

It Was Christmas in the Black House

by scaranda

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Festive fluff and frolics, complete in three. Oh, and a touch of angst too; it is almost
Christmas, after all.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 3

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There were six of them playing the Christmas board game that the twins had devised: Harry and Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Sirius and Lupin. They were stuffed fuller than the turkey that Hermione and Remus had cooked to perfection, despite Sirius's continual useless instructions, and now five of them were becoming quite mellow, and Sirius was getting drunk. The kitchen was warm and as cosy as Grimmauld Place could ever be, until Mrs Black began to shriek a tirade in the welcome of another guest.

'Get out, you whore's bastard. I know who you are, you repugnance of pureblood ... You detestation. Get out, and don't befoul this house with your unnatural presence.'

'Carol singers?' Sirius muttered more in hope than expectation.

Severus opened the kitchen door and let in the icy blast he'd brought with him from the street outside.

'Just in time to join the fun, Snape.' Sirius glared at him. 'Couldn't you shut the bloody door at least?'

'Clear my house of devil spawn, you worthless traitorous whelp,' Mrs Black screeched. 'Get that travesty of blood out of my house, you cur.'

'Fuck off, Mother,' Sirius said absently, as he stood up and shoved the door closed.

'Fun?' Severus muttered as he began to shake the snow off his black travelling cloak; Harry suspected it was as much to clear the offending whiteness, as to dry it off. 'What do you mean by "join the fun"?' Snape asked suspiciously.

'Yeah, fun ... even you must have heard of it ... it's where people interact with another and laugh ...' Sirius replied, giving Snape another glare. 'Forget it. The season of miracles only stretches so far.'

'Give it a rest; it's Christmas Day,' Harry muttered with a sigh. 'Can't you two just stop bickering for one day?'

The two men looked at him in surprise.

'Bickering?' Sirius asked. 'What are you talking about?'

'Christmas?' Snape asked. 'I'm a heathen, you idiot boy.'

'You don't even know you're doing it, do you?' Harry huffed at them in disgust.

'Happy Christmas, Severus,' Ginny interjected, nudging Harry to let the matter drop, and giving Snape the benefit of her smile, the one that Harry noticed stretched her face until all you could really see was a quite delicious confection of crinkles, freckles, button-nose and teeth.

Snape favoured her with a twist of his lip. She was the only person Harry had ever seen him befriend in any way in the nine years since he'd first met him. 'The compliments of the season to you too, Ginerva,' Snape replied, his tone implying that no one else around the table should include themselves in this private felicitation. Then he gave the rest of the players a sweeping black look, as though daring them to have the impertinence to address him in the same manner as his apprentice.

Hermione shook the dice cup impatiently. 'Come on, let's play,' she said. 'Would you like to join us, Professor?' She just stopped short of batting her eyelashes at him.

'No, he wouldn't,' Sirius snapped, all the Christmas spirit seeming to leak out of his seams.

'Thank you, Miss Granger, I shall,' Snape replied with a smirk.

Hermione shuffled along on the bench seat that ran along the wall, to make space for him, as Harry smirked to Ron at her disappointment when Snape pulled over a straight-backed chair from beside the fire, and sat between Ginny and Remus instead, pausing only to throw Sirius a hostile look. Hermione seemed to content herself just to gaze across at Snape instead, earnestly explaining the rules of what was really a very simple game.

Sirius watched on, making a great show of impatience, spinning the dice through his fingers and sighing. He knew Snape had only joined the game to annoy him. 'How was Malfoy Manor's Christmas dinner?' he snarled across the table, when he'd had quite enough of Hermione showing Snape how to actually throw a die, and Snape pretending to have as much as a modicum of interest.

'As obscene as last year ... why do you ask?'

'It's called conversation.' Sirius lit a cigarette, ignoring Harry's glare and Lupin's frown. 'Another art you haven't mastered. I can't understand why Lucius lets you into Malfoy Manor when you're so socially inadequate. He must be desperate for a shag.'

'I can assure you, Black, that when the company deserves it, I have all of the required social graces ... not that you would be able to recognise them.' Severus began to stand.

Sirius grinned, hiding a tiny twinge of guilt. He didn't know why he did it; he just couldn't help it. Being in Snape's company always made him feel this way; he was an unmissable target. He left it to one of the others to stop him; he knew they would, Ginny or Harry, it was just a toss-up to see which one it would be. He watched with only a little jealousy as Ginny tugged Snape's sleeve.

Sirius had been as surprised as everyone else when Severus had asked Ginny to stay on at Hogwarts as his research assistant, when she had finished her schooling in the summer, even though she had been amply qualified. She had been the best Potions student at Hogwarts since Snape himself, probably as a result of mixing up antidotes, from the age of six, for Fred and George. There seemed to be some sort of genuine friendship between them, something Sirius didn't realise that he envied. There wasn't any hint of a sexual relationship; he knew Snape better than that after all, but there was something. Ginny handled Snape so well that Sirius doubted that he even noticed.

'Severus, sit down. Just ignore him,' Lupin said with a sigh, as he gave Sirius his version of a hard look that left him feeling as though he should have done better, and Sirius quite unmoved. Lupin splashed a generous measure of malt whisky into a glass, and pushed it across the table to the Potions Master.

They restarted the game, and Harry was next to pick a dare card. "Drink the potion in the green vial, and sing one verse of 'Jingle Bells'." Harry looked at the potion with deep mistrust; spectacular bodily functions often featured as a result of imbibing anything George or Fred had had a hand in making, and he didn't fancy vomiting his Christmas dinner across the table. He grimaced as he swallowed it, and for a moment he felt nothing. He'd just got to "Jingle all the way", when water began to pour out of his ears with great hiccupping sounds that somehow played the tune. Harry noticed that not only was Snape not laughing, not that there was any surprise there, but Sirius wasn't either. He was a bit disappointed in his godfather.

Ginny's next turn required her to clean the shoes of the person on her left for one week. The shoes would present themselves to her each morning at six o'clock, and if she hadn't completed the task by seven, she would grow a boil on her nose. Harry suspected from her little smile that Ginny would know a counter curse for that; she seemed to know a lot of counter curses, he supposed being the youngest Weasley had made that necessary. He noted that this time Snape at least deigned to smirk at her, probably because they were his shoes. It went a bit better for a while as they settled into the game; Snape seemed to drink a lot of whisky and relax a little, and Sirius brightened up a bit, and Harry began to hope that the sniping was over.

