

Santa's Little Helper

by scaranda

Severus expects nothing more interesting in his Christmas stocking than his own foot.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 3

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Chapter One

Severus picked up the Daily Prophet again, pretending to himself that he wasn't rereading the discreet advertisement in the "All I Want for Christmas" lonely-hearts column. He skipped past "men looking for women", "women looking for men", "women looking for women", and let his eyes fall on the fifth entry under "men looking for men", where it sat just above "people looking for other things, legal entries only please".

He uncorked the whisky bottle, poured himself a healthy slug, another healthy slug, and pulled the paper to him again.

"Handsome fun-loving male would like to meet his soul mate. You're out there somewhere, aren't you? With your good sense of humour, your joie de vivre, your dark brooding looks. Don't hide from me any longer; I'm ready for you now. And you know me too, don't you? Thirty-eight, blue eyes, six feet of good solid muscle, my only boundaries are the ones you put round my heart. Let's meet up, my love. You know the place, the back room of the Leaky Cauldron, beside the fireplace. You'll know me; I'll know you."

Snape gave the clock on his mantelpiece a sour look as it ticked its way from "thirty-something" to "over the hill", and stood up; he'd better get moving. He'd got this far; there was no point in not seeing it through, and ... well, you never knew, did you? He wasn't quite sure he could pull off the "joie de vivre" bit, though.

He went through to his bedroom and looked at the clothes he'd laid on the bed and sighed, but he couldn't afford half measures, and he certainly couldn't go to the Leaky Cauldron wearing his frock coat and black high-waisted trousers; no Charms he could cast about himself could hide who he was if he wore that. He had a sudden awful vision of meeting up with Rita Skeeter and her poisonous quill whilst attempting to get himself laid through a lonely hearts column, and almost called the whole thing off. He pushed the thought away, along with thoughts of a hall full of Gryffindors laughing their socks off at him before they left for the Christmas break. Fuck them and their cosy little Christmas set ups, he snarled to himself; they didn't have to wrestle with the choice between dodging Lucius's grasp at Malfoy Manor's annual Christmas display of bad manners and worse taste, or the dripping taps and damp lumpy mattress at Spinner's End, or even the twin sympathetic glances of Flitwick and McGonagall, as they pretended not to both be headed in the same direction after they left the remains of their Christmas pudding on the high table.

'Not this Christmas, thank you very much,' Severus promised himself savagely, bravely trying to ignore the fact that pale blue wasn't his colour, as he carefully cast his Charms about him to ensure that he was not Severus Snape from the moment he Apparated from the hill outside Hogwarts under his heavy winter cloak, until the moment he returned.

Sirius looked at the advert again, admiring the wording as he tried to imagine what sort of men would turn up in answer to such an invitation. He lit a cigarette and blew a couple of smoke rings to keep in practice, watching them grow ever larger as they rose in the chilly air of the horrible kitchen in Grimmauld Place, until they fell apart, a bit

like his life kept doing.

He let his eyes fall to the paper again, wondering if he should really go through with it and thought, fuck it all, why should he be alone? He could have spent Christmas with Harry, he supposed, but he hadn't fancied Molly cooing over him, or Arthur's attempts at humour, or any of the other trimmings that beckoned from the Burrow with forced joviality. Anyway, Harry had Ron and Hermione there, and that pretty little Chinese girl he seemed to have taken a shine to again.

Sirius looked over to where his own companion sat folded under the kitchen sink snivelling to himself, still steeped in the abject misery that had fallen upon him months ago when Dumbledore had conveyed the secrets of the Veil from beyond the grave, and decided that he deserved something better. He'd cast a few Charms and see it through ... you never knew, did you?

As Sirius stood and squared his shoulders, another man did the same in a different part of England; he didn't fancy what Santa had already placed in his well-heeled stocking either. Lucius had made his excuses, insofar as he ever made them; cover up stories were for lesser men. He just hoped no one would see through the Charms he cast about himself to retain his anonymity.

As Lucius shaved carefully, watching himself in the mirror with no small degree of complacency, Remus Lupin smiled to himself some two hundred miles away, as he pushed the Daily Prophet across the table; he decided he didn't want to be alone either.

Tom rubbed his palms together; it was much busier than he had hoped it would be on a wet Wednesday night three weeks before Christmas. Usually only one or two regulars sat in the back room of the Leaky Cauldron in the midweek, more in hope than expectation; Tom pretended to himself that he didn't know they were soliciting. When the second stranger had come in, Tom had even felt magnanimous enough to sling an extra couple of logs on the usually pitiful fire in the back room. Boy's Back Room it had been nicknamed, a popular cruising spot for men of a particular persuasion, a spot where men rarely appeared as they would be recognised in everyday life. Tom wondered how they ever formed any long-term relationships with the men they met here, at what point they dropped the Charms they had obviously cast, what disappointments and surprises occurred in the mornings after, what bribes had to be paid and promises extorted. Tom was a ladies' man himself, on the few occasions he got lucky, but he was tolerant enough of the proclivities of others to accept whatever Galleons they condescended to throw his way.

He looked up from his half-hearted attempt at polishing the dirty glasses as another man came in, looking around himself before making his way to the back room. This one was dressed in a pale blue sweater and well-fitting Muggle denim jeans that hugged his lean body in all the right places. Tom wondered who he was, just as he had wondered who the other three strangers were who had now joined the regulars tonight.

As his eyes followed the fourth stranger, the door to Diagon Alley opened yet again and a strawberry-blond strutted over the threshold. Tom debated with himself as to whether he should sling another log onto the fire, and decided to wait for the numbers to even up.

Severus wondered if he should leave, if he should just put it down to another rotten experience. It was bad enough that he'd had to spend half an hour enduring the false bonhomie of the two young whores, who were still attempting to ply their wares to him and the four other disinterested men who were in the back room, without putting up with the garishly hideous Christmas Tree, with its tattily dressed fairies, which had obviously been illegally imported through Knockturn Alley, winking and leering at him. And now he'd added the heart-stopping fact that not only was Lucius Malfoy standing beside him, but so also was that idiot, Gilderoy Lockhart.

This was madness; Severus snarled to himself, as yet another two men came into the back room, this two quite clearly a couple. He couldn't think why they had bothered to come here at all ... it certainly wasn't for the classy surroundings or the carefully cultivated ambience. Perhaps they were swingers, he snorted in self-derision; he didn't even have one partner and the place was filling up with greedy bastards who wanted two. Another half-hour and he'd leave, unless Lucius chanced his arm before that. He wondered, only half in jest, if he would get away with breaking Malfoy's neck, if the Charms he'd cast would fool a jury, or the warders at Azkaban. Perhaps he would make a play for Lucius instead; he wasn't exactly difficult to flatter, and he would at least get some pleasure out of the evening watching the fear rise in Malfoy's pale grey eyes, as he had watched it so many times before. But he had come here tonight because he didn't want to take the safe ground, the path he had trodden throughout his life to his utter boredom and despair.

As the evening wore tortuously on, the back room became very busy with an assortment of hopefuls and hopeless, and Snape became more and more annoyed with himself for letting his self-esteem stoop to the depths of having left Hogwarts at all. Quite a few men had already paired off, and Severus found himself standing alone at the bar, with Lucius on one side and Lockhart on the other; the latter had an expression of baffled but injured narcissism on his face, as his Charms hovered dangerously close to vanishing completely. The two whores had moved to stand at the end of the bar; Snape suspected the quiet word Tom had had with them had been along the lines of leaving the few mouldy seats to paying customers. The seat that remained glaringly empty, however, was the one at the side of the miserable fire. He wondered if any of them were going to admit why they were here, apart from the two whores of course, whether any one of them would take the hot seat, so to speak.

He had decided to leave, and as he took a final disgusted look around he caught the eye of one of the other men, a man standing in the shadows beside the dusty, ragged-edged material that served as curtains. Severus had a suspicion he had been waiting to be noticed by him. For a moment he wondered if he had recognised the man, the turn of the head, the way the eyes looked up even when they were level with his own, as though they were calculating, challenging. He pushed down the flutter of anticipation and sighed to himself; he had better deal with Lucius first.

'Stay away from me, you idiot,' he hissed dangerously.

Malfoy turned and gave him a look he probably thought froze the corners of hell, but left Snape remarkably unimpressed. 'Let me assure you,' he snarled back under his breath, 'the only thing I want from you tonight is your discretion.'

'That makes a pleasant change,' Snape replied dryly.

'Don't be facetious. It's your own fault,' Malfoy returned. 'I'm through with begging you to spare me five of your precious minutes.'

'You're perfect, Lucius,' Snape replied. 'You don't even recognise an insult.'

'Of course I don't,' Lucius snapped. 'Now bugger off. I have designs on the blond in the corner, the one with the shy smile ... and I can manage just as well without your interference in the matter, thank you. Stay away from him.'

Severus barely registered Lucius's mutterings; he had decided to take the moody looking dark-haired man after all, and he would be quite content if Malfoy dropped through a hole in the floor. Of the five of men standing at the bar, two now considered themselves to be spoken for; that left Gilderoy the two tarts. Snape smiled sourly to himself; that sounded fair, if Lockhart were going to get his stupid leg over he deserved to get fleeced for the privilege.

Sirius was about to give it up as a bad job, when he realised the man standing in the opposite corner was none other than Lupin. Fuck, he muttered under his breath; he hoped Remus hadn't recognised him as easily, but he didn't think so. He paused for a moment and then crossed the room to the werewolf.

'Any idea who the guys at the bar are?' he asked quietly, as he realised it had been the shy smile that he'd recognised. 'Not the whores, the other ones.'

'I thought it was you,' Lupin said, as he smiled again and tapped the side of his nose. 'Canine intuition.'

'Thanks,' Sirius replied quietly. 'I had a bath though. Any idea who they are?' he repeated.

Lupin shook his head. 'Not a clue,' he said, 'apart from Gilderoy, of course.'

'Somehow I don't think it's going to be his lucky night.' Sirius touched Lupin's arm and winked. 'Good hunting, Old Wolf.'

'Do I get the impression that you're going for mean and I'm going for money?' Lupin asked as Sirius turned away.

'Hey listen, I've got lots of dough anyway.' Sirius flashed the werewolf a quick grin over his shoulder. 'And what would I want with a pussy cat?'

Severus watched the two men. The one Lucius had taken a shine to shook his head at the other man, and after a few words they split; it looked as though it would pair off quite well after all. He had moved away from the bar a little; he could do without Lucius's critical appraisal of his performance, but he turned away again in indecision. It had been a long time since he'd propositioned someone in a bar, a lifetime ago, in fact. He lied to himself that he didn't remember who it had been.

