

And May All Your Christmases Be Black

by scaranda

An interfering Dumbledore, some festive fun and frolics... oh, and a touch of angst;
it's Christmas, after all.

Chapter One

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Chapter One

'This is insanity,' Lucius hissed from the corner of his mouth, as he watched the trapeze artists swing from chandelier to chandelier in rehearsal for the tasteless concoction that was Malfoy Manor's Christmas ball.

Snape nodded to the puffing green-clad chimpanzees. 'I know; one of them will break its neck.'

'Not that,' Malfoy snarled, smacking the piece of parchment he held in his left hand with the manicured fingernails of his right. 'This.'

'Ahhh, yes, I should have known that your concerns were for yourself; how foolish of me,' Snape replied, as one of the chimpanzees lost its grip on the red tinsel between itself and its acrobatic partner, and spiralled through the air, screeching obscenities at Lucius as it fell in magical slow motion.

Malfoy raised his silver-blond eyebrow steadily, in time with the chimpanzee's fall. 'Remarkable,' he commented dryly, as the animal stood and made a rude gesture at him.

'Mmmm, yes, it really should be dead.'

'I meant its command of profanity.' Lucius began to walk away towards the drawing room without looking to see if Severus was following. 'Come on, if we're going, let us get out of here.'

Snape didn't have to wonder what had spurred the normally lethargic Malfoy into action; Narcissa was gliding across the floor in what looked like a white mink sheath. She had either spelled herself into it or grown it; neither would have surprised him.

'Where has he disappeared to in such a hurry?' she asked, with a disdainful twist of her spoilt pout, holding out a bejewelled hand for Severus to kiss; she seemed unconcerned that he didn't take up her offer.

'I really could not say,' Severus replied coolly as he turned on his heel. 'Don't try the dress in brown, Narcissa; you wouldn't want to be taken for one of the monkeys.'

'Make sure he comes to see me before you set off to wherever you're going; I want a word with him,' she called to his back, with the sweetness of rancid fat. 'And do try to keep him away over Christmas, Severus.'

Sirius looked over the Daily Prophet as his jaw dropped. 'He asked who?'

'Snape and Malfoy,' Lupin replied.

'Severus?' Sirius asked dumbly.

'And Lucius,' Lupin replied.

'Albus asked Severus and Lucius to come here?' Sirius asked again. He needed time to think about this, but he wasn't quite sure where to send his thoughts. He knew he should be disappointed that such a black cloud of depression was about to be cast over the Christmas holidays, but he couldn't get away from the fact that his balls had tightened alarmingly.

Lupin nodded, but Sirius didn't think he looked as glum at the prospect as he really should; he wondered if the werewolf's stomach had done the same little back flip that his own had done. He looked to the door as Harry opened it and came into the kitchen followed by Ron and Hermione; he looked as unhappy as Lupin should have looked.

'Dumbledore's asked Draco Malfoy to come here for Christmas,' Harry retorted. 'He's finally lost the few marbles he had. I didn't know you could go nuts when you're dead.'

'Don't think you're bugging off to chase that cheap bit of skirt and leaving me on my own,' Lucius muttered at Snape through the mirror in his dressing room. 'Like you did the last time.'

'What cheap bit of skirt might that be?' Snape asked.

'The Animagus,' Malfoy replied as he dragged a silver-backed brush through his hair.

'That was almost twenty years ago, Lucius,' Snape reminded him. He noticed Malfoy seemed quite happy now he was in the safety of his own rooms. Narcissa never came to this part of the house; Severus suspected, not at all unkindly, that she was hardly aware that it existed.

'I haven't forgotten, you know. You left me to fend off a tatty half-blood Ravenclaw at the Yule Ball.' Lucius gave him an unforgiving look.

'I must say for a man who has trouble remembering what day follows Monday you have a remarkable ability to hold a grudge.'

Lucius assumed the compliment. 'One of us has to.'

Severus wasn't at all sure what that remark actually meant; he was equally sure that Lucius wasn't either. He suspected it had something to do with the enthusiastic washing of the Malfoy blood to a point where it couldn't even support intelligence. 'Do I take it that you have decided to go?' he asked, instead of asking Lucius to explain.

'We haven't been left with an option.'

'Look on the bright side; you won't have to spend all week avoiding Narcissa,' Snape replied. 'And you won't be here when the Animal Rights protestors burn the manor to the ground for abusing the monkeys.'

'They're chimpanzees; at least I paid for chimpanzees so they had better be. Anyway, they'll probably piss in the punchbowl when no one's looking.' Lucius smiled with the charm of a great white shark that had missed lunch. 'Why don't we burn the manor as we leave and blame the animal people? That way we can make sure Narcissa's inside when we do.'

Snape gave him a look; he wasn't entirely convinced that Malfoy was speaking in jest. 'Why don't you start packing, Lucius? You've only got a week to work out what to wear.'

Lucius looked in the mirror and dragged the brush through his hair again; he gave himself a long appreciative look before turning once more to Snape. 'I suppose the werewolf will be there.' He let out a tragic but overdone sigh. 'Whatever has Christmas come to?'

Severus smiled to himself. 'I suppose so. I really don't know why you bother with this nonsense. In case it has escaped your notice, you are a heathen.'

'Such an ugly word, Severus.' Lucius winced, and tried to feign chagrin. 'We'll be spending Christmas with half-bloods and paupers and Blacks.'

'Just keep thinking of the alternatives and you will see how truly blessed we are.' Severus didn't want to point out that he would be leaving a houseful of Blacks and their assorted hangers-on behind him; it was a pity to score points off him so early in the day. He would have preferred not to think of Blacks though, one Black in particular. It had been a long time since he'd come face to face with Sirius, almost three years; he hoped he'd got over him more than his fantasies seemed to dictate.

'Anyway, just remember, no messing about with the Gryffindors, Severus. I don't want to have to bail you out again.'

Snape looked up from the book he was flipping through. 'Bail me out? What do you mean?' he asked as he felt something lurch in his chest.

'Who do you think saved you from making an idiot of yourself last time?' Lucius declared in something that looked like triumph.

'I don't know what you mean.' Snape frowned.

'It's all right. I'm not looking for thanks, not after all these years.'

Severus felt the blood rushing in his ears; for a moment he couldn't think. 'What are you talking about, Lucius?'

'I'm talking about getting rid of the Animagus for you. Who do you think put a stop to his attentions for you? Really, Severus, do you think I wouldn't look after you if you got into trouble?'

'I must think of a way to thank you properly,' Snape said quietly. He decided to deliver his coup de grace; he had been going to keep it for later, but he didn't see why only his own day should be ruined. 'I meant to mention to you; we're taking Draco with us.'

'Who?'

'The blond boy you have led the world to believe is the fruit of your loins. You must know him; he lives here.'

'Don't be facetious.' Malfoy gave him a hard look.

'The house isn't big enough,' Sirius complained.

'Nonsense, Sirius, you have rooms here that you have never even opened,' Dumbledore argued mildly from the portrait, which now hung on the kitchen wall in Grimmauld Place, having been removed from Minerva's office so it didn't get lonely over the Christmas holidays. 'You never know what you'll find behind a closed door.'

'I think that's one of the best reasons for not opening them in this house,' Lupin remarked with his self-effacing smile.

'I have not invited Severus and Lucius simply to annoy you,' Dumbledore murmured. 'I have a grander scheme in mind; one that I did not get the chance to bring to fruition.'

'Before Snape murdered you, you mean?' Sirius snarled. 'Your habit of seeing the good in people is starting to look a bit silly, Albus.'

'Hush, Sirius. Severus was only carrying out my ultimate order as you well know, one which I am quite confident no one else would have had the courage or dedication to carry out.' He gave Sirius a level look; it wasn't quite challenging, but it was getting there.

Sirius looked away. He'd been more relieved than he thought possible when Dumbledore had told him Severus had been acting for him and not Voldemort when he'd killed him. He wasn't sure why that was, or he wasn't ready to admit to himself why that was; maybe he'd wait another twenty years. He decided to change the subject.

'Harry's not too pleased about Draco coming either,' he grunted.

'Nonsense, that's just a front. Young Harry is quite fond of Draco Malfoy; he just doesn't want Ron and Hermione to know. However ...' Dumbledore trailed off as the kitchen door opened and Harry came in with the other two.