On his next turn, Sirius landed on a dare. "Throw the dice, and whatever number comes up, count from your left, not including yourself, and give that person a passionate kiss under the mistletoe." Sirius looked up to where the mistletoe hung over the table. He made a great show of shaking the dice in the cup, and threw them across the table: two ones, snake eyes, how apt. Harry didn't think Sirius need to count along the table.

'Well, well, Black, hoist by thine own petard ... now you know why mistletoe is poisonous,' Snape said dryly. 'Let us all see your own formidable social grace.'

'Put your tongue in my mouth and I'll bite it off, Snape,' Sirius snarled, as the others began to laugh. Even Severus smirked at his discomfiture as Sirius drank in the reactions of the players, and seemed determined to make the best of it. 'Clear the way, people,' he said grandly. 'I shall not falter in the face of iniquity.' He stood and went to where Snape was rising from his seat, slipped an arm around his back, and kissed him chastely on the lips for a couple of seconds to cheers from the others.

'You call that passion, Black?' Severus said as Sirius drew back. 'I am unmoved.' Snape put one of his own hands to the small of Sirius's back and the other behind his head, pushed him over the table with his body, scattering the dice, the dice cup, and all of the game markers onto the floor, and kissed him long and hard. He straightened up, leaving Sirius lying across the table, gasping for breath. 'If you're going to play, Black, play properly.'

'Corrupter of my son ... whore spawn,' Walburga Black screamed from the hall. 'Do not besmirch my Noble House with your lewd unnatural coupling.'

'My, my,' Ginny said admiringly, breaking the silence around the table. 'He's got a way about him, hasn't he?'

Hermione had flushed a rosy pink. 'Hasn't he just,' she muttered under her breath, as Harry nudged Ron, and they shared a snigger that Harry knew was really just hiding their discomfort.

'Clear my house of this rotten fruit of a putrid womb. Get the fetid abomination out.' Mrs Black continued her tirade, rising in her fury to an alarming crescendo. 'I know who you are, Severus Snape. Get the whore's devil spawn out of my house ... degenerate inhuman.'

She had just paused for breath as Kreacher came into kitchen, and began to hand round dirty cups of lukewarm grey tea; he gave a yelp as Sirius aimed a half-hearted kick at him, and turned to Snape. 'Scum,' the elf muttered at him and threw him a look. 'You has upset my mistress.'

Mrs Black had begun screeching again, '... decaying subspecies out of my noble home, bastard trash ...' her words spiralling until Harry thought it was entirely possible that the windows would shatter.

Harry had placed his hands over his ears. 'Can't you do anything about that?' he asked Sirius.

'She doesn't seem to like you,' Sirius snapped at Severus. 'I can't imagine why.' He shot Snape another look then smiled around the table at the others. 'She'll get fed up

soon.'

But Severus had stood up. 'Not before I do,' he said, and marched into the hall.

'This'll be good,' Harry said hopefully to Ron, as he craned his neck to see what was going to happen.

The portrait started back when Snape stood before it. Instead of trying to fully close the curtains surrounding the picture, Severus pulled them wide, toppling the tinsel that Kreacher had placed on the rail above. 'Shut up, you ugly old bitch,' he snarled, 'and get back to hell where you belong.'

Sirius had gone into the hall to get a better look as the rest of them stood in the doorway too, to watch this clash of the Titans. To Harry's surprise Sirius's mother turned her back; he'd never seen her do that before. He watched as Snape reached into the portrait, Merlin alone knew how, and turned her back around.

'Don't you turn your back on me, you rude, lowbred hag of the serving classes. I know exactly where you came from, you ill-born whelp of a whoremaster,' he said in a voice that, although he had pitched it in his customary low hiss, carried to his whole audience. 'Now shut up your foul, ignorant mouthing. All you are succeeding in doing is showing everybody what a guttersnipe you truly are.'

Harry grinned at Ron and Hermione; this was a good contest so far.

'You bastard son of blood, you disgrace to pureblood, you should have been drowned at birth like the unwanted freak you are, you deviant spawn of perversion.' Mrs Black started as low as Snape, but she seemed to build to an ear-splitting climax. 'Even your own cuckold of a father wouldn't acknowledge you and your whore mother. I know who you are, Severus Snape... I know what abomination you are... Stay away from my house, you abhorrence.'

Snape reached into the portrait again and grabbed her dress at the throat. 'How dare you speak to me in that manner, you worthless old tripe hound. You and your family of harridans served my mother's family for centuries; you couldn't even walk on your hind legs until we taught you,' he snarled. 'You crept on your bellies like the low bred scum you are before Orion Black picked you up out of the gutter that we'd thrown you back into...' He raised his eyebrow in his familiar way. 'Perhaps he should have wiped you off his shoe instead.'

'You distortion of nature, bastard son of an unnatural whore ... get out of my house,' Walburga screeched on as though Severus hadn't spoken.

Snape drew himself up to his six feet and three inches and reached into the portrait a last time, slapped her smartly across the mouth, and drew her curtains about her.

Harry looked at him in admiration. 'Wow, that was really cool.'

Severus gave him a withering look and then smirked. 'Yes, it was, wasn't it?'

It was about then that Harry began to wonder just how drunk Snape was.

Sirius became a little distracted after that; his mind seemed to be somewhere else, and instead of the open glares he usually reserved for Snape, he kept giving him covert looks. Harry noticed Lupin watching the two of them; he wondered, not for the first time, if there had ever been anything but hate between Snape and Sirius.

The few dares which came up now were of a much more innocuous nature: some frogs coming out of Ron's ears, an impressive blue nosebleed for Lupin, one or two more mistletoe kisses, but nothing as spectacular as the one between Snape and Sirius; some things were hard to eclipse. Harry just prayed he wasn't going to have to kiss Ron; he was sure Ron was praying the same thing.

It was a little later when Kreacher slunk back in again; he sidled up to Hermione when he saw everyone else was ignoring him. 'Tea, little missy prissy Mudblood?' the elf said with a leering look.

'Go away,' Hermione replied, her face contorted in distaste.

'Kreacher will try the werewolf next; the milk is off anyway,' the elf hissed in a loud stage whisper. 'The werewolf will not refuse; he leeches everything on offer. Tea, Professor sir?'

'That's enough of that shit.' Sirius stood up and threw the elf into the hall, where he landed in a howling heap of feigned misery below his mistress. 'Can we finish this sodding game now?'

