

The Dark Padded Cell

by veradee

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Many thanks go to my beta, Beth Kennedy, for catching my mistakes and introducing me to the finer details of the English grammar.

Summary: On the morning, after Narcissa Malfoy visits him, Severus Snape makes up his mind.

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I would miss my home.

That was my first thought when I awoke from an uneasy night's rest. I couldn't deny that Narcissa Malfoy's visit last night had been a rather unpleasant surprise and had kept me awake for several hours. Taking an Unbreakable Vow isn't something you do only to go back to normal right afterwards. An Unbreakable Vow changes your life.

Through the curtain a sliver of light fell into the room. It had to be shortly after dawn. No sound could be heard yet. Obviously, Wormtail, whom the Dark Lord had sent to stay with me over the summer, was still asleep.

I stretched myself. The muscles in my neck and shoulders were stiff and hurt. I felt like staying in bed for a few more hours but knew that I wouldn't be able to find any comfort there with my thoughts constantly revolving about the previous night.

I sat up, swung my legs out of the bed and angled for my slippers. Instantly, the cool morning air crept up my legs and under my nightshirt and made me shiver.

Stiffing a loud yawn, I rose and reached for my terry cloth bathrobe, which lay on a chair. As I put it on, I caught a glimpse of myself in the old mirror on the wall opposite the bed and suppressed a smile.

The dressing gown was dark red. I didn't like the colour, but it was the last present my mother had given me before she had died some years ago. She always used to shake her head at my preferring to wear black only.

She also would have shaken her head at my taking the Unbreakable Vow.

I swallowed, finally realising what I had done although I realised that it had been the only possible thing for me to do.

I shivered again and decided I could do with a mug of hot tea.

When I turned towards the bedside table to grab my wand, a plank creaked beneath my feet, reminding me of the old wooden stairs leading to the ground floor. That vermin Wormtail would inevitably wake up from the noise. I settled on Apparating instead.

I waved my wand above the bed to right the bed linen. It used to be my parents' bed. Until his death last year, my father had still slept in it. I felt a bit strange sleeping here and would have preferred to stay in my old bedroom next door, but that would have meant letting Wormtail sleep in my parents' bed, which was an unbearable thought.

I took a deep breath and, with a small pop, Apparated into my sitting room, right beside the old sofa. Not moving, I listened for any sound, but Wormtail obviously hadn't woken.

I went over to the window, drew back the curtain from one corner and peeked out. No one could be seen.

Letting go of the curtain, I headed towards a hidden door and entered my kitchen, where I filled a kettle with water and placed it on the oven.

Most people I knew would be astonished if they saw me preparing tea the Muggle way. But, although it took longer, I liked to believe that the result justified the extra effort.

I held my hands over the oven, rubbing them and trying to feel some of the rising heat.

Of course, there weren't many things I did the Muggle way. Most of the time, the wizarding way was superior. But there were moments when it had its advantages, especially if one was familiar with certain details and habits of the Muggle world.

If I didn't have any Muggle ancestors, I would never have been able to create the logic puzzle that helped to protect the Philosopher's Stone. My assumption that wizards would find it difficult to solve proved to be correct; it wasn't Quirrell who had solved it, but the Dark Lord himself.

I fetched a package of Earl Grey from the shelf and put some tea leaves in a pot.

Even when I had been a committed Death Eater, it had come in handy. It helped if you knew what exactly you fought against. Knowing about something and understanding how it works didn't necessarily mean that one supported it something most of the Dark Lord's followers have never grasped.

I reached for a mug. The bright yellow one among the white ones reminded me of Dumbledore, who had given it to me last Christmas, and I sank against the sideboard, suddenly feeling a little weak.

How did you approach your friend and long standing comrade-in-arms when you knew that you most probably were going to kill him in the foreseeable future?

I knew that Draco wouldn't be up to the task the Dark Lord had set him. He would certainly try to fulfil it, but would eventually fail, so that the duty would fall onto me.

I also knew Dumbledore wasn't afraid of dying. He had been prepared to die for the greater good for years. I had heard him saying many times that to the well-organised mind, death was but the next great adventure.

