Promises Unbroken

by Robin4

Summary

Sirius Black remained the Secret Keeper and everything he feared came to pass. Ten years later, James and Lily live, Harry attends Hogwarts, and Voldemort remains...yet the world is different and nothing is as it seems.

A Marauders-centric fic originally posted on FFN, now updated and edited for AO3.

Notes

This story was originally posted back in 2003, but has just been updated to fit in with canon through Deathly Hallows. However, since quite a few things have changed in the Harry Potter universe since I started this story, you’ll note a few inaccuracies that simply couldn’t be fixed. For example, you’ll note that Arabella Figg is not a squib, while Charlie and Bill Weasley are both a few years older than they turned out to be. The errors are mine, although these facts were not known when I started the story, and I can’t really fix them without damaging the fabric of the entire story. So, I ask that you forgive me the errors.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Prologue/Chapter 1: Ten Years Ago

“Then you should have died! Died rather than betray your friends, as we would have done for you!”

Prologue: As We Would Have Done for You

Upon the hill sat a monument of stone, shaped in the form of a pillar. It was made of gleaming black marble, with a six-pointed gold star on the top. Inscribed upon the memorial were the words:

SIRIUS BLACK
1960-1981

Faithful until the end.
Gone, but never forgotten.

As sun set over Godric’s Hollow, its rays reflected off of the six-pointed star, illuminating the faces of the three men who stood silently before the monument. At the bottom of the hill stood a red-haired woman, but she was separate from the others, allowing them one last goodbye. However, even she would never have claimed that the wind caused the tears in her eyes. To say such would be to dishonor a sacrifice made ten years before by a man who had never been the self-sacrificing sort, but who had always been the best of friends, even for a young Muggleborn witch who had wanted so badly to mistrust him. Once upon a time.

That was years ago. Now, the men gathered at the monument knew that she understood, and knew that she shared their grief…but this was a moment that they alone could share.

But the monument was not a tombstone, and nor was the hill a graveyard. His body, after all, had never been found.

Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity of silence, the center man spoke. He was around thirty years old, with unruly black hair, and hazel eyes that might have been striking if they had not been so sad. “True friendships never really die,” he whispered heavily and slowly. “And family isn’t defined by blood. It’s made strong by bonds that won’t break, tempered and tested by trials and pain. What we are is brothers, and as such we remain, loyal to one another until the end. And no matter what happens between this moment and then, I shall always be thankful to have had such friends.”

The shorter and slightly plumper figure to his left sobbed, his blond head shaking in the desperate disbelief they had lived with for over a decade.

“Faithful until the end,” the third man quoted in a choked voice. His light brown hair was already streaked with gray despite his relative youth, and tears shone in his blue eyes. “Oh, Padfoot…why did you have to mean that so much?”

“I always thought he would be the last to go,” the short man added after sucking in a shuddering breath. “Too stubborn to let go.”

“Or the first, in a blaze of glory.” The center man pushed his glasses up his nose convulsively, as if searching for something to do with his hands. “He’d hate us not knowing.”
The right most figure laid a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “We know,” he said heavily. “He made his choice, Prongs…and it was one he would have been proud of.”

“I know… I just miss him.” Finally, James Potter let the tears fall. “It’s been ten years… And I still want him back. I still wish he hadn’t done it.”

“It’s not your fault, James.” Peter Pettigrew whispered. “It’s not anyone’s fault, except for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’s. You never thought he’d have to die for you.”

“But if I hadn’t asked him…”

Remus Lupin turned and wrapped his arms around his friend. “Don’t even say it, James. Don’t do this to yourself. Not now. You don’t know what would have happened in the war, and you don’t know if Sirius would have lived or died. Don’t kill yourself over what might have been. We can’t change that now. All we can do is honor his sacrifice. All we can do is remember the good times. And we can go on with our lives, as Sirius would have wanted us to. Let us remember him as he was and live for the days he let us have.”