'Can I buy you a drink?' the cool voice said from behind him, and he turned to meet the grey eyes, a deep bluish steely-grey that spoke of determination and bravery and dedication and honour, and a deep-seated need to prove himself beyond all others.

'Actually I was wondering whether to stay or go,' Snape replied, and nodded to the empty chair at the fire. He'd summed the man up as a ruddy Gryffindor right away; he'd enjoy playing with all that nobility, reducing it to its component parts. 'My host doesn't seem to have turned up.'

'Nor mine.' The man smiled a smile that didn't reach his eyes. 'Well, if you decide you're staying; can I buy you a drink?'

Snape pretended to consider it, reminding himself not to lace his remarks with too much acid; it wouldn't do for whoever this man was to recognise him. He nodded his head. 'Yes, thanks. Ogden's,' he added, remembering not to ask for single malt; not many wizards drank malt. He caught the man's eye again and felt a thrill run through him, something he hadn't felt for a very long time, something rash and wild.

The man nodded to a corner. 'We can sit over there if you like,' he said with a question in his grey eyes. 'Or...'

'Or just get a key?' Snape finished for him. 'Let us have a couple of drinks for the sake of propriety,' he said, with a forced smile that sat as uneasily on the face he'd Charmed for himself as it would have sat on his own.

Sirius walked across to the bar, giving the slim man a good long look over his shoulder; he had a feeling that, although he was turned the other way, the man knew he was being watched. He let his eyes flick to where Remus was in conversation with the other man from the bar, a well dressed, old money sort, looking for a bit of rough for the night; Sirius smiled to himself as he summed him up. He'd get more than he bargained for; Remus certainly knew how to deal out the rough, in more ways than one, or perhaps that was exactly what he'd bargained for.

He bought the Firewhisky, and as he turned back to the table he'd left the man at, he did a double take, for just a moment he reminded him of someone. Sirius searched his mind but it was gone, and whatever the little mannerism was, it had gone too, but it hadn't taken away the feeling that this was one of the last people on earth he'd consider spending the night with. As he crossed the bar, he let his mind filter through the admittedly long list: Hagrid, Flitwick, Voldemort, Lucius Malfoy, Peter Pettigrew; he reached the table before he ran out of options.

'Do you have a name?' the man asked, as Sirius sat down and pushed one of the glasses across the table.

He had caught Sirius unaware; for some reason he hadn't thought of an answer to that one. 'Umm, yeah,' he said, avoiding picking a name he'd forget, or something he'd hate being called in a moment of passion. 'Have you?'

The man nodded in veiled amusement. 'I shall tell you mine, if you tell me yours.'

'Amadeus,' Sirius said the first acceptable name that came to mind, hoping the man wouldn't ask him how to spell it.

'Really?' the man replied. 'I was going to pick that one. Now I shall have to think up something else.'

Sirius grinned and turned to the door as yet another man came into the bar. 'I wonder if our mysterious host has turned up after all,' he said, as he gave the newcomer a quick up and down look, but the latest arrival went straight to the bar after glancing to the still empty seat at the fire.

'I doubt it,' the man replied. 'I also doubt that Tom expected that his admittedly clever advertising ploy would work as well as it undoubtedly has.'

Sirius laughed and this time the laugh reached the cold eyes, setting them alight, like ice on fire. 'I never thought of Tom,' he admitted.

The man didn't see fit to point out that he hadn't either, not until that moment. 'I suspect Gilderoy Lockhart just got lucky though,' he said instead, as the newcomer looked around the bar again and seemed to settle for what was handily available, not to mention desperate.

Sirius grinned again; he was beginning to enjoy himself, beginning to relax in the knowledge that he hadn't picked some empty-headed bimbo who couldn't string two interesting words together. He'd quite forgotten he been just about to leave. 'His Charms are about as good as the rest of his wand work.'

'Am I speaking to someone with experience?' the man asked, with his eyebrow raised in a way that made Sirius frown to himself.

'Not likely. Your name?' Sirius asked. 'You've had long enough now.'

'Julius,' the man replied. 'It is as good a name as any, and I am more likely to remember it than you are to remember yours. What was it again?'

Sirius blinked in reply. 'Aurelius?'

The man shook his head.

'I know it started with an 'A',' Sirius said.

The man seemed to have taken stock of him and turned instead to his surroundings; Sirius hoped he wasn't getting bored already, not now that he was just becoming intrigued. He'd have liked to move right along to step two, but it had been so long since he'd done this that he wasn't quite sure where to start.

'Tell me a bit about you,' he said. 'Just general things, nothing private, of course. What do you like doing? Do you work? That sort of thing.'

'There is only one thing you need to know about me, Amadeus,' the man who called himself Julius said quietly, and turned again to him, holding his eyes without the need to challenge.

Sirius could feel his breath constrict, just a little, just the way he hoped he'd feel, the thrill of stranger danger. 'And what would that be, Julius?' he asked without letting go of the eyes that were so dark that they were almost black.

'I am a giver, not a taker,' he said quietly. 'Let there be no misunderstanding.'

Sirius felt himself nod as the man stood up, as though dismissing any more small talk, that it was as superfluous to the needs of the night as the untouched drinks on the table. He began to walk through the room and Sirius looked quickly across to where Remus stood relaxing against the bar, and gave him a barely perceptible nod. He

noticed the man Remus was with cast a long glance at the retreating back of the man called Julius; Sirius had a feeling these two knew one another.

Severus let the man calling himself Amadeus, amongst other things, negotiate a room rate with Tom; he didn't see why he should have to deal with such mundane matters. He did wonder for a moment if he were insane though; he could be opening himself to more ridicule than even his own unenviable past had thrown up. He should have learnt by now, he thought sourly to himself, as Amadeus turned with the key in his hand and nodded coolly to the stairs. If he had winked or grinned Severus would have turned heel and left, but something about the false calm of the grey eyes, hiding the man's own doubts and, perhaps even the same fears as Snape had himself, stopped him. The man intrigued him, and after all, he'd come all the way from Hogwarts wearing a pale blue sweater; he deserved a fuck for that alone.

He led the way up the stairs, just setting out his stall; it wouldn't do for this man to think he was taking the lead in any way. He was quite confident he wouldn't let him walk past whatever room he had hired. He wasn't disappointed.

'Number thirteen,' the man said quietly, as they walked along the torch-lit corridor.

Severus stood back a little and let the other man open the door onto the generously proportioned room. A nice strong beam ran across the ceiling, and Severus felt himself smile inwardly in approval; it was adequate for his purposes, perhaps he'd use it, perhaps he wouldn't. He felt the other man's momentary concern as he followed Snape's line of vision; sometimes the anticipation was better than the act, he'd learnt that lesson a few times in the past. He darkened the room until the single torch had dimmed to a sooty glow, and found the man watching him; he knew his expectation was pitching to fever level too, that was good. It was important now not to break the mood with awkwardness.

'Let us forego the difficulties of unfamiliarity with one another,' he said smoothly, and drew one long-fingered white hand down the man's check. 'We know one another; for all intents and purposes we know one another very well.'

The man nodded his understanding.

Sirius felt himself swallow; for a moment he had thought he'd walked into something he couldn't handle, felt the tiny prickle of alarm as the man eyed the heavy oak beam on the ceiling, until he understood. He felt his fears relax as his expectancy mounted; it had been a long time since he had been allowed the luxury of giving flight to his fancies without fear of ridicule, forever was a long time too. The brutality handed out to him in another place in another time had not been the cruelty that fuelled his innermost desires, not the calculated pain dished out by a benevolent master seeking to heal him with his vicious gifts. Sirius knew that this man knew what boundaries could be crossed and what doors could be opened; he would not pass his limits, but he would explore their very edges. He didn't remember dropping to his knees, only found the comfort of the hard floor beneath him and the vice-like grip on his shoulder from the master above him, as he surrendered himself to the inner man, to be led to the place where pain became pleasure, and pleasure became the peace he craved.

He felt himself start as something fell at his side, something that clinked as it landed. Before he had time to wonder what it was, the man had bent over his shoulder to hiss quietly in his ear. 'Dress properly in my presence, whore,' he said, making the last word sound like a caress of menace.

Sirius picked up one of what he now recognised as leather cuffs with buckles on them, black leather, soft leather, used before; there were four of them, one for each wrist and ankle. He began to put them on, willing his hands not to fumble the buckles, but feeling faintly ridiculous about doing this when he was still clothed.

'I think you have forgotten something,' the man said.

Sirius nodded. 'You want me to undress first?'

'It would be easier in the long run, I suspect,' the man said, letting the faintest smile twist the corner of his thin mouth; a smile as devoid of humour as it was of the ridicule Sirius had feared. The humiliation would come later, when he would welcome it, dignified humiliation, degradation with honour.

As Sirius undressed he noticed the man had seated himself on a table that he couldn't recall having been in the room when they came in; he had one leg swinging lazily and the other foot planted firmly on the floor. A cigarette was dangling from his lips, and somewhere along the line he had redressed in a black shirt and tight black trousers. Behind him two dark red candles were guttering in a draught from nowhere, casting their flickering glow on the assortment of utensils that seemed to have spread themselves on what Sirius could only describe to himself as a sacrificial altar. The man had either brought them with him, concealed about him, or had used a very strong Accio Charm to summon them; then again, perhaps he lived here.

'I am going to explain some things to you which I suspect you already know,' the man said in the same low measured tone. 'If you do not, I suggest that you leave here and find someone else.'

'I understand,' Sirius replied.

The slap caught him by surprise, a clean sharp slap, a reward for the insolence of having spoken uninvited. 'Perhaps now you do,' the man said. 'I shall now continue uninterrupted. You will be permitted to reply when I see fit.' He returned to his table and sat back in the same position, the leg swinging lazily again. 'You will be allowed the use of a safe word, which is the word "red". I assume that you understand its use will terminate whatever is causing you pain or distress that you cannot deal with. If at any time you feel unable to continue, either mentally or physically unable to handle the situation in which you find yourself, the use of your safe word will end the activity. However, if that happens, I shall not continue, either then or at any time later. You will be free to leave. Those are my terms; take them or leave them. You will be allowed to respond in a moment,' he said, as he held up his hand to forestall any interruption. 'If you accept, from that time you will not be permitted to speak, unless I ask you a direct question. Now,' he raised his eyebrow in question, 'do we understand one another? You may reply.'

'Yes.'