They were playing the final round; Harry was glad, it had become almost boring. Then Snape landed on a double dare, the only one of the night. 'Throw the dice and whatever number comes up, count from your right, not including yourself, and give that person the smallest vial. Then ask them the one question you've always wanted to know the answer to.'

Harry noticed that Sirius closed his eyes for a moment; when he opened them he seemed to give Snape a pleading look. Snape picked up the dice cup and threw two predictable ones, then looked across to Sirius with a half-smile. Harry saw Sirius shake his head as Snape passed him the vial; he had a suspicion it contained Veritaserum. He held his breath as Sirius drank it off.

'Severus, no ...please.'

'You have become a mind reader, along with all of your other dubious talents?' Snape enquired, but Harry thought he looked even paler than usual.

'I mean it, Severus ... that was Veritaserum ... don't do this.'

Harry looked at the others; they all seemed as puzzled by Sirius's reaction as he was, all of them except Lupin.

'Tell me, Black,' Snape began, and Harry could see he was just a little nervous, as though he didn't really want to know the answer, but felt compelled to ask. 'Why?'

Sirius looked panic stricken. 'Why? ... Why what?'

'Why did you send me to Lupin in fifth year? I always wondered.'

Nobody spoke; it was as though something dark and ugly had been dredged up from the past. Sirius seemed to be struggling not to respond; he kept giving Snape desperate looks that Harry didn't think he wanted to understand.

'Why?' Snape repeated quietly. 'You could have picked other ways to do what you wanted to do. Why did you make it so public? Did I mean so little that you just wanted to humiliate me, to make yourself esteemed by your Gryffindor cronies? Or perhaps you really did mean to kill me. Was that it?'

Sirius threw a last panicked look, at Harry this time. 'I didn't,' he whispered.

Snape frowned as Lupin touched his arm. 'Leave it, Severus. Don't do this,' Lupin said. 'It's only a game.'

Snape shook his hand away. 'What do you mean, you didn't?' he demanded of Sirius, as though the rest of the uncomfortable players weren't still sitting around the table. He had become even paler: pale, and frightening in his intensity; his black eyes glittered. 'Tell me, damn you.'

'I didn't do it.' Sirius looked away.

'I don't understand. What do you mean?'

'It wasn't me.' Sirius stood up and stumbled out of the room, leaving the others gawping after him.

'What did he mean?' Harry looked at Lupin, who was watching Snape.

'Nothing, Harry,' the werewolf replied. 'I think some of us have had too much to drink ... just forget it.'

They all watched on quietly as Snape picked up the vial which Sirius had drunk from, stood up, lifted his cloak, and made to leave the room without saying anything.

'Don't go, Professor ... please, it's snowing. And it's cold out there,' Hermione said in a small voice, as Ginny bit her lip and seemed to think it was useless to make any attempt to stop him.

'Of course it's snowing, Miss Granger ... it's Christmas, isn't it?' Snape seemed to lack the energy or will to dispense his usual malice; beneath the towering dignity and cold exterior, Harry thought he'd never seen anyone so hurt looking in his life. Something had happened here, and he knew that Remus knew what it was.

Lupin stood with his back to the front door, blocking Snape's way. 'Stay, Severus,' he said. 'You're drunk. Sirius is too. Anyway, it was a stupid game to play.' He managed not to look to the stairs to where he knew Sirius stood on the half-landing.

'Get out of my way, Lupin.' Snape's voice was weary. 'I do not want to be here.'

'Where are you going to go? It's bloody freezing,' Lupin pleaded.

'Anywhere is warmer than here, thank you.'

'Get out of here, you whore spawn, and do not seek to bring your traitorous blood here again ... get out and freeze to death in a gutter like the abomination to pureblood you are,' Mrs Black added unhelpfully.

Lupin looked down; he knew argument was futile. 'I didn't want this, Severus ... and I'm sure he didn't either.' He touched Snape's arm as he passed. 'Look after yourself.' Only when the front door closed on the cold night and the colder man did Lupin look up the stairs to where Sirius had slid to the floor, watching him helplessly.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 3

Black holes are most difficult sort to mend in one's Christmas socking. Festive fluff and frolics, complete in three. Oh, and a touch of angst too; it is almost Christmas, after all.

'Well, what was that all about?' Ron asked.

'I'm not sure,' Harry said, frowning, as he stood up and moved towards the door. 'But I bet Remus knows.'

'Harry ... wait ... give them some time,' Hermione said quickly as she and Ginny exchanged worried glances.

'What for?' Ron put in.

'There are other people's feelings involved here,' Hermione replied. 'Don't go blundering in, asking questions you don't need the answers to right now.'

Harry hesitated; so it wasn't just his imagination.

Ron wasn't put off though; in his normal fashion he felt he deserved needed more. 'Feelings? ...What are you on about?'

'She's on about the fact that Sirius and Severus were a very hot item at school for a while ... and then something happened,' Ginny said, in her matter-of-fact way, with a knowing glance to Hermione that Harry didn't miss.

'What?' Ron's face had gone a colour that clashed horribly with his hair. 'Who told you that shit?'

'Bill, actually,' Ginny replied with a smug little grin.

'What?' Ron's ears darkened to purple; all in all he was a Technicolor mess. 'Bill? ... Our Bill? Snape and Sirius? Don't talk crap ... Our Bill?' he repeated, as though he hadn't heard properly. 'I don't believe you; our Bill wouldn't even talk to that slimy git.'

'Don't ask then,' Ginny retorted back.

'How does Bill know anyway?' Ron persisted.

'You don't want to know,' Ginny said firmly, and tossed her red mane.

'I do.'

'Okay then.' Ginny looked once to where Hermione was watching her with the air of a young woman who shares a secret with another. Ginny gave her brother the little smile she used when she delivered a really good bit of information. 'He had a fling with Severus a couple of years ago.'

'I don't believe you,' Ron said hotly. 'You're making it up. Bill? ... and ... and Snape?'

Harry watched on; he believed it. 'What else did Bill say, Ginny?' he asked.

'That Severus used to visit Sirius in Azkaban.'

'Oh,' Hermione said quietly, as though she were reluctant to admit her ignorance, and just realised that she had done so. 'I didn't know that bit.'

'The visiting warrants got sent to Dad in the Ministry by mistake once. Apparently Severus used to go about once every three months or so.' Ginny gave her little smile. 'He was the only visitor he ever got, except for Ministry officials.'

'Lupin didn't go?' Harry asked quietly now.

