

His Own True Heir

by scaranda

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1: Not Guilty As Charged.

Chapter 1 of 8

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Chapter One

Not Guilty As Charged

'What's he doing here?' Draco and Sirius snarled at one another in unison.

'Be quiet, Black,' Severus snapped, closing his eyes briefly in the exasperation he'd been stifling and anticipating in equal measure.

'Keep quiet, Draco,' Lucius muttered, as he scanned the room as though to check no other immediate family members were lurking.

Snape tried to keep a lid on his fraying temper as he ushered Lucius and Draco inside. It had been a couple of hours since he'd spirited Lucius out of Azkaban, having left Draco under a charm in the forest next to the strait of water that separated the prison from the mainland. Father and son had been at one another's throats ever since Severus had released Draco's charm, and now he'd thrown them into the cauldron with Black.

He closed the door of the safe house behind him, not at all sure that he was shutting out more trouble than he was shutting in. Safe house indeed, he snorted to himself, as the latch clicked and the charm resealed itself. It hadn't looked very safe to him when Dumbledore had brought him here a few months ago to help him set the charms and wards in place; in fact it had looked as though it was ready to collapse about their ruddy ears every time the door was closed ... but they'd had to move Black, he couldn't sit under a Concealment Charm forever.

The door had opened directly onto the large room which served as both kitchen and living area, fulfilling neither function particularly well. A table, a few odd chairs, a lumpy settee, a sink complete with a dripping tap: all the comforts of home, Severus thought sourly. If Spinner's End hadn't been much smaller and full of books, he'd have thought he'd gone there; it was nearly as ugly. The floorboards creaked, and the windows rattled so badly if more than one person crossed the room at a time that he suspected the only thing that held them in their frames were the ghastly curtains. He took a moment to compose himself, before turning to the hostility.

Malfoy had begun to take off his travelling cloak, the one Severus had not quite risked life and limb to go and collect. It hadn't been easy to slip in and out of Malfoy Manor when Ministry men patrolled the grounds, presumably looking for the same Draco he had concealed with him as he walked past them. Not that Lucius cared; as long as someone fetched and carried for him he was remarkably unconcerned. Malfoy draped the cloak on a seat, as though he would either be donning it shortly, or someone else would put it away. He shook out his long blond hair, fretting at the bit at the front that had got damp. Snape hoped it would go frizzy; there were no house-elves here to straighten it with a flat iron. He let his first mental smirk of the day through. Lucius was in for a culture shock; the service in Azkaban wasn't up to much, but it was better than the service here.

He watched Draco move to the fire and begin warming his slim hands. The boy looked so like his father, except for Malfoy senior's impressive bulk; Snape smirked cynically to himself again, as he always did when he saw them together... Lucius must have managed to fuck Narcissa at least once after all.

He let his eyes slip at last to Black, where he sat with a disgusted scowl for company. Severus looked away quickly, stifling the warmth that always crept through him from the pit of his stomach when he saw him: fear of his own feelings, pain, whatever; it didn't really matter, probably it never had. This wasn't going to work; he just knew it.

He turned from the other three, leaving them to whatever bad job of reacquainting themselves they had in mind, and moved across to the sink. He ran water into a basin, splashing the water over his face as though it would wash some of the pain away. It didn't work. He grabbed the damp, once white towel which Black had left crumpled in a ball again, in an attempt to dry his face, avoiding the accusing looks from Lucius and Sirius for as long as he could.

'Well?' Black demanded. 'Is it done?'

'Yes,' Snape hissed back.

'Fuck,' Sirius muttered and ran a hand over his face. 'And Harry?'

'Oh, do not worry on that account, Black. Your precious godson is blissfully unaware of anything but what he assumes is his own private crusade to save wizardkind ... although how he thinks he will achieve that by sticking poisoned darts into clay effigies of me, I am really not sure.'

'I think that's just a sideline. For some reason he doesn't like you. Was he there?'

'Considering his talent for always being where he is not supposed to be, I shall treat that as a rhetorical question.'

Lucius sat with a blank look on his face, looking at the two other men alternately as they spoke. When he was quite sure Snape had finished, he turned to Draco. 'Did you know what any of that meant?'

'Yes.' Draco gave him a cool look back. It wasn't quite a sneer, but it was certainly getting there.

It took Sirius some time to come to terms with the fact that the Pride of Slytherin's presence wasn't a figment of his overtaxed imagination; they'd been there for an hour. He had almost reeled back in shock when Lucius had come in, not that he didn't know he was coming, even though he'd tried gamely to talk himself out of it, but he had recoiled at the physical blow of the stench of Azkaban, from where it clung to Malfoy, and to Snape's clothes to a lesser degree. Sirius was more sensitive to it than the others would be; they would not even notice it, he knew that, but his canine sense of hidden smells, and his own stark recollections, allowed it to pervade his senses. For a moment he almost felt sorry for the Slytherin thug who had invaded his wretched bit of space.

Considering he had just spent a year in Azkaban, Malfoy was surprisingly well groomed though, even allowing for the hasty charms that he, or perhaps more likely Snape, had cast about him in an effort to hide the worse of the ravages. It helped when one knew just what palms to grease, Sirius thought wryly. He found himself wondering in sour jest if Snape had let Malfoy stop off to visit his tailor and his barber on the way.

Sirius found his eyes wandering to Snape and dragged them away again, comforting himself with the thought that there was at least some consolation in this god-awful mess they found themselves in. At least he had Severus under the same roof for the foreseeable future; he couldn't run away from him now. He shot Snape another quick, almost furtive look, and found he was looking the other way, deliberately, Sirius suspected. He'd take his time; he'd find the right note to strike and begin the climb back, he hoped he wasn't going to have to grovel too much. The black eyes had turned on him before he realised it, no help for him there; they were veiled with hostility, and something else Sirius couldn't bear to read. He watched him look away again and felt the tug of regret, more than regret, he felt the tug of anguish; he didn't know how to do this.

It took him a moment to realise Lucius was talking, but Sirius hadn't a clue what he'd said. 'How did you get out of Azkaban?' he asked, failing to hide his disappointment, as he dragged himself into the conversation.

'Suffice it to say that I did not have to stoop to changing into a mongrel to achieve my freedom.' Lucius let his silver eyebrow rise in the superiority that made Sirius want to laugh in derision and punch his face in at the same time, and turned to Snape. 'Severus persuaded the guards that I wasn't with him when he passed them on the way out,' Malfoy went on. 'He's really rather good at that.'

'Fine, he can persuade me that you're not really here too.'

Lucius looked down his nose at Sirius, and then scanned the room again with the air of a man who has swapped one prison for another and wishes he'd stayed put. 'I'm quite sure the Ministry modelled Azkaban on this place. All things being equal, I'm not sure that the guards are worse cell mates than the one I appear to have now.' He gave Sirius a look of hate that he'd diluted with a generous splash of contempt.

'Button it, Shirley,' Sirius spat back. 'Who's in your cell now, anyway?'

'Dobby, of course.' Lucius smiled his expensive smile for the first time; at least the warders hadn't stolen his classy dental work. 'The little fucker has a penance to pay for betraying me, and I intend to ensure he pays it in full. The charm he has will fool my visitors; they won't notice.' He flared his nostrils in satisfaction.

'What visitors?' Draco smirked from the end of table. 'Although I think Mother went once to ask you how to lift the charm on the bullion vault, but she's hardly likely to recognise you anyway, is she?'

'Why have you brought him here?' Lucius complained to Snape, after glaring at the only fruit of his loins.

'For his own safety. I'm sure you're as concerned about it as I am,' Severus snapped back at him.

Sirius suspected it wasn't Malfoy's first whinge and was unlikely to be the last. He could see Severus was struggling in his role of being a three-way referee, and now he couldn't even escape back to Hogwarts for a break. The thought of Hogwarts made him stop in his mental tracks. No matter what way he turned it, Snape had killed the man who Sirius knew had been his anchor, the man who had believed in him and had trusted in him so much that he knew that he would obey the ultimate order when the time came. Sirius knew how Snape would feel about that: isolated, alone, hurting badly. Sirius had been there too, done it all; he even wore the hair shirt. He let his eyes meet the dark angry pits; he knew he wouldn't welcome sympathy.

'Don't dare start with the platitudes,' Snape warned savagely, as though he'd plucked the very idea from Sirius's head. 'Don't any of you come away with, "You knew you had to do it", or any such shit.'

Sirius looked away. This wasn't going to work; he just knew it.

'Don't I get anything for my efforts?' Mundungus asked as he looked up at his visitor. 'I got a doing off Harry for nicking stuff from Grimmauld Place.'

'Smokes.' Lupin smiled as he held up the package. Fletcher held out his hand, but Lupin was taller. 'But first, I need some information. Where's the necklace?'

'What do you need it for? What's it worth?' Fletcher squinted at him in suspicion. 'It's just a horrible old necklace. The case nearly bit my arm off when I opened it.'

'Sentimental value,' Lupin replied. 'My father gave it to Sirius's mother when they had an affair, and I'd like it back.'

'Your father had an affair with that old harpy?' Fletcher narrowed his eyes again as he scratched his ample stomach

'Yes.' Lupin gave him another smile; he wished he hadn't asked Sirius to make up his background story. He winced inwardly and took two backward steps, hoping nothing had jumped onto his cloak; Sirius had warned him about the Azkaban wildlife. 'Now where is it? I need to get it. I'd like to have it before Dumbledore's funeral.'

'Why? Were you thinking of wearing it?' Mundungus gave him another sceptical look as he scented something. 'What's so special about it? I couldn't feel anything special about it.'

'Oh well, I'll not bother,' Lupin said in the airy way he had practiced with Sirius. 'I'll bring the smokes back when you can remember where it is. It's not that important. I'll give this lot to Stan Shunpike.'

'Okay, okay. It's under the loose floorboard below the leg of my kitchen table, the one nearest the window.'

Lupin smiled his slow smile again and tossed Fletcher the cigarettes and two boxes of wooden matches; he'd kept a few packs aside for Stan anyway. He wanted to be away from this place where the walls wept despair all over him.

Fletcher lit one of the cigarettes. 'Is it really true about Snape, Remus?'

'Yes, yes I'm afraid it is.' Lupin nodded as he turned to leave.

'I never trusted him. Harry was right all along. Just goes to show you.'

The mood assaulted Lupin the moment he opened the door; nobody was talking to anybody. Lucius sat at the table, seeming to manage to glare at Draco and Sirius at the same time; Draco sat blowing smoke rings as though daring his father to comment, Lupin thought the boy was playing a dangerous game of brinkmanship; Snape was reading a book at the miserable fire, and didn't even look up; and Sirius was cleaning his fingernails with his flick knife, he could have cut the atmosphere with it.

Lupin resisted the urge to ask what Draco was doing there; surely Narcissa could have found somewhere safe for him. He suspected his presence was going to curtail any nefarious doings though; that was a pity, he hadn't seen much of his Slytherin for a while.

'Did you get it?' Sirius asked with a parody of his usual grin.

Lupin sat down beside Lucius, and pulled the black box from inside his cloak, laying it on the table in front of him; he was glad to be rid of it. The big blond Slytherin looked slightly mollified for the moment, and the werewolf smiled to himself. It would have been nice to be alone, or even to throw him over the table and fuck him senseless in full view of everyone; he'd need that, after all that time locked away with nothing but his left hand for company. Lupin could scent the beginnings of Malfoy's sexual arousal from where it sat below the stench of Azkaban, that particular odour which would take weeks to wash out of Lucius's hair and forever to wash out of his nostrils, the little tang that would catch Malfoy unaware some days, if he turned too quickly, or heard something to remind him of it, the same way it haunted Sirius, like the reeking Doppelganger of those who at least managed to break away. Lupin was sensitive to smells too; he was a dog as well. He hoped they would all bed down early.

He watched as Draco looked from his father, to catch his eye, and back again; Lupin didn't miss the insolence of that look. He didn't care much for Malfoy junior, not when he was showing off, or playing to the gallery of those whom he thought would be impressed by a combination of bad manners and outright ignorance. And yet, Lupin had come across Draco Malfoy at other times, when he didn't have an audience of toadies, or those upon whom he sought to make an impact. It was as though there were two different boys; he wasn't sure whether this one was the real one, or the pleasantly mild-mannered, sometimes outrageously amusing boy he also knew.

'I'm tired. What are the sleeping arrangements?' Draco asked his father, with an all-knowing smirk.

Lucius gave him a cold look, without glancing in Lupin's direction. 'We haven't worked it out yet, so you may sleep in the corner just now. We'll wake you when it's time for you to make dinner,' he said, reaching out his hand and knocking the cigarette from the boy's fingers. The action was so quick it reminded Lupin of a cobra striking. 'And if I catch you smoking again,' Lucius went on, 'I shall disinherit you.'

'I don't really want to stay here at all,' Draco replied in a bored tone; obviously he'd heard the threat before.

Lupin stifled a sigh as Sirius jumped to his feet and flung the door open. 'Fine, fuck off then. You make up an odd number,' Sirius snapped, looking away quickly as though he were wondering why he'd said that.

'Just stop it, all of you.' Snape slammed the door shut; it rattled the lintel alarmingly. 'Draco, you will sleep down here in the room behind the kitchen. This house will always provide sufficient rooms for those who need to stay here ... and you will keep your stupid mouth shut.' He spun on Lucius and Sirius in turn, and let the long white finger he'd pointed at the boy encompass both men. 'And so will you two.'

Lupin sighed to himself again; this wasn't going to work ... he just knew it.

Chapter Two: Messages

Chapter 2 of 8

When Severus frees Lucius from Azkaban, he has nowhere else to take him but the safe house, the one in which Sirius Black is hiding.

Snape leafed through the ancient text once more. He wasn't sure whether Dumbledore had been making the words fit the Horcruxes as he identified them, or if he had really picked up the clues beforehand. The Headmaster had had a habit of making things fit where he wanted them to, like making him fit into the position of Potions Master for sixteen soul-destroying years, he thought bitterly. He looked up quickly as he heard the stairs creak; Black had the air of a man who had either come down looking for cigarettes, or a fight.

'What's that?' Sirius asked, stifling an unconvincing yawn.

'A book,' Snape said shortly, as he felt Black frown over his shoulder at the ancient spidery handwriting.

'Does it have a name?'

'It is called, "Hogwarts, a History",' Severus replied, and closed the cover. Black was too close to him; he felt something rise inside him that he refused to recognise as panic. He couldn't even stand up to get away; Black was right behind his chair.

"Hogwarts a History" is a huge great thing,' Sirius murmured.

'How would you know? You never read anything more taxing than a Quidditch magazine or Muggle pornography.'

'I used to stand on it to reach the top shelves of the Restricted Section,' Sirius replied. He seemed to give up on his own cigarettes and took one from Snape's box, reaching across his shoulder, touching him so that Severus had to stifle his gasp at the unintentional body contact Black would not even have noticed.