'In that case, you may signify acceptance of my terms by bowing your head, or take your belongings and leave here. From this point on, all bets are off.' He cracked the carriage whip that had appeared in his hand; the noise was shocking in the loaded silence of the room. As Sirius bent his head before him, he felt the wind of the whip as it gathered the clothing he had strewn about him, and piled it into the corner. He realised his cock was screaming for attention he dared not give it.

Severus was satisfied that he'd chosen well; he'd chosen a man who understood the game. Nothing he had said had surprised or confused him; it was a good starting point. He'd found too often in the past that those who pretended to be players were in fact nothing but men who were looking for a little bit of bedroom bondage. The only exception had been Lucius, but Lucius was frightened of him; Severus needed someone who understood the value of his gifts, as he understood the value of theirs. There weren't many men around who appreciated the arts of a truly brutal master.

He had used the beam; it would have been a pity not to, securing the man spread-eagled upside-down, with his ankle bonds attached to chains leading from the beam, and his wrists to the table. Along with the few carefully seductive strokes of the carriage whip, it had been a good way of getting the man's totally undivided attention, of making sure he was completely focussed on the matter in hand. He hadn't left him that way for long; he didn't know him well enough to know what was too much and what was not enough; for now he would take the safe route.

He watched him carefully now as he lay across the table with his hands secured to a point under it; his feet were just able to make tiny purchase on the stone floor, just enough to tease at the thought of standing. His legs were held apart by a steel pole clipped to the ankle straps; and a thin metal chain ran from his body from the steel plug Severus had planted inside him. He had done well, very well, and Snape knew it was from experience and desire, and not some foolhardy notion of seeing how far he could push himself. It was enough for one night, he decided; he would keep a few little tricks up his sleeve for another time ... if there were another time, but he felt sure there would be.

'Are you coping?' he asked quietly, from where he'd stooped to be level with the man's ear. His breathing was slow and even, and his skin was warm to the touch, slippery with sweat, but not the clammy stickiness of panic; he had not given the telltale involuntary flinch away. Severus was pleased; he would take him now and give the man the climax he deserved, they both deserved, before he became tired or cold, before his sexual arousal waned and the pain became just sore.

The man nodded his head in reply, without turning his head.

Sirius couldn't remember ever having felt so alive, or so rewarded; he knew this had been a first. Some parts of the evening had even now receded to a hazy recollection of pain; the times when his flying endorphins had led him to another place. As the man spoke to him he felt his cock jump and begin to leak a silky rope of pre-come in anticipation. He knew the man would be reaching a point when his own need for release would push them toward the endgame.

He felt the man tug on the chain that dangled between his legs as a reminder of what he was, an object for the enjoyment of another, a vessel about to be emptied only to be filled again. He didn't manage to stifle the groan as the steel plug, with which he had been violated, slipped from his body, leaving him feeling bereft. He felt his breath catch, as the man kicked his legs even wider and spread something cool and wet over him, slipping a hand underneath him to caress his balls and stroke his cock, just once, as though to remind him who was in charge.

He felt himself clench as the man drove into him, before he relaxed to accept this new intruder, to welcome it at last. He found to his surprise that one of his hands was free of restraint and assumed he was allowed to use it. Sirius was desperate now. His hand tightened on his cock as he felt the man grasp him around the waist with one hand whilst his other toyed alternately with one of his nipples and then with the other, rubbing and caressing until they stood out like reddened pinpricks of ecstatic pain. He felt the man increase his pace and he knew it would not be long for either of them; his own breath was becoming ragged. And then he could think no more; he was barely aware of the new warmth that flooded inside him as his vision starred and he almost blacked out with the power of his climax.

Severus found himself unable to speak, such was the depth of what he now recognised as the man's power: the power to accept the unacceptable and bear the unbearable. He sensed that their roles had reversed in some way, as he felt the man relax into the body of his tormentor, as though he acknowledged the few crumbs of comfort to make him feel he had not crossed any boundary or broken any unwritten rule.

'Are you all right?' the man asked quietly into his chest.

Severus felt himself nod, as much in concurrence as in understanding that the man recognized he was free to speak now, free to do whatever he wished; the cards had been dealt and the hand had been played out. More than that, the man understood just how vulnerable Severus now felt, how his doubts and self-recriminations would come home to roost if he did not have this assurance. He wondered just who had been the master of the game. He stifled the sigh that was half exhaustion and half deep fulfilment. 'I am fine,' he replied. 'Is it not I who should be asking you?'

He found the steely-blue eyes watching him; they had changed, the challenge had left them, fled with the hunger to leave a deep peace. It was enough; both had given, both had taken. 'Will you lie with me for a while?' the man asked.

Severus felt himself nod again; he would allow himself this last indulgence, the ultimate weakness.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 3

Sirius makes a discovery and learns to cope with it. Severus makes a discovery and finds he cannot.

Chapter Two

Sirius awoke to find himself alone in the room. It was so devoid of anyone but himself that for a moment he thought he'd got drunk and dreamed the night before. He pulled himself upright and winced as delicious reminders of pain caressed his body. He looked at his bruised wrists; it would have been fairly simple to spell the marks away, although the ache would remain, but he decided not to. He'd wear these battle scars with pride, even if he were the only one to see them; he felt he'd earned them. It took him a good few minutes to come to terms with the fact that the man wasn't in the bathroom; he had left him. Sirius felt panic rise in his chest; he didn't know how to get in touch with him, how to see him again. He didn't even know who he was.

He got out of the bed, pulling the sheets aside as he did, and stared down at the black rose, its petals still sparking with dew, lying where the man had lain the night before. Sirius felt something he didn't recognise catch at his chest. This couldn't be all; there had to be more, a return match, another meeting. It couldn't just be a cold bed and a fucking rose.

He dressed quickly, finding nothing in the room that served as a clue to who the man was or where he had come from; it was empty except for the furnishings that had been there when he and ... fuck, he and someone else had arrived last night. He ran his fingers through his hair, the hair he had charmed for himself; at least he still had that, still had his own anonymity. He ran down the stairs to where Tom was pretending to clean the hallway, which hadn't had that particular honour for some years now.

'Anyone else around, Tom?' he asked, forgetting for a moment that the landlord wouldn't know him.

'You're the last,' Tom said, bobbing his head to the side as though he could recognise Sirius if he caught him in a better light.

'Any messages for Aurelius?' Sirius asked, hating himself for the desperation that he thought had crept into his voice.

'Aurelius, Aurelius,' Tom muttered as he thumbed through a small tray of parchments, as though he didn't know exactly what clandestine messages he had waiting to be collected. 'Nope, 'fraid not.'

'What about Amadeus?'

Tom began flipping through the three or four parchments again, but Sirius had already turned away.

Severus arrived back in Hogwarts just as Sirius was stirring; he hadn't wanted to linger, to examine himself in the cold light of day with another looking on, telling him not to pass judgement upon himself, or any of the other platitudes that he couldn't bear to hear. He sat down heavily and pulled one of the last boxes of his favourite black cigarettes from the drawer of his desk; he hadn't wanted to smoke them last night, just in case someone recognised them. Perhaps he flattered himself; perhaps no one ever noticed any of the foolish little idiosyncrasies that set him apart from others, or worse, perhaps they did and did not care anyway.

He found himself wondering how Lucius had fared last night; he was fairly sure that the man Malfoy had been with knew "Amadeus". He wondered if there were any way he could find out who he was, but he wouldn't care to discover that he was having an affair with Arthur Weasley or Walden Macnair. He stopped in his mental tracks. He was getting carried away with himself; he had had a one night stand of the best sex he could ever remember, with a man whom he didn't know and was unlikely to ever see again. But even as he tried to convince himself he knew that was not true; they had something to offer one another which each knew would be hard to find elsewhere. They would meet again, if for that reason alone.

He tried to put it out of his mind as he went about the soul-destroying daily business of teaching Potions to those who did not want to learn. He found himself harking back to the night before at odd times of the day, missing the chance to deduct points from both Ron Weasley and Harry Potter, ignoring the sycophantic Draco's news that his unbearable father asked him to accompany him to Malfoy Manor for the Christmas break. Even Minerva had to repeat herself three times at dinner before Severus realised he was being spoken to.

He gave himself a shake; this wouldn't do. There was one way to stop this nonsense before it started; he would go back to the Leaky Cauldron tonight and lay whatever ghost was there to rest. His alter ego had been satisfied beyond his wildest imaginings; he would see in the cool light of better judgement that the man was nothing to him. How could he be? He had been water when Severus had been parched, food when he starved; that was all, he thought, as he pulled on a fine black roll-necked sweater. At least it wasn't pale blue; he wouldn't make that mistake again. He would put this away now, an experience to be savoured as he sat alone, to be examined and relived and probably romanticised over. That was the only reason he was going back, he told himself; it was easier than acknowledging the panic that threatened to rise when he thought the man might not be there.

'How was it?' Sirius asked as he pushed a cup of coffee across the kitchen table to Lupin, hoping he'd get the hint that he wasn't about to sit drinking all night with him.

Lupin smiled as he lifted the mug to lips. 'Fine, it was a good night ... only one thing put me off actually.'

'Do I want to know what it was?' Sirius asked with a grimace.

'Well, I certainly didn't.' Lupin smiled again. 'I'm glad I was past noticing such blemishes at the time. It might have quite put me off.'

'Okay,' Sirius said, grinning, 'I'll bite. What blemishes?'

'Do you remember someone a couple of years above us at Hogwarts, who had a birthmark on the base of his spine that looked like a downward pointing arrow. We all used to take the piss out of him about it. I suspect it was the only reason the lazy bastard ever bothered to learn to hurl a decent hex,' Lupin replied, as Sirius's jaw dropped.

'Well, it's very faded now, but it's still there.'

'You're kidding me on,' Sirius said as he sat bolt upright in disbelief. 'Does he know who you are?'

'How happy do you think Lucius Malfoy would have been to be contaminated by half-blood and werewolf on one night, not to mention poor?'

Sirius laughed out loud. 'I hope you picked the fat tart's pockets.'

'No, actually.' Lupin smiled yet again as he stood up. 'I'll try to remember to do that tonight though.'

'Tonight? You're seeing him again tonight?'

'Why not? He's taking me for dinner to somewhere nice in London. Come on, Sirius, surely you don't grudge me a dinner or two. I only came in to borrow something to wear.'

'Help yourself.' Sirius nodded to the hall. 'But be careful, Old Wolf, Malfoy's not a man to mess with. Anyway, you never asked me how my date was.'

'I didn't need to. You be careful too, Sirius.' Lupin turned in doorway. 'I know what games you like to play. Remember he's a stranger.'