'Nobody went ... remember, Harry,' Ginny said, 'Remus thought he'd betrayed James.'

'Snape did too,' Ron pointed out. 'So does Bill,' he added, clearly wanting to distance any Weasley from Severus Snape, apart from his clearly deranged sister.

'Perhaps he didn't care...' Hermione said, giving Harry a look. 'I don't mean he didn't care that your parents were dead. But perhaps ... I mean ... when you love someone, it's unconditional, isn't it?'

'Are we still talking about Snape?' Ron expostulated. 'I mean, imagine finding your only visitor is that greasy git. No wonder Sirius broke out,' he added, as though that made any sense at all. 'What did they do? Stand and hex one another?'

'Probably,' Harry said thoughtfully; he didn't think to disbelieve Ginny. 'Probably they were so used to doing it, it kept them both happy ...it probably still does. I don't think they even know they're doing it half the time. Anyway, I think I'm glad he went ... at least someone did.'

'I think that's so romantic,' Hermione said, smiling wistfully.

'I think you're all nuts,' Ron said with a pained expression, as Lupin opened the door.

Sirius sat in his bedroom, trying in vain to shut out the images that haunted him.

But still the picture of a young Severus, just bare days after his sixteenth birthday when Sirius has seen him in a drugged sleep in the Infirmary that awful night of the incident at the Shack, crept out of the dark corners of his mind. Sirius had sneaked down under James's cloak, once Dumbledore had finished with him, and he'd realised then that that something was over, that a gift he hadn't had time to unwrap properly had been snatched from his grasp. He remembered standing for a long time at Snape's bedside, looking at the bluish shadows under his eyes; he remembered being hardly able to breathe at the thought of what had happened, and what would become of them. Perhaps it was as well he hadn't known then what the long future held.

Sirius let the images flow, steeping himself in all too familiar self-pity, and found himself thinking of Snape leaving his cell in Azkaban, handing him clean water and cigarettes, which would be stolen from him, at the end of another painful fifteen minute visit. He thought of how Severus would never know he lived for these visits, or maybe he did; maybe that was why he'd kept coming back, maybe he had needed them too. He thought that if he tried he could recall every single visit, every time he told Severus never to come back to gloat at his downfall, every bitter wounding word he hurled at Severus's back as he left the cell, all the time wanting to beg him to stay a few more minutes.

And he thought of a new image now, one he could add to his collection of personal Dementors: a picture of Severus standing at the bottom of the stairs with Lupin barring his way, of him moving Lupin aside and going out into the cold Christmas night ... alone... Happy Christmas, Severus.

How had they managed to make such a mess of everything? he wondered.

He hoped he hadn't gone back to Lucius ... Happy Christmas, Sirius.

Snape's mind was reeling with a combination of alcohol and doubts. He laid the tiny vial aside. He had run his tests, and confirmed what he had already known; it had contained Veritaserum. Sirius couldn't have been lying, but he couldn't think what he had meant. He failed to notice how cold his rooms were; it didn't seem to matter. He wished he hadn't left Grimmauld Place now; that had been childish, and somewhat beneath his dignity, and ... at least Sirius was there, and even fighting, and keeping up the show of aggression he had practised for so long, was better than this lonely peace without him. Severus wondered how he'd ever let himself get into this mess. It was too late now though, too late to change; it had taken him too many years to realise that he desperately needed what was never coming back to him. He despaired of his own folly, his own inadequacies.

Maybe he'd go back to Lucius tomorrow, at least he'd be glad to see him ... but Severus didn't want Lucius; he wanted what he couldn't have. He drained the last of the bottle into his half empty glass, and tossed the lot over his throat; it didn't even burn on the way down.

Harry wanted to be alone with Lupin; he didn't want any more of this history scoffed at by Ron, or cooed over by Hermione. Ginny seemed to be the only one who really accepted things at face value, without either ridicule or romance. He thought a little about that, about how long she'd known about the secret visits to Azkaban and had kept the information to herself; she was a deep pool. He wondered if that was why, of all of the Gryffindors, she was the only one Snape ever addressed by her given name, ever graced with one of his twisted smiles. Harry realised with a jolt that he was very fond of Ginny himself.

'It's late, come on, let's go to bed,' Hermione said pointedly when the chatter turned desultory.

'Coming, Harry?' Ron stood and stretched.

'I'm just going to make some hot chocolate,' Harry replied. 'I'll be up in a minute.'

'Okay, I'll wait, I'll have some too.'

'You don't need hot chocolate, Ronald. Come on,' Hermione said a bit more pointedly.

'How do you know what I need? I'll wait for Harry, if it's all the same to you,' Ron flared in his usual way to Hermione.

'What she means is, Harry would like a private word with Remus, and that's a bit difficult with you hanging onto every word he says.' Ginny stopped at the door and looked over her shoulder.

Harry couldn't help laughing; trust her to get it right again.

'I don't really know, Harry, and if I did, I still wouldn't tell you,' Remus said. 'If you want to know about Sirius, he's the man to ask.'

'What about him and Snape?' Harry persisted. 'Did they have an ... an affair?'

'Harry ... they were fifteen ... just turned sixteen. You've been sixteen. You know what it was like, in love with a different person every three weeks ... let it lie.'

'But it was different with them, wasn't it? I mean Ginny just told me that Snape used to visit Sirius in Azkaban ... every three months ... for twelve years,' Harry said, adding bits all the time to emphasise his point. 'And they still pretend to hate one another ... what's that all about?' It struck Harry just then that Lupin was surprised. 'You didn't know that, did you?'

'No ... Sirius never told me. But then, that's his business. I never interfered when it came to Snape and him.' Lupin seemed to catch himself, to try to cover his error. 'It's not our business, Harry. It's Snape's and Sirius's.'

'Who did? Who did interfere?'

Remus looked down; he looked as though he were weighing up what to tell and what not to tell.

'It was my father, wasn't it? It was my father who tried to drive them apart,' Harry demanded. 'That's why Sirius was so upset when he guessed what Snape was going to ask him. I know that. He would have said if it had been Pettigrew.'

'How do you know it wasn't me?' Lupin asked.

'You? No way. Even if he'd said that under Veritaserum I wouldn't have believed it.' Harry frowned as the candles guttered slightly just before they heard the front door click shut. 'Someone just came in.'

Lupin stood and opened the door to the quiet and empty hallway. 'No, no one came in, Harry, someone just went out.' He gave a little smile. 'Go to bed.'