'Go away, Black. I have a lot to do,' he said, relieved that his voice sounded cool and steady.

'And you'd prefer to do it alone, so that you can cover yourself in glory?' Sirius snapped.

'Yes, so I can cover myself in the same glory as killing Dumbledore has given me.'

'You're pathetic, you know that?' Sirius spat the words at him, and bent down to look over his shoulder again. He raised his eyebrow at the cover of the book. It was leather; maybe it had been tan or cream at one time, but it was so cracked and faded with age that it appeared dark greyish brown. The title and the authors had been burnt onto the front of it, probably by a hot fine poker in the manner of ancient books: "Hogwarts, a History", by Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff and Rowena Ravenclaw. 'Is that the first edition?'

'It would appear so.' Snape turned the book over, so that just the dirty faded clueless back cover lay face up. He really needed Black to go away now, before he stood up and threw him over a chair. He wondered if he was taunting him deliberately, if he knew what his closeness was doing to him, if he was laughing at him again. But he didn't have an audience; maybe he just wanted to torment him for the sake of it.

'Why didn't Salazar put his name to it?'

'He had already left for warmer climes,' Severus snarled.

'Yeah, hell from what I can gather.'

'I have work to do, Black. Go and play with the werewolf if you are bored.'

'I can't.' Sirius pouted. 'He's playing with his other toys.'

'Where's Draco?' Snape's eyes swept the room suspiciously as though he'd find the boy sitting innocently in a corner he missed. He hadn't cared for the reference to plural toys; he didn't think there was anything that Lucius had to teach Draco, especially where the werewolf was concerned.

'In your room,' Sirius replied with a grin. 'I was wondering why he was there, Snape. Is there something you'd like to get off your chest?'

Severus stood up quickly and pushed Sirius to the wall. 'Don't try to tar me with your brush. You're the animal around here, not me.'

'It was a joke.'

Sirius had grasped his wrist, before dropping it as quickly and stalking towards the stairs. Severus wished his groin hadn't puddled in warmth at the contact; he'd tried to leave that a long way behind him. Some days he thought he'd managed, but others, like today, told him the hard cold truth; of all the doors in the empty chamber of his life, this was the one he never seemed to be able to close properly.

Harry watched Hedwig fly off; he wished he could follow her. Things weren't adding up. Things like, if Snape had done what he'd quite clearly seen him do, why wasn't he in Azkaban? Things like, where had Draco Malfoy gone, and why was he concerned about the horrible little shit anyway? Things like, where had Lupin disappeared to? He was worried that Lupin hadn't come back since he'd said he was going to try to find out to whom Mundungus had sold the stuff he'd stolen from Grimmauld Place. He didn't even hear Hermione come into the Owlery.

'Who are you writing to?' she asked as she sat beside him.

'Lupin,' he lied.

She nodded her disbelief. 'I'm not sure she can find a safe house, Harry.'

He spun to her. 'What do you mean? Why should Lupin be in a safe house?' He turned away again, hoping she wouldn't see the lie, even as he was glad when he knew she would.

'I've been thinking,' she said carefully, 'if Snape and Draco have gone into hiding ...' She held up her hand as he began to object. 'I know what you're thinking, Harry. I think you're right too. But if Snape and Draco have gone into hiding, they'll have Lupin with them. They'll need some contact with the outside world, if they're not on Voldemort's side ... and I know that's what you're thinking. And if Lupin's in hiding, it means there's something big and important going on.'

'How much more important do you get than dead?' he flared at her.

'I think you think the same as me,' she went on, unperturbed. 'I think you think Snape had to kill Dumbledore, not for Voldemort, but for us. In fact, I think it's even more than that. I think he was already dead. He was somehow ... I don't know ... letting him pass on, or something.'

Harry felt the blood in his cheeks freeze as she put into words what he'd been struggling with for ages now. For the last few months he'd known Dumbledore was dead; he'd known on some level that the man who had been at his side wasn't really there, known that was why Dumbledore had drunk so readily in the cave ... the poison couldn't kill him, he was already dead. He knew he was nodding dumbly in relief. 'I don't know what to think,' he said. 'I need to know where to find the missing Horcruxes, and I don't know where to start.'

'Is that why you wrote to Draco?' She nodded to where Hedwig had disappeared.

'Yes.' Harry allowed himself to hold her eyes now, as he felt the defiance coalesce into resolution. 'And if I'm wrong about him, at least we can be sure of one thing.'

'What?'

'He'll be as keen to find the missing Horcruxes as I am.'

Hermione smiled at last, her knowing smile. 'That kind of lets you hedge your bets then, doesn't it?'

He wasn't quite sure that she didn't mean the double-entendre.

Hedwig circled the spot for almost two hours; it was a remote headland that led down to a cove. She couldn't see the house, even though she knew some type of shelter was here, where the windswept heath grudgingly threw up a few small trees and hardy bushes as it turned to the sandy shingle leading to the distant sea that had swept itself away on the morning tide. She knew the boy she sought was here somewhere, not too far away, and she knew he couldn't stay where he was hidden forever; he'd have to leave the protection of the Fidelius Charm eventually. The hunting would be good here; she could wait.

Lupin looked out of the window; the bleak landscape was a welcome reprieve from the bleaker faces around the table. Even he was beginning to feel stifled. He hoped Severus would find whatever he was looking for soon. Sirius was becoming difficult, bickering with Snape for the sake of it, winding him up at any opportunity; Lucius was inclined to be difficult anyway, although Lupin knew he could handle that one; Draco was a pain, discontent and boredom hadn't made his company any more bearable; and Severus was constantly losing what little temper he had, while he read and reread the ancient looking books he had somehow spirited out of Hogwarts.

Remus had toyed with the idea of going back to Hogwarts; he wasn't a wanted man. There was no good reason for staying with the band of fugitives he'd landed himself with, except for keeping them all from one another's throats, but he wasn't ready to tell Harry about Severus; he didn't think he'd be ready to listen yet. He frowned as he saw a white bird dip across the bay; he knew it wasn't a gull, even before he realised just what it was.

He thought for a moment, wondering who Hedwig was looking for, then deciding it was best not to draw any attention to her. He knew she wasn't looking for Sirius; as far as Harry was concerned Sirius was dead. She wouldn't be looking for Lucius either. She might just possibly have been sent to locate Snape, but Lupin was pretty sure that Harry would know an owl wasn't capable of giving him any information about the whereabouts of the recipient of any message. It wouldn't be anyone but himself, he decided.

'I'm going out for a walk,' he said blandly, as he let the curtain fall back into place.

'I'll come with you,' Lucius put in quickly.

'No you won't,' Snape growled at Malfoy across the table.

'It's raining anyway, Shirley,' Sirius added unhelpfully. 'You wouldn't want your hair to go frizzy.'

Lupin pulled the door open before he heard any more. He walked around the back of the cottage to where there were no windows. He didn't want the others to see Hedwig; there was no point in starting the inevitable fight that Harry's owl was likely to start, not until he knew if it were necessary. He stood in the drizzly rain for a few moments, before striking off across the beach. It was good to be out of the cottage for a little; he hadn't realised how frayed his nerves were. He watched the owl dip across the bay, and lifted his head to her, sorry he hadn't had the presence of mind to slip a crust into his pocket for her. He smiled to himself, sure in the knowledge that she'd forgive him.

His smile turned to a frown when she flew on, circled the bay once, and disappeared again.

'That was quick,' Sirius remarked.

'Yeah, like you said, it's raining,' Lupin sat down.

Snape lifted his head; he wondered why the werewolf had gone out at all. He gave him a long look, and contented himself that he wouldn't keep it a secret for long.

'Does anyone know we're here?' Lupin asked diffidently, the way he did everything.

'I certainly hope not,' Lucius replied, and threw Draco a glare. 'You haven't been shouting your mouth off, I hope.'

'I don't even know where we are,' the boy replied. He'd become very sullen.

'Why?' Snape asked, before they managed to strike up a fight about nothing.

'It's just that Harry's owl is circling the bay,' Lupin replied, 'and whatever message she's got, it isn't for me.'

'Damn, Potter,' Snape swore; all he needed was Potter's interference. He snapped the book shut; he wasn't getting anywhere, he needed to be on his own. He couldn't concentrate with all of these people around, with Black around, being there, breathing his air.

It was bad enough when it had just been Black and Lupin in the cottage, and he could come and throw a few insults at them, and go back to Hogwarts. But he couldn't go back now; on the surface of it he'd murdered Dumbledore, a detail that was so staggering that he couldn't even look at it objectively yet. He struggled to come to terms with the fact that he was every bit as much a prisoner there as he would be at Azkaban, and now he had Lucius and Draco flung in for extra measure. He'd only been there for two days, and already the scream of impotence was threatening to rip from him.

He noticed Draco had coloured slightly at the mention of Potter's name, and frowned to himself. 'Perhaps we should go out one by one,' he said, 'and see just whom it is that Mr Potter wishes to converse with ... although I suppose we can take you out of the equation, Black, as he has not sent a Necromancer. You too, Lucius, as you never learnt the art of reading, and nobody would want to write to you anyway.'

Severus watched in satisfaction as Lucius's nostrils flared, Black gave him a hard look, and Lupin sighed in exasperation; it was the high point of his day so far.

He smirked and pulled the door open. 'Come, Draco, you and I shall take a short walk.' He watched the boy hesitate.

'I thought you said we'd go one by one,' Draco said eventually, clearly uneasy about any company he might have. It only confirmed to Snape what he had just become sure of; whatever message the owl carried, it was for Draco.

'You're not leaving this cottage alone, young man,' Snape replied, suddenly wondering if Draco and Potter were having a fling, and deciding not. He was left with no option but to admit to himself that he was intrigued.

They had only gone a couple of dozen steps when the snowy owl swooped from nowhere and landed on Draco's shoulder. She had a scroll attached to her foot which the boy swapped for the piece of bacon rind he'd lifted from his plate as he'd stood. He toyed with the scroll as Hedwig hovered over him.

'Bring the owl back in; she can follow you, if you permit it. We may want to send a return message.' Snape smirked unkindly. 'Or you may, depending on the content.'

'It's to me, not you,' Draco flared at his father. 'Just because no one ever wrote to you unless they wanted money, doesn't mean I don't get letters.'

Snape raised his hand as his earlier suspicion confirmed itself to him, the one he had brushed aside. 'Just read the letter.' He turned to Lucius. 'Keep your opinions for those who want to hear them,' he muttered, managing not to look at Lupin. He looked back to where Draco was frowning over the scroll; obviously it wasn't private, he'd unrolled it completely across the kitchen table.

"Hi, perhaps it's best if I don't mention your name. I'm not sure where to start here or even if I should start at all, but for what it's worth, I've got a gut feeling that I'm right. I think that much more has been going on than I've ever realised, and that S was doing something that I didn't understand at the time. I'm not going to say much because I could be very wrong, and if I'm not, I'll leave it to you to find a way to let me know I can trust you. I'm stuck pretty much on my own here, trying to work out a way of finding the missing articles we're all looking for. Between Hermione and me we think we've worked out where one of them might be, but it seems to have disappeared from under my nose. I'm not going to say any more just now, except that if we're on the same side, I need help, and if we're not, well, I've made mistakes before, I'm getting used to it.

If I'm right, I hope you're safe and well and you can find a way to write back. Bye for now, Harry."

'He's obviously concerned about security,' Sirius mused, as he scanned the scroll for himself.

'Quite,' Snape concurred grudgingly. 'We need now to find a way to let him know that he can trust us.' He mulled something over. 'Have you ever written to your godson, Black?'

"Dear Harry, thanks for sending Hedwig. You're right, I'm staying with friends for a bit. I think we can get together soon and work things out. Maybe better if we do it in secret. Don't mention my friends or use Hedwig again; I spotted her right away. Regards, Remus J Lupin."

'Well, that settles that,' Hermione said with a smile. 'He's with Lupin.'

'Anyone could have written that,' Ron argued. 'Malfoy could have written it himself. Don't trust him, Harry. You said you told him to find a way to make you trust him ... forging Lupin's name isn't good enough.'

Harry sat in silence for a few moments; he wanted to be sure his voice would work when he tried it out. He was aware that the two of them were staring at him, but he didn't care; it didn't matter. 'He didn't forge Lupin's signature, Ron,' he said, feeling the blood rush through him as his sense of purpose threatened to explode from him. 'Sirius did. That's his handwriting.'

'Harry,' Hermione said softly, and touched his arm. 'Sirius is dead.'

'Well, if he is, his corpse can write.' Harry began rummaging in his trunk for the couple of scrolls that he'd received from Sirius. He laid them beside the letter Hedwig had just delivered, in triumph. There was no mistaking it; the dashing slanted handwriting was Sirius's.

Chapter Three: Reunions

Chapter 3 of 8

When Severus frees Lucius from Azkaban, he has nowhere else to take him but the safe house, the one in which Sirius Black is hiding.

Reunions

Sirius had watched the werewolf and Lucius climb the stairs, and had waited until the door closed quietly behind Lupin, his sensitive hearing even identifying which door closed. He didn't need to listen to know if a different door would close behind Malfoy, he knew it wouldn't; they had shared a room since Lucius had arrived. Draco had gone to the room behind the kitchen a while back, seeming a little more contented with his lot since Hedwig had brought Harry's message; Sirius had a suspicion he knew why that was. He was alone now, except for the man who had his head bent over a book that Sirius knew he wasn't reading. For a moment he wondered if they would stay like that forever, he standing watching as the stark white centre parting in the black mess of hair eventually became unseen, as the years of dust collected on it, because both of them were too stubborn to make the first move. Probably, he thought, he'd better not chance it.

'You know forever is a very long time to hate someone,' he said instead.

'Oh, I don't hate you, Black.' Snape didn't bother to lift his head. 'Hate requires emotion. You are so far beneath my contempt that I struggle to even identify you.'

Sirius said nothing for a moment. He considered leaving Snape to his cold bitter self, but then he would be alone as well, and he didn't think he wanted that. He uncorked the whisky bottle and splashed a small one for himself and one for Snape. 'Cheers,' he said flatly, and tossed half the drink over his throat.

Snape looked up at last, narrowing his black eyes in suspicion. 'If you're angling for a fuck, forget it.' He dropped his head to the book again.

Sirius was so surprised that it took a manful effort to swallow the whisky in his mouth, instead of spraying it across the table. 'I wasn't, not from you anyway. I'm bored, not desperate,' he snarled, quite taken off guard.

'Make yourself useful then,' Snape replied. 'The dinner plates are still lying waiting to be washed; Draco seems to have forgotten again.'

'I'll wash if you dry.' Sirius grinned. He knew it was only a matter of time until his boyish charm wore Snape down; he reckoned if they could stay in this cottage together for another five or six years he might even get a civil word out of the arrogant fuck.