“I hate the fact that he died for me,” Potter replied stubbornly, his face buried in Lupin’s shoulder. James Potter was a strong man, but there were moments when he needed this.

Lupin shot him a gentle glare. “You’d have done the same for him, James, just as any of us would have for each other. You said it yourself—we are more than just friends. And Sirius”—here, his voice finally broke—“Sirius gave us a future. He kept you, and Lily, and Harry safe. I think he’d be proud of that.”

“He died a hero,” Peter added. “Just like he always wanted.”

“I don’t think he endured Voldemort’s torture out of a desire to be a hero, Peter!” James snapped. He might have gone on if not for Remus’ embrace.

“Peter didn’t mean it that way, James.” He tightened his arms around his friend. “But he’s right, in a way. No matter what they did to him, Sirius never broke. He did die a hero. And I wish I could thank him for saving you almost as much as I wish we could have him back.”

James might have been fooled by his friend’s calm voice if he hadn’t seen the tears streaming down Remus’ face. “Me, too.”

“And me,” Peter whispered. “I wish it hadn’t been this way.”

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**Chapter One: Ten Years Ago**

**November 1981**

“No!”

Remus Lupin howled the word as soon as he Apparated outside of a nondescript apartment building located in the outskirts of Muggle London. Heart racing, he sprinted towards the entranceway, unmindful of the leftover aches and pains from his transformation two nights beforehand. Those did not matter. Nothing else mattered when the Dark Mark was hovering in the sky.
Up two flights of stairs and he had reached his destination, and although the door was shut, he knew something was wrong. The wolf sensed it. Remus tried the doorknob, and it was not locked. He burst inside, dreading the scene he knew he would find.

The wolf had known. The flat was a wreck, a battlefield. Furniture was strewn all over the place, some destroyed by misaimed magic, and others simply thrown aside because it was in the way. The far wall was blackened, and the one to the right was peeling paint in places it hadn’t been before. A robe lay discarded over the back of the overturned armchair where its owner must have been sitting as the Death Eaters arrived. Not too far away was a copy of the *Daily Prophet* that would now never be read. Its edges were blistered as if the paper had been exposed to extreme heat and nearly burnt. To Remus’ right, there was blood; not much, but a little, and his sensitive nose told him that an enemy had fallen there, either dead or seriously wounded. The wall next to the front door had a new dent in it, and he knew his friend had not fallen without a fight.

Remus blinked and discovered tears streaming down his face. “Sirius?” he whispered, knowing there would be no answer, but having to try all the same. But his voice would not come out strongly enough; he was hoarse and he wanted to scream. No... “Sirius...?”

Of course, there was no answer. Somehow, he knew that he would never hear his friend’s voice again. Desperately, Remus moved around the flat, throwing furniture aside in a mad search to find someone who was not there. At least he hoped to find a body...but there was nothing. He searched every room of the small and dilapidated flat—the “perfect” hiding place, Sirius had called it with a laugh—but there was nothing. No body. No sign. There was only evidence of the battle Sirius had fought, even knowing he could not win.

His knees buckled, and Remus collapsed onto an overturned chair, not noticing that it lay on its side and letting his head fall into his hands. *Sirius...* For the first time since he’d gone to Hogwarts and met the friends he would come to love as brothers, Remus Lupin dissolved into sobs. *No...*

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*Pain.*

He could deal with pain. He was an Auror. Pain was something he had dealt with before.

“Tell me,” the cold voice demanded.

“Go to hell,” Sirius whispered, his lips cracked and bleeding. It hurt to speak, but he could deal with pain. He could survive it, and wait for death.

*Wait for death.*

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“I’m afraid it’s no use, James,” Albus Dumbledore said quietly. “There has been no sign.”

“What about your spies?” he whispered, feeling cold.