'D'you think Sirius has gone to see Snape?'

'Yes, I suspect he has.' Lupin put his hand on Harry's shoulder. 'Now, why don't we give them the privacy to sort themselves out if they can? I think they deserve at least that.'

'Where did he go? Snape, I mean ... has he got any family?' Harry was suddenly struck by how isolated his former Potions Master seemed. Everyone he knew had a bit of history, even himself, but he knew nothing at all about where Snape came from.

Lupin looked into the middle distance as he filched another cigarette from the packet someone had left on the table. Harry knew he knew loads of stuff; he wondered how he could drag it out of him.

'He had two brothers, half-brothers ... one died,' Lupin said eventually without any more prompting. 'I'm sure you gathered from Sirius's mother's tirade that Severus was born on the wrong side of the broomstick.'

'Who's his brother?' Harry asked more in hope than expectation.

'I'm not positive, but I think I know ... but that's not any of your business. Don't think I don't know what you're trying to do.' Lupin gave Harry a long level look, and then smiled his self-effacing smile. 'Severus is the son of a wealthy but plain daughter of an aristocratic wizarding family from the northeast of England. His father and mother met, and had what was known as a "liaison", during an International Wizarding Convention. I remember her vaguely. She befriended my mother, and sometimes visited when I was very young; strange woman, she was,' he said, and Harry thought there was something wistful in the way Lupin spoke, as though remembering a time when things were kinder, a time when he was different to the werewolf he had become. 'Anyway, she married a Muggle, a brute of a man who only took so plain a woman for the dowry that he could drink,' Lupin went on, somewhat bitterly, 'and she died many years ago. Severus was sent by the family to be brought up in the south of England, when Tobias Snape drank himself to death.'

'Who brought him up?' Harry asked with bated breath; this was good stuff.

Lupin looked at him in surprise. 'I thought that much was common knowledge. He was sent to grow up with Lucius.'

'Are you saying Lucius Malfoy's father was also Snape's father?'

'No, Harry. Severus is not a Malfoy ... now you're getting no more from me.' Lupin clapped his shoulder. 'Not a word of this gets spilled around, Harry, promise me. I'm sure I've been far too indiscreet as it is.'

Harry smiled; it had been a night for indiscretion. 'So he's not the impoverished Potions Master he appears to be?' he asked, pushing what he fancied might be his advantage. 'Why does he teach at Hogwarts?'

'Impoverished?' Lupin replied. 'I don't know where you got that idea, but Severus is quite probably almost as wealthy as Lucius Malfoy. He is an academic, Harry, and I suspect he has absolutely no interest in money. As to why he teaches at Hogwarts, I suspect that is to be near Dumbledore, the one man who always believed in him. Make no mistake about this, Harry, there isn't anyone more committed to what Hogwarts represents than Snape. At least the last few years have taught those who didn't trust him that lesson. Anyway, go to bed. I'm going too; I doubt it's worth waiting up for Sirius.'

'Yeah, just going ... but twelve years, that must mean something.'

'Harry, what you saw in the Pensieve when you were at school ... the incidents between James and Sirius and Severus Don't run away with notion that Snape was a romantic victim of some sort. Things happened to everyone. Maybe he got more than his fair share, but he wasn't the trodden upon boy you seem to think he was. He gave every bit as good as he got ... well, almost.'

'Such as?'

'He two-timed Sirius mercilessly, for a start,' Lupin replied. 'With Lucius Malfoy.'

'That's hardly the same thing as sending someone to a werewolf,' Harry argued.

'When you're sixteen, it is.'

The dungeon corridor was cold and empty when Sirius walked along it, hoping against slender hope that Severus had indeed come to this seemingly deserted netherworld, where only every third wall sconce was lit, and his footsteps seemed to be echoed by his too fast heartbeat. He thought about transforming into Padfoot to see if he could scent Snape, and discarded the idea; if he was in, he'd know soon enough. He stopped, dry-mouthed, at the door to the Potions Master's private rooms, and put an ear to the door, feeling a little silly; all he needed was for Filch to catch him. He watched in detached fascination as his hand knocked on the black oak.

No reply. Maybe Snape had gone back to Malfoy Manor after all. Sirius laid his forehead against the door, feeling the crush of disappointment. He knocked again. 'Please be in, Severus,' he whispered, as his knock seemed to reverberate from the stone walls of the uncaring corridor. He stood for a few moments, sure that Snape wouldn't have gone back to Lucius; he hated Malfoy Manor when there were other guests there. Maybe he'd sent an owl to Lucius, and had met him somewhere else; that was a possibility. Maybe Malfoy was in his rooms, on the other side of that oak door right now; Sirius balked at the thought. Then he heard it, the tiniest sound; he wasn't even sure what it was, but his acute hearing caught something, some human sound.

'I know you're in there, Severus. Open the door,' Sirius called, and knocked again. Nothing, no acknowledgement; perhaps he'd been mistaken. The whole dungeon

seemed devoid of life. He wondered what he had come here for anyway. Another argument? Another mutual slanging match? He was about to leave, unsure of how he would face the rest of the Christmas holidays and the joviality around him, when he tried the door, more out of habit than any conviction. It swung open onto the dark room. The dimness of the corridor let his eyes adjust quickly to the room, which was just as well; that saved him falling over the man who lay sprawled on the floor.

'Lumos,' Sirius whispered as he crouched at Snape's side. He tried to turn him over on his side, but Severus was heavy, and very drunk. He couldn't just leave him to lie on the floor to sober up though, and he certainly wasn't going to involve anyone else. 'Severus ... wake up ... come on, you can't lie here.'

He got a groan as a reply; at least Snape was bordering on consciousness, and he certainly wasn't dead. Sirius tried again to heave him upwards, surprised at how heavy he was; he wondered when he had filled out so much, and pushed the thought away. His eyes caught the tiny vial lying on Snape's table beside the empty whisky bottle. It looked suspiciously like the one from the board game; he supposed Snape had brought it here to check its contents. Sirius cursed himself for messing about at Grimmauld Place for so long. Snape had probably been drinking at Lucius's earlier, he'd certainly been knocking it back at Grimmauld Place, and he'd given him a good hour and a half to finish the work here. All in all old Severus seemed to have made a pretty decent job of getting smashed. He eventually used brute force to move Snape onto his side, and managed to slip his own arms under Severus's from behind, and heave him up to a semi-sitting position. It took him another ten minutes to get him onto a settee; Sirius wasn't exactly sober himself.