Sirius watched his back. Lupin could look after himself, and none of the unpleasant things he knew about Lucius pointed to him having left a trail of dead lovers behind him. Sirius's thoughts turned to the man he had been with last night, the man who had hardly left his thoughts all day. He had been almost sure that the man he knew as Julius also knew Lucius. He didn't want to think too hard; out of all of Lucius's acquaintances of former Death Eaters, he couldn't think of one he'd have been comfortable with. He hoped Lupin wouldn't take too long to pillage his wardrobe; he wanted to get moving himself.

'Someone was looking for you earlier,' Tom said as Severus tried in vain to sneak past him unobserved. The landlord of the Leaky Cauldron was having the unexpected windfall of a bonus day; he hadn't allowed for the fallout from the night before. 'Seemed to think there would be a message for him this morning.'

'Really?' Snape didn't bother to lift an eyebrow; he didn't want a reply and he certainly didn't want Tom keeping a log of his comings and goings. Perhaps the man from last night had just been a cheap tart who was hoping to get beaten up so he could sell his story to the 'Prophet' for a few Galleons to buy some interesting plants and herbs from Knockturn Alley. But Severus knew that wasn't true; Tom was just being nosey, and Severus believed that nosiness should be discouraged at every opportunity. He walked into the back room without waiting to see if Tom had any more to say, trying to shake the vaguely uncomfortable feeling that the man had been asking about him.

The same two tarts occupied the same mouldy old seats they had sat on last night, before Tom had moved them on... and Lucius stood at the bar once again. This time he made no show of recognising Severus, and he gladly returned the compliment. There were a couple of tables of two men, and one or two tables of single men who looked hopefully at the door every time it opened. The man he had been with last night wasn't here; Snape hoped he hadn't missed him. He reminded himself to keep his back to the door; he felt pitiable enough without looking pathetic. He just wished Lucius weren't here, then again he was alone too; he wondered if Malfoy had come along in hope or expectation. He didn't have long to wait; the next man who came in was the man he had been with last night. Lucius took his arm and they left the bar immediately, as though they were in a hurry to be somewhere else.

He wished he'd brought something to read, something to make him feel less like a wretched exhibit; the ten minutes he had been sitting staring at the untouched Firewhisky had seemed like forever.

'Can I buy you a drink?' the measured tone said from so near to him that Severus almost jumped.

He took his time in turning; he had to remember he wasn't Severus Snape. 'That depends on just how benevolent you feel towards Tom,' he replied as he glanced quickly to where the landlord had come through to the bar. He was pretending to polish some glasses that were beyond polishing, and making little attempt to conceal the fact that he was watching the proceedings, like a dubious deity overseeing the development of his own creations.

'Very actually... but I get your drift.' The man grinned his easy grin, and nodded to the door. 'Shall we?'

Severus had been just about to stand when he found himself remembering why he'd come here. 'Not tonight,' he replied. He read the flash of disappointment with more pleasure than he could have imagined. 'Perhaps some other time?'

The man didn't seem to want to take no for an answer; Severus admired that in a man as much as he ever admired anything, he knew what he wanted and he didn't let go until he got it. The man had cocked his head to one side and smiled ruefully, a "you might fool yourself, but you can't fool me" smile. Snape had to remind himself again that he wasn't available, even as he knew the man had read the opposite.

'When then?' the man asked as he sat at the other side of the table.

'I don't know,' Snape replied. 'We find ourselves in the difficult position of being unable to get in touch with one another.' He raked around in his mind for something that had annoyed him earlier, but had fled when the man had arrived. 'Why were you questioning Tom about me?'

The man started back in surprise. 'Tom? That Tom? I wouldn't ask him the time.' He nodded to where the landlord was fawning over his glasses. He gave him a pained look and then hesitated for a moment. 'I did ask him if there were any messages for me this morning though,' he admitted with a half measure of his grin. 'I certainly didn't mention you by either description or the name Julius. Mind you, I had a bummer of a job remembering my own name, come to think of it.'

Severus felt himself relax; he didn't really want to go back to the cold comfort of his rigidly righteous domain at Hogwarts, and he knew Malfoy Manor wasn't an option tonight. 'Well,' he said, as though he had given the matter some consideration. 'I could leave a message with Tom.'

The man gave him a cool look. 'And I'll just drop by every day and see if there's one here? Is that the idea?'

'Do you have a better one?' Snape asked, warming to the spat.

'Yes. Why don't you get down off your high horse and admit that you want to go somewhere quiet as much as I do.'

Severus raised his eyebrow. 'I find volte-face a painful option.'

'I just bet you do, you arrogant fuck.' The man smiled again as he stood from the table, an easy unforced smile that Severus envied. 'Let's go somewhere nice for dinner and I can tell you a pack of lies about me, if you tell me a pack of lies about you.'

'You strike a hard bargain, Amadeus.'

The man winced. 'I wish I hadn't called myself that.'

Sirius looked at the man sleeping at his side; he had been with him five out the last eight nights. They had not repeated the intense game they had played on the first night, but Sirius knew they would one day, one day when they both felt the need to take out their alter egos and play with them. He could wait for that, for now it was a pleasure to be on nodding acquaintance with what he had always regarded as a weakness.

The man stirred and Sirius smiled to himself; if he had been twenty years younger and if pigs could fly, he would have believed in love at first sight. The cynic in him scoffed at the idea; he hadn't even had sight of what this man looked like; all he saw was the bland image that his complex Charms cast, muting the features and the outlines beyond recognition, until they could have been a glance at any dark-haired, pale-skinned man on earth. He had taken great skill and great care to preserve his anonymity. What he couldn't hide was the lonely isolated man living below the facade, the bitter cold man who lived a bitter sterile life; a bit like Sirius himself.

Sirius had picked at bits of the man and his memories, even as he knew the same had been done to him, enough to know they were kindred spirits, both pariahs in some way, outcasts of their own making. The words hadn't really mattered, it had been the haunting behind them, the unhappy childhoods and formative years, the man's marked by poverty and cruelty, where Sirius's had been marked in a different way, but just as profoundly. The man denied having gone to Hogwarts, as Sirius did too, both knew the other was lying; even during the couple of relaxed hours over dinner, it was becoming difficult to live the lie. Sirius was frightened to find out who this man was, frightened that he would not want him if he knew who Sirius was; he had already cast him the role of the man he had always wanted ... Sirius had not believed he existed. He felt him stir again as a knock sounded on the door.

'Coffee, anyone?' Tom's voice sounded hopefully from the other side.

The man closed the eyes he'd just opened. 'Get rid of him,' he hissed. 'But make sure he leaves the coffee.'

Sirius looked down at him. 'I don't suppose you'd like to rephrase that? Or even consider getting up for the coffee yourself, you arrogant fuck,' he muttered as he shoved the bedclothes aside. 'Leave it on the floor and I'll get it in a minute,' he snarled at the door. 'And don't bother hanging about for an eyeful, you old pervert.'

He turned and found the man had hoisted himself up on his elbows and was looking at him with mild astonishment. 'Very nicely done,' he said, his voice laced with irony.

Sirius pointed at him. 'Don't question the manner in which I obey your orders,' he said, stifling his grin. 'Not at half past eight in the morning.'

Severus started. 'Half past what?'

'Eight.' The man grinned back as Snape jumped from the bed and began to haul on the black sweater and trousers he had been wearing the night before.

'I need to go. I'll grab a shower when I change for work,' Severus gasped, cursing his stupidity for having slept so long, but unable to regret the way he had spent the night. He wished he had had more time to think about how to leave the door open again, so to speak, and found himself at a loss for words; leaving was so difficult.

'I'll be here tonight,' the man offered, and this time the smile was only in his eyes. 'The next night as well. If you haven't come either of the nights, I'll know you're not coming back.'

He always said the same thing, as though he were hedging his bets, or giving Severus a way out if he wanted to take it. Snape nodded; that would do. He knew he should take time to think about what he was letting himself in for, but he hadn't, and now he thought it might just be too late. He touched the man's arm on his way past him, an asexual contact, to let him know there was perhaps more; he knew he understood. They both really needed to step back; this could continue in two ways, a series of anonymous but torrid sexual encounters, or an open relationship, however short or long. A combination of the two was not possible; on the other hand, it might just end as quickly as it had begun.

He was still thinking as he hurried down Diagon Alley, dropping his Charms as he pulled his winter cloak about him. He ducked into the tobacconist; he was well and truly late anyway, he might as well have his cigarettes too. As he pocketed his change he turned and hit the first sour note of the day; Sirius Black had come into the shop. Snape decided not to even acknowledge him; he had much more important things to think about than petty vendettas that had been going on for so long that their origins were buried in obscurity.

Sirius made his way through the shop; he needed cigarettes. There were three people in front of him, two witches, who seemed to be together, and fuck it all, Severus sodding Snape; that was enough to wipe any good feelings he had away in a cloud of sour gloom. He watched him pocket his change and his cigarettes and turn; he noticed Sirius of course, but he seemed to at least do the decent thing and ignore the fact.

He was a bit late for school, Sirius thought absently; classes stared at nine when he'd been there, not that Sirius had ever actually started at nine. Maybe the poor sod was teaching Gryffs first thing this morning and had decided to upstage them. He wondered if he should hex him on the way past and thought better of it; he'd more important things to think about. His thoughts slammed to a halt as Snape passed him, and he felt the colour drain from his face. He almost staggered into the women in front of him, and had to mutter a confused apology as Severus made his way out of the shop into Diagon Alley, dragging the man, Julius, out of his life as quickly as he had come in.

'Are you a'right, Sirius?' the tobacconist called in his wheezy voice. 'You looks like you see'd a ghost.'

'I'm fine,' Sirius said, as he dredged his heart from the pit of his stomach where it had fled when he had scented Snape as he passed him, when he had scented his own sweat on Snape. He turned and left the shop; he had to get out of here, he couldn't even think of the implications of what he'd just sensed, but he was a dog, he knew he had not made a mistake.

He Apparated straight to Grimmauld Place and did the only thing he could think of, nine o'clock in the morning or not; he poured himself a very large drink.

Severus gave him the benefit of the doubt, three hours' worth of the benefit of the doubt. He wished he had spent the miserable time getting well and truly drunk, but he hadn't wanted to ... just in case. It took him some considerable effort to drag himself to his feet once he'd decided to go, and it was only with reluctance that he didn't hurl a vicious hex at Tom as he passed him on the way out. It was cold when he got into Diagon Alley, and he pulled his cloak about him, making his way slowly past the closed shops to the Apparition point at the corner of Knockturn Alley.