Sirius had done this *for him*. He had sacrificed himself to protect *James’* family. He had said that he
knew the risks—and said it with a laughing smile, because he was Sirius—but neither of them had ever really wrapped their mind around what might happen if someone discovered Sirius was the Potters’ Secret Keeper.

And now Sirius never would.

“All they know is that he was taken to Voldemort,” the Headmaster replied, placing a gentle hand on James’ shoulder. The younger man knew he was shaking, but he did not care. Sirius was gone… Sirius had been missing for five days.

“What else aren’t you saying?” he demanded, half-hating the accusing tone of his own voice, but not wanting to be lied to. He didn’t want to be protected. He wanted to know the truth.

Today was not a day upon which he was prepared to have the master manipulator tell him what he wanted to hear. Today, James had to know. He had faced plenty of unpleasant things in his life, and he would face this.

Dumbledore sighed quietly. “They know he was tortured. They do not know if he has died yet.”

James tried to choke back a sob. It didn’t work. Sirius…

He’d come to Dumbledore for reassurance, for hope, yet he had only found despair. He had asked for the truth, but not for this blatant acceptance of the status quo. Even Dumbledore thought that Sirius would die. Even Albus Dumbledore, the one wizard that Voldemort feared, thought there was no chance! Where was the justice in that? Why had he sent a friend to die?

“We have to do something!” James cried before he even realized he was speaking.

“Such as what, James?” Dumbledore’s gentle voice asked him. “You have a family to protect. Remus and Peter have become targets as well, and the Ministry is too overwrought by trying counter threats to search for one missing Auror. There is hardly anything left with which to fight the war, now.” His other hand reached James’ shoulder. “I am truly, truly sorry, my friend, but there is nothing we can do.

“All we can do is hope for it to end.”

They held a funeral several months later, even though there was no body. And on the first anniversary of Sirius’ disappearance, James and Lily had erected the monument in his honor behind their house at Godric’s Hollow, knowing, all the while, that the Fidelius Charm had never been breached. They had stood silently together that morning, under the rising sun, but feeling none of its warmth. They were truly alone, now; the war was reaching new heights, and Voldemort had shown no sign of forgetting the Potters or the prophecy that had turned them into his prey.

Of course, they still communicated with Remus and Peter, but it hadn’t been the same. The Fidelius Charm kept them safe from Voldemort’s wrath, and although they knew he’d lose interest in time—or at least decide to target someone else—for the moment, they had to hide. Neither James nor Lily enjoyed keeping their heads down, but they knew it was necessary. They had a child to protect.

And so the years passed. Finally, the Fidelius Charm expired with time, and at James’ instance, it was renewed—this time, however, for only Lily and Harry, with James himself as the Secret
Keeper. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust either of his best friends; in fact, both Remus and Peter had offered, but he couldn’t bear to endanger someone else that way. Nor, however, could he keep his head in the sand forever. So with the assurance that his beloved wife and son were safe in Godric’s Hollow, James went back to work as an Auror. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement needed him desperately. Sirius’ death had ripped a hole in the upper ranks of the Aurors, and James’ leave of absence didn’t help, either. With more Aurors dying every day, they needed all the help they could get.

But times only grew darker, climaxing with Voldemort’s public killing of the Minister of Magic, whom he’d caught undefended in a Muggle Cafe, of all places, and had proceeded to kill after less than two minutes of dueling. The death of old Bagnold had frightened the Wizarding community beyond repair; it had been her strength that held the Magical world together, and her death heralded darker times to come. Supporters flocked to Voldemort’s banner, driven by fear, and the light side barely held its ground. And it only got worse.

Within three months, the new Minister of Magic lay dead at Voldemort’s hands, among rumors that he had actively betrayed the Ministry to the Dark Lord. Regardless, Botkins died just like the rest. His successor, too, was gone in another five weeks, and soon witches and wizards were afraid to even leave their homes. Inferni roamed the streets at will, snatching bystanders in their mindless manner. Communication began to break down. The various Wizarding academies threatened to die out when parents would not let their children out of their sight. Death Eaters killed and tortured both Muggles and magical folk to their hearts’ content, sometimes striking even in broad daylight, so confident were they.