He rummaged about in cupboards for a Sobering Potion; he didn't want to use a Sobering Spell on Snape, from his own experiences the accelerated hangover wasn't worth that. He found another bottle of malt whisky instead, and poured himself a hefty slug. 'Can't beat you, mate,' he said in self-mocking toast, 'so I might as well join you.' He threw the first measure over his throat, poured another, and went to the settee.

He pointed his wand to the cold empty grate, lit a fire, and sat next to the catatonic Potions Master. He brushed Snape's long black hair away from his pale face and pulled Severus to him, stifling his own gasp of pain as he did so; it had been over twenty-five years since he'd held this man, or boy as he had been then, and every day since, it had hurt a little more. Now they sat there, two damaged men, unable to untie themselves from the past, from the folly of youth, and the madness of injured pride and self-inflicted wounds. Sirius knew Severus loved him; he even thought that Snape knew his love was returned. He wondered what was wrong with them, what character flaws had made what should have been inevitable, impossible instead. Maybe it had just got easier to hate. Sirius felt himself drift off, as the room warmed bit by bit, and the whisky did its job.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 3

The season of miracles and a couple of shocks too.

Harry lay awake for a long time, mulling the night's revelations over in his mind; even as he did he realised that Lupin had skilfully steered him away from the one thing he really needed to know. What had happened the day of the incident at the Shrieking Shack? He found his mind shying away as different possibilities presented themselves. He just knew that his father had been heavily involved, but the why's and how's evaded him.

He hoped it wasn't too bad, but whatever it was he intended to find out the truth, and if Snape loathed him for it, so be it. He thought that unlikely though; men didn't stand shoulder to shoulder, holding one another up in the face of the direst adversity, just to hate one another the next day. And he and Snape had done that; when Harry had finally defeated Voldemort last year, it had been Snape who had been at his side, Snape who had given him the strength and shown him the way, Snape who had almost been killed himself, defending Harry, and giving him the room to make his final moves.

Harry had learnt now to ignore the barbs sent his way, learnt to recognise that Snape spoke to everyone in the same way, that he had just taken it so personally because of the history that was there, a history he thought he was beginning to unravel. He thought of the way Snape spoke to Sirius; that was worse than any way in which he had ever spoken to Harry, and yet he knew that it all masked the deep feelings Snape probably didn't know how to handle any other way, and maybe didn't even know he had.

Harry found himself wondering how they were getting on: probably fighting, probably spitting venom at one another as usual, because they didn't know what else to do. He'd felt humbled when Ginny had told them about Severus going to Azkaban, and he hadn't failed to notice that Lupin seemed to envy Snape the knowledge that he, for one, had not deserted Sirius. All those years ... Harry drifted off, hoping maybe somehow that they had a better tomorrow.

Severus woke to find his neck stiff and his throat parched ... and his arms around another man; he didn't need to look to know who it was. Maybe if he didn't stir or think he wouldn't fully waken and find himself clutching another dream instead. It was no use though; he'd have to move, he had to have a drink of water, about four gallons should do, he needed to straighten his neck, and he really needed to pee ... he wanted to stay right where he was, and never let go.

Sirius groaned in his sleep as Snape untangled himself, stood up and padded into his bathroom. When he came out Sirius still appeared to be asleep; Severus knew he wasn't. He let the tap in the stone sink in his workbench run cold for a moment, and drew a long glass of water, drank it off, and drew another. He sat down beside Sirius, afraid to say anything, afraid he'd make yet another mess of it. He ran his long-fingered white hand across Sirius's cheek, brushing away the mass of dark brown hair.

'I'm going to bed. I'm too old to lie freezing on a settee all night, even when I'm drunk.' He put twenty-five years of peace proposals into his few words. 'Are you coming?'

He had stripped off, and was already in bed, when he heard the creak of the settee as Sirius stood up. Severus could feel him walking through to the bathroom, heard water running, heard the soft slap of bare feet on the polished stone of the bedroom floor. He felt the mattress move as Sirius swung himself into bed ... beside him, and thought his heart would explode as he felt their naked bodies meet in a tight embrace.

They held one another for a long time, letting the beautiful silence wash away the pain; for now it was enough, more than enough.

'Where's Sirius?' Ron asked through a mouthful of toast. They usually raced one another to see who could be the latest down for breakfast, and as Ron had won that day, he was anxious to make up for any lost time.

'Dunno,' Harry said evasively.

'I think he went out last night,' Ginny offered. 'Probably went to try and find Severus.'

'We're not on about that again ... please,' Ron groaned.

'You were the one who started it,' Hermione pointed out. 'Anyway, you shouldn't talk with your mouth full.'

Harry smiled; it was always the same at breakfast: a round of pleasant bickering, ending with Ron getting a row from Hermione.

Lupin began to pour the tea; it looked hot and brown, obviously Kreacher was still sulking elsewhere.

For the moments between sleep and wakefulness Sirius couldn't imagine where he was; it was that delicious half-consciousness when it's warm and comfortable, and coming awake hasn't been forced. He groaned and felt Severus's arms around his waist; that felt good. He pushed himself back into the embrace as he felt Snape's mouth on his neck; that felt fucking wonderful.

'I thought you were going to sleep all day.'

'I still may,' Sirius murmured, turning to meet Snape's black eyes. 'I'm sure the world will get along fine without me.'

'I suspect the world has already sent out an advance search party for you.'

'You overestimate me ... and underestimate their powers of deduction.'

'I suppose you really are that obvious.'

Sirius tried to smile. 'Pity the only person who failed to notice was you.'

'Let's not talk, Sirius ... we're not very good at that, I'm afraid. Let the past deal with itself.'

'I need to talk ... I need to know how you could have believed I'd do ... well, you know what I mean.'

'Finish with me by sending me to get killed by a werewolf? Why not just say it if you've been burning to ask for twenty-five years?'

'You're no better,' Sirius flared. 'You had to fucking ask me over a board game on Christmas night ... in front of everyone.'

'Oh yes, let us not forget their sensibilities ... let us not upset Lupin or the kiddies. That would never do, would it?' Snape pulled the sheets aside and began to heave himself up.

'Don't you dare get out of this bed ... damn you, Severus.' Sirius pulled Snape's arm down and caught him off balance, so that he landed half on top of him. 'That's better.'

'I don't know why you have come here ... what you hope to gain by pursuing this conversation. The whole thing is madness. Let us pretend that I didn't get drunk, and you stayed in Grimmauld Place ... that way we can go back to normal. There is nothing else.' Snape tried to pull away. 'I must get up. I have to see Lucius.'