He let his Charms fall and pulled his cloak tighter against the cold night air, dropping his head in a combination of defeat and self-disgust, as he Apparated from view to the hill outside Hogwarts. He hadn't noticed the black dog that had ghosted his steps since he'd left the Leaky Cauldron; he would have thought nothing of it if he had.

Sirius had seen all he needed to see. Funny things Charms, they only worked properly if you didn't already know who the caster was; when he concentrated he could see below the complex spells. For some time he had wondered if Snape had Flooed from the Leaky Cauldron back to Hogwarts, but he doubted he would have wanted to break his cover in that way. He assumed he had gone out the back door into the London streets, and he was about to go back to spend a miserable night in Grimmauld Place when Snape had stepped into Diagon Alley.

Sirius almost whined when he saw him walk slowly up the street, a tall dark man, pulling his bitter loneliness about him with his winter cloak, like the hostile shroud he presented to the world.

It was Saturday, at least Merlin had to be thanked for that tiny mercy. Severus dragged himself upright from where he'd fallen asleep at his table, trying to ignore the slamming headache and the upturned glass and the whisky bottles, one empty, and one half-full. He stood up and rummaged around in the cupboard above the stone sink in the workbench, until he found the tiny bottle of the most vicious but effective hangover cure he'd ever brewed. He uncorked the bottle, his stomach recoiling at the yellow fumes, and tipped it bravely to his mouth. He should have taken it in the bathroom; he knew that much from previous experience, but it was too late now.

It seemed to be hours that he stood shivering over the sink, while he threw up the whisky and the Firewhisky he had gone on to when the malt had run out. At last he drew a long shaky breath and filled a tumbler with cold water. He was still shaking as he sipped it cautiously; then some ignorant bastard began knocking on his door.

He considered ignoring it; in fact he did ignore it for long enough to make sure that the excesses of his dissipation were cleared from view. But he might as well begin to put this adolescent nonsense behind himself immediately. He flung the door open and stifled a groan.

'Just to let you know there's a meeting at Grimmauld Place tomorrow at lunchtime, Severus,' Potter said, looking past him into the room before turning again to him. 'Are you all right? You look awful.'

'Thank you for your misplaced concern,' Snape hissed back. 'That will be all.' He tried to close the door on the insolent little whelp's face.

Potter muttered something under his breath, about it not being his fault that Voldemort was dead and had renounced him as a traitor to his cause with his dying breath, as Harry's hand had closed around his wand under Snape's hand some three months ago.

Severus pulled the door open wide; he may as well vent his rage at someone worthy. 'What did you say?' he snarled.

Potter turned in green-eyed insolence. 'Can't you drop it, Snape? We've all changed; we've all had to make adjustments, not only you,' he snapped back. 'Dumbledore's had to adjust to being dead, and you can't even adjust to being alive. You're pathetic, you know that?'

'I beg your pardon?' Snape asked, hoping he sounded more dangerous than he felt. He should have waited until he felt better to take on Potter and his smart mouth. That was a stupid mistake; it wasn't his first of the week.

'Forget it,' Harry said and turned away, clearly angry he'd risen to the bait. 'It's hardly my problem if you want to sit down here night after night like the cloistered old virgin you obviously are, getting drunk so you can have the excitement of a hangover in the morning. Anyway, I'm only the message boy; it's not my place to judge my betters,' he delivered with an irony that wasn't lost on Severus.

Severus had left himself with the wretched option he should have taken in the first place, and slammed the door in childish fury.

'We've got a meeting tomorrow,' Lupin said as he pushed a cup of coffee across the table. He eyed Sirius with concern. 'Want to talk about it?'

'Nope,' Sirius replied flatly. 'There's nothing to talk about.'

'Come on, Sirius, snap out of it. It's not as though you've never had a bad experience.'

Sirius wished Lupin would go now; he didn't want to talk, he didn't want to do anything but attempt to work out a way of forgetting that Julius was Severus Snape. He needed to see Snape again, and yet that thought terrified him; the thought that Severus would refuse to continue unless he knew who Sirius was, or that he would make some mistake, some slip of the tongue and that Snape would drop him like a hot brick. Sirius didn't think he was deluding himself, or reading more into the relationship that had hardly even begun; he knew how he felt and he thought he knew how Severus felt too.

And that was the tricky bit; he'd realised he'd already accepted the fact that Julius was Snape, but he doubted Severus would return the compliment. The possibility that he would not see him again hung over him. Snape was the only man who had ever had the balls and the finesse to push the outer limits of his endurance; the very possibility that this might end horrified Sirius. The man's touch was a drug he knew he could not do without, but it wasn't only that; had it been he would just have set it aside with regret. Sirius thought there was more; for the first time in his life he thought the big prize might just have been under his nose all the time, it had just been wrongly labelled.

'I haven't had a bad experience,' he replied as he tried to put on his grin.

'What then?' Lupin asked, his concern growing. 'You can't be in so deeply in a few days.'

In so deeply? Was he? Was that what was wrong? He found himself nodding in confusion. 'I don't know ... I just don't want it to end,' he said stifling a useless sigh. 'And it

will. I don't know how long I can pretend.'

'Pretend what, Sirius? Are you telling me you know who this man is?'

'Yes. And when he finds out who I am ... well suffice it say, that will be the end.' Sirius nodded as he felt something like hopelessness well up inside him. 'Anyway, I bet you haven't told Malfoy who you are,' he said, trying to steer Lupin away from the point.

The werewolf looked down. 'I didn't need to; he already guessed.'

'And?' Sirius raised his eyebrow in intrigue.

'We'll see,' Lupin replied.

'Well, well, well.' Sirius grinned with feeling this time. 'Just think, Remus, if you play your cards right you wouldn't have to borrow clothes anymore; you could buy your own.'

'I remember you said you thought he knew Lucius,' Lupin said, harking back, and Sirius could see him searching his mind. 'Who is he, Sirius? Or have I already guessed?'

'I think you have,' Sirius said; his grin had tightened again. 'I'm going to run something past you, Moony; it's not cruel, but it's not kind either. I just ... fuck it, I just don't know what to do. I need him to know that I know who he is, but I don't want him to think I've been asking around.'

'Why?' Lupin asked. 'I assume we are talking about Severus?'

'The very man,' Sirius said. 'Now you know why I need to keep my cover.'

'You hate him. Don't do this for the wrong reasons, Sirius. Let the past go; don't do this just to hurt him. I thought we'd left that behind us.'

Sirius gave him a level look. 'I have, Remus. I'm trying to move forward.'

Sirius knew he'd go back again, just as he knew Snape would go back too. He sat patiently in the lane beside the Leaky Cauldron and sure enough the man he now knew to be Severus Snape walked quickly along the dark street, looked around once and ducked inside the tavern.

Sirius wanted to go inside; he found it hard to imagine him sitting there, growing angrier by the minute, more depressed, lonelier. The minutes were as much an agony to him, but he contented himself to sit it out; he didn't think Severus would wait as long as last night. Maybe just over an hour later he watched him come out, with his Charms still cast about him. Sirius loathed himself for the slump in the shoulders; he hoped he could pull this off.

The timing was going to be crucial; he had to get to Snape after he'd dropped his Charms, but before he Apparated. The last thing he wanted was for Severus to go back to Hogwarts believing he had not turned up; he knew there wouldn't be another chance. He was just becoming concerned that he would Apparate the way he was, when he caught sight of the familiar harsh profile as Snape looked quickly up the street. Sirius made his move.

Severus was glad in a way that he had come, glad that he at least had no doubts left in his mind. He knew the man had not turned up, even as he knew he would not come back here again. He would put this nonsense behind him and learn to live with the fact that he was alone; it had ever been thus anyway, there was no good reason why it should change now. He was just crossing the street when he heard footsteps behind him.

'Can I buy you a drink?' the man said breathlessly from behind him. 'I'm glad I caught you. I was beginning to think I'd blown it.'

Severus turned quickly, forgetting he had let his Charms drop and watched the man frown in disappointment and surprise.

'Sorry,' he said, stepping back from where he had been about to touch him. 'I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else.' The man began to turn away.

'I am whomever you want me to be, Amadeus,' Snape replied, and watched the man stop in his tracks. 'But you have me at an advantage now. My cover is, as they say, well and truly blown.'

'It is, isn't it, Severus?' the man replied.

'I take it then that you know me,' he said quietly, only slightly concerned. 'Do you intend to extend me the equal courtesy?'

'No,' the man let his familiar grin slip onto his face, 'not until I think I can risk it. We don't like one another very much.'

'Why does that not surprise me?' Severus replied wryly.

'About last night,' the man said. 'I hope you didn't come. I had a family matter crop up, and I couldn't get away.'

'It doesn't matter,' Snape said, and it was true; it didn't matter now.

'Your place or mine?' the man asked.

'I could call your bluff and say your place,' Severus answered. 'And then you'd have to make up some outlandish excuse as to why we couldn't go back there, perhaps even inventing a wife and several children that you would have to keep remembering about. Seeing as you have difficulty remembering your name, perhaps we should go to my rooms.'

It had been over twenty years since Sirius had been in these rooms; the last time had been detention when he was in his seventh year at Hogwarts. He tried not to recall that it was for hexing Severus, so that the perfect potion he had made had spilled over the floor, and had multiplied at such an alarming rate that the class had to be abandoned and Filch had to be called to clear up the resultant mess.

'What are you smiling about?' Snape asked as he closed the door and turned his wand to the empty fireplace, lighting a merry blaze that seemed out of place in these cold damp rooms, lined with shelves of old books and dusty bottles of unimaginable things, and a fat black cat that slunk out of a shadowy corner and eyed Sirius with suspicious hostility as though he had no right to encroach upon its domain.

Sirius suspected the fire was rarely lit. He could picture Severus sitting down here with his cloak on, warming himself from the inside out with whisky, while the cat sat in front of the blank grate and dreamt of the contents of the jars. 'Nothing much,' he replied. 'I didn't ever expect to be back at Hogwarts in such a capacity.'

Snape turned to him with something like concern etched on his hard features. 'Have you been one of my pupils?' he asked as the cat jumped onto the table and hissed at Sirius, before nudging Snape's long-fingered white hand in the hope of having its ears rubbed.

Sirius shook his head; he could see that worried him. 'No, I left here before you arrived.' He watched Severus relax a little, as though he had accepted what he'd said; he had a suspicion the cat recognised his other form though. 'I don't think the cat likes me.'

'The cat doesn't like anyone,' Severus replied as he gave it a look that seemed to border oddly on affection, 'although she tolerates me. I know it to be cupboard love though, fickle things cats.'