Sirius gave the portrait a suspicious look; the crazy old buffer was up to something. Even when he was dead he still wanted to interfere in everyone's life and pair them off, until everyone lived happily ever after to his grand scheme. He stopped himself; he wondered what had made him think that. They were supposed to be here on some mysterious task for the Order, or so they had been told. 'Swallow that one with the turkey if you like,' he muttered to himself.

Harry slumped down into the chair opposite Sirius. 'What time are they arriving?' he asked.

'I don't know.' Sirius gave him a look, trying to see if his gloom at the imminent arrival of his archenemy was an act. He gave up; he wasn't the mind reader, Snape was. He put that one away for now.

'Let's not start with them,' Lupin put in mildly from where he'd just taken two cigarettes out of Sirius's packet. He lit one and tucked the other behind his ear. He gave both Harry and Sirius a warning look, which coming from Lupin was a bit like being nuzzled by a dead sheep.

'I won't start if he doesn't,' Harry flared.

'I won't start if he doesn't,' Sirius flared.

Lupin sighed as the kitchen door opened again and Hermione came in; from the icy blast that followed her it was obvious the front door was open.

'God, I hope that's Santa,' Sirius muttered as Harry sniggered. 'The alternative is unbearable.'

'They're here,' Hermione whispered, giving Sirius and Harry a long look each. 'Don't you two start with them, it's Christmas.'

'Not yet, it's not,' Harry muttered.

Sirius noticed he'd flushed slightly; he tucked that little gem away for later too.

The two Slytherins spilled into the kitchen, jet-black and silver-blond, staid and flamboyant, slim and not as slim as he'd like to think; they were a perfect counterpoint for one another, sort of equal opposites.

'Dumbledore.' Lucius nodded to the portrait, managing to make the greeting sound like an accusation. He shed his sable-lined cloak and dropped it onto Hermione, without bothering to check if anyone were actually there to catch it.

'Lucius.' The Headmaster smiled back. 'You're looking well. Perhaps carrying a little more weight than you should, but all in all, not too bad.'

Sirius smiled to himself as Malfoy's nostrils flared in suppressed fury; he could see the big blond Slytherin hadn't a clue as to how to deal with a dead Dumbledore, the living one had been bad enough. He caught Snape's smirk before he could turn it into a scowl; maybe it was going to be fun after all.

Sirius didn't bother standing; he'd quite forgotten he was the host. 'Well, well, Snape, where's that warm sunny smile of yours, the one that's full of festive fun and frolics?' he asked with his most annoying grin; he might as well start winding the arrogant fuck up right away.

'Bugger off, Black; I am not here by personal choice,' Severus replied as he shook the snow off his own cloak.

'That's the one.' Sirius grinned again and looked past Snape, smiling to himself as he saw the werewolf give Lucius's rear view an up and down look, stopping at the splendidly well-padded Malfoy arse for a moment longer than he thought was proper for a first date. He watched Harry and Draco give one another a hostile nod. It was as though they were all taking the time to draw up their battle lines. He didn't notice Dumbledore smiling to himself in satisfaction as he accepted a cup of tea from a fat woman who had walked into his portrait.

Chapter Two

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The fun begins, but not to Dumbledore's recipe.

'Open up, fat boy.' Sirius hammered again on the bathroom door. 'I'm dying for a piss and Hermione won't let me have a slash in the kitchen sink.'

'Go away, Black,' Lucius's voice issued lazily from the inside. 'I'm sure you must have other bathrooms in this tip you call a house.'

'I can't find them; Kreacher keeps hiding them.' Sirius gasped; he really needed to pee. 'What the fuck are you doing in there anyway?'

Lucius pulled the door aside so quickly that Sirius almost fell into the bathroom; it was so full of steam that he could hardly see. He gave the naked Slytherin an up and down look, from the bare feet to the damp silver-blond hair. 'I see you haven't shrunk anyway,' he growled as he pushed past him, fiddling with the buttons of his trousers.

'Why didn't you just turn into a dog and go out and piss against a lamppost?' Malfoy drawled from the doorway.

'Why don't you keep that smart mouth of yours shut?' Sirius called over his shoulder.

'Hurry up, Black; don't take all day. I want to get shaved and dressed,' Lucius snapped. 'This dump is freezing.'

Sirius began to button up his trousers. He ran the hot tap for a moment, until it became evident that Lucius had used all of the available hot water; he searched for a towel and found that they were all scattered damply on the floor. 'You only just got here, you fat tart,' he complained. 'Couldn't you have arrived clean and left some water for someone else?'

'You're a wizard, Black, or so you would have us believe; why don't you make some more?' Malfoy turned away as a door closed further along the corridor.

'And don't use my razor to shave your legs, Shirley,' Sirius snarled back at him from inside the bathroom.

'That's a pretty sight on a cold day.' Lupin's voice came wafting along; it seemed to be laced with amusement and something Sirius couldn't quite place. 'Is this the Malfoy version of hanging around on a street corner?'

Sirius frowned to himself as he saw the still-naked Lucius give what looked like a tiny warning shake of his head. He was about to give that some thought when he heard a screeching, which could only have come from Kreacher, issuing from the direction of the kitchen; he hoped someone had strangled him.

Draco had kicked the elf into a corner by the time Sirius got back downstairs, and he and Harry were trying to scrape a grey gluey mess, which appeared to be sticking to the floor, into a cup.

Sirius looked at it, and looked at the two boys. 'Don't tell me that's Lupin's Wolfsbane.'

'That was Lupin's Wolfsbane,' Harry said flatly.

'How did he get it?' Lupin asked from behind Sirius. Sirius thought he sounded a little panicked.

The two boys shrugged, but Sirius had already grabbed Kreacher at the neck of his tea towel, and his huge eyes were bulging even more than normal.

'What in the name of all that is sacred is going on?' Snape's voice sounded over the cacophony of screaming elf and master as he appeared in the doorway.

'This ... fucking ... shitebag ... of a ... traitorous ... piece ... of shite ...' Sirius punctuated almost every word with a slap on the elf's head. '...Has stolen Lupin's Wolfsbane, and flung it over the floor.'

Malfoy looked at his plate with an unusual lack of enthusiasm. 'Might one enquire as to just what species this was when it was alive?'

Sirius gave him a hard look. 'A fucking dodo, eat it up like a good boy. It's good for you.'

Harry snorted into his glass of cola as Hermione nudged Ron, and Draco rolled his eyes.

'If I don't know what it is, how am I supposed to eat it?' Lucius asked, oblivious to the fact that he didn't make any more sense than he usually did.

'For a man who seems to believe that the food chain begins on his plate, you are being a touch pedantic, Lucius,' Snape said from the opposite side of the table, where he sat smoking a thin black cigarette.

'I don't see you making any attempt.'

'I am not hungry. Anyway, Lupin and I shall have to stay the night at Hogwarts now; it's too late in the day to make it there and back on time.' He gave Kreacher a venomous look to where he was sniggering under the sink. 'I am quite sure that the Hogwarts elves will be able to produce something edible.' He managed not to raise his eyebrow at greyish meat the rest of them were chewing bravely.

'If we get a move on I can eat at Hogwarts too.' Lupin smiled and pushed his own plate away, with what looked to Sirius like relief. 'It'll be quiet there anyway.' He cast a glance at the window to where the dusk was already falling in counties far to the east, dragging his kind to their torment. Winter nights were the hardest; the moon rode in the sky for a long time on winter nights.

Sirius watched Lucius; he didn't look too pleased with the prospect of being left behind, he clearly didn't fancy Snape abandoning him so soon after arriving. He grinned to himself; maybe he'd give the fat bimbo one while Lupin and Snape were away; at least he'd get up close and personal with one Slytherin, even if it were the wrong one. He didn't realise Snape was watching him until he caught his eye; for a moment Sirius thought he read confusion in the black depths as Severus looked away quickly. Maybe he wouldn't do Malfoy after all; maybe he'd just wait another twenty years for Severus.

'I could kill that ruddy elf,' Harry fumed. 'Now we'll have to wait until tomorrow to try this stuff out.' He picked up the bottle of green liquid and shook it before giving Ron a look. 'Are Fred and George sure this won't kill them?'

'Oh, yeah, it's just a strong aphrodisiac with some kind of charm in it. They said they've tried it out on themselves.'

'You didn't tell me that,' Harry said. 'What happened?'