'Do I look like a house-elf?' The black eyebrow had risen as Snape looked up again.

'No,' Sirius replied, carefully dulling the edge that threatened to come into his voice. 'You make Kreacher look like a young Tony Curtis, actually.'

'Who?'

'It doesn't matter; it's going to lose something in the explanation.' Sirius backtracked. He didn't want to break this fragile line of communication, where the hostility had almost descended to banter. It was the longest conversation he'd had with Severus since, well, since he'd fucked up the last time, a lifetime ago. He looked at the pile of dirty plates; he knew Lupin knew a good spell for cleaning them. 'If I wash them and dry them ...' He let it hang.

'No. Go to bed, Black. I have work to do here.' The shutter had come down.

Sirius sat smoking and watching him for a few more minutes, watching the head bent deliberately over the book Snape wasn't reading again, the same thin line of white scalp where his hair parted with what looked like a vengeance. He smiled to himself. Severus must know he noticed he hadn't turned a page yet; even Lucius could read faster than that. He'd smelt the arousal on Snape the other night, below the hostility and the black armour and the self-doubts, same as it was tonight. Sirius didn't want to push it though; it was too soon. It had only been seventeen years; he thought he'd better give it another hour or so.

Severus sat with his eyes closed, waiting until his pulse rate returned to normal, until he heard the last of Sirius's footsteps, and a door closing somewhere upstairs. He drained his whisky glass, so he could blame the scald at the back of his throat on the spirit; he had become a master at fooling himself over the years. He hadn't let himself be deceived tonight though, not by Black, not by his lying blue eyes, promising one thing and delivering another; he'd learnt that lesson the hard way. He was still picking up the pieces of his broken life, like fallout scattered over so many years that he felt sure they would still be lying around when he was long gone.

He picked the book up again and opened it at the part that Rowena Ravenclaw had written, puzzling over the rhyme again.

"It's here where none can come and go,

But the safe way back it's sure to know.

It joins me on my last walk home,

A path where none can come and roam.

My brooch protects me night and day,

My sword will point the safest way,

My likeness always will wear them all,

Safe where none can come to call."

He fretted over it, turning it this way and that. It must be the brooch; it was the only single item that she mentioned, apart from her sword, and for some reason he didn't think it was that, not when it hung out in open view in the Ravenclaw common room, along with her shield.

Snape knew he had to get to Hogwarts; it must be in a portrait somewhere. Damnit, he wondered how he was going to work this. A few ideas ran through his mind, mainly ones centring on imbibing Polyjuice and donning the persona of the werewolf, but he needed the ingredients for the potion, and it would take days to brew even with an accelerator. He came to the uncomfortable conclusion that he was going to have to enlist the awful Harry Potter. Damnit to hell and back, he cursed to himself.

Severus sat back, feeling the strain of the last few days lessen slightly; he didn't care to admit it to himself, but he was glad that Potter had written to Draco. He really needed someone at Hogwarts, someone who didn't mind flouting a few rules and stealing a few stores. He heaved a sigh. He hated taking Polyjuice; it upset his stomach for days, and he felt his guts recoil at the very thought. Maybe he'd get Potter to take a good look at all of the portraits of Rowena Ravenclaw that were at Hogwarts; he could enlist the even more awful Granger to check where they all were. He'd get Lupin to ask Black to ask him; it wouldn't do for him to do it, he smirked to himself. He wasn't quite ready to let Potter know he was in any way useful; he was going to have to use him soon enough.

His thoughts ran to Black again for a moment, before he managed to catch them. He'd promised himself he wouldn't do this; he'd treat him with the disdain he pretended he felt ... it was better than reality. He shut it away, in the cold place, and stood up.

Sirius was almost asleep when he heard the stairs creak at last. He'd begun to wonder if Snape had fallen asleep downstairs. He tried to banish the sudden panic he felt at the tiny draught as the door opened. This was a mistake; Snape would throw him out, which was a pity ... it had seemed like such a good idea.

He watched the Slytherin turn slowly. He could tell Snape knew he wasn't alone, just as he knew he wasn't going to light the room. Sirius hoped he wouldn't trip over his boots and break his neck. He hardly dared breathe; he knew just how fragile Snape's ego was, just how brittle the shield of black armour he covered himself with was. He'd play this any way Snape wanted to; if he wanted to pretend, that was okay with Sirius.

His eyes had the twin benefit of having been accustomed to the dark and his heightened canine sense; it let him watch as Snape undressed slowly, removing his frock coat and draping it over the chair, untying his cravat and letting it hang loose about his neck as he unbuttoned his white silk shirt. Sirius saw the gleam of pale skin as Snape freed first one shoulder, then the other from the shirt, and discarded it along with the cravat. He felt the bed sag as Snape sat on the side of it and removed his shoes and socks. Sirius smiled to himself, sneaky old snake keeping the best for last, as he felt his heart quicken a little.

'You can get out now, Black.' The voice was cold and dull.

'I don't want to,' Sirius said quietly.

'Suit yourself.' Snape stood up and began to gather his clothes.

'Severus, wait ... please.' Sirius watched him turn again. He saw the slump of Snape's shoulders, and he knew he'd done that; he didn't know how to make this right, or even if he ever could. 'How long have I to serve this sentence?' he asked.

'Forever,' Snape said flatly. 'Forever sounds good to me.'

Sirius watched him sit and quickly pull on his socks and shoes, before deciding not to allow this; he had some pride. He got out of the bed and crossed the room before Snape could lift his frock coat, gathering his own scattered clothes with a muttered spell as he went. 'You don't have to go ... I was just leaving,' he snapped. 'If you hurry and get in, the bed's still warm, something you'd never manage, you cold fuck.'

He refused to look at Snape; he didn't want to see the pain, but he didn't manage to shut out the little gasp he heard, the sharp involuntary intake of shock. It stopped him in his tracks. He wouldn't do this; he couldn't bear it. One of them had to stop this. Sirius knew how he'd look before he turned again, knew his head would be hanging the way it had hung all those years ago when Sirius had set out to hurt him and humiliate him as much as he possibly could, for having the audacity to make him fall in love. No matter how Sirius tried, or how long a time had passed, he could never forget the day Severus had finally accepted that there was nothing left for him; he would take it to his grave.

'I was nineteen, Severus,' he whispered in explanation.

'So was I.'

Severus tried to keep the bite out of his voice, the sting from his remarks; better not to say any more, better he should let Black do the talking. He didn't know why Black hadn't left yet, why he was prolonging the game; surely he had given up on humiliating him by now. Severus wished he had lit the room, but it was too late now; he'd have to read Black's voice, as he stood there half-clothed and vulnerable in the soft darkness.

'I never looked at anyone else after we split up.' Black paused for a moment, as though expecting, or maybe just hoping for a reply. 'Never, I swear it.'

'Since the only competition for your dubious attentions were the Dementors, I shall take that in the spirit it was intended,' Severus returned quietly, surprised at how cool he managed to keep his own voice.

'I didn't understand,' Sirius replied with what sounded like a flash of anger. 'I didn't understand that you can't tell your heart who to love. It just flings one at you, and when you're nineteen sometimes you think you know better. Don't tell me you think I didn't love you, and you didn't love me; I know you did.' Black trailed off, and Severus thought he'd finished; he didn't have a reply anyway. 'And I think you still do,' Sirius added softly into the darkness.

Severus stood in silence; he had nothing left to say. He felt Black come to some sort of decision; maybe he'd had enough of the game after all.

'Do you want me to leave?'

Severus couldn't answer. There was only one reply, neither yes nor no, but he didn't know the words for what he felt. He felt the silence hang, only realising his eyes were closed when he opened them as he felt Black's hand on his waist from behind him, the feather touch of his breath on his shoulder, and thought he would die of it.

The involuntary flinch was surprise, not distaste, Sirius knew that, just as he knew an overtly sexual move would be a mistake. That wasn't what he was here for anyway, he realised, it was only the way he explained it to himself.

He took his time picking his words, there didn't seem to be any hurry now. He moved forward a tiny bit, increasing the pressure of his fingers ever so slightly, as he dipped his head to Severus's hair. 'I wasn't angling for a fuck,' he said quietly. 'I was begging for another chance.' He wanted to turn Severus around and pull him to his chest, or maybe turn the clock back seventeen years.

'I couldn't understand it,' he went on. 'I couldn't understand why everyone had someone ... socially acceptable ... and I was stuck with you. I knew you must have enchanted me, or used some sort of charm on me. How could Sirius Black be in love with a sullen, ugly half-blooded pauper?'

Snape said nothing, but Sirius thought he leant back a little; maybe he was imagining it. 'James had Lily, Bella had just got married, Reggie had a girlfriend, there were even rumours going around that Lucius Malfoy's "mistress" was none other than Lupin ... and you'd made me fall in love with you so I couldn't find anyone else. I was so angry with you, Severus. I was Sirius Black; I should have been able to love whoever I wanted to.' Sirius felt himself shake his head at his own folly.

'So you tried to destroy me?' Severus broke his silence.

'Yes ... and destroyed myself instead.'

Severus felt that at last he had a focus for all of the hurt and torment, the years of bitterness and emptiness, the years as a Death Eater, while Sirius rotted in Azkaban, and he could only howl his regret that at nineteen he had been hailed as inadequate as a man and a lover, labelled in his own mind forever. It all coalesced into a pinpoint of fury.

'Do you have any idea of what you did to me?' He spun, and spluttered his outrage. 'Do you think you can stand there and expect me to accept that you didn't understand your own pathetic prejudices ... that they could be an excuse for what you did to me?' He felt the resentment subside as quickly as it had risen; it left him feeling utterly drained, as though it had sustained him for so long that its absence left him bereft, unable to stand without it. 'You wanted another chance? What about the second chance I begged for? The second chance you bragged about to your fancy friends, and laughed about as an after dinner speech ... what about my second chance?'

He didn't give Sirius a chance to respond; he didn't want hear any more of what he had to say. 'I was wrong when I said I didn't hate you, Black. I do. I hate you so much that it doesn't have name.' He lifted the frock coat that still lay where he'd draped it across the chair, as some instinct of self-preservation kicked in. He felt sick, sickened, by Black, by what had happened over the past few days, but most of all he felt sickened by himself.

He staggered out of the door and slammed it behind him.

'How the fuck should I know where he's gone?' Sirius snarled across the table.

Lupin raised his hands, palms facing outward. 'I only asked if you knew. Don't bite my head off if you've got a hangover.'

Sirius looked away. He wished he'd been the one to leave. Wherever Snape was, at least he wasn't in this godforsaken excuse for a safe house. He turned in time to see Malfoy junior walking down the stairs with an attitude for company; that was all he fucking needed. He stood up and flung the door open.

'I'll see you later, Remus,' he offered in some sort of apology.

'Sirius, you can't go out; you know that.' Lupin had stood as well; he pushed the door shut.

'I can't sit here doing nothing.' Sirius looked away. 'Anyway, I'll change into Padfoot. I need to find Snape. All we need is for him to get lifted by unfriendly Aurors. There's a lot of bad feeling towards him out there.'

Lucius raised his head lazily from where he'd been reading and trying in vain to ignore the other two. 'How do you know?' he asked with his eyebrow raised. 'You haven't been out for longer than me.'

Sirius spun on him. 'Button it, Shirley, I'm warning you. I'm just in the mood for you today.' He flung the door open again, and jumped back as Harry almost flew into his surprised embrace.

Chapter Four: More Than One Secret

Chapter 4 of 8

Another one joins the melting pot.

'I recognised the handwriting straight away,' Harry said with a grin, pushing his glasses up on his nose. 'I'm not sure what else I would have believed. I was a bit worried about how you would let me know I could trust you.' He gave another fleeting glance to Draco, to where he sat at the end of the table, dressed Muggle style, in a soft roll-necked black sweater and black jeans; it had the effect of making him appear even more startlingly blond than usual. For some reason Harry thought he looked like the odd man out in a way that had nothing to do with his age.

'It was Severus's brainchild,' Draco replied.

If Harry hadn't known better he would have thought there was something almost coy about the way Draco looked down. Harry shot a grateful look at Snape before he could stop himself; he wasn't surprised it had been his idea. 'Well, he gave me the fright of my life,' he said, 'materialising at the side of my bed in the middle of the night.'

Harry sat next to Sirius, between him and Lupin; it felt great, in fact if the situation they were in hadn't been so serious, it would have been the best feeling in the world. He wasn't sure just what Lucius Malfoy was doing there, but he supposed if he were there with the rest of them, there must be a good reason; for now Harry was happy to just enjoy the fact Sirius was there, and Sirius was alive.

'I need you to go back to Hogwarts and get the things we discussed, Potter,' Snape said quietly, from where he was still standing beside the fireplace.

Harry wasn't sure why he hadn't sat down with the rest of them, as though he were somehow apart from the reunion. Even Lucius Malfoy had remained at the table, as cold and arrogant as he always was, but at least he hadn't stood up. There was still one empty seat beside Sirius, and its very emptiness made Harry suppose Snape and Sirius were still fighting. 'Yes, okay,' he replied. 'School's finished anyway. I can pretty much come and go as I please.'

'I seem to recall you always did. See me before you go; I have a few instructions for you,' Snape said. He nodded curtly, and began to climb the stairs.

'I see he's still a bundle of joy,' Harry said with a laugh. He noticed Sirius had turned away.

'If you can't get over him, do something about it, Severus, but don't do this to yourself,' Lucius said from the bedroom door. 'You deserve better.'

'I have to get away from here,' Snape returned. 'I cannot bear to stay here any longer.'

Lucius gave him a long cool look. 'How do you think Azkaban felt?'

'You didn't have Sirius Black as a cell mate.'

'Stop it, Severus; stop this nonsense of feeling sorry for yourself. It's torture to watch it.'

Snape dropped his head, defeated by himself. He had so much to do, so much to think about and work out, and all he could think about was Black. He knew Lucius was right; he had to stop it. 'How did you do it? You and Lupin? How did you cross the great class divide?' he asked.

Lucius had sat down on the bed with a vaguely surprised look on his face. The year in Azkaban hadn't changed him, not much, outwardly at any rate. Only those who knew him very well would detect the subtle changes: the fine lines at the corner of the grey eyes, the way his arrogance was preceded by the tiniest moment of hesitation, the almost overt affection he showed towards Lupin, as though he dared not waste any more time in his life in pursuit of what he wanted most, in case it ran away from him again.

'It was easy,' Lucius replied. 'I had the man I love waiting for me on the other side, and the courage to admit that.'

Snape frowned; he'd never thought of Lucius actually loving anyone apart from himself. He'd assumed, like everyone else, that Lupin was just a rich man's plaything; it was quite a shock for Severus to eventually accept that wasn't true. 'I can't do it,' he said flatly.