But I couldn't imagine that he ever expected to be killed by someone from his own side. However, it wasn't too difficult to guess what he would ask of me when I would tell him about it. In the past he had asked me to do several things that might seem unusual or even questionable to most people.

The whistling kettle jolted me back to the present.

I filled the boiling water into the pot, took the pot and the yellow mug and went back into the sitting room, where a chilly draft seemed to greet me.

I flopped onto the sofa, freezing for a moment when an elastic spring squeaked, but no other sound could be heard.

If the situation weren't so dire, I would be tempted to laugh out loud.

What only Dumbledore and I knew was that Dumbledore was dying. The curse he had been hexed with when he had destroyed the Dark Lord's Horcrux in Marvolo Gaunt's ring last week was slowly going to kill him. The moment he had returned to Hogwarts, I had given him some healing potions, but the curse had proven to be too dark. All the potions could do was postpone the inevitable, not stop it.

Now, it no longer mattered anyway. I had saved him from certain death by the Dark Lord's hand only to kill him myself instead. If I were lucky, he'd die before I had to kill him, but then I've never been very lucky in my life.

I poured myself a mug of tea and took a sip, hoping that the beverage would chase away the chill.

Usually, I never was cold. Usually, I felt comfortable at my home, but not this morning.

I looked around the sitting room, which I have known as long as I could remember. All four walls were covered by bookshelves. Most of the books were wizarding books, but a few were Muggle ones. My father had loved to read his Dickens. I had kept his books, but placed them on a top shelf and changed their covers in case an unwanted visitor might have the urge to look around too closely.

The shelves lent the room a distinctly gloomy atmosphere and the sparse furniture didn't help either, but I liked it this way. It was familiar and reminded me of my childhood. Sitting on the sofa and feeling the threadbare fabric beneath my hands reminded me of my mother, who used to sit here, while my father had preferred the old armchair.

I sipped some more tea, enjoying the slightly bitter taste on my tongue, before I put the mug on the rickety table before me.

Last summer, Minerva McGonagall had visited me on some Order business. She hadn't commented on my home, but the expression on her face had shown me that she felt uncomfortable. Not because she was used to more luxury but because of the confined space and the darkness. It had been obvious that she had felt trapped. She had constantly been looking at the curtain, which I usually kept closed, and, at one point, I had been convinced she'd ask me to open them but she hadn't.

For me the sitting room has always been a haven. The Muggles in the neighbourhood had regarded me as a freak because, as I hadn't been able to control my magic yet, I had caused a few mishaps. I'd never hurt anyone, but the children in the street hadn't been thrilled when their remote control cars suddenly chased them or their black shoes turned pink.

As a child I often had been afraid of being out on the street, only waiting for the next misfortune to happen.

But I'd felt safe in our sitting room between all these books that showed me a fascinating world a world I belonged to but was still too young to join. My mother had told me wondrous stories about Hogwarts, and I had been desperate to go there as well. Until then I had read everything about spells and potions I could get hold of. Although I hadn't been allowed to use any of them yet, knowing them had made me feel stronger.

A shiver ran down my back, and I pulled my bathrobe tighter around my body.

Contrary to popular belief, my childhood had been a rather happy one. My parents had loved each other and me, but, of course, there had been problems and rows. Especially about magic. Although my father had known from the start that my mother was a witch, it had not been easy for him to live with her and their wizard son. When I had still been a child, I hadn't understood that he sometimes felt inferior to us.

I got up, walked over to the window and looked out again. It had got lighter, but it was still early morning. Returning to the sofa, I poured some more tea and cradled the hot

mug in my hands, but it didn't warm me. I'd never felt as cold in my sitting room as I did now.

There was one fight I'd never forgotten. I was five and would have had to attend school soon. My mother wanted me to receive home-schooling while my father insisted on me attending the Muggle primary school in the neighbourhood. He had shouted at my mother that they couldn't afford home-schooling and that I finally had to get used to coping with Muggles apart from himself. "I wish the boy weren't a wizard," he had screamed at the top of his lungs, causing my mother to shrink before him. I had never seen my parents like this before and had been terrified.

In the end, my mother had started to cry, and my father had yielded to her tears. He'd never been able to see her unhappy.