'They didn't remember much about it, but they both woke up with hangovers in the same bed.'

'That doesn't say much,' Draco said with evident disappointment.

'It does when Fred had locked George at the other end of the house before they took it.' Ron gave him a sly grin.

'Why don't we try it on Sirius and Lucius?' Draco beamed. 'At least they won't be at one another's throats all night.'

'Err, I'm not sure the alternative is acceptable.' Harry smiled slowly; he didn't want to admit the plan had some merits any more than he wanted to admit that he was actually quite pleased that Draco had come after all. He'd been a bit nervous about trying to spike Snape's food with anything that might turn him green or dead; he would be the automatic choice to get the blame. Now that Malfoy was here Harry could shift some of the responsibility onto his more than deserving shoulders.

Lupin paced the floor of Snape's rooms as the Potions Master tried to read. Dusk was falling fast and the moon would be rising soon. This was always the worst time: the anticipation, the fear that just maybe this time the Wolfsbane wouldn't work. He wished he were alone, and yet he craved the company of even this cold and occasionally hostile man.

'Sit down, Lupin. I can't concentrate with you pacing up and down.'

Lupin continued pacing, padding across the floor and back, marking time to something else, as Snape watched him. Severus laid the book aside as he placed something that had been tugging at the edges of his consciousness for a long time. He waited until the werewolf's back was to him.

'Can I ask you a personal question?'

Lupin spun, confused for a moment. 'Perhaps I don't want to answer any personal questions,' he replied, with a telltale hint of the aggression he'd been trying to suppress all day.

'Perhaps I shall ask it anyway,' Snape replied. 'How long has it been going on for?'

'What do you mean?' The werewolf flushed slightly, clearly uncomfortable as he dropped his gold-flecked eyes.

'How long have you been having an affair with Lucius?'

Lupin seemed about to deny it, and then appeared to see the futility in that. 'How long have you known?'

'I didn't know. Not until just now,' Snape said quietly. 'I have long suspected that Lucius had a fancy for you, for want of a more appropriate expression, but that was all I thought it was. I confess to being surprised.'

'That he should soil himself with half-blood?' Lupin challenged in a way that was quite unlike him on days when the moon wasn't tugging at his awareness. 'Werewolf half-blood.'

'No ... I am surprised he was able to keep the secret from me.' Snape smirked. 'Discretion is not normally his long suit.'

The werewolf seemed mollified; he gave a self-deprecating little laugh, as though acknowledging that he'd overreacted. Lupin found his moods very difficult to control as the moon rose somewhere beyond another horizon, creeping inexorably nearer to sweep him into her merciless path.

'How long?' Snape raised his eyebrow.

'A long time. I'm good at keeping secrets.' Lupin seemed to smile to himself. 'I've had a lot of practice.'

Sirius was beginning to wish Dumbledore had never started whatever stupid scheme he had embarked upon; this was turning out to be about as lousy a Christmas as he usually had. Lupin was away at Hogwarts, and he didn't even have the pleasure of goading Snape. Harry seemed preoccupied, and he hardly saw him; Ron and Hermione were constantly chatting to one another in confidential whispers; and even insulting Lucius had lost a lot of its merits now that he didn't have an audience.

He'd reached the bottom of the stairs when he heard the Slytherin's voice issuing from the kitchen; he knew the others were upstairs. Lucius must have begun to talk to himself; all that inbreeding, he supposed.

'I am not staying here,' Malfoy's voice had risen to a whine.

'Yes, you are, Lucius. You will stay here until I am satisfied that every one of you has his or her special wish.'

Sirius recognised the annoyingly placating voice of the dead Headmaster.

'My special wish is that I am back at the manor before the night is out, Dumbledore.'

Sirius pushed the door open. 'Mine too,' he said flatly and gave Lucius a hard look.

'I confess I had not allowed for the outside influence of the elf,' Dumbledore said mildly. 'Never mind though. Perhaps it is for the best that Lupin has the peace of Hogwarts for his change tonight. We can begin again tomorrow.'

'Begin what?' Lucius flared. 'I have no interest in some foolish game.'

'You'll be interested in this one.' Dumbledore seemed to sit back in the portrait. He smiled across to the door in some type of satisfaction as the kitchen door opened again and Draco and Harry came in, with Ron a few steps behind. Sirius noticed that he had subconsciously thought of Draco and Harry and then added Ron as a rider, instead of the other way about. He frowned to himself.

'Let's play cards,' Draco said brightly.

'Let's not bother.' Lucius twisted his lip at the boy.

'Do you have to be so unpleasant?' Draco asked mildly.

'Unpleasant?' Lucius looked at him in surprise, and then gave the horrible kitchen a sweeping glance. 'In view of my surroundings, anything I say or do should be considered pleasant.'

'I don't even know what that means,' Sirius snarled.

'Stop it, both of you,' Harry flared. 'You've no idea how boring and childish you sound.'

Sirius looked surprised, and Lucius moved to the door in preparation for a grand exit.

'Where's Hermione?' Sirius asked the boys, as Malfoy flung the door open.

'She's found some doxies upstairs,' Ron replied.

Sirius watched Lucius back away quickly from the door. 'Where?' he asked, as he dragged a hand through his almost-white mass of hair.

Sirius noticed his hysteria with satisfaction. 'I cleared most of them out of your room, fat boy, don't worry,' he said. Perhaps there was a little fun to be had with Malfoy, after all.

'Just once more with the smart remarks, Animagus.' Malfoy flared his nostrils. 'And I'll hex you into next week.'

'Have a drink and relax,' Draco said smoothly, as he handed his father a glass and Harry handed one to Sirius. Both men tossed the drinks over their throats, glaring at one another as the two boys took a backward step and watched them carefully, and Dumbledore frowned out of the portrait.

Chapter Three

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As the fall-out starts falling out, Sirius finds most of it has landed on his shoulders.

Snape had settled himself at his table; the fire was burning, the glass was full, and the wolf snoozed gently at his feet. He picked up the book that lay open on his table, but laid it aside after a few moments, unable to concentrate.

He tried to analyse his feelings, shying away from the obvious. He didn't want to consider envy or longing, or the pervasive feeling of uncertainty that he hadn't noticed was sinking to despair. Severus Snape was feeling sorry for himself. He tossed off the glass of whisky as the wolf whined and jerked his paws in dreaming sleep. He wondered at Lucius and Lupin, and why Lucius had kept whatever relationship they shared a secret from him, wondered which of them wanted the secrecy; maybe it was both of them. He found his thoughts drifting like the smoke from his cigarette and he sank deeper into despondency, and closed his eyes for a moment when thoughts of the futile love of his life threatened to break to the surface. He pushed it away and poured another drink. He wouldn't drag himself down, not tonight; he wasn't alone and he wasn't sure the werewolf would be unaware of his mood. But the more he drank, the more the thoughts vied for attention, the ones he'd tried to drink into submission, the thoughts of Black and what might have been.

He found the hot sting of something burn the back of the throat. He decided it was the whisky. It was easy to lie to himself; he'd had a lifetime of practice. He heard the wolf whine again, and when he looked down he saw it was watching him, its golden eyes wide as it cocked its head. It moved closer and tentatively licked his hand.

'You're going to take Lucius away from me, wolf, aren't you?'

The wolf laid its chin on Snape's thigh and blinked.

'I am drunk, wolf, but I'm sure you have already guessed as much. Drunk and maudlin, and about as pitiful as they come.' Snape shook his head in a self-mocking gesture. 'Don't worry, you are welcome to him; he was only ever a substitute for what he took from me. I shall not stand in your way.'

Sirius picked up the cards. He felt a little drunk, but he couldn't think why; he'd only had a few. He wished Lupin were here. Although he had more company than he normally had, he felt oddly lonely ... he was feeling incredibly randy too. He tossed away a card and found Malfoy watching him with his cool grey eyes narrowed. After a moment Lucius looked down; Sirius noticed he hadn't picked up his own cards yet.

'Are you playing or not?' Draco asked testily.

He and Harry and Ron seemed a little on edge; Sirius couldn't think why, not when he felt so incredibly relaxed.

Lucius started, as though he had been woolgathering. 'This is the last hand I'm playing. I'm tired.' He gave Sirius an openly inviting look. 'I'm going upstairs.'