'I don't suppose you can.' Lucius heaved himself back up onto his feet and gave Snape a level look. 'But you could just stop resisting, couldn't you? And before you say anything, I have not discussed either you or him with Lupin.' Malfoy sighed and dropped his eyes for a moment. 'He's not good enough for you, Severus, not by a long way; I always knew that,' he said. 'But I know something else now; he really does care for you.'

Snape sat down in the place Lucius had vacated; he watched the big blond Slytherin turn in the doorway.

'If you love him, Severus, you must tell him.' The grey eyes held Snape's, empty of their usual arrogant superiority. 'And then you must tell him every day of your life. You never know when fate will snatch what you cherish most from your grasp forever. There is nothing more bitter than the taste of regret.'

Snape stared at the door as it closed.

Harry toyed with his glass of water as he shot another covert look at Draco. He turned as Lucius came back down the stairs; he seemed to have forgotten the book he'd gone up for.

'Can we go out for a bit?' Draco asked.

'No,' Lucius replied as he sat down heavily, gave Lupin a resigned look, and ignored Sirius completely. 'You'll have to stay inside.'

'For how long?' the blond boy muttered. 'I can't stay in here forever.'

'You'll stay in here until we can think of the best way to defend you, you selfish little pup,' Lucius flared. 'Do you think you have been brought here for fun? Men have risked their lives and freedom for you.'

'I only asked.' Draco started back and flushed; he wasn't used to being spoken to in such a manner, certainly not in company.

'I know.' Lucius sighed. 'Content yourself, Draco. It is bad enough being penned up here, without everyone whining at one another constantly.'

'That's rich coming from you,' Sirius remarked moodily.

'Oh, I forgot to say,' Malfoy remarked, raising his eyebrow, as though surprised to find Sirius at the table, 'Severus wants to see you, Black; he's upstairs.'

Lupin watched Sirius rise and climb the stairs, before turning to Malfoy. 'Are you playing Cupid?'

'Mmmm, although I am quite sure it will backfire on me any minute.' Lucius turned to where Draco and Harry had developed a keen interest in staying indoors to watch whatever little tableau was being acted out. 'Perhaps you can go out for a while. No tricks, Draco. I would not care to explain to Severus, or your mother, for that matter, why we are all going to take up residence in Azkaban, if you are careless,' he said with a shudder.

Draco looked surprised. 'We won't go far, I promise. Just some fresh air,' he said as he stood up quickly and nodded to Harry before Lucius could change his mind.

Harry wondered if Lucius noticed Draco patting his pockets down to check he had his cigarettes.

'Stay at the front of the house where we can see you from the window,' Lucius said, a tone coming into his voice that Harry didn't recognise. He dipped into the breast pocket of his doublet and pulled out a small round black stone. 'Keep this in your pocket, Draco; it will tell me if you are in danger.'

Draco gasped in some kind of emotion Harry wasn't sure he could identify. 'I'm glad you're back, Father,' he said quietly and closed his hand on the stone.

'Lucius said you wanted me,' Black said, startling Severus from his moody introspection. 'What is it?'

'Lucius has a vivid imagination.'

'I can't be arsed with this again.' Sirius turned away. 'I'm not nineteen any more.'

'Black, wait.' The words were out before Severus could stop them. He couldn't think of what to say next, as he felt the familiar panic rise in his chest. He found he was standing; he didn't remember doing that ... he found he was crossing the few feet to where Black stood, the second step easier than the first, the third yet easier. If Lucius could do this, he could too.

'I don't know what you want,' Black breathed, clearly confused. Sirius was within touching distance. He hadn't moved, seemingly at a loss, probably reluctant to make another move like the disastrous one of the previous night. 'I can't turn the clock back, Severus.'

'I don't want to turn the clock back,' Snape replied, as he understood what had evaded him for so long. 'I just want to move forward. I need to take control of my own life again.'

'I don't know what you want,' Sirius repeated.

'I want closure. I need to start again, and I didn't know how to, but I do now. I want to end this ... this nowhere I've been living in, and I want to do it on my terms, or even on mutual terms, but I can't live my life like this. I owe myself better than that.'

'Are you saying that you don't want to make a fresh start ... to try again?'

'I'm saying I do want to make a fresh start.'

'But not with me?' Sirius looked away.

Severus thought about that for a moment. It would be so easy to send him packing, but he knew if he did there would be no new horizon beckoning, however doubtfully; he would drown in the despair of his own making. 'I haven't decided that yet,' he answered as truthfully as he could. Black surprised him by seeming to accept that.

'Okay. I understand, at least I think I do. I won't pressure you.' Sirius had turned back to face him. 'Do you want me to leave you?'

Snape nodded; he knew he'd done the best he could. He felt as though some of the weight on his chest had been lifted; it would do for now. 'It would be both the easiest and most disastrous thing to just succumb to lust,' he said. 'No issues would be resolved with a short term fix.'

Black had let a ghost of his grin creep onto his face. 'It would be nice though.'

'Oh, I didn't say it wouldn't.' Severus felt the smirk; he could afford it now. It felt good to acknowledge to himself even that small victory; he had moved forward after all.

'I don't know how I knew,' Harry admitted. 'Nothing stacked up, not that it ever really does. But there were so many times in the past that we could have stopped one another, if that had been the real agenda. Maybe that's why.'

Draco nodded thoughtfully as he cast another furtive look to the house, before raising the cigarette to his lips. 'I don't know what's going to happen. I mean we can't stay here forever.' He looked again to the house no one but those invited under the Fidelius Charm could see. 'I think the only person who's stopping a murder in there, is Lupin.'

Harry frowned; he'd wanted to come to the subject of Lupin. 'I wouldn't have thought that he and your father would be so friendly,' he said tentatively.

Draco grinned. It wasn't a grin Harry recognised; it had come from amusement instead of malice. 'Because he's a half-blood or a werewolf ... or poor? And Lucius wouldn't want to soil himself with speaking with the lower orders of humanity?'

'All three, I suppose,' Harry replied. 'He doesn't strike me as the tolerant sort.'

'Oh, he's not, but for some reason Lupin has always been an exception. It's as though Lucius pretends not to know.'

'Why?'

'I thought you knew actually, Potter. I thought everyone knew,' Draco replied. 'He's been having an affair with Lupin for as long as I can remember.'

Harry didn't bother to feign surprise; he'd begun to suspect Lupin had been so reluctant to succumb to Tonks because he didn't like women. 'I thought your father was gay, actually, when I first saw him in Flourish and Blotts,' he lied. He actually remembered wondering if the big blond poof really was Draco's father when he was hidden in Borgin and Burke's shop a couple of years before, until Mr Borgin himself addressed Malfoy. Of course, that had been before Harry had understood that the likelihood of a wizard being homosexual or bisexual increased directly with how powerful he was. Hermione had told him that; somehow he didn't think she'd read that in "Hogwarts, A History", and he'd never been quite sure if she had been lying when she had told him that witches weren't affected in the same way. He supposed that went a long way to explaining why there were so many one children wizarding families though, and so many unmarried wizards too.

'Yes, I think I'm the result of the "I tried it once and didn't like it" syndrome,' Draco said with a laugh. 'I'm not sure I'd use the term, "gay", around him, Potter. I don't think he's even acknowledged that to himself. Lucius tends to just do his own thing; he doesn't care to categorise himself. I suppose he thinks he's above all that.'

'And Sirius and Snape?' Harry asked. 'That one I won't believe.'

'I don't know; I never did get the hang of what happened there. There was definitely something though; even Severus couldn't bear a grudge that long.'

Draco had turned away a little, and Harry wasn't sure whether he was lying, or just checking Lucius wasn't watching him. 'Oh, I don't know,' Harry replied. 'He managed to start with me before I was born.'

'We'd better get back,' Draco said as he looked uneasily around at the darkening landscape, and hoisted himself to his feet, grinding the cigarette into the sand.

'Draco.' Harry pulled him back for a second. 'I know Lucius is your father, but why is he out of prison? What's he got to do with what's happening?'

The blond boy turned; for a moment it seemed he wasn't sure himself. 'Lucius isn't on Voldemort's side, Potter; he never really has been. The only side Lucius is on, is his

own.'

'How does that help us? Someone playing two sides against the middle isn't good.'

'I don't know, but neither Severus nor Sirius seem very concerned about that; that's good enough for me.'

Harry nodded. He liked the way Sirius had been brought into it, as though some importance attached itself to his opinions; in a way he was less surprised about that than he thought he should have been.

'Where are the boys?' Sirius asked as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

Malfoy nodded to the door. 'Outside having a clandestine smoke.'

'Are you insane?' Sirius flared. 'No, don't answer that; of course you are.'

'They're quite safe, Black, I can assure you.'

'How do you know that, you fat fuck?' Sirius wrenched the door open, and Harry almost fell inside for the second time.

'Sit down and behave, Black,' Malfoy replied as Draco took a round, black shiny stone from his pocket and handed it to him.

Sirius frowned as Lucius closed his hand on the stone, as though he did not care for anyone else to see it. 'Is that what I think it is?' he asked quietly. 'Where did you get it?'

'There is very little that money cannot buy,' Lucius replied, as he deposited the stone in the breast pocket of his doublet.

Harry watched, fascinated, as it seemed to throb as it settled, almost as though it had taken a few beats in time with Malfoy's heart. He thought Sirius gave Malfoy a look that very nearly bordered on respect as the blond man looked away.

'Is Severus joining us?' Malfoy asked, clearly wanting to draw attention away from the stone.

'Who knows?' Sirius shrugged and nodded to the stairs. 'Give him a shout, Harry; be a good lad.'

'Not likely,' Harry replied with a laugh.

'Do you want me to go back to Hogwarts tonight, Professor?' Harry asked Snape, before realising there were three other men around the table, and he hadn't thought to ask any of them.

'Professor no longer, Potter, may Merlin be thanked for small mercies. In fact the only consolation of the situation in which I find myself is that I do not have to instruct either yourself or Mr Malfoy in the art of Potion making or Defence Against the Dark Arts, talents, I may add, that none of us bothered to fulfil to their potential.'

Harry blinked. 'Was that a no?'

'That was a "he hasn't made his mind up yet, but he'll spew out a load of crap to draw attention from the fact that he's indecisive" ... something like that,' Sirius said with a grin.

'Why don't you make the decisions, Black,' Snape asked, 'and I shall sit back and make the smart remarks?'

'No, no, you're all right,' Sirius replied.

Harry noticed Sirius was more relaxed, that the banter was just that, and not the hostile interchanges he'd witnessed between the two men in Grimmauld Place. 'Will I just stay here then?' he asked, not at all sure whether his question had been answered or not. He looked to the darkening outside; it looked bleak and unfriendly. 'Only, if I'm going back, I think I'd like to go soon.'

He saw Sirius give Snape a glance, almost as though he were confirming what he was going to say before saying it. 'Stay here. I don't want you wandering around on your own.'

Harry nodded, a bit relieved. 'I think I'd like to know a little of what's going on anyway. I feel as though I've just stepped into something that's halfway through.' He looked at the four men, certain now that, as unlikely as it had seemed to him, they had a shared history of some sort; he thought he needed to know what that history was.

Chapter Five: Regrets and Recollections

Chapter 5 of 8

When Severus frees Lucius from Azkaban, he has nowhere else to take him but the safe house, the one in which Sirius Black is hiding.

Snape had gone upstairs to read. He'd told them what he thought about Rowena Ravenclaw's brooch in her poem, but they were all of the same opinion: it was too easy; if it had been that simple, Dumbledore would certainly have spotted it.

Lucius, Draco and Lupin were playing cards, and Harry found himself alone with his godfather. Sirius had changed form, and they went outside for a walk on the moonlit beach; just a boy and a black dog, it should be safe enough if they stayed near the lights of the cottage. Harry looked back as Sirius changed form again, and they sat with their heavy cloaks pulled tight, on a bench below a tree which grew incongruously where the sandy shingle met the rough grassland. Although Harry didn't know it, Dumbledore and Snape had grown the tree only a few months back as the Apparition point for the safe house, so that if the co-ordinates ever fell into the wrong hands all

that would be found were a tree and a bench, where the beach met the windswept heath, somewhere on the northwest coast. Snape had only reluctantly agreed to be the Secret Keeper, as though if he refused, Dumbledore would have to stay alive to fulfil the obligation.

Harry sensed someone watching from a dark upstairs window to where their silhouettes were thrown into relief by the candlelight from the cottage windows and the lantern he had lit as they sat. He knew it was Snape; he felt oddly comforted by that, as if he were watching out for him, as though nothing would harm him while he watched.

'Tell me all about it, Sirius,' Harry asked, breaking the companionable silence.

'What?' Sirius gave him a sidelong look, as though he'd wondered how long it would take Harry to ask.

'You know,' Harry said with a smile, sure now that he was being teased. He hadn't wanted to ask in front of the others; he hadn't wanted them to see how hurt he'd been that he hadn't known. 'How you got out from behind the Veil. Dumbledore told me there was no spell that could bring you back.'

'I'm sorry about that, Harry. There was nothing I could do about it. Things were moving fast, and the Prophecy was only one part of it. Voldemort knew we were on to the Horcruxes; too much was at stake, and Dumbledore knew he didn't have long,' Sirius said. 'When I went through the Veil ... it wasn't all of me. I left a part behind, a living part, and I was able to reunite with it.'

Harry watched him; he knew Sirius was thinking and trying to put it all into words. 'A Horcrux?' he asked, aghast at the thought.

'No, no.' Sirius shook his head in denial. 'When I was young I took a blood oath with some other people, and when that oath matured it meant that my actual blood lives in their veins, as theirs does in mine. With the right incantations, and the permission of the people who hold my blood, I could rejoin the rest of me.'

'Does this go way back to the start of the Order of the Phoenix?' Harry frowned. 'You were all members, weren't you, even Malfoy?'

'Oh no, Lucius was never a member of the Order of the Phoenix, Harry.' Sirius shook his head again. 'We were members of a very different secret society. Some of us were members of the Order, but we had a different society and a different agenda. There were six of us,' he said with a little laugh, half sad, half reminiscing. 'We thought we were invincible, like the bloody Knights of the Round Table.'

'Who were the six?' Harry whispered; he hoped James was one of them.

Sirius seemed to go off in a tangent. 'We thought we were powerful enough to get rid of Voldemort on our own, five teenagers and one boy of twenty-one.'

'Malfoy?'

Sirius nodded. 'We had it all worked out. Three of us worked from the Order of the Phoenix, and three of us worked from inside the Death Eaters. It could have worked too ... if we'd had any sense.'

'Who were the others? Who were the missing two? Was my father one?' Harry asked in a rush.