'I'm not fickle, Severus,' Sirius said. 'I just want you to accept me for a while as the man I am, not the man you may have thought I was.'

'Why do I think I am going to regret this?'

'I promise you won't.'

Snape was last to arrive, as was his habit; he couldn't see what the meeting was for anyway, it wasn't as if Voldemort had risen from the dead. He couldn't see why he'd had to cut his Sunday short. He managed to avoid waking the harridan in the portrait as he passed, and pushed the door that opened onto the ugly kitchen.

Black and Lupin were sitting at the top of the table with Bill and Charlie Weasley on either side; Potter and Ron Weasley were standing at the sink arguing over who made the worse coffee, and Minerva sat talking to Arthur and Molly whilst the rest of the Order talked and argued amongst themselves. The only people who acknowledged Snape's presence were Dumbledore, who had cracked an eye open from where he sat slumbering in the portrait Minerva had brought with her from Hogwarts, and Potter, who gave him an odd look; he felt as welcome as a dose of pox.

Severus took no part in the general discussions of the meeting, apart from exchanging a few hostile glares with Black, who admittedly appeared to be out of sorts in that he hadn't yet stooped to fling random insults at him. He was just about to excuse himself, once he thought up a suitable reason, when Dumbledore seemed to wake up properly.

'Let us now go on to the main business of why I have called you all here a week before Christmas,' he said, eyeing Snape keenly in way he didn't like a bit. 'I have it on good authority that many of the former Death Eaters are attempting to form themselves into a group again. Let us not become careless and allow a new Dark Lord to arise just because the situation has become vacant.'

Severus found Black and Lupin both watching him and twisted his lip. 'What am I supposed to about it? I do not have contact with any of them.'

'You've got contact with Lucius Malfoy, Severus,' Dumbledore said reasonably.

'Lucius is no longer a Death Eater,' Severus snapped. 'He has neither the inclination nor the balls to rejoin any group that may be attempting to form. He got into enough of a mess the last time, if you recall.'

'Nevertheless, Severus, it may be an idea to see if he has heard anything. Such things would come to his ears, one way or another,' Dumbledore replied as he accepted a cup of tea from the curvy blond witch who had walked into his portrait. 'From then you could perhaps pay some visits? Just to keep tabs on things.'

Snape almost laughed. 'I'll be very welcome, I'm sure. Perhaps it escaped your notice, but I doubt it escaped theirs, that I was with Potter when Voldemort fell.'

'That could be read in different ways in different quarters,' Minerva suggested.

'Quite,' Snape replied. 'Perhaps you should send Potter then, to avoid confusion.'

'This is a real concern, Snape,' Bill Weasley said. 'We didn't meet here for fun.'

'Why me?' Snape asked. 'Or is it that my hands are muddied enough from dallying with the Dark Forces that a little more won't matter?'

'Someone will go with you,' Dumbledore replied. 'You will not be left to work alone, Severus.'

'I think I can just about manage,' Snape sneered as he looked around them, cursing inwardly for allowing himself to be tricked into picking up a gauntlet that he should have left on the floor. 'There isn't anyone here I feel I want to work with any more than they want to work with me.'

'Why don't you just listen for a moment, Snape?' Black suggested.

'You're bottom of the list, Black, let me assure you.'

'Shut up for a minute, you arrogant fuck,' Sirius said, and stopped short in realisation of the words he had used ... but it was too late.

Severus felt his heart actually falter, as though someone had twisted a fist around it. 'Fascinating turn of phrase, Black,' he whispered, as he dragged himself to his feet, unsurprised to find he was actually shaking.

Sirius felt as though someone had thrown a bucket of cold water at him, or hit him with a cricket bat. He had been so careful, so casual, measuring every glance, and making sure he only gave Severus the few antagonistic glares he would expect.

He'd made sure Snape wasn't looking at him as he watched the way almost everyone ignored him when he came in, the way he sat at the bottom of the table as though he didn't want to be there and nobody else wanted him there either. It made him wonder why Severus ever bothered to turn up; if people had treated Sirius like that he knew he wouldn't have bothered his arse with them, Dark Lord or not. He almost understood what had turned Snape towards the Death Eaters in the first place, when he had been little more than a boy; he'd been treated in the same way since he'd been a child. Perhaps when he was with the Death Eaters at least Voldemort had acknowledged he was of some value.

And yet, even with the bad feeling of all of the Order, and the people he worked with, and the outright hostility and mistrust with which he was viewed, he had never faltered. He had even killed Dumbledore, the last act of outrage to the wizarding world, the one that sealed opinions in the eyes of others ... whilst behind their backs he and Harry saved their kind. Sirius had a sickening feeling that although Harry had been feted like the conquering hero he was, no one had ever bothered to say thank you to Snape; he knew he hadn't.

Sirius had found himself becoming more and more anxious to get the meeting over; he wanted to go back to Hogwarts, he wanted to be with him. He just wished Severus would stop putting up objections to what he was going to do anyway, just wished he'd listen and accept what he had to do; it wasn't as though it was particularly dangerous, and someone would go with him. Sirius had fully intended to be that someone; he had a bit of work to do on that though, he admitted to himself.

And then it had just slipped out; he had only been trying to hurry him on, just two words. He'd never used them before a few days ago; there had never been anyone worthy of that particular endearment in his life before now.

Arrogant fuck, just two words to send the lot crumbling about his ears.

'What's wrong?' Harry asked from the sink, when it became obvious that Snape wasn't talking about anything to do with the meeting. 'Fuck sake, it's only a throwaway remark, Severus; it doesn't mean anything. Stop taking things so personally.'

'You're right, Potter; it doesn't mean anything. That much is now patently obvious,' Severus said quietly as he turned away. 'You have surpassed yourself this time, Black. I was quite taken in,' he said over his shoulder, as he passed out of the room into the hall and out into Grimmauld Place.

Harry flung the tea towel he was holding into the sink. 'I'll go after him,' he snapped at Sirius, 'if you promise to keep that mouth shut for a change.'

Sirius didn't know why he should be surprised; he'd realised a while back that Snape and Harry had come to some sort of aggressively grudging acceptance of one another. You didn't fight with a man, holding him up as he held you up in the way they had, to go back to a war over nothing. 'Just leave him, Harry. Let him cool off.'

'Maybe he's not well,' Harry objected.

'Just leave him, Harry,' Sirius repeated.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 3

Severus finds his faith in human nature back at its familiar low level, for a while at least.

Chapter Three

Harry and Ron had tried to linger after the meeting, but Sirius made it clear that he wanted to be alone, that he needed an early night; he wasn't sure what stupid excuses he made to get rid of everyone.

'Do I take it you blew it?' Lupin asked once he was alone with Sirius.

Sirius nodded. 'It looks that way, doesn't it?'

'Something you said?' Lupin guessed. 'Although I'm not sure that "arrogant fuck" sounds much like pillow talk. It's a new one on me.'

Sirius winced at the words and dropped his head to his hands. 'Why couldn't I keep my mouth shut?'

'Does it matter that much to you?'

'Yes. I believe it does.'

'Well,' Lupin said carefully, 'do something about it, Sirius.'

'Like what? Do you think he'll want to see me now? You saw the way he looked at me.'

'Don't pretend to be someone you're not. You're a better person than anyone you pretend to be,' Lupin replied. 'If you care that much, go to him and tell him. You're still the same person he wanted to be with.'

'You know that's not true, Moony. You know he'll think I dreamt up the whole business as some kind of elaborate hoax to humiliate him. I have a track record, after all.'

'You'll just have to convince him otherwise then, won't you?' Lupin said as he stood up. 'I need to go. Will you be okay on your own?'

'Of course I will,' Sirius replied as he forced his grin. 'It's one of the only things I'm really good at.'

'Stop being pathetic.'

'Where are you going anyway, Old Wolf?' Sirius asked. 'Don't tell me Malfoy's still got some uncharted waters.'

Lupin just smiled his enigmatic little smile.

'You're quite keen on him, aren't you?' Sirius pushed. 'And what about him? Don't let him hurt you, Remus.'

'Actually, I'm not the one doing the chasing.'

Snape pulled his door open, disappointed and relieved that it wasn't Sirius. 'What do you want?' he snarled at his visitor.

'I came to see you were all right, actually,' Harry replied, giving him a hard look. 'I'm sorry I bothered.'

'Why shouldn't I be?' Severus asked suspiciously.

'I just thought you didn't look well when you left the meeting and as no one else went after you I ... Oh fuck it, I don't give a toss,' Harry snapped and turned away.

Snape stopped himself slamming his door. 'Thank you for your concern,' he replied through gritted teeth, with as much grace as he could dredge up. 'I am fine, Potter; I just wish to be left alone to get drunk in peace. As you said yourself, a hangover in the morning is the highlight of my life.'

'What's wrong with you?' Harry asked. 'Why do you have to be so fucking hostile?'

Snape let his eyebrow rise at the profanity. 'It is what I do, Potter. Now, is that all? Only I have a bottle waiting for me and I should not want it to think I didn't care.'

Harry began to walk away. 'Yeah, that's all. Don't drown, I haven't brought my dress robes with me this term for your funeral.'

Snape watched him go, stifling the small gratitude he felt inside him, glad that his relationship with Potter had changed over the months to one of antagonism without hate; he suspected the boy was as comfortable with things that way as he was. At the end of the corridor Potter turned and looked back, giving Snape a haughty toss of his head. He nodded back, forgiveness without apology; at least someone cared.

It was only when Severus closed the door that he allowed himself to think of Sirius, about all of the hints and clues as to who he was. He'd known he was a Gryffindor, reckoned they were about the same age, not that his Charms couldn't alter that one, but his way of speaking, and his experience of life pitched him around the same age as himself. Black had as near as told him who he was by admitting they didn't like one another, as glaring an understatement as they came. And then, of course, there had been the morning in the tobaccoconists; he wondered if Sirius had followed him, but he didn't think so.

Snape wondered what he'd got out of it, how he had planned it, and what lengths he had gone to to inflict this upon him. It never occurred to him to wonder why; he had long ago accepted that there were con artists in this world and those who were there to be conned. He knew which category he fell into; he'd been there often enough.

He found himself unable to get drunk; maybe he was too disconsolate, too edgy, thinking too deeply. He couldn't concentrate to read, and he couldn't stop thinking for long enough to sleep. He found to his alarm that something like panic was trying to rise in chest; he didn't want to be alone for the rest of his life, not now, not now that he had thought, for however short a time, that there might be another way.