Sirius felt his balls tighten; he wondered what the fuck he was thinking of, but for some reason Malfoy look about as sexed-up as any man could. 'Yeah, me too,' he breathed. He failed to notice the covert looks the boys exchanged.

Severus woke with a start. He couldn't remember going into his bedroom and lying on top of the bed; he must have been drunk. He could hear Lupin in the other room, the man not the wolf; it must be morning. He dragged himself upright and tried to ignore the slamming headache as the smell of coffee wafted through.

Lupin appeared in the doorway; he looked tired. 'Coffee?' He held a steaming mug in front of him.

Snape stood up and took the mug. 'You'd better get back, Lupin. The kiddies will be waiting for you.'

'I'm ready when you are.'

'I'm not going.'

'Don't be stupid,' Lupin flared. 'I'm not leaving you here alone.'

'I prefer to be alone,' Snape said curtly. 'But thank you for your misplaced concern.'

Lupin looked away for a moment, as though unsure of whether he should voice his thoughts. 'Do you have a problem with my relationship with Lucius?' he asked eventually.

'No, why should I?' Snape bridled.

'I just wondered. I know you're close.'

'I am not in love with Lucius Malfoy, Lupin. I never have been and never will be.' Snape pushed past him. 'You are welcome to one another.'

'You asked me a personal question last night, and now I shall ask you one,' Lupin said to Severus's back, and watched the shoulders stiffen as though Snape had donned his black armour along with the cloak he'd picked up. He seemed to have decided to go back to Grimmauld Place after all. 'How long are you two going to keep it up?'

Snape didn't turn. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'I think you do, Severus,' Lupin persisted. 'How long are you and Sirius going to pretend you hate one another?'

Sirius wasn't awfully sure where he was. He had an idea he was still at Grimmauld Place, but he didn't think he recognised the particular pattern on the horrible wallpaper of this room. The general air of carefully cultivated neglect, the grotesquely ornate plaster work, liberally hung with a century of cobwebs, and the heavy blood-red curtains that seemed to twitch suspiciously of their own accord every now and again did seem to suggest the Most Noble House of Black though; nobody else could have reduced faded grandeur to such an art form. It was as though the original decorators had been handed a huge pot of gold, and had been told to get on with it; they'd spent most of the money on Firewhisky and then set about making the place as ugly as possible before someone actually stopped them. Either that, or they ran out of money and legged it before anyone saw the results.

He heard a groan coming from somewhere very near; he hoped it wasn't the curtains, although the alternative was equally unappealing, knowing, as he did, that the lifelong fuel of his fantasies was still at Hogwarts.

The bed was definitely warmer than it should have been, as though another body had lent its heat as a buffer to the usual draughty dampness that permeated the upper floors of the house. Maybe Snape had come back early. It was nice to go with the unlikely fantasy that Severus had come back and had been unable to stifle a lifelong desire, and had sneaked into the room while Sirius was asleep to surprise him just before Christmas; Santa Snape. Sirius let the fantasy linger on until the soft groan came again. He wanted to put one of the dubious pillows over whatever face had ruined his daydream; he knew it wasn't Severus, but, he supposed ruefully, he always had.

He let his hand drift across the bed, as though in sleep. Whoever was there was quite large; he had to stretch out his arm to get it around the comatose man, at least he sincerely hoped it was a man. He knew he was running out of options now. It was too big to be Harry. His godson hadn't sneaked into bed for a heat; it wasn't any of the kids playing a trick on him, and the only other acceptable bedmate was away with Severus. Fuck, he didn't want to open his eyes and see the mass of white-blond hair, but they were open; they were registering what his brain didn't want to recognise. He was in bed with Lucius Malfoy.

He jumped out of bed as the Slytherin icon woke with a start and jumped out of the other side; Sirius wished he'd had the presence of mind to whip one of the sheets away.

'You'd better not have raped me, fat boy,' he said dangerously. He knew he would have sounded a lot more threatening if he'd had the benefit of something other than his hand to cover his dignity.

'Raped you?' Lucius flared. 'How do I know you didn't change into a dog and defile me?'

'Defile you? I couldn't get it up for you sober with a Levitating Charm, never mind drunk, you arrogant fat fuck,' Sirius screamed back, oblivious to the fact that the bedroom door had been flung open.

'You broke into my room with some intention, Animagus.'

Sirius watched Lucius draw himself up with the Malfoy family jewels proudly on display; he didn't seem as concerned about any possible affront to his modesty.

'It's my fucking house; how can I break in?' Sirius began to become aware that Malfoy's attention was now firmly riveted on the bedroom door. That must have been the source of the cold draught that was threatening to send his balls chasing his cock to the pit of his stomach. He turned slowly; maybe whoever was there would have gone away. 'What are you lot staring at? Fuck off out of it.' He pointed the fingers of the hand which had been over his cock at the considerably swelled audience.

'We wondered what all the noise was,' Hermione replied reasonably from deep inside a pink fluffy dressing gown. Her bushy hair was like a large brown haystack, and Ron had his hand on her shoulder, vigorously nodding agreement. On a better day Sirius would have seen the significance of that.

'And we just wanted to check we'd left you everything you needed.' Draco beamed his insufferably sycophantic smile, and nodded confidentially to Harry. 'And you told us to wake you before Severus got back.'

'What?' Sirius asked Harry, who had remained wisely silent so far.

'I beg your pardon?' Lucius fixed his son with a look.

The two boys exchanged a quick glance; they seemed to wonder which of them was going to respond.

'Just... you know?' Draco nodded knowingly to the nightstand, where the various bottles and jars and accoutrements they had left the previous afternoon lay in an accusing disarray of spilt oil. 'Did you have everything you needed?'

The two men froze until Lucius looked at the nightstand, as though some memory of how it got into the state it was in were filtering through his mind. Sirius followed his gaze, as he tried to blot out the fractured images of the Pride of Slytherin writhing below him in sexual agony.

Severus shook his cloak and handed it to Kreacher with a threatening twist of his lip, and followed Lupin into the kitchen. He failed to notice the smug look on Mrs Black's portrait, or the alternating smirks that the elf kept casting to the staircase and then the two men, or Dumbledore running through a succession of portraits on the staircase with his beard flying behind him. Severus wondered why he'd bothered coming back, what the point was of him being here; the old Headmaster's games usually left him either cold or out in the cold.

'I thought they might have had breakfast prepared,' Lupin commented with a little disappointment. 'They must be too busy messing about upstairs.' He stood at the kitchen door, nodding to where Sirius and Lucius's voices could be heard issuing down the stairs, punctuated every now and again by Draco and Harry, with the occasional Hermione thrown in for good measure.

Severus walked back into the hall and began to climb the stairs; he became vaguely aware that what he had taken for horseplay with the children was not quite anger, but something near to it. He frowned as he saw Ron and Hermione cast a nervous glance along the corridor from where they stood in the doorway to Lucius's room.

He stopped dead in the doorway as something cold clutched his heart. Draco and Potter were standing just inside the door being alternately berated by Lucius and Sirius. He took in the tumbled bed, the two naked men, the two artfully contrite boys, the strewn contents of the nightstand and the clothes scattered on the floor as though they had been torn off in sexual frenzy.

Neither man had noticed him yet; he had time, he could have walked away, but he was aware that the choice to stay was made by himself alone. He wondered what mental dysfunction caused him to always allow what he saw as his own humiliations to be so public; like standing naked in the corner of his childhood home, waiting for his father's belt to fall on his back while his mother answered the door to Lucius and Abraxas; like being suspended upside down at Hogwarts for everyone to laugh at his nakedness; like waiting for Sirius for hours on end after Quidditch practice while the rest of the Gryffindors trooped past him, sniggering behind their hands. All witnesses to his humiliation, to his inadequacies.

'If you do not have the common sense to keep your activities private; at least have the shame not to parade them in front of children,' he said in a cold whisper. 'Cover yourselves up.'

'This isn't what it seems, Severus,' Lucius said, as he paled in shock.

'You have no need to explain to me, Lucius. A bitch in heat hardly has control of what dog it finds itself under,' Snape replied in a carefully measured voice. 'It does explain some things though. I had not realised you wanted the Animagus so much.' He turned on his heel; he didn't want to look at this any longer ... at Lucius's confusion, at Black looking away like a scolded schoolboy. He almost collided with Lupin, cursing himself that he hadn't had the presence of mind to leave the room earlier and stop the werewolf. He looked as unhappy as Snape felt; he should have spared him this.