Very quietly, Voldemort began to destroy his horcuxes. After all, everyone knew that the darkness was going to win. The Ministry and the Order of the Phoenix were fighting a losing battle, no matter how hard they fought, and the Dark Lord had discovered over time that having split his soul into six parts seriously handicapped his ability to cast several ancient spells he had recently uncovered. He could always create more if a serious threat arose, but Voldemort doubted one would.

After a serious attack upon Hogwarts proved to him that Dumbledore was not eager to face him, he retrieved his soul from the final two horcruxes, having reacquired one of them from some obscure Ministry employee courtesy of the Malfoy family. The Lucius Malfoy’s industriousness gave him a leg up in the Death Eaters’ ranks, and Voldemort’s inner circle became both more powerful and more exclusive. Slowly, he was drawing the oldest of the old families to him—except for the one thorn, that one head of a family of the Fourteen that persisted in defying him openly.

Throughout it all, James Potter worked tirelessly as an Auror, bringing in Dark wizard after Dark wizard, and gaining fame that he had never asked for as the world grew still darker. No matter how many Death Eaters they took, the Ministry lost at least half again that many Aurors. Finally, the Ministry of Magic itself began to crumble.

Until, one day, a man arrived to change all that.

And after six years of Darkness, the world began to lighten ever so slightly.
Train Tracks to Destiny

September 1991

“Can I sit in here? Everywhere else is full.”

Harry looked up from reading his battered copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages* to see a tall and freckled boy with red hair standing in the door to his compartment.

“Sure,” Harry smiled. The other boy looked as lonely as he felt at the moment. One’s own excitement, after all, made for poor company.

The redhead grinned and thrust out a hand after sitting down. “I’m Ron Weasley. Nice to meet you.”

“Harry Potter.” He braced himself for the inevitable, and was not disappointed when Ron’s eyes widened to the size of saucers.

“Wow,” the other boy gaped. “What are you doing here?”

Harry shrugged, trying not to seem uncomfortable. His recent experiences in Diagon Alley had taught him to take such greetings philosophically—and from what he knew of the Weasley family, Ron had every right to be surprised. “Going to Hogwarts, same as you. Or do you mean something else?”

Ron turned red. “Well, I thought you’d be further up the train. You know, with Malfoy and his friends.”

“How would I want anything to do with them?” Harry demanded. People were always making that mistake…he didn’t know Malfoy well (he didn’t really know anyone well, given his childhood), but he knew enough about the entire family to know that he’d rather befriend a Weasley any day.

“I dunno…” If possible, Ron turned an even brighter shade of red. “I just figured with as famous as your Dad is, and, well, they say that you’re…rich and all.”

“So?” *Is that all?* Harry found himself smiling.

For most of his life, he’d been isolated from the other people in the Wizarding world aside from a few close friends of his parents’, which meant that he hadn’t had a lot of contact with kids his age. Oh, sure, he’d met others, but his father’s position in the Ministry meant that the Potter family was still high on Voldemort’s list…and that meant that he and his Mum had spent much of the last decade in hiding. He’d been looking forward to Hogwarts for years now, at least to meet other kids his own age. He hated to admit it, but he was lonely. The look on the other boy’s face, however, offered to change all of that.

“So you’re not friends with Malfoy?” Ron asked eagerly.

“Not in this lifetime!”
“Mudblood!”
“Unworthy!”
“Muggle scum!”
“Freak!”

Bushy hair flying behind her, Hermione Granger fled. She was no coward, but the three boys chasing her were all bigger than she was, and all looked ready to actually attack her. For all of her life, Hermione had felt out of place—she’d made things happen without meaning to, had never understood why she was different. Her classmates made fun of her and she took refuge in her books to escape them, but this was even worse.