'Yes. There was Remus, James and me in the Order, and Severus, Lucius and Regulus in the Death Eaters. The Gryffindors and the Slytherins, all very apt. Don't run away with the idea that we were all the best of mates all the time. We fought and bickered with one another most of the time, but we had a common goal. You see, Harry, we were all very powerful. We were the most powerful generation born for a long time,' Sirius said. 'Every now and again a single powerful wizard is born,' he went on, 'like Dumbledore and Voldemort himself, and you for that matter, but for six boys of extraordinary power to be born within a handful of years of one another was very unusual. And we squandered that power,' he said quietly, shaking his head at the futility of it all, 'and lives as well.'

'How did they get you back from behind the Veil, Sirius?' Harry frowned, harking back to his original question; he hoped he could keep Sirius talking until he had all the answers he needed. 'Malfoy went to Azkaban.'

'It wasn't easy. Snape and Lupin had to go and do the incantations in Lucius's cell. He wasn't too happy about me walking out as Padfoot again, while he was locked up for something he'd got roped into. It was a mess.'

Harry made a face. 'It was all my fault, wasn't it?'

'Not really, it was our fault as well. We should have made sure you knew more than you did. We were all at fault there. Secrets,' Sirius said sourly. 'Too many secrets.'

'Couldn't you bring back my dad ... and Regulus then, the way you came back?' Harry asked.

'No, Harry. You see, I wasn't dead, they were. It's very different.'

Harry thought about that for a moment; however reluctantly he admitted it to himself, it seemed to make sense. There was so much he wanted to know; he wanted to grab at the chance of finding out about the past, a past that he'd thought was completely lost to him. 'What happened?' he asked. 'I mean when you were younger?'

'We were too clever to listen,' Sirius replied. 'Dumbledore had found out about us. To say he wasn't pleased, was an understatement. Of course, that was a cue for us to be even more secretive in what we did. He warned us, and we just didn't listen.' He gave Harry a long serious look. 'Don't do that one, Harry; don't keep secrets. If you don't want to tell me, make sure you tell someone. Do you understand what I'm saying?' He gave an involuntary look to where Snape still watched from the upstairs window.

'I think so. You're telling me to trust Snape, aren't you?'

'I'm telling you that if you trust no one else on this earth, including me, you must trust him.'

'I think I know that now. What happened, Sirius?' Harry repeated, and pushed his glasses up on his nose, remembering all the times Dumbledore had tried to instil into him the fact that he trusted Snape. 'What went so wrong?'

'You know already that Voldemort had split himself up. Well, we did much as you're trying to do now, searching for the Horcruxes. We thought if we got them all together, we could somehow recreate him and destroy him; in fact Severus still believes that. He thinks that just destroying one part at a time isn't good enough.' Sirius lit a cigarette and let the smoke drift from it as he thought. 'Regulus managed to get hold of Salazar Slytherin's necklace; we never found out how. He was dead by the time I got back to Grimmauld Place. Lupin and I found him. Merlin alone knows how he staggered back there, but he did, and he still had the necklace. We knew then that Voldemort had found out about us. I suspected Severus of that one.' He sighed deeply. 'Another of my stunning mistakes. Voldemort set out to kill us one by one. Poor Reggie was first, little shit that he was, then James, and well, you know most of the rest.'

'Sirius,' Harry said reproachfully, 'what about the bits you're not telling me? Why did you and Snape fight so much? Why did you send him to the Shack?'

'A lot of it's personal. But the Shack incident was years before, we got over that; for some reason it has descended into folklore. It's really not significant. I wasn't a very nice person, Harry,' he said suddenly. Then he seemed to think again for a while, before going on. 'Your mum and dad were about to get married. Reggie was going out with a girl. There were even a few rumours about Lucius and Lupin, something I never bothered to investigate; I suppose I didn't want to know. I'm sure you've noticed I don't like Lucius much. Anyway, I was stuck in a relationship with Severus that I couldn't seem to drag myself out of.'

'You and Snape?' Harry was genuinely shocked. Of all of the permutations, that one hadn't occurred to him as a real possibility; he'd assumed they'd fought over a girl, he'd even cast his own mother in the vacant role.

Sirius gave him a quizzical look. 'Oh yes, I thought you'd guessed that much. Anyway, as I said, I wasn't a very nice person. I had too much money, too high an opinion of myself, and too much time on my hands. I tried to break up with him. I wanted someone smart, maybe a nice pure-blood aristocrat. A boy or a girl, I wasn't fussy, as long

as it wasn't him, and they were what I considered good enough for me. I know, I know,' he said with a deep sigh, 'but I was a master of double standards.'

'The blood didn't seem to worry Malfoy, if he had an affair with Lupin,' Harry pointed out a bit defensively. 'And Lily was a Muggle.'

'I know. There was always something romantic about Lupin though, he was so handsome and gentle and clever ... and Lily, well, Lily was just Lily, clever too, and lots of fun, and extremely pretty. Funny, it never occurred to me at the time that she was Muggle-born. And all I had was the dour, ugly Severus Snape, about as socially acceptable as herpes.'

'Well, if you didn't like him, what was the problem?' Harry asked with a frown.

'I didn't like him,' Sirius agreed with a tight smile. 'No one liked him; he's not very likeable. That was what made it all so easy.'

'What?' Harry almost held his breath as he pushed his godfather for more information, and found himself remembering what he had seen of Snape's early recollections in Dumbledore's Pensieve; now that he looked at the memory objectively, Harry could see a very unhappy boy. He wondered what had happened next, what he would have seen if Snape hadn't interrupted him. He found himself glad that he had, glad, and almost ashamed that he'd eavesdropped on his misery.

'He wouldn't accept that we were finished, and I couldn't seem to break away. I thought he'd put some kind of curse on me. So I systematically destroyed him.'

'How?'

'I don't want to talk about this any more,' Sirius said flatly, as he lit one cigarette with the butt of the other and ground the finished one out with his heel, as though he were trying to bury the past in the stony sand along with the cigarette stub.

'I think you do, or you wouldn't have said this much.' Harry stood his ground.

For a while it seemed as though Sirius wouldn't reply; he sat smoking and looking into the distance at nothing. Harry had a feeling he was presenting his own case to himself in the best light he could find, and still found it wanting.

At last he turned to Harry, looking at him as though he were hoping for some sort of understanding. 'I spread the most unpleasant rumours about him, ugly cheap rumours that were so easy to believe about an ugly cheap boy. There was more, much, much more I'm not prepared to go into; you really had to be there to understand. In the end no one even spoke to him, not that they ever had much; they avoided him like the plague, except for Lucius. It was about then that I realised that I hadn't met anyone; the great Sirius Black didn't want to go out with any of the queue of prospects James and the rest presented to me ... and it was too late.' Sirius stopped talking for a moment, as though he were summoning the courage to purge the rest of his shame. 'I found out later that he'd tried to kill himself. He would have managed too, if Andromeda hadn't turned up unexpectedly and found him gagging up some awful potion he'd concocted... he was ill for weeks. I don't think he knows that I know that; I think the only people who knew were Lucius and Andromeda, and I expect your word that it will stay that way.'

'Of course.' Harry nodded quickly in agreement. He had to remind himself that only a few short weeks ago he would have revelled in the information that now only saddened him in the oddest way. 'Who told you?' he asked.

'Andromeda flung it at me just before James and Lily died. Now I really want to leave it there, Harry; I'm not proud of what I did.'

'And you're still in love with him?' Harry said quietly. It wasn't really a question, not one he needed an answer to. He looked up at the window and smiled a little to himself again; it wasn't Harry that Snape was looking out for, it was Sirius. Of all of the adolescent love stories he'd found himself enduring this year, this one was the most poignant.

Harry was sure he'd looked at all of the portraits of Rowena Ravenclaw now. Hermione had unearthed a catalogue of the founders' portraits, and she'd crossed them off, one by one.

'There's no brooch, Harry,' she said in frustration. 'Let me see the rhyme again.'

Harry handed her the copy of the rhyme that Snape had written out for him in his spidery hand. There was a list of all of the bits and pieces he'd asked for below it. Harry could hardly read the jagged scrawl; even his handwriting looked angry.

'I'd better start getting this stuff together,' he muttered as he squinted over Hermione's shoulder at the second item, trying to understand what it was. 'Merlin alone knows what he wants all this stuff for, unless he's decided to make an atomic bomb.'

Hermione tore the bottom off the parchment and handed Harry back his shopping list. 'You do your breaking and entering; I want to think about this. I might not go to the Burrow, Harry. I think I should stay here, just in case you need anything done here. Ron's got to go with Molly and Arthur to Romania next week anyway.'

He looked at her gratefully. He'd secretly hoped that she wasn't going to follow Ron to the Burrow; Hermione was too clever not to use. 'Thanks, but what will you do when I'm not here?'

'There are still books I haven't read, Harry. Anyway, Professor McGonagall's here, and so are a few of the other teachers, so I'll be fine.' Hermione gave him a furtive little look, and cocked her head to the side; he thought she looked very pretty when she did it. She held up a tiny vial which seemed to have something inside it, and a little bottle of greyish liquid which he suspected was Polyjuice. 'This might let Draco come with you next time.' She smiled her knowing smile. 'But, Harry, promise me you won't do it if you haven't cleared it with Professor Snape.'

'Thanks, Hermione,' he repeated as he took the vial of Ron Weasley's hair. He gave her cheek a little kiss; he felt very gallant about that.

Harry had only one more thing to do before he went back to the safe house, an unscheduled stop, one he hadn't discussed with anyone. He had been going to talk to Hermione about it, but something changed his mind; he didn't want to be talked out of what he thought was the right thing to do.

He let his hand fall on the door, sure that he was already being watched.

He was shown into a room off a long oak-panelled hallway; it smelt of polish and great age and money. He suspected he had been left longer than necessary to cool his heels; that amused him a little. He turned slowly when the elf came into the room again.

'My mistress will see the half-blood now.'

'Charming.' Harry smiled and swept past it, enormously pleased with how he had conducted himself; it was good fun playing at being a gentleman. He had a sudden insight that that was what Lucius Malfoy did; he played a game ... Harry hoped he hadn't loaded the dice.

Narcissa Malfoy stood behind a deep red chaise. Her white-blonde hair was swept up into a chignon, and she was wearing a black silk robe, buttoned high on her neck as though to repel invaders. She was as beautiful as Harry remembered, and appeared just as cold.

'Well, well, the mighty Dumbledore has fallen, and I am left to duel with a whelp,' she said with an arch of a fine blonde eyebrow.

'Madam.' Harry smiled graciously, making no sign that he noticed the tiny shake of her head. He was proud of the way he ignored Bellatrix lounging on the chaise, her face

a mask of contempt. 'I am sure you know I am not alone. A duel by all means, if you care to take us on. However, I have merely called to inform you that it would be unwise for you and your associates to attend Professor Dumbledore's funeral.' It was a scanty excuse for his being there, but Harry hadn't been able to think up anything else at such short notice. He hadn't thought this out properly; he hadn't allowed for Narcissa having company. He was quite impressed with his wording though.

Narcissa gave a tinkling little laugh. 'Let me assure you, Potter, that we had no intention of attending that charade.' She paused, and Harry was quite sure of the warning shake of her head this time. 'But now I feel that we may attend, for the sport of it. What say you, Bella?'

Her sister turned to her with a laugh. 'Shall I see this baby off the premises, Cissa? Only my wand hand needs exercise.'

'I think I can manage,' Narcissa replied. 'I'll do it in person. If he is anything like our late unlamented cousin I couldn't be sure he wouldn't pilfer the family silver on the way out.' She lifted a wine bottle from the table and topped up her sister's almost full glass. 'I shan't be long.'

Harry allowed himself to be ushered from the room into the hallway, empty for now of all but portraits of long-forgotten Malfoys.

'This way, Potter; don't think you're going out by anything but the tradesman's entrance.'

He followed Narcissa into the deserted kitchen, and watched her search the place with her eyes and her mind, seeming to satisfy herself that she was alone. The woman who turned back to him was fretful and anxious; he knew he had done the right thing.

'Draco is safe, Mrs Malfoy. I only came to let you know that.'

'Where is he, boy? Is Severus with him?' she asked in a hurry, clutching at his sleeve.

'Please don't ask me anything; I can't answer you. I just felt you should know that.'

'You humble me beyond words.' She put a hand on his shoulder. 'Do not come back here, Potter. It is not a safe place for you.'

He nodded to where they had come from. 'You had better get back.'

'Potter, I have been married to one of the Knight Protectors of the Shield of Merlin for long enough to know they have set aside their common differences again and are working even now at freeing us from this ... this ...' She trailed off, at a loss for words.

'Nightmare?' he suggested. Harry turned the name over in his head; the Knight Protectors of the Shield of Merlin; he hadn't thought to ask Sirius if they had a name. For some reason he thought Malfoy had dreamed that up; it was certainly grandiose enough.

'As good a word as any,' she replied. 'There is no affection, and never has been, between Lucius and myself; there is, however, the bond of mutual respect ... but like all ladies I enjoy a few secrets. He does not know that I am Legilimens, and he therefore does not know that I know he is no longer in Azkaban.'

Harry nodded his understanding of her unasked question. 'Lucius is safe as well.'

'May Merlin watch you, Harry,' she replied, surprising him, 'and make you equal to your task. Go now, boy.'

Chapter Six: Revelations

Chapter 6 of 8

When Severus frees Lucius from Azkaban, he has nowhere else to take him but the safe house, the one in which Sirius Black is hiding.

Chapter Six: Revelations

'You did what?' Sirius flared. 'Do you think this is a fucking game?'

'You shouldn't have done that, Harry,' Lupin reprimanded him mildly. 'I'm really disappointed in you. I've told you before about putting yourself in unnecessary danger.'

'Leave him alone,' Snape said quietly, surprising them. 'No harm was likely to befall him anyway, not with the manor watched day and night by Aurors. You did the right thing, Potter, and gained some valuable information.'

Harry had already told them all the Hogwarts stuff; he'd kept the visit to Malfoy Manor for the end. It had only lasted a few minutes, but he found himself going over it again and again as Snape and Sirius asked question after question. He was surprised at how much he remembered, and how much had slipped into his subconscious, only to be picked back out again and made sense of.

'Legilimens?' Lucius said faintly at last, when it seemed the others had finished.

Harry shared a smile with Draco at that; Narcissa might have had secrets, but it now seemed as though Lucius had none.

Snape stirred the Wolfsbane and the Polyjuice alternately, where they stood bubbling contentedly, side by side.

'Make sure you don't mix them up,' Lupin commented.

The ex-Potions Master stopped, mid stir. For a long moment he stood in silent thought, and then turned towards the stairs.

'What did I say?' Lupin turned to Sirius with a slightly offended look.

'I don't know. Whatever it was he doesn't want our company to think about it.'

'How are you two getting on, anyway?'

'We're not,' Sirius replied flatly. 'Apart from a suspension of our more outrageous hostilities, it's business as usual.'

'Do something about it, Sirius,' Lupin replied.