'This wasn't what I meant, at all,' Dumbledore admonished Sirius from behind a fat cherub with a supercilious smirk on its face; it looked a bit like Lucius.

Sirius looked around himself, the two boys making their escape, the empty space Snape had occupied, something angry and hurt in Lupin, Dumbledore's reproach from the portrait above the bed. 'Why is it always my fault?' he asked. He noticed Lucius had turned away when Lupin had come in, as though finally realising he'd been caught with his pants down.

Hermione came to his aid, predictably. 'Now you've upset everyone,' she said in exasperation. 'Why do you do these things, Sirius?'

Breakfast was an uncomfortable affair; all of the men seemed to want to sit as far apart from eye contact with one another as possible. Mrs Black humming happily and loudly to herself, and then breaking into song as Sirius passed through the hall hadn't helped the situation.

'My son has lain with purest blood, no more paupers, no more mud,' she trilled at the top of her admirably loud voice, in a horrible pitch which wavered dangerously between soprano and contralto. She reached out of her portrait as Lucius passed and patted him on the head before he could pull back in horror. 'So pure,' she purred. 'Perhaps a touch chunkier than I would have liked, but the blood and money more than make up for that.'

'Keep that harpy away from me,' Malfoy screamed, but no one seemed inclined to come to his aid.

Harry and Draco shared an uncomfortable snigger. This wasn't going quite as well as they'd hoped; they hadn't allowed for the inevitable fallout.

Hermione gave everyone, with the exception of Ron, Lupin and Snape, long cool looks as she walked behind them pouring tea, as Draco and Harry followed with the toast. Ron seemed to be enjoying himself enormously; he and Snape and Lupin were the only ones she'd cooked breakfast for.

Sirius was about to leave the table as he heard a peck at the window; he hadn't any appetite anyway, he had a hangover and a guilty conscience, although he wasn't sure why that was. A large eagle owl was trying to gain admittance.

Hermione opened the window and the owl swooped in; something about its majesty seemed to suggest that it was used to better things than the hideous but cavernous kitchen in Grimmauld Place. It stopped at Lucius and eyed him as it dropped a scroll on a plate bereft of all but toast crumbs.

'Don't look at me, unless you've brought something to eat,' Malfoy said to it. He seemed to consider the twin options of Lupin and Snape, but had to discard them and nod across to where Ron was protecting his heaped plate with his arm. 'I haven't got anything; he's got the food.' He picked up the scroll and began to unroll it. Normally he would have had Severus read anything that came from Malfoy Manor, but Snape didn't seem to be too pleased with him. He had a suspicion why that might be, and it had nothing to do with the sensibilities the children didn't possess anyway.

'Have mine,' Snape said ungraciously as he pushed his plate towards Malfoy. 'I'm surprised you haven't just taken it anyway, like you take everything else.'

Sirius watched Malfoy drop his eyes to the scroll as Snape gave him a hostile look.

'Good news?' Draco enquired as Lucius began to smile broadly as he read, not something he usually did that early in the day unless he was still drunk from the night before.

'Indeed. It seems that your mother has finally decided that life in Wiltshire is not to her taste. I must say it took her long enough.' He sat back with a satisfied smirk on his handsome face.

The others exchanged looks; only Snape seemed disinterested.

'She's left you?' Sirius asked without looking at Malfoy. 'I can hardly say I'm surprised; even Blacks like her should have better sense.'

'Up you too, Animagus,' Lucius replied, and winced at his own poor choice of words. 'I have no obstacles now.'

'To what?' Draco asked.

Sirius watched Lupin give his head a tiny shake as he gave Lucius a look; it was the same kind of warning look Lucius had sent the werewolf's way the day before, a look that shared secrets.

'I shall be able to enjoy my Gryffindor without worrying that what passes for my wife will use our affair for a lawsuit,' Malfoy replied with a self-satisfied twist of his lip.

Sirius began to object, but Malfoy held his hand up. 'Don't flatter yourself, Animagus. You were all right, but not quite my taste.' He let his hand fall on top of Lupin's. 'You just happened to be around when my idiot son carried out his experiment.'

'Lupin?' Harry said, and forgot to shut his mouth.

'The werewolf?' Draco stared at his father's hand.

'Remus?' Sirius asked.

Even Ron had stopped eating, although his 'Cor blimey' was somewhat muffled by the contents of his mouth.

Snape had looked away, and Sirius could see it wasn't as much a surprise to him as the rest of them.

'None of you knew?' Lucius raised his eyebrow. 'How disappointing. And I just thought you were all being fiercely loyal over the last fifteen years.'

'Fifteen years?' Sirius mouthed in shock. 'Remus?'

The werewolf nodded and gave his self-effacing smile before turning to Lucius. 'Don't do anything like that again without warning me, and don't think your little declaration has got you off the hook either. I'm very put out by you, Lucius.' He nodded to Sirius. 'You too. And you may all lower your eyebrows. He's a Malfoy; he's not that bad a catch.' Sirius noticed he hadn't drawn his hand away.

'I'm just shocked,' Draco offered. 'I didn't know he was human.'

'He's a werewolf; not a sub human,' Lucius flared as Harry gasped in outrage.

Sirius was about to berate Draco too until he saw the up and down look he gave Lucius.

'I meant you, Father,' Draco replied with more disdain than a boy of his age should have been able to muster.

Sirius looked up as the door closed; it wasn't until he turned again that he realised that Snape had left the room. He frowned to himself; he wondered if Severus were in love with Malfoy.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 5

Every man has his moment in time, and every dog his day.

'Call Severus, Harry; dinner's ready,' Hermione gasped, from where the top of her body was inside the cavernous oven. She half-turned and handed Ron a huge steak pie, which he dropped onto the table with a yelp; the oven mitten she had handed him first was still tucked under his arm.

'You go.' Harry nodded to Draco, who was sitting with his feet up on the table, blowing smoke rings at the dingy ceiling. 'He's less likely to bite your head off.'

Hermione gave the two boys a shrewd look; there was something contrived about the way they sat at different sides of the table, about the way they almost seemed to struggle to maintain the air of hostility between them. If she hadn't known better she would have thought that there was something going on between the two of them. She hadn't had enough time to study them though, what with supervising whoever was on the rota she'd drawn up to cook the meals and, well, other things that had happened. She gave Ron a quick, almost guilty look.

'I'm not going,' Draco replied and nodded to Sirius. 'You go. It's your fault he's in the huff.'

'My fault?' Sirius snapped. He was becoming fed up with everyone blaming him. 'I didn't spike our drinks with whatever crap you two slung together.'

'They didn't make it,' Ron offered. 'Fred and George did. It sold very well for Christmas. Funny,' he said with a smirk, 'it was mainly women who bought it.'

'Why doesn't that surprise me?' Hermione asked nobody in particular.

'What's that supposed to mean?' Ron asked, as he flushed horribly at some imagined indiscretion.

'I made the lunch. Lucius, you go,' Lupin said coolly to the blond Slytherin, who had been uncharacteristically quiet since breakfast.

Sirius reckoned Lupin had been giving Malfoy a hard time too; he was glad he wasn't the only one who was getting it in the neck. Served the supercilious fat bimbo right. Only he wasn't fat, not really; Sirius remembered that much from the night before ... he was sixteen stone of solid muscle. He pushed the thought away.

Hermione stood at the head of the table with her hands on her hips. 'Nobody eats until Severus comes down, and I'm not going for him.' Sirius wondered who had put her in charge.

'The house traitor and his scum friends will have a long wait,' Kreacher said in a snigger from under the sink. 'The black-haired half-blood went out hours ago.' He gave a nasty little laugh. 'Nobody even noticed but Kreacher and his mistress.'

Sirius stood up and bent to haul Kreacher from his hidey-hole. 'When did he go out?' he snarled at the elf as he shook him.

'Many hours ago.' The elf gave him a sly look. 'Does my master care now that he has tasted the wholesomeness of the pure-blood's body?' He let out a yelp as Sirius dropped him and booted his arse for good measure.

The dungeon corridor was even creepier than Sirius remembered. It was empty; the echo of his footsteps sounded uncomfortable, a kind of out of kilter double click, as though his doppelganger stalked one and a half steps behind. He got quite a turn when the Bloody Barron appeared on his right shoulder and hissed in his ear.

'Come to waken the dead, Animagus?'