She had come to Hogwarts out of a hope and dream to belong, thinking that maybe these people were like her and might understand. But now that didn’t seem possible. Desperately, she spied a closed compartment near the end of the train, and Hermione bolted inside, slamming the door shut behind her and hoping that Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle hadn’t seen where she’d gone.

Breathing hard, she turned around, ready to collapse into a seat and wallow in a bout of self-pity. Instead of an empty car, however, she found two boys, one with flaming red hair and freckles and another with glasses and messy black hair. They were both staring at her.

“What are you doing here?” the red-haired one asked suspiciously.

Hermione gulped. “I’m sorry,” she said, quickly deciding that perhaps the Magical world wasn’t something that she wanted to be a part of. Hermione reached for the door. “I’ll leave. I was just looking for…”

“Are you okay?” the boy with glasses asked.

“Yes. I’m fine.” He looked slightly worried, but she was sure that was a mistaken impression. Wizards, Hermione was rapidly realizing, were all the same. Jerks.

Suddenly, there was shouting in the corridor, and she found herself glancing nervously at the door. Where would be safer: in a compartment with boys she knew nothing about, or in the hallway with boys that already hated her? Hermione didn’t want to go out there, but staying didn’t seem to be a great idea, either. I wish I’d never come here, Hermione thought furiously. I wish I’d never gotten that stupid letter. Stupid magic. Horrible people. She looked nervously at the two boys as the voices outside grew louder. And to think I was so excited about this!

“Are they looking for you?” the red-haired one asked.

A bang on a nearby door made Hermione jump, and she nodded uncertainly.

“What for?” the other asked.

“I don’t know.” She bit her lip. “They called me a Mudblood. They said I was unworthy.”

Her words seemed to anger them; both boys stood up suddenly, making Hermione wish there was somewhere to back up to without going out the door. But the red-haired boy smiled a little at her. “Here, you’d better sit down,” he said kindly. “Just stay behind us in case they come in—”

There wasn’t time to ask why. The compartment door flew open and Goyle howled in triumph. “I found her!”
Malfoy was there within moments, but Hermione was surprised to find herself thrown behind the other two boys. She stared at them in confusion, but both had their arms crossed and were standing between her and the doorway, blocking Malfoy and his two goons. The blonde-haired boy sneered.

“Trying to hide, Mudblood?” he drawled.

“Get lost, jerk,” the red-haired boy snarled immediately. “This is our compartment.”

“I don’t see your name written on it,” Malfoy replied arrogantly. “But then again, I don’t have to ask who you are, do I? Red hair, hand-me down robes—it’s easy to tell you’re a Weasley. I shouldn’t be surprised to see you defending a piece of Muggle trash.”

“The only trash in this compartment is you, Malfoy,” the black haired boy growled, drawing the other’s surprised gaze to him. “Get out. You’re not welcome here.”

The blond boy blinked. “I’d have thought better of you, Potter, with your blood,” he sneered. “But maybe that Mudblood mother of yours had more influence on you than one would hope.”

“Well, I guess you’re proof that money doesn’t equal brains, aren’t you, Draco?” Potter retorted, not rising to the bait even though his eyes flashed dangerously.

“You ought to pick better friends, Potter,” Malfoy snapped. “More worthy ones.”

“Like you, you mean? No thanks. I’d rather keep company with a flubberworm. It’d provide more intelligent conversation, and probably be more honest, too.”

“Eat dung, four eyes!”

“Four eyes?” Weasley interjected. “Is that the best you can come up with, Malfoy? I’ve met owls who can think of better insults.”

“As if your family could even afford a decent owl. I hear your old one practically dies making deliveries,” Malfoy snapped, making Weasley turn red in embarrassment. Hermione watched, fascinated, as the black-haired boy—Potter—spoke up immediately in his defense. *I wish I had friends like that,* she thought enviously.