'I'm open to suggestions. My personal charm doesn't seem to be enough.'

Lupin gave him a long look. 'Are you sure you've tried hard enough?'

'I have agreed not to pressure him.'

'That was stupid.' Malfoy looked up from the book he was reading. 'Surely you know by now that no means yes ... in certain situations.' He let his silver-blond eyebrow rise.

'Here speaketh the expert,' Sirius said cynically.

'I'm not the one who's alone.' Malfoy stood up and opened the door, looking to the sky to where the rising moon was a silvery waxing gibbous. 'Draco, come inside now; it's getting dark,' he called across to where the boy sat talking quietly to Harry.

Snape thought it through one more time; he wondered why he'd never thought of it before. It was simplicity itself, and if it worked it could roll out a multitude of different ways it could be used, all of them underhand, but he wasn't much worried about that. He'd have liked to run the idea past Dumbledore, but he knew he wouldn't be able to speak to him in a portrait until after his funeral, and if it was going to work he'd want to try it before that. He sat on the bed, deciding against going back downstairs; the desultory dialogue, and the way they were all trying to keep lids on their frustrations was wearing him down. He'd rather be alone anyway.

He found his thoughts running where they always ran when he had the leisure. He couldn't make Black's intentions out; he sighed to himself, he couldn't even make out his own intentions. Maybe he should have listened more carefully to Lucius. He was drifting off to sleep when he felt the draught as the door opened. He dragged himself upright, in time to see Sirius dim the room and begin to remove his clothes.

'What the ...'

'Be quiet, Severus. I've decided we should have that quick fix and work back,' Sirius said as his head reappeared from the shirt he'd just pulled over it. 'You can't escape, by the way. I've warded the door and put a Silencing Charm on the room,' he lied easily as his Gryffindor grin slid onto his face.

'Please tell me that wasn't the foreplay,' Snape murmured.

'Yeah, staggering, wasn't it? I bet you're all a-quiver.' The grin began to slip, along with the false self-confidence as Black sat down beside him. 'Help me here, Severus. Meet me part of the way.'

Snape felt his eyes close for a little longer than a blink. He tried to avoid the blue eyes; he knew they would be his downfall, and he'd tried so hard. Somehow it just didn't seem worth it any more; he'd fought the good fight and lost. Maybe surrender wasn't the worst option, whatever victory he had been living had certainly been hollow enough. He reached out, and found it wasn't so far after all, just a few inches, six at most. Just to touch, to feel his body heat and to hold him, that was all, he promised himself, but he knew he was undone.

Sirius couldn't hold on much longer; he knew that, it had been too long and he wanted too much. He felt the shift of position; in the confusion of pain and ecstasy, he felt Snape lift his legs further onto his white shoulders and drive deeper. He heard a raw scream and knew it had ripped from his own throat as he felt him rub off his prostate again. Sirius tried to raise himself up to prolong the sensation, and found he couldn't.

He flailed uselessly, captive of his own making, lying below the man who had more power over him than he could have believed possible; there was no hiding place from him, there never had been. He tried to focus on the one thing he needed, more than his own climax, more than anything else; he needed to know Severus had dropped the final vestiges of the armour he'd surrounded himself with.

The sweat had run into his eyes, stinging them as he tried to blink it away, joining the rest of the pleasure pain as he watched Severus above him, drawing his thin lips across his teeth in what could have been a snarl; Sirius hoped it was. He felt Snape hesitate, almost as though he consciously thought about his change of rhythm, from the relentless but measured pounding, to the last frantic buck as his control was swept away.

Sirius couldn't think; all he could do was feel, feel the new warmth flood inside him as he felt his balls draw up, and his own climax refused to be denied any longer. He felt the breath rasping in his chest and the thunder beat of his heart join that of Severus's as Snape collapsed on top of him in a heaving sweating heap.

'I need to know you forgive me,' Sirius whispered into the long damp black hair.

'I need to know you forgive yourself.'

'Where's Sirius?' Harry asked as he began to pour the tea he'd just made.

'Upstairs furthering his tortuous non affair, I suspect,' Lucius replied, without lifting his head from the book he'd been reading since he'd arrived; he'd almost finished the first chapter.

'What?' Draco blinked.

'Getting shagged senseless,' Lucius replied.

'Lucius!' Lupin objected mildly.

'I believe in calling a fuck a fuck, Lupin, it helps avoid confusion. It wouldn't do for youngsters to rush up the stairs with tea and muffins and catch anyone in flagrante, so to speak.' Lucius looked towards the stairs to where Snape had almost reached the bottom step. 'Ah, Severus, how kind of you to join us. Where's Black? Not that I'm interested, but his godson was asking.'

'I really would not know.' Snape gave him a cool look as he moved to the sink and began to fill the now empty kettle.

'That would be a lot more convincing if you'd cast a Silencing Spell on the room, Severus,' Lucius replied with his eyebrow raised in faint mockery.

'I'll kill him,' Snape snarled.

'We rather thought you had.' Lucius smiled, and seemed to change his mind as Snape gave him a look that froze the outskirts of hell.

'How long will it be before it's ready,' Draco asked as Snape added something from a stoneware bottle Harry had brought him that morning.

'Another two days.'

'Can I have some of it?' Draco had been meaning to ask for days now, ever since Harry had come back armed with Ron Weasley's hair.

'No,' Severus snapped, 'it's not here to play with.'

'Severus,' Lucius chided him, 'don't be so miserable; you don't need it all.' He gave Draco a look. 'And it would get the little fucker out of my hair for a bit.'

'What were you thinking about the other day?' Lupin headed off the potential argument. 'When you were stirring the potions. I meant to ask you.'

Harry noticed Snape sat down beside Sirius; he wouldn't have done that a few days before, even if it had been the only empty seat as it was just then. He was pleased about that; at least something seemed to be going back on track.

'I was thinking about what you said about not mixing up the Polyjuice and the Wolfsbane, and have decided to do just that,' Snape replied. 'I have been taking Wolfsbane along with you this week and will continue to do so until the full moon, and then I am going to effect a change to you with the Polyjuice, just before the moon rises. You are also going to take some Polyjuice, Lupin, and change into whomsoever you choose, as long as it's not me. It will be interesting to see if I turn into a wolf too.'

Sirius seemed to have woken himself up from where he'd had his head propped on his elbow. 'Why?'

Snape didn't answer him directly. 'You are also going to take some Polyjuice, Black, and when you have changed to Lucius I want you to effect your Animagus change. If my thoughts are right, and I'm not entirely sure they are, you will change to whatever animal is Lucius's Animagus alter ego.'

'I'm not Animagus,' Lucius objected, as though it were some type of socially unacceptable disease.

'Be quiet, Lucius,' Snape said absently, in the way Harry noticed he addressed Malfoy most of the time; he hadn't even bothered to drag his gaze from Sirius to Malfoy. 'It is my belief that everyone has an Animagus form, whether they ever use it or not. Of course, Black, a true Animagus, like yourself or Minerva, is born, but as you very well know any wizard can effect the change if they learn how to do it; even Pettigrew managed.'

'What if I'm a lamb or a rabbit or something awful like that?' Lucius asked in what looked like genuine chagrin.

'I wouldn't advise that, Lucius,' Snape murmured. 'Lupin might begin to view you as dinner if you are.'

Harry snorted into his tea; he'd never thought Snape was capable of making a joke, certainly not one that was remotely funny.

'One of Hagrid's Blast-Ended Skrewts would be good though, wouldn't it?' Draco nudged Harry in the ribs and collapsed in a gale of laughter.

'Let us hope for something in good taste, Lucius. Nothing fancy, no emperor penguins or woolly mammoths.' Snape smirked.

'What about a sloth,' Sirius offered unhelpfully.

'Up yours, Black,' Lucius said with a flare of his nostrils, 'with a porcupine.'

'Just out of interest, Black,' Snape asked, ignoring Malfoy again, 'did Potter and Pettigrew pick the animals they eventually changed to?'

Sirius shook his head. 'Nope, not as far as I know. Would you have chosen to be a rat?'

'No, but then I am not Pettigrew.'

'Where are we going with this, anyway?' Lupin asked.

'Black's alter ego of the dog is fine when he isn't accompanying you or Potter, Lupin,' Snape said. 'One dog is much the same as another, but too many people would make the connection if he were seen around either of you.'

'Okay,' Lupin agreed doubtfully. 'But what about the wolf bit?' When Snape said nothing he went on. 'You're just doing that for fun, aren't you?' he accused mildly.

'Academics, Lupin,' Snape said vaguely, as though that should be enough to put the matter well over the rest of their heads. 'Let us see what Lucius can conjure up.'

Harry was pleased to see Malfoy looked worried.

Sirius dropped his trousers quickly and turned to Harry. 'Is it there?' he asked with a grin that didn't suit Lucius's face.

'Is what there?' Lucius flared as Sirius tried to look over his shoulder at his newly padded arse.

'The tattoo that says "THIS SIDE UP".'

'Severus, tell him to stop that,' Malfoy complained as Sirius began exploring the rest of his nether regions. 'And stop baring my body if you don't mind; it's sensitive to cold.'

'He's a big boy, Remus; don't let him back you against a wall,' Sirius said with another grin.

'When you've finished playing, Black, could we turn to the task in hand?' Snape said testily. 'Effect your change, and may Merlin have mercy on our souls.' He gave the real Lucius a long hard look.

Lupin looked surprised, Snape looked reluctantly impressed, Draco looked quite proud, and Malfoy looked enormously pleased with himself; Harry suspected the only one who wouldn't be happy was Sirius, but it was a bit hard to tell.

'I suppose it could have been worse, and it will certainly allow us another avenue I had not considered.' Snape watched as the olive-green cobra flared its hood and scented the air with its tongue. He nodded to the real Malfoy. 'Very good, Lucius, you do have a use after all. Who would have thought it? Change back, Black, we've got no spare animals for dinner unless you want Lucius, but I'm not sure how that would affect you when you're actually doubling in his body.' He paused for a moment as though he were considering whether the academic merits of the experiment would be worth the risk.

'Bloody Slytherin,' Sirius muttered as he dusted himself down and seemed to remember he was still Malfoy. 'I should have guessed. What the fuck use is a ruddy great snake?'

'The cobra is one snake which is quite happy to kill other snakes, Black,' Severus replied.

'So?'

'Nagini is a snake, and I confess she has always concerned me.'

'Okay,' Sirius conceded doubtfully. 'But how do I get around. Wherever we're going, it's a long way to slither.'

'Potter and Draco will take turns in carrying you,' Severus replied, and turned to Draco. 'In a basket, Mister Malfoy, not around your neck.'

'Does that mean I can get some Polyjuice?' Draco beamed.

'I shall think about it.'

'There's something else as well, Professor,' Harry said.

'Do call him, Severus, Potter, I keep looking around to see if Dumbledore has risen from the dead,' Lucius offered magnanimously.

Snape gave Lucius a frosty look and raised his eyebrow in query. 'What else, Potter?'

'I can speak Parseltongue.'

Snape nodded, grudgingly impressed again. 'Yes,' he said slowly, 'so you can.'

Hermione chewed a wisp of hair as she reread the passage. She wished she didn't feel so isolated. She hadn't wanted to admit it to Harry; she felt it was good for him to spend some time with Sirius, but he'd been away for two whole days now, and she was stuck pretty much on her own.

'Is there something you would like to talk to me about, Miss Granger?'

Hermione jumped; she'd been so engrossed that she hadn't even noticed the Library door open. 'No, Professor McGonagall, thanks.'

'Very well, then. Has Potter done yet another disappearing trick?' The sharp gaze was somewhat softened by a mixture of grief and the warm candlelight in the Restricted Section.

'He's gone to the Burrow, I think,' Hermione replied. She wasn't very good at lying to the Headmistress; she always felt caught out before the words left her mouth.

'I see.' Minerva McGonagall pulled herself up to her not very impressive height and clutched her green velvet robes to her bony breast. 'Whenever you feel you can trust me, Miss Granger, my door is open.'

Hermione looked down, for some reason ashamed. 'Of course I trust you,' she blurted out. She was on the verge of tears, as though a false accusation had been laid at her door.

McGonagall softened. 'Now, now, my dear, I didn't intend to sound harsh. I shall leave you to study. You seem to have much to do,' she said knowingly. She turned and made her way slowly up the rows of books and scrolls.

'Professor,' Hermione called to her ramrod back. 'Why did Sirius Black die behind the Veil? Everything I've read suggests that it was just put in place by the founders for study. All I can see are hints to mysticism.' She waved her arm at the mountains of books. 'Nothing says a death chamber is behind it.'

She watched the Headmistress stop, not suddenly as though in shock, more as though she had been waiting for something to pull her back. 'And is death not the last great mystery?' McGonagall turned and gave Hermione a mildly reproving look. 'But that is not what you're really trying to ask me, is it?'

'You mean that you know he's alive?' Hermione whispered.

'Of course he is alive, Miss Granger. Or perhaps you thought Mr Potter was hallucinating? Now, don't you think you should begin to allow someone to help you with your burden?'

'Yes ... I don't know what to tell you ... what you know.' Hermione scrubbed the tears away as she felt the rush of relief when the Headmistress walked back along the rows.

'Let us say that I know that Severus Snape is as innocent of the actual crime he is accused of, as the evidence would seem to point otherwise. Do I take it that he has taken Draco Malfoy to Black in the safe house?'

Hermione nodded. She hadn't betrayed anything; McGonagall knew or had guessed everything so far.

'Is Lupin there too?'

'Yes, and Lucius Malfoy,' Hermione replied.

The Headmistress clutched her chest again as she sat down. 'Oh, not the ruddy Knight Protectors of the ruddy Shield of Merlin again; please tell me they've not all got together again.'

'They've got together again,' Hermione replied with a grimace. 'Is that bad?'

'It is a disaster waiting to happen, Miss Granger. It is as well we are having this little chat; at least we women will have a chance to run after the boys and close the doors on their more glaring errors, as they go charging forward like the Light Brigade, with as little net effect.'

Hermione could see her remarks were tempered with nostalgia and affection and regret, as though she were being given an unexpected second chance at something she'd failed at in the past. 'We can help them, can't we?'

'Of course, and as long as they do not realise it, they will accept our advice.' Minerva looked at the piles of books Hermione had been trying to cross-reference. 'I shall owl Andromeda Black right away; she has been champing on the bit for days to find a starting point. It may be wise to keep the boys in the dark for the time being, Miss Granger; we don't want them closing ranks and keeping secrets.' She gave a tight little smile. 'That's what happened the last time, you know. And it cost James and Lily Potter and Regulus Black their lives, and Sirius Black twelve years of his.'

'But they're older now,' Hermione offered. 'Older and wiser.'

'I'm disappointed in you, Miss Granger.' McGonagall smiled at her, a woman-to-woman smile. 'Boys never grow up, they just get bigger, and some get bigger than others.'