'Bugger off,' Sirius snarled, the reality of his own voice doing little to calm the nerves he didn't realise were frayed.

He saw Peeves further down the corridor; he had a Santa hat on and seemed to be bouncing a series of snowballs against the door to Snape's room, just out of kilter too, designed to drive the occupant insane. It seemed pointless to go any further; Snape obviously wasn't here. Peeves wasn't that brave.

'Well doggone, if it's not the cur,' the poltergeist cackled. 'Nothing here for you to hump.'

'You can bugger off too, Peeves.'

'Bugger off, bugger off, oh,' Peeves mocked. 'Was that a threat or a promise?' He disappeared and reappeared between Sirius's legs, his hand snaking up to his crotch. 'Is that for me, Rover? Bugger on I say. Woof woof.'

Sirius tried to catch his throat, but ended up with a handful of cold air instead. 'Clear up this mess or I'll set Snape on you when he comes back.'

'Not coming back.' Peeves shrieked in maniacal laughter. 'So why don't you go jump in the lake too.' He threw a snowball at Sirius; that was real enough, it was wet and cold.

'What's going on?' Another voice issued from the end of the corridor, coming from below a lantern. 'Who's there?'

Sirius turned so Filch could see him. 'Peeves has thrown snow all over here; it'll need cleared up before Snape gets back. I wouldn't want to be you if he goes on his arse.'

'What did you bring him down here for?' Filch nodded to Peeves, who was throwing snowballs at the walls in an erratic zigzag pattern.

'I didn't bring him,' Sirius argued. 'I just came looking for Snape; he was here when I got here.'

'Yer musta; he don't come down here when the Professor's here,' Filch rasped, and gave him a hard look. 'What are you wanting here anyway? Coming in here and disturbing the peace.'

'That's none of your business actually,' Sirius said in as cool a tone as he could. He was trying not to look at Peeves who was now pretending to masturbate an inch above Filch's head. 'Why has everyone got to be so fucking hostile?'

'Maybe we don't want you here.'

'Where's Snape?' Sirius asked flatly; he'd had enough.

'If he ain't in his rooms, he musta gone out,' Filch replied, as though losing interest. 'I'll not bother to tell him you called; he's in a bad enough mood.'

Sirius watched him walk away, with Peeves still an inch over his head, and his bug-eyed kneazle throwing one last suspicious glare at him. He walked to the door of Snape's rooms; he'd better check he wasn't inside after all. No one answered, and he turned the handle, more out of habit than expectation; he was surprised when the door swung open.

He'd never been in this room, not since he'd been at school and the occupant had been his own Potion's Master. He supposed it was what he'd expected, if he'd expected anything.

One torch was lit in the far corner; it gave off an oddly sooty glow, casting shadows and darkening already dark corners. The fire was low, and instead of warming the room, it suggested that it was cooling; the whisky bottle on the table was three-quarters empty, as though it hadn't been brought out, more that it hadn't been put away; everything seemed to be negative. Sirius had a funny feeling he'd just missed Snape.

He didn't really take in the rows and rows of books, and the jars and bottles all meticulously labelled in Snape's spidery green handwriting, or the black bearskin rug on the hard flagstone floor. He let his eyes rest on the door to the left, which probably led to his bedroom. He opened the door for a cursory look: no bed of nails, no empty coffin lying open in the corner, no Potions Master dangling from the rafters with a noose around his neck, he thought with an inward smile, and then started uncomfortably, wondering what had made him think that. He pushed back the pang he felt as he looked at the bed; he wondered who had last grappled with Snape on the black rugs.

Sirius closed the bedroom door again and moved back to the living room. A book lay open on the table, and he picked it up, careful not to let it shut on whatever Snape had been reading. His raised his eyebrow; he didn't think Severus would read Muggle literature, but he supposed Poe was a suitable exception, another depressive. The line of text jumped out at him; he recognised it as the last line from "The Raven".

"And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor

Shall be lifted - Nevermore."

Poems to cut your throat to, he thought sourly, and froze. What had Peeves said? Something about the lake, jump in the lake too? Had that been it?

He ran the length of the now empty corridor and up the two flights of stone steps to ground level. The hallway was empty too he noticed vaguely, as he gasped to catch his breath, cursing the years of Azkaban, alcohol and cigarettes, and the fact he wasn't twenty any more. The front doors were closed, and he had to fiddle with the myriad of bolts to open it. He gasped again as the cold of the air outside assaulted his lungs.

He didn't notice Filch standing on the stairs behind him, or the grim smile of relief on the old caretaker's stubbled face, as Sirius hared across the lawn to the lakeside.

Filch bent down and picked up the scrawny kneazle; he stifled her to his chest. 'Be all right now, my lovely. Took him a while, but it'll be all right now,' he rasped into her tattered ears, and turned to climb the stairs again, just an old man with a battered cat doing his rounds, checking everything was safe and no one was going to jump in no lakes, not on his shift.

'I shouldn't jump if I were you; it looks very cold tonight,' a soft, almost nickering voice said from behind Snape. 'The answer you seek is not in the depths of the Dark Lake, Severus, but in the heavens. It will come to you.'

'I can't even remember the question, Firenze.'

'So melancholy? Perhaps even a little misty-eyed? Oh dear, my old friend, maybe you should jump after all,' the Centaur replied in his deadpan mocking voice. 'If even you have become wistful and self-pitying I really fear for the world. I shall possibly follow if it is that bad.'

'Back off, Centaur,' Snape replied with a smirk. 'I am not about to succumb to your charms.'

'It was ever thus betwixt us.' Firenze sighed. 'What are you doing back here anyway? I thought the school was closed for the festival of men.'

'It is. I just wanted some time alone.'

'Because Lupus and Serpens have at last decided to make their dance through the heavens public, and you feel that now Lucius does not need you, you are alone?' Firenze cocked his shaggy head to the sky to constellations only he could see.

'You knew about Lupin and Lucius?'

'Oh yes, for many years, even before they knew themselves. Their namesake constellations have been hurtling towards one another for a million of your years.'

'I suppose I am not surprised, by either you or them.' Snape smiled his quirky smile; Firenze was one of the few people with whom he was truly at ease. 'But to answer you, I envy them both their courage to do the one thing I never managed to do. I am, however, quite confident that Lucius will still be able to get into trouble with Lupin at his side.'

Firenze gave him a level look. 'He will come to you, Severus; that is also written in the stars.'

Snape looked at him sharply. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Ah well,' Firenze said as he looked again into the Dark Lake, 'it might as well be the water then. Farewell, old friend. I confess I thought you were a stronger man.'

For a while man and Centaur said nothing, each lost in his own thoughts as the gentle but bitter wind ruffled their hair and rippled the moon path on the dark water.

'The Dog Star will only be here for a few short months, Severus.' Firenze broke the silence and pointed to where Canis Major's blue-eyed boy shone low in the southern sky just below Orion's belt. 'Pluck him quickly, lest he slips from your grasp below the horizon again ... unless you want to wait another forty-nine of your years.'

'What do you mean?' Snape frowned.

'Even now the Dog Star and his invisible brother spin together in an orbit of such intensity that for a time they actually change places. It does not happen very often, only every half century or so. You will be an elderly man when it happens again, and neither you nor he will be very much use to one another if you let him slip away. Every man has his moment in time and every dog his day.' Firenze began to move away. 'Of course, if you change your mind about him, I'm always available, Severus, and I'll always be young.'

Snape waited until his soft strange chuckle faded in time with his almost silent hoof beats, and turned towards the dimly lit castle. He squared his shoulders and began to walk, not noticing the large black dog that ghosted him in the shadows.

Severus would never know the little chain of creatures that had watched over him; he'd never know that Filch had sent Mrs Norris to watch out for him when he saw the set of his shoulders when he'd come back from Grimmauld Place. He'd never know that she had followed him when he'd gone outside, and had run to the Forbidden Forrest for the Centaur when she'd realised he was heading for the lake. He'd never know that she'd left him with Firenze to run back to the castle to tell Filch, or that the Centaur had watched him until he sensed the Animagus join them, and that he'd passed the watch to the unknowing Sirius, secure in the knowledge that he would let no harm come to him. He would never know these things, but it didn't matter; he hadn't really been going to drown himself. As Firenze had said, the water looked cold.