'Fuck Lucius, he can wait. You're not going anywhere,' Sirius said, deciding to try a different tack. 'The kiss was good,' he said. 'In fact they all enjoyed it. Hermione nearly wet herself.'

'How gratifying.'

Sirius smiled to himself. He really didn't know where to start here, but he was glad Severus didn't either; he noticed though that he hadn't moved from where he landed on top of him. It was a pity they had both been so drunk last night; they could have had this awkwardness out of the way by now; then again, if they'd been sober he'd still be in Grimmauld Place.

'I think she fancies you.'

Severus heaved himself up a bit. 'Don't be ridiculous ... now I really need to get ready,' he said unconvincingly as he dropped his head again.

'And I really need to make love.' Sirius felt Snape stiffen and then slowly relax a little. He dropped the hand that wasn't trapped under Severus's body to his cock, and was rewarded with a low groan. 'I think you do too.'

It was late in the afternoon when Sirius ambled into the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. Hermione and Ginny were taking trays of fresh scones out of the oven, trying valiantly to keep up with the others who were scoffing them as fast as they produced them. He noticed that Bill Weasley had joined them too. They had all turned as Sirius came in, all pointedly looking behind him.

Sirius looked behind himself as well. 'Have I grown a tail?' he asked.

'Don't think so,' Ron said, spraying a few crumbs.

'Are you alone?' Harry asked.

'Nope... you're all here.'

'He means, he thought you were with Severus, and now it appears you're not,' Ginny translated.

'Ahh.' Sirius sat at the table, and picked up a scone and the butter knife. 'Any tea?'

'Weren't you with Severus?' Harry asked. Direct questioning seemed to work for Ginny; he thought he'd give it a try.

Sirius gave him a "mind your own business" look. 'Pass me the jam, Harry,' he said by way of an answer.

'Filthy perverted scum,' Mrs Black announced as they heard the front door click closed about half an hour later. 'I can smell the depravity from my grave....' She trailed off and continued mouthing soundlessly, as Snape lowered his wand and swept his sea of black into the kitchen.

Harry watched him closely; he favoured Ginny with his usual twist of the lip, gave Bill a nod that Harry tried to read, and totally ignored everyone else, until he asked Remus to hand him a cup.

'That was quick,' Sirius remarked as Snape sat opposite him.

'I hope that damned elf didn't make this tea,' Snape said in place of a reply.

'Wasn't he in?' Sirius persisted.

Snape turned on him. 'One of the reasons I didn't marry Bellatrix was that I didn't care to answer questions about my movements.'

'Was the other that even that mad cow wouldn't have you?'

'No ... it was the thought of marrying into the Blacks actually.'

Bill snorted a laugh. 'God, are you two still at it?'

'At what?' Sirius asked, and looked to the hall to where his mother was still mouthing her silent obscenities.

Kreacher was standing in front of the portrait, wringing his hands; he had great tears leaking down his face. He slunk into the kitchen a few moments later, tears miraculously dried. 'Kreacher sees the House Traitor has returned with the abomination not far behind him,' he said with a sly grin. 'Kreacher will not allow them to defile his mistress's house with their vile corrupted acts.'

'Shut up, you horrible little piece of vermin,' Hermione snarled at him.

'So much for S.P.E.W.' Ron remarked to his tea cup, as Harry gave her a shocked look.

'The Mudblood speaks. Kreacher hears, but does not listen.' The elf tugged Bill's sleeve, and tried to pass him a chipped cup filled with grey liquid. 'Tea, Curse-Breaker?' he asked. 'The Curse-Breaker is well rid of the whore's bastard,' he added in a confidential loud whisper. 'My poor mistress sobs alone at the downfall of her house, and poor Kreacher is alone too, as he performs his corruptions upon...'

He didn't get the chance to finish; Snape stood up and grabbed his tea towel at the neck, marched into the hall, and stuffed the elf into the portrait. 'Now neither of you needs to be alone ever again.' He shut the curtains.

'Hey, who's going to do the cleaning now?' Sirius objected.

'Cleaning?' Snape looked up at the cobwebbed ceiling. 'Have you seen this place?'

Lupin sat at the end of table. He watched their little tableau with some sort of wishful affection; they were putting on a good act, but he wasn't fooled. He hoped the two of them could keep from rubbing one another up the wrong way for long enough to heal some of the wounds; he thought they just might.

'I really want to know, Sirius, and I think I've got the right.' Harry swallowed some Butterbeer; they'd run out of Budweiser.

'It's all a very long time ago ... and it just doesn't matter any longer.'

'It does to me ... tell me, how did he do it?' Harry just wanted it confirmed now; he reckoned he'd worked it out himself; after all, he'd done much the same thing himself once.

Sirius lit a cigarette and watched him; he supposed Harry did have the right, they all did. 'You won't like it,' he said quietly.

'I know that,' Harry reasoned. 'What did he do? Use Polyjuice and pretend to be you?'

Sirius nodded.

'Why?'

'He fancied Severus ... couldn't understand when he kept knocking him back. At first he thought it was because of Lucius,' Sirius said in some sort of explanation. 'But Severus never returned Lucius's feelings for him; Lucius was just a spare shag to him.'

'Lucius Malfoy?' Harry exclaimed. 'Lucius Malfoy fancied Snape?'

'Lucius was besotted by him... always was... still is. Anyway it wasn't Malfoy's doing, it was Peter's... Peter must have been spying on us for a long time, and he told James... and James went off the deep end.'

'But why? It's not as though my father owned Snape.' Harry frowned. It was too much; it didn't make sense.

'A combination of things. Probably just that it had been going on for so long and he didn't even know ... and it only came to light when James fancied a slice of Slytherin for himself.'

'So he took Polyjuice and lured Snape to Lupin, pretending he was you?' Harry had guessed it, but somewhere he'd prayed for a denial.

'Yes, but he got cold feet, and tried to drag Snape back when he changed back from the Polyjuice.'

Harry couldn't remember ever being so angry in his life. 'He let you take the blame? He was a spoilt brat, who was upset because someone else was playing with a toy he wanted... and for all these years you've covered up for him? Are you insane? You ruined your life for him ... not once, fucking twice. Fuck sake!' Harry ranted, springing to his feet. 'You were sixteen. When are you going to stop picking up the tab, Sirius?'

Sirius just looked at him. 'You don't understand.'