Chapter Seven: Hidden Motives

Chapter 7 of 8

When Severus frees Lucius from Azkaban, he has nowhere else to take him but the safe house, the one in which Sirius Black is hiding.

Lupin had begun the restless pacing that always preceded his transformation, the tortuous walking up and down, stopping at whatever window he found himself nearest to look towards a lightening sky, as the tug of the moon became more and more insistent.

Snape watched him carefully, as Sirius and Lucius watched Snape. Severus was glad he'd sent the two boys to Hogwarts; it wouldn't do to increase the werewolf's anxieties any more than necessary. 'Lupin?' he asked, and nodded to the Polyjuice Potion Black had set on the table beside him, as the werewolf turned, golden-eyed and aggressive in his distress. 'How long?'

Lupin ran his hands through his short grey hair in a gesture of hopeless apology for a crime not committed. 'I don't know ... I lose the track ... not long.' He turned away, as though the question had confused him.

'Take it now,' Lucius said quietly into the uneasy atmosphere.

Snape nodded, not so much taking an order as in agreement of what he had already decided himself. He watched Lupin for a moment longer, then drank the Polyjuice that Black held out to him, the one containing one of Lupin's hairs. He didn't have to wait for long until he felt the familiar roiling under his skin, matching the roiling in his rebelling guts, as the physical changes began to manifest themselves, the changing of the planes of his face and the length of his limbs, as he became the taller but slightly slimmer man. He nodded to Sirius, and watched as he handed Lupin the other beaker of Polyjuice.

Snape was just beginning to think he was completely wrong in his thoughts as he watched Lupin begin the change to a second Sirius Black, just begun to think that the moon would still find the real Remus Lupin, when he felt something try to encroach on his mind, much the way the Dark Lord used to try to creep in the back door. There was something infinitely more subtle about this though; the moon didn't need to be furtive, the moon wasn't an unexpected visitor slipping in to steal a few secrets and then be off like a thief in the night. The moon believed in her own superiority and her rite of passage through the sky and the souls she dragged in her wake.

He found himself having to wrench his thoughts back to the duplicate Sirius Black, who now sat at the table; the pressures Severus was now feeling seemed to have lifted from the other man.

He saw Malfoy take Lupin's hand and talk quietly to him; he couldn't hear the words, just murmurs, sounds of comfort. He felt Black at his side, and he shook his head in futile denial of what was happening to him. They all had their instructions; they all knew what to do when the first hour was up, in case he did indeed turn into a wolf ... he didn't realise he already had.

'What does it feel like?' Sirius asked Lupin as he sat down at the table; there was no point in asking the grey wolf that stood looking out of the window at the cold white disc that called to him. Sirius didn't like this; this wasn't the kind of thing they should be doing away from the safety of somewhere like Hogwarts, where they could summon help in a heartbeat if it all went wrong.

'I can't explain it,' Lupin replied. He was calm now, secure in the other body. 'I can feel something. It's as though it's sitting in the background. I don't like this, Sirius.' He nodded to the grey wolf. 'If he changes back to himself in an hour and I stay like this, where does the wolf go?'

'That's what he wants to try to find out,' Sirius replied and looked to the corner to where the wolf had dropped to his haunches as a cloud slipped over the moon.

Sirius checked his watch again, forty-five minutes; he hadn't known just how slowly the minutes could drag and yet how quickly the hour could snatch itself away. He watched Lucius measure out the next dose of Polyjuice, just one this time. He could see Malfoy was as anxious as he was. He wished they weren't doing this.

With five minutes to go Lupin took the next few sips of the potion, and Sirius could see his relief. He wondered if the moon had sensed the Polyjuice working its way through him, and had been hoping to catch him unawares at the end of the hour. Sirius jotted that thought down on the parchment at his side; until Severus was back he'd do things his way.

They all watched the corner now to where the wolf had stood up. He shook his shaggy head and turned again to the window, almost as though he were bidding his ultimate mistress goodbye, and slipped into the form of Severus Snape. From outside, a howl of confused misery sounded, and they all turned to the window in time to see the scrubby bushes part as something, which had no form,

ran through them.

'What the holy fuck was that?' Lucius broke the short shocked silence.

'I confess I am at a loss,' Snape said quietly as he sat down. He looked pale and drawn and doubtful, as though he had misplaced something. 'I think we have to accept that sleep is off the agenda tonight.'

'It's got nowhere to go, has it?' Lupin asked, and Sirius thought he sounded almost guilty about that.

'Let us hope it doesn't find somewhere,' Lucius replied. 'Are you all right, Severus?'

Snape nodded, and then shook his head. 'No, not really. I ... I'm not sure, but I think I understand just what happens now.' He shook his head again, as though trying to clear whatever invader had been accessing his mind. He gave Lupin a long look. 'The next thing I do, after we get out of this mess we're in, is find a way to stop what happens to you.'

'Let's not get off the subject in hand,' Malfoy replied. 'We need to get moving, Severus. No more experiments; we have to go with what we've got.'

'Isn't that what we're here for anyway?' Snape nodded as he stood back up. 'Nobody should ever be that helpless, werewolves included.' He moved away and began to climb the stairs.

'Severus, don't leave us down here on our own,' Sirius said as he felt the jolt of him leaving.

'There are three of you; surely one of you can stay awake.'

'I think they were going to do something with the Polyjuice,' Draco said. 'They've been very secretive about it. It wasn't just Lupin taking it before the moon rose, Severus

was taking it too, and there wasn't much left. Whatever it was, my father didn't seem too happy about it.'

Hermione had just about got over the fact that she had two Ron Weasleys opposite her, and that one of them was none other than Draco Malfoy. 'I bet I know,' she said, 'I bet he's trying to analyse the werewolf if he turns into it ... or something.'

Ron scoffed at the idea as they heard someone on the stairs. Harry threw the Invisibility Cloak over Draco, just as Professor McGonagall reached the top of the stairs.

'Returned to the fold, yet again, Potter?' She nodded to the three. 'And Mr Weasley, too, I see.'

Hermione thought she gave Ron a long look, before satisfying herself he was indeed Arthur and Molly's son.

'Well, Professor Dumbledore's funeral is tomorrow; we didn't want to be late,' Harry offered as Ron nodded agreement.

'Of course.' McGonagall smiled thinly and turned to Hermione. 'A moment, Miss Granger, if you would.'

Hermione followed her down the stairs to the corridor, and watched as she checked to see they were alone.

'I hope there will be nobody attending the Headmaster's funeral in disguise of anyone else, Miss Granger.'

'No, not that I know of.' Hermione hoped so too.

'It is just that several of the people who will be there have at least some Legilimency skills, and it would not do for Severus Snape to think he can slip in unnoticed, however good an Occlumens he is. One never knows when one could drop one's guard if caught unaware ... and he is a wanted man.'

'He managed with Voldemort for long enough, Professor,' Hermione reasoned. 'But he's not going, I know that,' she added in a hurry.

'Very well, Miss Granger, but if you hear to the contrary please let me know, and at least I can keep my eye on things. People know how clever he is; they will be watching out for him.'

Hermione nodded. 'He's not coming, Professor. Lupin is coming himself; he'll be with us. In fact the only reason he's not here now is the full moon. Severus has no one else he can change to ... so far.'

'Very well,' McGonagall repeated, raising her eyebrow at Hermione's use of Snape's given name. For a moment she seemed to have accepted what Hermione said. 'And make quite sure that Draco Malfoy continues to stay out of sight; two Ronald Weasleys is one too many,' she said, and paused for a second. 'In fact it's two too many sometimes.'

'Where's Severus,' Lucius asked as Sirius sat down heavily.

'Upstairs,' Sirius replied shortly; he didn't fancy a dose of Malfoy's company. 'He's not feeling well.'

'Keep your eye on him today, Black. We don't want him slipping away to Hogwarts.'

Sirius was about to snarl at him, but something changed his mind; today wasn't the day for petty vendettas, not even with Lucius Malfoy. 'Yeah, I know. It's not easy for him.' He poured himself coffee from the jug that sat on the hob on the fire; he hoped Lucius hadn't made it. 'Has Lupin left?'

Malfoy nodded. 'A few minutes ago. You may drink the coffee; he made it before he left.'

'Don't worry; I was getting around to asking.'

'What's he doing, Black?' Lucius nodded to the stairs. 'What's his plan? All this nonsense with the ruddy Polyjuice, we won't know who the fuck's who if he messes about any more.'

Sirius shrugged. He wasn't quite sure what Snape was up to either, but he didn't really feel like admitting that to Malfoy.

'Don't let him get too complicated,' Lucius muttered. 'Remember what happened last time.'

'Yes, I remember, thank you. Some of us paid a price, and the rest of us got off smelling of fucking roses if I recall, you in particular.'

Malfoy looked away. 'It wasn't like that.'

Sirius pushed the coffee mug away and stood up. 'I promised myself I wouldn't do this, not today.' He left Lucius sitting alone at the table.

'Black,' Malfoy said quietly when he was half way up the stairs. 'For what it's worth, I tried to get you out. Oh, not for yourself, don't think that, but I tried for Lupin and Severus.'

'Not hard enough,' Sirius snarled over his shoulder.

'Sometimes the best we can do isn't good enough,' Lucius replied. 'But it's still the best we can do.'

Sirius began to walk back down the stairs. 'Just what did you do? What wonders did you perform on my behalf while I was rotting my life away?'

'I ratified all the permits, the ones for Lupin and Severus. No one ever knew they were able to visit you; there was a specific injunction on you getting visits without Ministry approval,' Malfoy replied. 'And I abstained in any vote against reviewing your case. I never voted against you.'

'Thanks a lot. That's not exactly voting for me.'

'How could I have voted for you?' Lucius flared for the first time. 'I was in the ruddy Ministry. How could I vote for a man they believed was Voldemort's staunchest follower?'

'You said you tried to get me out,' Sirius challenged, but much of the bullishness had leaked out of him. There was something about Lucius's demeanour that he didn't think was feigned, something asking for the same kind of understanding he had asked Snape to allow him.

'I did.' Lucius raised his silver eyebrow. 'I forged Cornelius Fudge and Kingsley Shacklebolt's signatures on a review document, which I made up myself, saying that the case against you could not be proven because of the lack of Pettigrew's body, but someone caught it on the way through, and it was blocked. There was a hell of an uproar about it. No one traced it to me, of course; they were hardly likely to. I wasn't so lucky with the next one; I had to pay a serious amount of money to Arthur Weasley to keep quiet about the fact that I was the one who objected to the fact that you had no trial, and I was considering going to the International Court for Wizarding Injustice to bring suit against the Ministry. I suspect he paid for all of his multitude of children's Hogwarts uniforms with the cash.'

'I still hate you, Malfoy,' Sirius said, as he tried to stop a half a grin slip onto his face.

'Oh, that's fine, I hate you too.' Lucius nodded to the stairs. 'Go and see if he wants anything; he'll be brooding up there. Either that or he left with Lupin.'

'Severus never came to see me,' Sirius said quietly from where he still stood on the stairs.

'Of course he did, it was Lupin who only went a couple of times.' Lucius smiled at last. 'He wouldn't go as himself; he thought you wouldn't want to see him. Pity really, he's allergic to Polyjuice. You have no idea how tedious it was to sit watching him heave his guts up all night afterwards.'

Sirius felt something warm spread through him; on some level he'd known Severus would never have forsaken him. 'Well,' he said, letting himself hold Malfoy's pale grey eyes, 'for what it's worth, thanks.'

'I didn't do it for you.'

Chapter Eight : Advice of the Dead

Chapter 8 of 8

When Severus frees Lucius from Azkaban, he has nowhere else to take him but the safe house, the one in which Sirius Black is hiding.

Harry sat with Hermione and Ron and Lupin in the subdued Great Hall. He watched as Hermione slipped some more food into the bag at her side; he wasn't sure just how much she thought Draco was actually going to eat. Of course Ron would probably join him for an after lunch snack; he'd have to build himself up for sharing mealtimes with the rest of the Weasleys in Romania next week.

The Hall was packed with the dignitaries of the wizarding world and the friends and contemporaries of Albus Dumbledore, who had come to pay their last respects. Harry kept looking around the tables to check that no one who could possibly be Snape or Sirius came in. He'd spent most of Dumbledore's funeral anxiously scanning the crowd for another Lupin, or a tell-tale scuffle that the Aurors had arrested someone. He wished this were over and he was back at the safe house, checking what was going on there.

He found his thoughts unexpectedly slipping to Severus Snape; he wondered how he was feeling just now. Harry knew in himself that Snape would have been the one to deliver the Headmaster's eulogy if things had been different. Somehow he knew that was what the Knight Protectors of the Shield of Merlin were going to do anyway, in quite another way. He watched Minerva McGonagall walk across the hall and stoop to have a few words with Lupin. The werewolf rose and followed her out.

'Come on,' Hermione said. 'Let's get back up to the dorm. Draco will be starving.' She nodded to the bag.

As they passed through the entrance hall they saw Lupin and McGonagall disappear behind the closing wall of the staircase leading to the Headmistress's office.

'I wonder what that's all about,' Ron murmured.

Harry frowned. 'I don't know.'

'Are you uneasy about Lupin, Harry?' Hermione asked.

'No.' Harry shook his head. 'I don't think so. I don't think he'd willingly betray anyone, if that's what you mean.'

'But you think he might submit to pressure?' Hermione gave him a calculating look. She didn't want to tell him just how much McGonagall knew. She well understood what the Headmistress had said about dangerous secrets, but she knew this was worth keeping. She had to know what was going on, and she didn't want Harry, or Draco for that matter, to stop telling her things; she knew that was exactly what had happened last time. Women were better at secrets; they understood the courtesies and relevancies of the different types, they were much more experienced.

Harry frowned again, and pushed his glasses up on his nose. 'Maybe McGonagall just thought Lupin was upset. He tends to be a bit overemotional.' He nodded to the other two. 'You go on; I'm going to watch for him coming back out.'

He didn't have long to wait for the staircase to open again, but when it did it was Minerva McGonagall who stepped into the corridor. Harry had a funny feeling she summed him up in the moments it took for her to reseal the steps.

'Potter,' she called, 'what are you hanging about for?'

He decided to call her bluff. 'I thought I saw Remus Lupin go upstairs with you. I was waiting for him. I wanted to speak to him.'

'And you were right, Potter,' she replied as she reached him. 'Lupin won't be long. Professor Dumbledore just wanted a quiet word with him.'

'He's alert in his portrait?' Harry gasped; the Dumbledore he'd seen in the portrait the week before had been slumbering. 'Can I speak to him?'

'Not just now, Potter,' she said. 'Perhaps in the days to come, but for now he only has short periods of time when he can converse with this world from the next. Perhaps once he settles in, and the Times behind the portraits get used to another being inhabiting their spaces.'

