gryffindor and Slytherin in a joint double period of Potions just after lunch, and helping out in the Infirmary later in the afternoon. I didn't mind; it all kept me busy.

All in all I hadn't had much time to reflect on what had happened.

SIRIUS

It had been six weeks since we'd come back from Little Hangleton, after having stayed there for two tortuously long days, until Dumbledore and Neville thought he was strong enough to move. He hadn't regained consciousness for another two weeks, and our greatest fear had been that he hadn't left himself with enough magic to replenish his former power. Looking back, I think he enjoyed watching us tread on eggshells around the subject, until Neville managed to upset a vase of rather fierce looking thistles, which Minerva had placed at his bedside, all over him. He cleared the resultant mess without even lifting his wand from where it lay accusingly on the nightstand, the arrogant fuck.

He was undoubtedly the single most difficult patient ever to have graced the Infirmary, and I'm sure Poppy Pomfrey felt relieved to have his bad temper spread amongst

Neville, Hermione and Ginny, all of whom bore it with amused fortitude. The moment he could support himself with the aid of a cane, he left to go to his own rooms; nobody saw fit to attempt to stop him.

It would be nice to say that we wiped out twenty-five years of hurt with a couple of smouldering glances, that some profound change had come over both of us, but that wasn't true. The letter was never mentioned; it wasn't necessary, he knew I'd read it. Some unspoken understanding had passed between us though, and I felt comfortable in the knowledge that he cared as deeply for me as I cared for him; maybe one day we'd start our courtship, we had a big backlog to clear.

I could tell he was uncomfortable about the place in which he found himself: the centre of some sort of attraction, having to bear enquiries into his health and wellbeing with some sort of grace, even the open friendship of some. It was all alien to him, and I knew he needed to don his black cloak of hostility again, and slink away from the limelight, and didn't know how to.

He was sitting at his table when Remus and I called after lunch, listening to Wagner on his gramophone, smoking his black cigarettes and drinking whisky; a slim volume of verse lay open on the table. He watched us, black eyes as unreadable as ever, as Remus took two more glasses from the cupboard above the stone sink in his workbench, and we made ourselves comfortable. Albus had decided it was time he went back to work, and had left it to us to break the bad tidings. I'd thought long and hard about how to go about it.

'You're getting lazy, Severus,' I said, as I poured one each for Remus and me and topped up his glass. 'How long are you going to sit here and let everyone else do your work for you?'

He let his lip curl. 'Until the end of term at least, why?' He picked up a piece of parchment that looked like a class timetable, scanned it, and looked across at us. 'Haven't you forgotten something, Black?'

'Me?... No, I don't think so.' I looked at Remus, who was biting his lip to stop laughing.

'I am here... you are here, making free with my whisky.' He gave Lupin a look. 'Even your understudy is here... whilst Gryffindor and Slytherin second years are at this moment in my classroom. Which brave soul, dare I ask, is ensuring that it is not buried under a thousand gallons of slime?'

I looked at Remus, but he'd ducked under the table to find something he hadn't dropped. I tried very hard not to smile as I delivered what I hoped was my coup de grace. 'Neville Longbottom.'

His recovery was even more miraculous than the one he'd done between us finding him at Little Hangleton, and arriving back at Hogwarts. He stood up, donned his black academic gown and his scowl, and swept out of the room before Lupin could surface again.

'Hey, Severus,' I called to his ramrod straight back. 'You forgot your cane.'

He didn't break his stride, and I almost fancied I heard the terrified hush that dropped over his classroom as he pushed the door open.

Severus Snape was back.