He could have accepted this, he thought, accepted him if the playing field had been level, if Black had been as unaware of him as he was of Black; the muddled thoughts chased themselves around his mind. For just a while his fantasy had been real; somehow it was even more real now that it had a face and a past. Severus wished he hadn't walked out of Grimmauld Place; he'd let himself down doing that.

He tried to look back on all of the times in his life when he'd come into contact with Sirius Black, and could find nothing good, nothing to latch onto, no anchor for the hope he smothered before it rose to choke him with its lies. The moment one door closed, another slammed in his face.

He swallowed another gulp of whisky, hoping it would stifle the terror of being alone, without the man he now knew to be a figment of his imagination. He felt it scald the back of his throat; at least he blamed the whisky, it was easier than admitting the truth. He felt himself become sleepy at last, and let his head rest on his arms on the table; just for a minute he promised himself, just a minute and he'd go to bed. He'd start fresh in the morning. He'd paint on the aggressive armour and raise the shield of hostility, and die a little more inside each day... but it would be all right, because no one would notice the difference.

Three times Sirius had raised his fist to the door; three times he had let it fall to his side. He knew Snape would probably ask who was there, and that would be the end of any chance of getting face to face with him. Maybe if he stood here all night he could ambush him when he left his rooms; tomorrow was Monday, he'd definitely leave his rooms for classes.

He tried to imagine what Severus was doing: was he reading, thinking, drinking? Sirius doubted he'd be asleep; it was still early. He cursed the fact that he hadn't had the bottle to come earlier, that way he could have accosted him on his way to dinner; he didn't know Snape hadn't gone to the Hall.

He took a deep breath and knocked on the door before he could think about it again.

'Go away,' came the reply from the other side.

Fuck, Sirius snarled to himself; Snape was drunk. He knocked again, a little harder, and heard the scrape of a chair on the stone floor and then the smash of glass, followed by a volley of curses, and then the door was flung open. He didn't take the time to think or speak or anything else but stick his foot in the door, so it couldn't be slammed in his face; the lack of resistance surprised him so much that he almost fell into the room.

'Come for an encore without an audience, Black?' Snape said coldly. 'How unlike you.'

'Whatever you're thinking, it isn't true,' Sirius said, unsure where to start, but anywhere was a beginning. He could see Snape struggling to get his mental gears in order. He was obviously very drunk; it wasn't going to help things.

'Why have you come here?' he asked.

'I thought I'd made that pretty obvious over the last two weeks,' Sirius replied. 'I couldn't tell you, Severus, not once I knew who you were. I knew you would want to end it.'

'End it?' Severus snorted his derision. 'End what?'

'Don't try to pretend we didn't have something.'

'You flatter yourself if you think you're anything more than a quick anonymous fuck. Any tart can perform to an audience of one.'

'I don't believe you,' Sirius replied, wishing his voice hadn't taken on a pleading note. 'Don't do this to me, Severus.'

'That's rather odd, coming from you,' Snape said. 'Have you ever in your miserable existence stopped to think about what you do to other people?' His face was white with suppressed fury, and behind it Sirius detected the first trace of vulnerability.

Severus knew he'd started badly and gone downhill quickly, and he didn't know how to stop. He was on the attack when he felt he should be in defence; he was listening to what he wanted to say himself, and he was at a total loss as to how to start again. He turned away, closing his eyes, and felt himself sway with a combination of whisky and he couldn't even imagine what else.

'Go away, Black. There is nothing here for you,' he said tiredly, 'or me.'

'We could still pretend,' Black said from so close behind him that he started and turned.

'Pretend?' Snape snarled. 'Why don't you put another advertisement in the "Daily Prophet" and get someone who is more susceptible to your dubious appeal and pretend with them? Who knows, you might not even need your Charms; your doggy suit would probably do.'

'Now you're being ridiculous,' Black retorted, showing a first spark of annoyance. 'I didn't place any advertisement, and you're not stupid enough to think I did.'

'Why have you come here?' Snape asked, suddenly needing to keep him talking. The real Sirius Black was coming out, emerging from the shadows, and he was pleased of that much. He watched as Black sat at his table, spelled away the broken glass from the floor, and uncorked the new whisky bottle that had sat as a backup.

'Where are your glasses?' he asked.

For a moment Snape stood in indecision. He could throw him out or he could hear him out; he had no idea why he took the stance he did. Perhaps some instinct of self-preservation kicked in through the haze in his mind; some horizon, however doubtful, beckoned to him. Maybe it was just the fact that he was not alone, as he thought he would be, that even this company, unproven as it was, was better than none at all. He nodded towards the sinks and watched as Black got back up from his seat and rummaged around on the shelves in the cupboard above the sink until he found two glasses. As Sirius splashed two measures, Severus realised he had taken a tiny step forward after all.

'Don't stand there like that,' Black said. 'You make me feel uncomfortable.'

Severus found it hard to move, so hard to back down; it was as though he were leaving himself open to he knew not what. He had never felt so defenceless in his life; nothing had prepared him for how he felt.

'Do you remember what you said to me that first night?' Sirius said, and went on without waiting for a reply. 'It was something like, "Let's dispense with the difficulties of unfamiliarity",' he said, smiling a little ruefully. 'They sound like your words; Merlin alone knows how I didn't recognise you right away. You said, "For all intents and purposes we know one another very well", that's what you said.'

'What is your point, if you have one?' Severus asked, but he couldn't seem to dredge up any acid to lace it with.

'My point is that nothing has changed,' Black replied, his eyes remaining steadfastly on Snape's. 'I am the same man ... and so are you.'

Severus didn't know how to move on, how to take the few steps to the table; he felt like an intruder in his own territory. 'I can't do this,' he whispered as he turned away and looked down, shocked that he'd voiced his thoughts. It was a few long moments before he heard the scrape of the chair, just long enough for him to come to terms with the things he really wanted to say, but not long enough to find the courage to say them. And now it looked as though it was too late anyway; Black was leaving and Severus didn't have the guts to stop him. Then he felt the man behind him, his hand on his waist, and his breath in his hair.

'I know you can't,' Black said, 'but I can. Please, Severus. Believe me, I never meant this to happen, and if I had known who you were, it never would have ... but, Merlin help me, I think I've fallen for you.'

Snape said nothing; it was enough just to stand and accept the words he so needed to believe. Black would probably expect no more.

'And I know something else,' Sirius said quietly, speaking into his neck in a way that thawed the last stubborn ice around his heart. 'It's not only everyone else in the world who deserves a bit of happiness; maybe we deserve a bit too.'

'I find volte-face a painful option,' Snape replied in a low steady voice he found from somewhere.

'I just bet you do, you arrogant fuck.'

Severus found himself turning; it wasn't really that difficult, not once he'd started. He was glad there was no trace of the grin, just a frailty that matched his own, a longing to belong, a need to care and be cared for.

Sirius couldn't think where he was in the moments between sleep and waking, until the physical heat caught up with the mental warmth. The man beside him was still asleep. They had talked into the small hours of the morning, punctuating the time with long hostile silences, often arguing or accusing, sometimes even laughing at the few and far between reminiscences that had hurt neither of them, and had finally come to some sort of understanding of one another. Sirius had been very conscious of what Remus had said, and had admitted just when he had recognised Severus. Instead of the reaction he had feared, the admission had seemed to be some sort of comfort to Snape and had been almost a watershed. He thought Snape understood that now, understood that Sirius had known who he was and that he had still come back to him. He was surprised at how easy the truth could be, how it didn't need to hide, how it was only lies that turned on you when you least expected them.

He wondered what time it was; the light filtering in through Snape's tiny bedroom window, set almost at the ceiling, gave him no clue. He gave the prone man a gentle kick. 'How about getting some breakfast down here?' he said, unsurprised to realise he was awake.

'This is Hogwarts, not the Leaky Cauldron,' Snape muttered, dragging himself up to a sitting position.

'They do room service here, you know,' Sirius replied. 'At least they did when I was here.'

'Why does that not surprise me?' Snape gave him a sour look. 'What time is it? I have an ominous feeling that my classroom is already under a foot of slime.'

'Gryffindors first thing?'

'Of course. Minerva's sense of humour on timetables is the same as Dumbledore's was,' Snape muttered as he hauled himself out of bed and walked into his living room. 'Fuck,' Sirius heard him curse in panic, 'it's half past nine.'

Sirius grinned to himself as Snape hurried back into the bedroom just as someone began to hammer on his door. 'Shall I get that?' he asked, throwing the rugs back.

'Don't dare move and don't open your mouth,' Severus snarled at him, as he pulled on the pair of trousers that he found lying on the floor, and last night's shirt.

Sirius snuggled back down under the covers; he wasn't in a hurry. He'd always found one of the advantages of not really having anywhere to go was that he was never late.

'Are we going to have a Potions class or not?' Harry asked, looking Snape up and down.

'Not today, thank you. Let us all forego that particular pleasure,' Severus replied, pleased to see the boy start back in surprise.

'A hangover?' Harry asked, as he gave him another up and down look. 'Or perhaps not. What excuse will I give for your absence?'

'You know something, Potter,' Snape replied. 'I don't really give a fuck.'

Harry laughed. 'For a moment you sounded human,' he said as he walked away. 'A head cold or a stomach bug, which one would you prefer?'

'You choose,' Snape called after him. 'And, Potter, no spectacular bodily functions or sexually transmitted diseases, if you don't mind.'

'Of course not. After all what would a cloistered old virgin want with one of them?' Harry gave Snape an annoyingly knowing look. 'A headache it is then.'

Sirius set the table in the kitchen in Grimmauld Place, or to be exact he flung the family-crested silverware to lie where it landed. He'd had a run in with a doxy when he'd tried to take the bone china from an ancient cabinet in the dining room, and gave up, slamming the door behind him and hexing it so he would never open it again by mistake. Chipped kitchen plates would do; he lied to himself that Severus wouldn't notice.

Kreacher had been following about on his heels, muttering darkly to himself, so that every time Sirius turned round he almost fell over him, as his mother screeched obscenities about entertaining filthy, half-blood poverty stricken scum in her house. Sirius felt the elf would have been better employed scraping at least some of the years of accumulated grime from the Ancient and Most Noble and Equally Grubby House of Black, but he forewent wasting his breath in trying to explain that to him.

At least the kitchen looked, perhaps not festive, but a little less unwelcoming than the rest of the dump. Sirius would have liked to get rid of Grimmauld Place, but as Dumbledore had been the Secret Keeper and he was dead, he was finding it as difficult to get rid of the house as a socially unacceptable rash, seeing as the only people who could gain admittance were Order members. He resigned himself to the fact that he was stuck with it; he just wished the damned place didn't resist every feeble attempt he made in trying to make it more like a home.