Harry frowned, then gave a little laugh. 'I think I'll get Hermione to translate what that means; it sounds as though it would take a while.'

Lupin took a deep breath before he opened the door of the safe house; he was almost expecting the walls to be dripping with blood, or at the very least to find the atmosphere so hostile that he had to cut his way through it. He didn't expect to find Lucius sitting reading the beginning of chapter two of his book, with his long damp silver-blond hair lying loose on his shoulders, whilst Sirius stirred a pot of what looked and smelt suspiciously like fermented manure.

Snape was nowhere to be seen; perhaps he'd been killed in an effort to keep the two of them apart, and they'd donned this façade of domesticity to try to cover the crime.

'Where's Severus?' Draco asked as he and Harry followed him in.

Sirius nodded to the stairs. 'Asleep.'

'How is he?' Lupin asked.

'All right, I suppose; it's hard to tell. He's not exactly communicative at the best of times,' Sirius replied as he picked what looked uncomfortably like one of his long dark wavy hairs from the pot. 'How was it?'

'Okay, I suppose. The boys will tell you. I need to talk to Severus.' Lupin began to climb the stairs as the rest of them frowned at his back.

Severus had heard them come in, heard the brief exchange of words without knowing what they were, and the creak of the stairs as someone came up; he knew it was Lupin. He was sitting up by the time the werewolf pushed the door open. He still felt nauseous from the Polyjuice Potion. If he'd been at Hogwarts he'd have cobbled up something to settle his stomach; he didn't think Lupin's company would do the trick.

'Did you speak to him?' he asked without the preamble of discussing who was at the funeral, who delivered the addresses and eulogies; he knew it hadn't been him, so it didn't matter much.

Lupin nodded. 'You knew?'

'I suspected he'd be in his portrait immediately. He's not a fool, Lupin; he knows we need to strike while Voldemort thinks we are at a low point.'

'He wants you to get to Hogwarts tonight. He says he'll make sure the steps are open and the office is empty two hours after midnight.'

Snape winced as his stomach roiled, in case he'd forgotten about his abuse of it, as though threatening him with double retribution if he tried to maltreat it again. 'What about Minerva?' he asked.

'I'm not sure.' Lupin shrugged. 'I don't know what she knows.'

'More than we want her to know, I suspect,' Snape replied and stood up as quickly as he dared. 'What is that disgusting smell? Please tell me Black isn't making dinner.'

'He's making something; it smells like old shoes,' Lupin replied with his self-effacing smile. 'I'd hoped you left him stirring a potion. I'm glad I had a big lunch.'

'What if I wait on the Apparition point on the hill outside Hogwarts with the Invisibility Cloak, and that way Sirius can just change to Padfoot?' Harry suggested, omitting to mention it would save him lugging a basket of snake around if it weren't necessary.

'Don't just ignore it because you didn't think of it, Severus.' Sirius pointed the ladle at him before he had a chance to say anything. Something brown was sliding off it; it made an unpleasant plopping sound as it landed on the floor. Harry watched, fascinated to see if it was going to crawl off into a corner of its own accord.

'I'm not ignoring anything, Black,' Snape replied; his lip was curled in disgust at the brown mess too. 'You're not going.'

'Wouldn't it be better to have me under your watchful eye than to have to worry about what I was up to behind your back?'

'You're very childish at times, Black,' Lucius muttered across the table. He looked disappointed that dinner did indeed appear to be what Sirius was messing about with; he hadn't even had the buffer of a Hogwarts lunch.

'Yes, I revert to it as a last option when common sense doesn't work,' Sirius snarled at him. 'Let's eat and go.' He began ladling great lumps of gooey matter onto plates. 'This'll put hairs on your chest.' He grinned as he manfully tried to shake it off the serving spoon.

'What is it?' Draco poked hesitantly at his plate with his fork, as though he expected it to poke him back.

'Peasant fodder,' Lucius muttered as his own plate was laid before him. He gave it a threatening look.

Sirius laid the next plate in front of Snape. He pushed it away and glared at him. 'Don't be ridiculous, Black. I am not eating that.'

'Fine, your delicate stomach can starve then,' Sirius declared in triumph as he laid Harry's plate in front of him, 'or have another dose of Polyjuice. There's nothing else.' He brought two plates on the last trip. Harry noticed he'd given Lupin a big helping and hadn't taken much for himself; he suspected that was a pointer.

Snape had already left the table, and was cutting some slices from the hard loaf that sat waiting to be fed to the gulls. He broke the remainder of the bread into small pieces and put them onto his still full dinner plate. He opened the door, placed it on the ground outside and stood watching for a moment. None of them saw the smirk on his face as the gulls began to swoop in to scavenge. He took the remaining two slices of bread over to the fire, and began to toast them on a fork as the others chewed bravely for a bit.

Sirius laid his fork down at last; he'd managed to swallow a few token mouthfuls. 'It's fucking horrible, isn't it?' He assumed his most crestfallen look, before turning to where Snape had buttered his nicely browned toast and had proceeded to crunch into it with apparent satisfaction. 'And that miserable fuck's finished the bread.'

'All clear. Mischief managed,' Harry whispered and folded up the Marauders Map. It wasn't fooled anyway, but he knew it wouldn't be; it had recognised Peter Pettigrew and Barty Crouch quickly enough when they'd been to Hogwarts under different guises. He nodded to Snape and Sirius, and the two men slid in the door, still under the Cloak; Sirius, as though he was a young boy enjoying a game of hide and seek, Snape, as though the whole thing was somewhat beneath his dignity. Severus had taken the Polyjuice, and Harry suspected it was already having effects other than having allowed him to don his Lupin persona; even in the dark he could see his moody silence and pallor were more marked than usual. That was beginning to worry Harry. Sirius hadn't bothered to take the potion; Lucius wasn't any less a wanted man than he was, and he could use Padfoot if necessary.

'Do you want us to come up with you?' Sirius asked quietly as they reached the bottom of the steps leading to the Headmistress's office.

'No.' Snape shook his head. 'Potter, you wait here with the Map and you wait halfway up, Black. That way you can let me know if anyone is coming.'

'Professor,' Harry said as something that had been nagging at him coalesced into a thought. 'What about the rest of the portraits? Aren't some of them unfriendly to our cause?'

'It is a risk we have to take. I suspect there is some code of honour amongst portraits which does not allow them to eavesdrop though,' Snape gave him a long look. 'Perhaps while you're waiting you could give your godfather some lessons in the forward thinking technique you have managed to develop.'

'Will Voldemort worry about codes of honour?' Harry asked with a tight smile as Sirius made a rude sign at Snape.

'You must all go, Severus,' Dumbledore said from the portrait. 'And your missing members must be replaced by another Gryffindor and another Slytherin. We cannot allow

death to defeat us.'

Snape shook his head in denial. 'They're too young. I cannot allow it.'

'Then you have already failed,' Dumbledore said firmly, dismissing his objections. 'When you work out where the last two Horcruxes are, you must summon him formed as the pentagram, and you must not break formation if you all want to survive.'

'How will we find them?' Snape asked and ran his hands through Lupin's hair.

'I cannot say. But I know this much, Rowena's brooch has passed from your world. I suspect it will be waiting for you somewhere. Remember they may be infected by Voldemort's soul, but they once belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw and Helga Hufflepuff.'

'And is the cup still in this world?' Snape asked with a frown; things seemed to be becoming more complicated instead of clearer.

'Leave Helga Hufflepuff's cup to the ladies, Severus.'

'What ladies?' Snape asked suspiciously, and took another look around the seemingly empty office.

'It is a grave failing of yours to want to do everything by yourself. I seem to remember telling you that a long time ago.' Dumbledore gave Severus a long look. 'And don't bother to give me that fraudulent humiliated look; I always saw through it, you know.'

'Are we going to succeed?' Snape asked quietly.

'I do not know, Severus. I only know you are going to try. Keep one another close.'

His voice had dropped to a low murmur, and when Snape looked back to the portrait it was just a picture of an old man slumbering in a red armchair, until it opened one eye and winked at him. It was taking a huge effort on Snape's part to keep the toast he had eaten earlier in its current place of residence, and the wink hadn't helped.

Apart from throwing the toast up into a sink in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, with same Myrtle cackling her delight from one of the cubicles, Harry thought Snape looked much better than he had since he'd killed Dumbledore, as though speaking to him had laid any self-doubts he might have had. They had moved to the Gryffindor Common Room, and Harry raised a finger to his lips as the tapestry hanging on the gallery flapped in what might only have been an errant draught. He unfolded the map and watched the three witches climb the stairs, as Sirius pulled the cloak over himself, and Snape lit one of Lupin's cigarettes, slouching in a chair, and leaving the cigarette dangling between his teeth the way the werewolf did.

Hermione opened the door, and McGonagall and Andromeda Black followed her in.

'Potter,' McGonagall nodded. 'Severus,' she added nonchalantly to where he sat watching her. She sniffed the air with a little smile. 'And I think the cat in me smells dog.'

'Minerva.' Snape twisted Lupin's lip in his own mannerism, as he belatedly hauled himself to his feet. It wouldn't have mattered whose persona he'd donned, Harry reckoned; only Severus Snape could acknowledge a greeting in quite that way. 'You may as well show yourself, Black,' Snape added without bothering to feign resignation.

Severus took his time turning to Andromeda; she had always fascinated him, she was the only woman he had ever lain with. He suspected that if she hadn't already been married to Ted Tonks he might have taken the step himself, even though she was almost ten years his senior. It had been Andromeda and Lucius who had dragged him back from his suicidal abyss when Sirius had dumped him, Andromeda who had shown him more about pleasuring a man than anyone else ever could have, although he had to admit to himself that Lucius had had a little input there too.

'Why bother with the disguise, Severus? No one else smells of cinnamon and orange blossom.' Andromeda smiled and leant to embrace him.

Damn the Blacks and damn their blue eyes, Snape swore to himself. One was as bad as the other. 'Andromeda,' he murmured and kissed her cheek. It took some effort on his part to remember they weren't alone in the room, and he only reluctantly managed to resist the temptation to push her over the table and make a proper job of it. He rather liked Andromeda; there weren't many people Severus Snape thought that about.

'Is this a private party?' Sirius asked.

Harry could see he was a touch miffed, as though he was the one who was supposed to be popular. The attentions of Hermione batting her eyelashes hopefully, and the Headmistress, who was looking at him as though she was chewing a rag soaked in vinegar, seemed to be poor compensation for his stunningly beautiful cousin. Harry had a feeling Sirius was missing something.

'I hope you're looking after him this time, Sirius.' Andromeda gave him an accusing look, as Snape looked away, and Sirius favoured her with a sour look back that eclipsed many of those Severus had to offer.

'Can we get on?' Sirius muttered as Harry and Hermione shared a snigger.

Sirius was definitely missing something, Harry realised with a smile; Snape had had a fling with Andromeda, and Sirius didn't know. He watched his godfather try to catch Severus's eye, but Snape wasn't having any of it; he blanked him completely. Harry straightened his face as Sirius tried to dredge his Gryffindor grin from somewhere, the irresistible one, the one he assumed would knock everyone flat, the one that left the present company remarkably unimpressed.

'Aren't you being a bit childish?' Harry asked Sirius as Snape went upstairs shortly after Lucius and Lupin, pleading tiredness. Severus didn't fool Harry; even though he'd resumed his own form, he'd noticed him becoming more and more withdrawn, the pallor he wouldn't have seen on Snape's face had been evident on Lupin's though. Harry knew Severus was struggling with the effect of the Polyjuice. He hadn't even bothered to return any of Sirius's jibes, and the more he ignored them the more outrageous Sirius had become.

'What d'you mean?' Sirius turned; he still had a petty wronged look on his face.

'Come on, Sirius. He's obviously not feeling well.' Harry nodded to the stairs. 'Don't you think you should go up and check he's okay?'

'Yeah,' Draco added unhelpfully, 'and you could leave the attitude down here. It's enough to make anyone sick.'

'How entertaining do you think it is to watch someone throw up?' Sirius asked with an indignant air to Harry and a hostile look to Draco.

Harry thought there something a touch defensive about the remark. 'Why are you being so horrible to him?' he asked with a perfectly straight face, as he laughed to himself at all the times he'd thought exactly the opposite when Sirius had been in Grimmauld Place.

'Well, for a start he's horrible. You've got to admit that, Harry,' Sirius reasoned.

Harry nodded. 'Yup, pretty horrible.'

'Pot ugly too, now that I come to think about it,' Draco added more helpfully. 'Funny, I never really noticed that before.'

'How can you not notice that?' Harry asked.

Draco shrugged. 'I had a sheltered upbringing.'

'With Lucius and Narcissa?' Harry scoffed, glad Draco had joined the game.

'Yeah, Severus too,' Draco nodded. 'All I really had to compare them to were elves.'

'Who won? Between Snape and Dobby, in the looks stakes?' Harry asked, wondering if Sirius had at last realised they were playing.

'I never did work that out.' Draco seemed to mull something over in his mind, as though he were just realising something he'd known for a long time. 'He's a dreadfully decadent old tart too, versatile as well.' He ignored Harry's warning look. 'If he wasn't shagging my father, he'd be shagging my aunt. It all became a bit incestuous. Merlin only knows what went on when Lupin came a-calling. The only one who never got a bit was Narcissa, I suspect.'

Harry gave the two of them a weak all-encompassing smile. 'Well, who needs looks if you've got all that personal charm?'

Sirius finally shot them a suspicious look. 'Are you two laughing at me?'

'Are you going to sleep at all, Black? Only we have a great deal to do tomorrow and it would help if you're not falling asleep at the important bits.'

Harry started as he looked at the barefooted man on the stairs, wondering just how long he'd been standing there. He was dressed in a pair of high-waisted black trousers and a white silk shirt; fine dark hair escaped from where the top buttons had been undone, and an untied cravat hung around his neck. His long ebony hair fell to his shoulders in what could only be described as a shaggy mess. It was as though his comb had worn itself out with the precision of the middle parting and had gone into retirement, leaving the rest to frame his almost white face and startlingly contrasting black eyes in whatever unruly way it saw fit. The thin-lipped mouth, which was either twisted in scorn or twisted in cynicism, although to be fair, Harry reckoned indigestion might be contributing that evening, perfectly offset the long nose that cast unkind shadows on the almost angular planes of his face, giving him a dark brooding look. That was it, Harry realised, dark and mysterious. There was no getting away from it though, he was one ugly bastard; he had enough sex appeal to stagger a Hippogriff too.

He watched Sirius give Snape a slow up and down look as though satisfying himself that sleep wasn't on the agenda.

'I'm just coming. This two were trying to take the piss out of me.'

'I suspect that wouldn't be terribly difficult,' Snape replied as he turned and made his way back up the stairs.

'Now who's got the personal charm?' Sirius grinned in triumph at the two boys as he stood.