He saw Filch looking out of a top floor window and then turn away; he didn't hear Peeves demanding the hundred Galleons Filch had promised him if he managed to get Sirius out to the lake, or see the Leprechaun gold the caretaker had confiscated years before from the Weasley twins change hands.

The moment Severus closed his door he sensed that someone had been in his rooms. The whisky bottle was where he thought he'd left it; the bedroom door was closed, nothing was disturbed ... but he knew. He leant against the door, unsure as to how to proceed with his evening; he hadn't made any long-term plans. He hoped there was another bottle of whisky in the cupboard; getting seriously smashed seemed like a good idea.

He uncorked the bottle with a pop and splashed a slug into a glass before shrugging himself out of his heavy winter cloak. He glared at the dying fire, and it flared somewhat reluctantly anew. He sat down, lit one of his slim black Russian-blended cigarettes, slung his long legs up on the table and lifted the book of the works of Edgar Allan Poe. He had his back to the door when it swung silently open again.

'Kindly close the door, Black, preferably from the outside,' he said calmly without turning. 'It is cold enough in here.'

Sirius closed the door and walked to the table; he didn't look at Snape until he had sat opposite him. 'How hard are you going to make this for me?' he asked.

Severus tried to keep his breathing even, as he tried to still the trip hammer beat of his heart. 'What are you talking about?'

Sirius looked away for a moment; when he looked up his Gryffindor grin was on his face. 'Can we skip all the crap and get to the important bits?'

'What important bits?' Snape asked, painfully aware that not only his eyebrow had risen. He knew he had the benefit of a drink and a cigarette, big advantages, but he was feeling magnanimous; he pushed the almost empty whisky bottle across the table. 'The glasses are above the sinks.' He'd made a commitment, taken a huge step. He watched the Gryffindor stand and pat his pockets down for his cigarettes, light one, and curse as he got the first smoke in his eye. He thought Black rummaged around more than could possibly be necessary to find a glass before he sat back down, completely emptying the bottle into his tumbler.

'Old animosity,' Black said as he tipped the drink and swallowed it in one.

'What important bits?' Snape persisted, aware that somehow over the last few minutes he'd become a little more relaxed. He drew on his own cigarette, squinting his eyes to make sure he didn't suffer Sirius's fate. He was aware of the room becoming warmer, or maybe that was just him.

'I suppose there's only one. One question, one answer, nothing else matters.'

Black seemed to have drawn courage from the whisky; Snape was glad, he was already regretting being so pedantic. 'Ask your question,' he said. The silence hung between them; but it didn't really matter now, they both knew where they were going.

'Do you want me as much as I want you?' Sirius asked eventually; he'd put the grin away.

Severus held the blue eyes; he'd backed himself into this corner, put the noose neatly around his own neck. Surely one word couldn't be so hard for a man of his undoubted eloquence; that was all it needed, just one word. He looked away for a moment. His cigarette was burnt to nothing, his glass was empty; he had nothing left to hold him up, but it hardly mattered. He knew he was undone.

'Yes.'

He watched Sirius close his eyes; he had his elbow on the table and he dropped his forehead to the palm of his hand. Severus stood up; Black had done the hard work, and he knew he had to reach out too. He stood behind Sirius's chair and dropped his head.

'I have a question too,' he said quietly into Sirius's long dark hair. He felt the fractional nod of Black's head, the invitation. 'Why? Is it just because you feel you have lost Lupin?'

Sirius turned with a frown. 'It's not like that with Lupin and me. It's more convenience ... not even that.' He creased his brow, as though in an effort to find words to express himself. 'I love Lupin like a best friend. The sex is just ... I don't know how to describe it.'

Snape nodded; he knew exactly what Black meant, it was much like the relationship he had shared for so long with Lucius. Lovers, who loved one another, but weren't in love. He hadn't moved his hands from where they sat on Sirius's shoulders as he held the blue eyes. 'So that just leaves the 'why?' doesn't it?' He raised his eyebrow.

He felt Sirius do a quick mental appraisal; he could see him discounting looks, temperament and humour in quick succession, it didn't leave much.

'It goes so far back that I can't even remember. It's just a bit of who I am.' Sirius looked away, as though trying to make up his mind whether he should voice his thoughts; when he did they surprised Snape. 'Why didn't you tell me who you were?'

'What do you mean?' Severus frowned.

'I mean when you came to Azkaban, but I think you knew that.'

It was Snape's turn to look away; he had been so sure no one had known who he was, no one had seen through the disguise. 'I don't know what you mean.'

Sirius smiled. 'I'm a dog, Severus. The first time you walked in that door I knew it was you, even in the state I was in.'

'Denial is pointless then. Let us just say that I was not prepared to risk you telling me not to come back,' Snape replied, trying to suppress the memories of the years of watching helplessly on as the man he loved turned into the bitter wreck he had become.

Sirius drew in a shaky sigh. 'All I lived for was these visits. I pretended it was revenge, or wanting to see Harry grow up, or clear my name, but it wasn't any of these things. I stayed alive because I thought I owed you that.'

'Enough talk,' Severus said quietly, aware that somehow their roles had reversed. 'It's strange, but we have nothing to say to one another that isn't deeply hurtful on some level.'

'There's one more thing I need to know.' Sirius gave an attempt at his Gryffindor grin. 'Why did you leave Grimmauld Place? Are you upset about Malfoy and Lupin?'

'That is why I left, but not for the reason you think. I only really realised about Lucius and Lupin last night, and yet I cannot think why that should be. I've long suspected Lucius of harbouring a fancy for the werewolf. His place in my affections is similar to Lupin's in yours. The reason I left...' He trailed off; it was so petty, so petulant, and he could tell Sirius was enjoying his discomfiture. 'For what it was worth I couldn't bear to be witness again to the fact that I was the one who never got what I wanted, not what I really wanted. Apart from that, the plumbing and heating are woefully inadequate.'

'Apart from the plumbing,' Sirius said with a smile, 'sometimes you've got to wait for quality and class.'

Severus pulled him to his feet. 'We'll see,' he said with a smirk, and nodded to the bedroom door.

'By the way, I only top,' Sirius called to his back, and Snape froze mid-stride.

'I beg your pardon?' he said as he turned slowly. 'Allow me to make it quite clear...'

'Only kidding,' Sirius interrupted him with another grin.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 5

It was Christmas in the Black House, and everyone wanted to have a go at Sirius, even the turkey.

Hermione handed the rejects back to Kreacher; she'd made it quite clear that bits of peel, black bits and fingerprints weren't acceptable on potatoes. The first potful he'd produced had looked all right, until she made him turn them over so she could examine the undersides. He had retreated under the sink with the pot and a paring knife, muttering about the duplicity of mudbloods who thought they could reduce a house-elf, as indubitably fine as he was, to menial chores. Hermione suspected that explained the fact that no one had actually cleaned the Noble House of Black for a century.

'I wonder if Sirius will be back for dinner,' she asked of no one in particular.

'Sling in a few extra spuds in case,' Ron replied. 'I don't want him eating my share.'

'I wonder where he is,' she said more directly to Ron this time, as she passed the reluctant Kreacher another six potatoes. 'Severus too. I wonder where he is. I hope he's all right.'

She looked to Dumbledore's portrait, but the dead headmaster was snoring gently with his annoyingly benign smile on his face.

'He'll be fine,' Lupin commented mildly. He was hoping Sirius would be back soon too; he was beginning to run out of cigarettes and he couldn't find where Sirius had stashed them. Lucius only smoked ghastly little cheroots, and Harry, Draco and Ron had given him almost hostile looks when he'd asked them for some cigarettes. The horrible alternative of actually leaving the dubious comfort of Grimmauld Place and going out to buy some beckoned; maybe he could send Kreacher. Lupin wasn't usually lazy; he wondered if he'd caught it off Lucius.

Harry looked up from where he was almost asleep on the elbow he'd propped on the table. 'Can I ask you something?'

Lupin looked at him, wondering how many cigarettes his secrets were worth; he discarded the idea. 'Not if it's anything to do with Sirius and Severus,' he replied with his calm smile. 'Or Lucius, for that matter.'

'That doesn't leave much,' Draco replied.

'Come on, Lupin.' Harry grinned, fully awake now. 'Entertain us; it's nearly Christmas.'

'Not likely.' Lupin laughed.