'Actually, I do. You're the one who doesn't understand... James is dead. He wasn't the great saint you all pretend he was. He was just a guy, just a spoilt boy from a rich family, who thought he was entitled to whatever he wanted,' Harry said, explaining to himself as much as Sirius, as he went along. 'He wasn't a bad guy for all that, but he was just a guy... so why don't you put it a-fucking-way?'

'Harry...' Sirius began.

'You're a real fucking martyr, aren't you?' Harry sat back down, exhausted by his own fury, and only a little shocked by his own profanities. He shook his head slowly at the madness of it all. 'You owe yourself more than this, Sirius. Have you told Severus?'

'No. He doesn't need to know.'

'Yes, he does. And if you don't tell him I will.'

'Sirius is right, Potter. I do not need to know.'

Harry started, and spun to where Snape stood in the doorway, resting his tall lean frame against the upright. 'How long have you been listening?' he asked.

'Long enough. Can we leave this now?' Severus looked to where Sirius sat; he'd dropped his head to his hands when Snape had shown himself. 'I need to go out just now.'

Sirius looked up, and Harry was surprised to see a ghost of his usual grin on his face. 'Don't get so involved shagging that fat bimbo that you can't remember your way back.'

Snape arched an eyebrow at him. 'What fat bimbo? I'm going to see Lucius.'

He swept out, but not before Harry saw his smirk. Somehow that warmed him; somehow he knew this was the way these two would always deal with one another. He didn't miss the soft glint in Sirius's eyes either.

'Severus?'

It was well into the next afternoon when the voice issued from Snape's study. The two men exchanged looks as Snape heaved himself out of bed; this time Sirius didn't try to stop him.

'Give me a second. I'm just coming,' Snape called, as he pulled on a black robe, tried gamely to make some sense of his rosey mass of hair, and padded towards his study.

'Sorry to disturb you. I assumed you would be up by now,' Dumbledore said mildly. 'It was actually Sirius I wanted to speak to.'

'Sirius?' Snape asked stupidly.

'Yes. Sirius Black... quite tall, long dark hair... you must have heard of him. Quite notorious at one time; he was in all the papers.' Dumbledore looked over Snape's shoulder to where Sirius now stood in the bedroom doorway, wearing just a pair of black trousers and a sheepish grin.

'Damn it, Albus, I was in disguise.' Sirius gave him another grin, this time brief and unabashed, as he thought of Severus's shattered reputation. 'How did you know I was here anyway?'

'I know everyone who is at Hogwarts at any time,' Dumbledore replied, failing to mention the staggering exceptions of Voldemort, and Peter Pettigrew, and Sirius himself, but that was so much history now. 'Anyway, Argus saw you coming in.' He sat at Snape's table and gestured at the fireplace and the kettle. Only once he'd got himself comfortable, and had sorted his tea and his fire out, did he go on. 'I've had a complaint from the Portraits Commission,' he said, raising his teacup to his lips. 'It seems someone has been tampering with things at Grimmauld Place.'

'Portraits Commission? There's a Commission for all those horrible dusty old pictures hanging around everyone's houses?' Sirius blinked at him.

'Of course. Who else is going to look after their interests?' Dumbledore passed them cups of tea. 'It seems that someone at Grimmauld Place has placed a live body into the portrait of your esteemed mother.'

'I don't have an esteemed mother.'

'Whatever,' the Headmaster continued airily. 'Get it back out. We can't have live things running amok inside portraits; that would never do. Especially that little creep Kreacher. Merlin alone knows what havoc he'd create.'

Sirius gave Snape a look, and was pleased to see he appeared to be lost for words. 'It was him.'

'Yes, you always said that, I recall, Sirius.' Dumbledore turned to Severus. 'I'm not sure that I'd lift the Silencing Charm on Walburga though,' he said. 'The Commission did seem quite pleased about that. Anyway, get the elf out of the portrait, Severus.'

'I... I don't know how to.'

'I'm sure you'll manage... given that he's spreading all sort of malicious gossip about you...' Dumbledore said, trailing off suggestively. 'Within a week you won't have a secret left worth knowing,' he added, as a coup de grace, 'and will quite probably have inherited a few you never had anyway.'

Snape had gone a funny colour. 'What sort of gossip?'

'So far it's all true. I'd only really worry when he begins to make things up.'

'I'll kill that elf,' Snape said with real feeling.

'Good boy, that's the stuff... just get it out of the portrait first.' Dumbledore himself poured another cup of tea. 'He's been going on about one thing in particular, which is rather unfortunate. I'm sure even the redoubtable Walburga Black might have tempered him on this subject... had you left her with the wherewithal.'

'What subject?' Sirius grinned; he was quite enjoying this.

'Your father's infidelity, actually,' Dumbledore replied, inclining his head to Sirius.

Something began to dawn on Sirius about then, quite slowly at first. He turned and gave Severus a long look, trying to see similarities between them, satisfying himself that there were none. 'He can't be my brother,' he said in a whisper.

'He is.' The Headmaster began to rise. 'Half-brother to be precise.'

'But... that's incest,' Sirius spluttered, '... it's madness.'

'Oh, I wouldn't worry too much about that; it's not as though you intended to start a family.' Dumbledore turned in the doorway. 'Happy Christmas.'

The door closed behind him and Sirius turned to Severus.

'You just had to start with the fucking elf, didn't you? You had to show off.' He stood and pointed a finger at Snape. 'Get that bloody thing back out of that picture...' He trailed off for a moment at the look of horror on Snape's face. 'Severus, are you all right?' he asked. 'You're a funny colour.'

'It wouldn't be black, would it?' Snape replied.

'There's nothing wrong with Black,' Sirius replied, pouting a little. 'Anyway, you don't need to worry about marrying into the Blacks now... you are one,' he added gamely, not at all sure that was what Snape wanted to hear.

'Just goes to show the old adage is true,' Severus snapped back. 'You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family.'

'There is a bright side,' Sirius remarked, uncapping Snape's whisky bottle and pouring two hefty slugs, content that at least he hadn't been tossed out in Dumbledore's wake. 'Mother will be apoplectic.'

'Hmmm,' Snape returned, lifting his glass. 'Perhaps it's the season of miracles after all.'

'Anyway,' Sirius said, raising his glass in a toast and nodding to the door Dumbledore had left through. 'The old buffer was lying.'

'Of course he was,' Severus replied. 'But I think I'll kill the elf anyway... just in case.'