“I wish I had friends like that,” she thought enviously.

“Get out, Malfoy.”

“And why should I, Potter? D’you think I’m afraid of you two or your Mudblood friend who’s hiding behind you?”

Before either boy—or Hermione, for that matter—could even think of replying, another voice came from the corridor. This one was deeper and older sounding than the others. “Is there a problem here?”

Malfoy and his companions spun, affording Hermione a view of another red-haired boy. This one was older than the boy in front of her, though, with a rather slim and stern seeming build.

Seeing who it was, though, Malfoy only shrugged. “Another Weasley, huh?” he asked arrogantly. “I guess they do move in packs.”

Crabbe and Goyle snickered, and the younger Weasley growled, but the older one only looked narrowly at the threesome before him.

“Yes, another Weasley,” he snapped. “This one, however, happens to be a Prefect. Move along,
you three, or I’ll speak to the Deputy Headmaster when we reach school.”

Hermione’s former pursers glared, but they sulked away, although Hermione thought she heard Malfoy mumbling something under his breath. It sounded like he was saying “You’ll get yours, eventually, Muggle-lover,” but she couldn’t be sure—and it didn’t seem to matter as the Prefect turned his stern glare on her and her newfound companions. However, he chose to concentrate on the red-haired boy, whom she assumed was his younger brother. The resemblance was amazing, to say the least, and the younger Weasley bristled under his brother’s glare.

“Before you even begin yelling at me, Perce, it wasn’t our fault,” Weasley said angrily. “They started it.”

“I don’t care who started it, Ron,” ‘Perce’ snapped. “You should know better than to get into fights. On the train, no less! We’re not even at school yet, and—”

“I can’t help that they decided to chase her in here, calling her all sorts of names!” Ron snapped back. “What am I supposed to do, sit here and say nothing?”

The older boy sighed. “Well, I suppose not,” he said stiffly. “Just try not to get into trouble any more, all right, Ron? I’d hate to have to owl Mum as soon as we get to school…” He frowned. “I knew those three would be trouble from the moment they got on the train.”

“You can say that again,” Ron mumbled, but his brother didn’t seem to hear him.

The older Weasley suddenly brightened. “Well, I have things to do. The prefects have compartments up front, and I’m sure that they’re all wondering where I got off to… I’ll see you at the Sorting, Ron. Good luck.”

“Right.” With a final nod, the prefect disappeared down the passageway, leaving the three of them in relative peace and quiet. After a moment, Ron shrugged and closed the compartment door again. “Well, that was bloody good timing!”

“No kidding,” the other boy—Potter, Hermione remembered his name being—said with relief. Then, however, he did exactly what she had been dreading, and turned to face her. “You can sit down, you know,” he said with a slight smile. “Neither of us is going to bite.”

“Oh.” Hermione remembered Ron’s earlier offer, but she’d never gotten to take a seat in the face of Malfoy’s appearance and the aftermath. Cautiously, she sat down in the car’s plush seat, wondering what would happen next. Both boys took seats facing her, but Ron smiled and stuck out a hand.

“I’m Ron Weasley, as I’m sure you noticed,” he said cheerily. “This is Harry Potter.”

There was something relaxing in his smile, and she took his hand with only a slight hesitation. “I’m Hermione Granger.”

“Nice to meet you,” both boys replied, and she shook Harry’s hand as well. They seemed so nice… And they looked so comfortable there, so confident, that she had to ask.

“So, I guess you two have been friends for awhile?”

Harry grinned. “Actually, we just met.”

“Yeah. I walked in about two minutes before you came flying through the door,” Ron replied.

“But you seemed to…” Now she was confused. Why had they both stuck up for her, and for each
other, then?

“Hate Malfoy?” Ron supplied. “Oh, that’s easy. Everyone knows that Malfoy is a git. He’s one of them, you know.”