The turkey smelt good. He opened the oven, pretending that actually lighting the ugly great furnace and occasionally opening it to look at the bird constituted cooking the dinner, and conveniently forgot that it had been Severus who had actually done the preparation. Sirius had been impressed with his culinary skill, even though he knew every time his back was turned Snape cheated outrageously, until there wouldn't be a mouthful that had not been magically enhanced one way or another.

He found himself standing in the horrible kitchen, with a ragged oven cloth in his hand, and a sniffing house-elf looking balefully up at him; and his mother screaming her eternal fury at the disgrace he had brought to the family name; and tears in his eyes and a huge lump of emotion choking his chest. Sirius was happy; for the first time in his life he was happy. He hadn't even known what happy was before now. He had heard of it, of course, and had mistakenly assumed it to have something to do with laughing, but it had been something for other people. He'd always wondered why they had cherished it so ... now he knew; now it was his.

He sniffed loudly as he drew the back of his hand across his nose and felt the grin creep onto his face. He was just about to yell up the stairs to see what was keeping Severus when some ungracious unwanted visitor knocked on the door. For a moment he considered ignoring it, but his mother was now shrieking at such a crescendo that the plaster on the kitchen ceiling was beginning to crack.

'Happy Christmas,' Harry said with a beam as he ducked under Sirius's arm, dragging a pretty Chinese-looking girl after him.

'Happy Christmas,' Cho said, smiling so fetchingly that Sirius almost forgave the interruption.

'You didn't think we'd let you spend Christmas on your own, did you?' Harry said, making himself comfortable at the kitchen table. 'Don't argue, Sirius. I know you didn't want to go to Molly's; so we've come here instead.'

'How,' Sirius stammered, 'how did Cho get under the Fidelius Charm?'

'Dumbledore fixed it,' Harry admitted. 'He wouldn't tell me how he did it, pretending it could only be done by someone who was dead; I think in case you try it yourself. Something smells good,' he said enthusiastically. 'Now you won't have to eat it on your own.'

'I wasn't going to,' Sirius replied.

Harry was really enjoying this; he wondered if Sirius's visitor was going to show himself or not. It didn't matter; his godfather couldn't really bluff it out for long. He was just about to string Sirius along a bit more when the kitchen door opened.

'Can't you do something about the ruddy racket that old harpy is making?' Snape said, and kind of trailed off, but for only a moment. 'And get that ruddy useless piece of shit you call an elf to put clean towels in the bathroom; the one I used was damp,' he went on, staring at Harry and Cho as though they were some type of bizarre Christmas decorations that Sirius had put at the table as a joke.

'Happy Christmas, Severus,' Harry said, looking the half-naked man up and down. He was very impressed with how Snape had recovered; he'd done much better than Sirius. 'It's usually cold here. I wouldn't wander about like that for too long.'

'Have you brought me a present?' Sirius asked once he recovered enough to see that Severus wasn't going to storm off to Hogwarts because of the interruption.

'Have you bought me one?' Harry asked.

'Not yet, I wasn't expecting you,' Sirius replied.

'You are supposed to buy them in advance of the festivities, Black,' Snape said dryly, from where he'd sat down with the offending damp towel tied precariously around his waist. 'Not wait until you see what other people have bought for you so you don't spend too much money on them if you don't need to. You can be very tight-fisted at times.'

'I didn't notice you put your hand in your pocket when it came to buying the turkey,' Sirius retorted.

'Anytime you want to get to your point will be fine,' Snape replied. 'Have you even offered your guests a refreshment... or perhaps you have at last taught the elf how to do tricks.' He nodded meaningfully to Harry. 'Although I warn you, Potter, not to eat or drink anything it touches. Only yesterday I think I caught it about to piss in the teapot.'

Sirius gave the elf a quick horrified look, as Harry sat back watching them with a mysterious smile on his face.

'Why don't you go and get dressed,' Sirius suggested. 'You'll make the turkey go off if you sit about like that, not to mention ruining my appetite.'

Snape stood up, giving Sirius, Harry, and the silent but smiling Cho a sweeping look to share amongst themselves. 'At least pour some wine, Black. I'm sure there must be another two clean glasses somewhere in this tasteless mausoleum.'

He was only away for a short time and Harry was unsurprised to see that he was dressed the way he always was, in his tight buttoned-down high-waisted trousers and his frock coat; anything else would have disappointed him. He would have been uncomfortable seeing Severus in Muggle clothes; it just wouldn't seem right. Severus Snape was the most un-Muggle man he had ever met.

When Snape sat back down Harry felt that they had both resigned themselves to having company for dinner; in fact he suspected they were pleased about it.

'Can I set this table properly?' Cho asked a little timidly. 'It's like a dog's dinner ... and it is Christmas.'

'I am gratified that someone has noticed,' Snape replied, as Sirius took on his most crestfallen look.

It had been a good day, the best Severus could remember. He was almost tempted to believe it would be first of many, and that bit by bit he could let down the armour with which he had protected himself for so long that it had become a second skin.

Potter and Cho Chang had stood to leave; that was good too, they seemed to have no intentions of outstaying their uncertain welcome. Severus admitted to himself he was glad they had come, that he had been able to practise on these two, especially Potter; he and Potter knew one another well, it was easier to start with him, like an advance party, a test case.

'What about my present?' Sirius said as Harry helped Cho on with her cloak.

Snape watched Harry dip into his pocket and remove a small piece of parchment; it looked like a bill of some sort. He smiled to himself in an emotion he didn't quite recognise, understanding at last why Potter had seemed to be at his door so often over the last couple of weeks.

Harry had been trying to work this out ever since shortly after Minerva McGonagall had met him as he came off the Hogwarts Express at Kings Cross the end of his sixth year; a boy trying to find a direction without the guidance of the Headmaster who had always been there to show him the way. She had been waiting for him with a tall slim man, who although he seemed oddly familiar, Harry did not know. They had waited until the platform had cleared and had re-boarded the train. The man had spoken little during the journey and Harry had contented himself to waiting to listen to what Dumbledore had to say to him from beyond the grave. Once they had reached McGonagall's office, Harry noticed that the man he had only seen slumbering in the portrait was now awake and as alert as he had ever looked when he was alive.

'Harry, this has been a great trial for you. But now I need you to trust me as much as you have ever done, perhaps more,' Dumbledore said with the compassionate but steely-blue gaze that had marked him apart from lesser men.

Harry remembered nodding his assent, only too relieved to find that the Headmaster's advice would still be available to him. But the portrait was looking past him, to where the slim man had turned away. 'Show yourself, Severus,' Dumbledore said quietly.

Harry spun, his wand already in his hand, but he stopped short, letting his hand fall to his side in confusion. 'You,' he said, accusingly. 'Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you right now.'

Snape had let his eyebrow rise a fraction. 'I do not need to tell you the reasons, Potter; you know them.'

He remembered turning to Dumbledore again. 'I don't understand. He killed you ... I saw him do it.'

'And you were unable to stop it, Harry,' Dumbledore replied. 'Why do you think that was?'

'Because it had to happen?' Harry replied, and then a wave of understanding washed over him. 'Because you were already dead?'

Snape nodded. 'Indeed, although I admit the complication of Draco Malfoy had not occurred to me. I had assumed that taking the Unbreakable Oath with his mother would have removed him from the picture.'

'But I'm the one who's got to kill Voldemort,' Harry argued. 'Not you.'

'Indeed, Potter,' Snape repeated. 'That particular pleasure is one which will be denied me, a bitter pill to swallow. But I am the one man alive who can get the Dark Lord to where you need him to be when you do dispatch him.'

'Where?'

'The Department of Mysteries,' Snape said enigmatically and nodded to the portrait. 'The Headmaster is privy to certain secrets beyond the grave, secrets which are not known to us. He has done a deal with the Keepers of the Veil to trade Sirius Black for the Dark Lord.'

He'd worked so closely with Severus after that, their previous hostility providing a solid backbone for the brutally honest way in which they dealt with one another, until each knew the other like they knew themselves.

It was just after Sirius had come back through the Veil that Harry began to think that if life had dealt the cards in a different order, that Snape and Sirius would have been perfect for one another. For quite a while the solution had evaded him; there were too many barriers to break down, too much stormy water had passed under the bridge, and it had seemed too daunting a task to even get the two of them to speak a civil word to one another. It came to him quite by chance one night when he had been sniggering through the personal advertisements in the "Prophet" with Ron.

It took ages to work it out and win over the confidence of the one man he needed to set it up; in fact it was only when Harry had dangled the prospect of Galleons in front of Tom's eyes, that he had agreed. Of course, he never knew who Harry was; he was just the man who had paid the piper and asked to take over behind the bar on the second night after the advertisement was placed. All Tom had to do was stay out of sight for an hour or two whilst his look-alike checked over his master plan. Harry had done it all himself, not wanting to take anyone else into his confidence. He hadn't wanted to share their feelings with anyone else. Sirius was the godfather he had thought he'd lost, and Snape, well ... he'd come to view Severus as being the mentor he had had since he'd first come to Hogwarts. More than that, he admitted to himself, in some odd way Harry had become very fond of Snape.

And it had been such fun at the beginning; he hadn't expected it all to happen so quickly. Then last week it had started to fall apart, and he'd been really worried that all he had achieved was to make the two men he cared for most even more lonely and unhappy than they had been. But they'd sorted it out, done that bit themselves, and it made Harry suppose that love really could find a way, even with two of the most intractable people he'd ever come across.

He dragged himself back to the present, to standing in the hallway of Grimmauld Place, watching the two men, who seemed for the moment to have run out of insults. Even the portrait of Sirius's mother had taken a breather. Harry found the small piece of parchment in his hand. He hadn't been sure whether to admit it or not, but he didn't have a present for Sirius, or Snape for that matter. He smiled like a boy caught with his hand in the biscuit tin and handed Sirius the receipt for the personal advertisement section of the "Daily Prophet".

'Happy Christmas ...I know I couldn't be happier,' he said, and hugged his godfather and then to Severus's surprise, hugged him too.

Sirius turned to Severus, almost in accusation. 'You told me Tom put the advisement in the "Prophet".'

Snape raised his eyebrow. 'And you told me your name was Amadeus.'

'Oh, Sirius,' Harry said with a laugh, 'was that the best you could do?'

Harry took Cho's arm as Sirius opened the door onto Grimmauld Place. They didn't need company to play this game any longer.