Both had always wanted the best for me. Unlike what most people thought, lack of love had not been the reason for my joining the Death Eaters, but I never corrected them because it was a neat excuse.

I've never told anyone why I had followed the Dark Lord, not even Dumbledore when I had come to him seeking shelter. I also have never really confided to him why I had decided to turn on the Dark Lord. He believed it to be because I passed on the prophecy to the Dark Lord, which resulted in the Potters' death. I've never corrected him on that.

I would need to talk to Dumbledore about me taking the Unbreakable Vow but not right now. It would be soon enough to do so in a few days when I would be clear in my mind what it actually meant for my future. As a spy, I couldn't afford to take one false step.

Dumbledore's words still rang in my ears. "Severus, you know what I must ask you to do. If you are ready... if you are prepared..." he'd said after the Dark Lord had returned, and I had agreed to return to the ranks of the Death Eaters as a spy.

Since then he had asked some more favours of me, and I have always done his bidding. I knew that Dumbledore trusted me. The trust was mutual, but I have sworn to myself that I would never again become the mindless henchman of another man. Therefore, I occasionally held back a detail.

Dumbledore is a good man, but I don't approve of all his decisions. He sometimes has the habit of not sharing all of his knowledge with the Order, but still expecting its members to follow him unconditionally, nonetheless. I would have done so in my youth just as I had served the Dark Lord without questioning his intentions. But I have learnt my lesson.

Now, I serve one master only. This master is myself, Severus Snape.

The tea in my mug had gone cold. I took my wand and cast a warming charm on it. The charm slightly reduces the flavour, but right now I was more interested in something hot than in something tasty.

I sipped the tea, my thoughts returning to the previous night.

To be honest, I had been truly stunned when Narcissa had asked me to take the Unbreakable Vow. While I had known of the Dark Lord's plans for Draco, I had to admit that I had misjudged Narcissa's motherly instincts.

If she had visited me on her own, I certainly would have been able to dissuade her from making me take the Vow, but with Bellatrix in tow, I had had no chance. That madwoman would instantly have run to the Dark Lord, and there was no way of telling if he might have believed her for once.

Again, the chilly air made me shudder, and I pulled up my bare feet, reclining on the sofa.

In the future, I would have to be a bit more careful to whom I made promises. Only a week before, when Dumbledore had returned from destroying the Horcrux in Marvolo Gaunt's ring, I had made another promise to him as well. It wasn't an Unbreakable Vow, but it didn't sit well with me nonetheless.

Dumbledore had begun to take too much for granted. Yes, I wanted to atone for the faults of my youth, and I also wanted to see the Dark Lord defeated, but not at all costs. Some people would be very astonished to hear this, but I didn't want to die.

Obviously in the hope of making me more pliable, Dumbledore had finally offered me the Defence Against the Dark Arts position. I knew that it was cursed, but I have always craved that position. And since I had known about the Dark Lord's plan to kill Dumbledore before Dumbledore had made the offer, I had wondered whether Dumbledore's death might bring the curse to an end.

I should have realised that you could never escape a curse. Now, it had hit me even before the new school year had begun.

How much time would I have left? I knew Draco. He wouldn't give up after having failed the first time. He would give it another shot, which would leave me with at least a few months to come up with a plan, if not until the end of the school year.

I would have to prepare myself for the crucial moment. Whenever it might be, I would have to be ready to do the deed and kill Dumbledore. There wouldn't be the time to think things through then. I would have to consider all possible scenarios beforehand, because when the time came, I couldn't afford to hesitate.

It wouldn't be easy. I wouldn't rejoice in doing it, but it would have to be done. I could only hope that my mind would be well-organised enough.

Two things I already knew. By the end of the upcoming school year at the latest, I would be on the run from the Order. And at the end of this summer break, I'd leave my parental home to never return again. I would miss it.

A sensation of calmness overcame me at this thought. It enveloped me, and suddenly, I felt as warm as I had always done here in my sitting room.

Placing the mug on the table with a decided bang, I rose from the sofa.

It was time to start planning how to kill a friend. It was time to start planning my flight.

The End