Draco gave him a sly look and nudged Harry. He produced an unopened packet of cigarettes from his pocket, and slapped them on the table. 'This says you haven't got the balls to tell us what went on between Severus and Black.' Draco raised his eyebrow in challenge.

Lupin was wavering; he really needed the cigarettes, and he knew it was raining. He watched Draco look across to the kitchen door as they heard Mrs Black shriek her dubious welcome, and took the opportunity to slip the blond boy's bribe into his pocket with a wink at Harry. He felt much better; he'd got his smokes without betraying any secrets, it left his conscience remarkably untarnished. It wasn't his fault if people didn't look after their belongings.

Sirius walked into the kitchen and dumped a large parcel onto the table. He was a bit put out that everyone seemed to be expecting someone to follow him, so much so that they hadn't even greeted him.

'Are you alone?' Harry asked when it eventually became apparent that he was.

'Not now,' he said, grinning. 'You're all here.'

'Where's Severus?' Draco asked almost accusingly.

'How should I know?'

'Where were you?' Harry asked.

'Getting the turkey,' Sirius replied with another grin, and nodded to the huge parcel. 'It's Christmas tomorrow.'

'That didn't take you all of last night,' Draco said.

'Tricky things, turkeys,' Sirius said evasively, enjoying the game; Draco and Harry's hostility, and Lupin's reproach, even Dumbledore's confusion. 'Have we worked out who's cooking what for Christmas dinner?'

'Didn't you find him?' Draco asked.

'You couldn't care less about anyone, could you?' Harry accused.

'I'm disappointed in you, Sirius.' Lupin frowned at him, as Malfoy shot him a worried look.

'If you're all so concerned, why was I the one to have to go looking for him?' Sirius replied with yet another grin, as Hermione came into the kitchen.

'You had better have brought Severus back, Sirius,' she warned.

'He was back here hours ago,' Sirius replied when they had all vented their disapproval. 'At least he said he was coming back here. Has no one bothered to check? Shame on you all,' he said, flashing a final grin of triumph as he left the room.

Sirius watched as Snape put the finishing touches to the chestnut stuffing, and Lupin chopped the vegetables for the soup. He noticed Lucius hadn't appeared downstairs yet; he couldn't have smelt breakfast. When they'd divided up the chores for Christmas Day the blond Slytherin had slapped twenty Galleons on the table and told them to stop annoying him, saying that it was bad form for a man of his standing to gain a reputation for working. Sirius had to admit it to himself, the big snake had style; he was one lazy bastard, but he did have style.

'Where is the turkey?' Severus asked.

'What?' Sirius blinked; he'd assumed that buying the damned thing and carting it home was enough. He hadn't expected to touch it again until it was hot and lying beside roast potatoes.

'I have made the stuffing, now stuff the damn thing; that's your bit.'

Sirius opened the larder and found the huge bird sitting in a basin of pink water. 'What end do I stuff?' he asked when he manhandled it onto the kitchen table and found a hole at both ends. 'Maybe I should do them both; there's a lot of us.' He dug his hand into the body cavity and drew it back with a yelp. 'There's something in there,' he said with a look of trepidation as he lifted the flap of soggy pink skin and peered inside. 'Oh, God, I think it's pregnant.'

'What are you talking about?' Harry shoved him out of the way and looked inside. 'Ugh, what's that?'

'I think it's a baby turkey,' Sirius said sickly. 'Oh, God, we've killed a baby turkey inside its mother.'

Snape rolled his eyes. 'I sure you'll all eventually realise that turkeys lay eggs.'

'Oh,' Sirius remarked and peered inside the turkey again, 'so they do. Something's crawled inside it though. Give me a hand, Harry, it's stuck,' he gasped, as he tried to free the packet of giblets from the cavity.

Harry took hold of one end of the turkey, which by now was a little slippery, as Sirius tried to grasp the giblets. They both heaved at one time and Sirius fell backwards in a spray of icy pink particles, as Harry and the turkey went in the other direction; the turkey eventually making its own bid for freedom, only to be stopped by the kitchen door. Unfortunately, Lucius took that moment to come in, and skidded on the pink water onto his arse.

Hermione had followed him in, and looked from Harry to turkey, to Lucius, to Sirius, and to the plastic-wrapped packet of giblets. She looked back at Sirius with suspicion.

'Where did you get the turkey, Sirius?' she asked with her eyes narrowed. 'And don't bother to say that you got it from a farmer. That's a Muggle turkey; wizards don't stamp a "sell by" date on a plastic-wrapped packet of giblets. And it's been frozen.'

'I ... I bought it,' Sirius stammered, 'in Diagon Alley.'

'You got it from Mundungus in a pub, didn't you?' she accused. 'How could you, Sirius? He probably stole it from a supermarket.'

Lucius had sat upright. 'Please don't tell me that is Christmas dinner.' He nodded to the great pink lump.

It could have been worse, Snape reflected; not much, but it could have been worse.

Lupin had put too much pepper in the soup and no one could eat it; only Ron seemed unconcerned that the turkey had used the rather grimy kitchen floor as a skating rink before its sojourn in the oven; and the pudding had so much brandy in it that Lucius had jumped up from the table, as his hair threatened to catch fire along with it when Sirius put a match to the pudding. When the fire eventually went out with the help of a bucket of water, there wasn't much left of the pudding, nothing edible anyway.

Draco sat munching a packet of potato crisps, and Lupin had put on some toast as Dumbledore cooed and slurped over the delicious plate of turkey and trimmings that a fat angel had put in front of him.

Snape caught Sirius's eye; the Gryffindor grinned at him, and it took all of Severus's control over his facial muscles not to smile back. He watched Sirius stand up and begin to top up the wine glasses. Lupin and Lucius were taking quietly together; the werewolf was shaking his head vehemently as Lucius tried to put something across to him. Snape wondered, with something bordering on affection, what staggering piece of political incorrectness Malfoy was trying to justify. Draco and Potter were chatting across the table to Hermione and Ron. It was all very cosy.

'Oh, that bottle's empty,' Sirius remarked quietly, and Snape smirked to himself again. Black was doing well; his remarks were just offhand enough not to cause alarm yet. 'You and I can have this, Severus. I think it's absinthe; it looks like it.' Sirius poured half of the green liquid into Snape's glass and the rest into his own. Both men drank off the spirit as Harry and Draco spluttered in belated realisation.

'Don't drink that,' Harry gasped.

'Fuck, don't,' Draco added.

'Why not?' Sirius asked, his eyes watering at the strength of the fiery spirit.

'It doesn't matter,' Ron said weakly.

It could have been worse, Severus reflected again as he stood up. 'Thank you all for your company. I shall treasure the memories of this Christmas dinner. I am going upstairs to read; kindly don't make too much noise.'

The three boys watched him go; Ron was biting his lip, and Draco and Harry were casting none too covert looks between Sirius and Severus's disappearing back.

'I'm tired.' Sirius stood up, once the kitchen door had been closed for a few moments. 'All that messing about with the ruddy turkey. I'm going for a sleep.'

Dumbledore nodded in satisfaction, maybe at the Christmas pudding and brandy sauce he'd just been served, maybe not. Whatever it was, he looked enormously pleased with himself.

'Serves the little fuckers right.' Sirius grinned at Snape as he pushed open his bedroom door.

'Actually I don't care for absinthe,' Severus remarked coolly, as he eyed the flagon of green potion Sirius had swapped for the absinthe earlier in the day.

'It's better than the crap they fed Lucius and me though,' Sirius replied as he began to unbutton Snape's frock coat, starting at the throat and working down at an ever increasing pace until he ripped the last few buttons apart, and they went skittering across the floor.

'I suppose so, and at least they won't come anywhere near here for a while.' Snape raised his eyebrow as he pulled his Gryffindor to him. He felt the sense of belonging to someone, and having someone belong to him sweep over him, catching his throat and stifling his chest until he had to gasp.

Sirius drew away from him and held him at arm's length. 'Me too, Severus.' For a moment his eyes looked a touch glassy. He blinked quickly and looked out of the window. 'Pity,' he mused, 'it's not going to snow again. I thought it might have been a white Christmas.'

Snape said nothing; he doubted he was capable of speech. He crossed the short space to stand behind Sirius, and put a hand on his shoulder. He felt his passion rising as he moved in close and put his arms around Sirius's waist to pull him even nearer, dropping his head to his neck. He supposed a Black Christmas was the best he'd ever hoped for.