“No, I don’t know,” Hermione frowned. She had no idea what they were talking about, and Ron looked at her in confusion.

“Your parents are Muggles, aren’t they?” Harry asked gently, but she looked at him blankly. “I mean, not wizards.”

“Yes,” she sighed. “I gather that’s why Malfoy and his friends didn’t like me.”

“Well, they’re stuck up jerks, anyway, so I wouldn’t worry about them,” Ron replied immediately, and Hermione smiled slightly. Maybe Hogwarts wouldn’t be so bad if most of the people weren’t like the boys who had chased her around the train a little while ago, threatening to hex her into a the worm they said she deserved to be. Thoughtfully, she frowned.

“I don’t understand what the big deal is, though,” Hermione said quietly, hoping she wouldn’t anger the other two. “I mean, I’m the same as you two…right?”

“Of course you are,” Harry replied immediately. “It’s just that some people from the old Wizarding families—especially most of the Fourteen—think that people with Muggle parents shouldn’t be allowed to become witches and wizards. They think that magic should be reserved for purebloods. Malfoy’s like that, but don’t worry. Most people aren’t.”

“Really?” Hermione wondered. She’d seen the kids snickering as Malfoy and his goons chased her around the train, and it seemed that a lot of people hated her simply because of something she couldn’t change. Sighing, she continued glumly, “I guess you’re both…purebloods, right?”

“Well, yeah, but that doesn’t matter to good people. Normal people,” Ron reassured her, and Harry smiled.

“I’m not. I’m a halfblood, no matter how old my Dad’s family is. Mum’s a witch, but her family’s all Muggle,” he replied. “Her sister, my aunt, is really awful about it, too—hates magic and wants nothing to do with my Mum or me because of it. Don’t worry. Everyone’s different, and none of the professors at Hogwarts are going to judge you for your blood. They’ll just look at who you choose to be.”

“I hope so.” Then Hermione swallowed. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Why did you stick up for me? You didn’t have to do anything.” And that was what she really didn’t understand.

“Of course we didn’t,” Ron agreed. “But my Dad always says that it’s what you don’t have to do that shows who you really are. Besides, you didn’t deserve that. No one deserves to be called a Mudblood.”

“But that’s what I am, isn’t it?” she found herself asking in a small voice.

“Your parents are Muggles, sure,” Harry replied with a slight frown, “but that doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with you. Calling someone a Mudblood is about as bad as you can get…but Malfoy and his type are like that.”
Hermione cocked her head curiously. “That’s the second time you’ve spoken like he’s on the other side of a war or something.”

“He is,” Ron grunted. Before Hermione could ask what he meant, however, Harry continued in the same kind voice.

“You’ve heard of Voldemort—sorry, I mean You-Know-Who—right?” he asked as Ron flinched.

“I read about him in The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts,” Hermione nodded, thinking fast. She’d been so excited about being a witch that she’d read absolutely everything she could get her hands on, and now that she thought about it—“Wait a minute, I read about someone named Potter in there, too,” she realized. “James Potter, I think. Are you related to him?”

Harry turned a little pink. “Yeah, that’s my Dad. He’s an Auror.”

“Dark wizard catcher, right?” Hermione asked, wanting to make sure she was correct. There was so much to learn!

“Yeah. Anyway, though, since you’ve heard about Vol—” Harry smiled sheepishly as Ron hissed anxiously. “You-Know-Who—you know about the war, right?”

“Yes, but I didn’t think that it would affect Hogwarts,” she replied. “I mean, it’s a school. You’re not saying that Malfoy and the other two are Death Eaters, are you?”

“Might as well be,” Ron snarled, and Harry nodded. “Their parents sure are.”

“Then why aren’t they in prison?” Hermione demanded. She’d read all about the horrible things that Death Eaters did, even though she had a feeling that the authors of all the books she’d read weren’t saying an awful lot. In her gut, she knew that things were a lot worse than people wanted to think that they were.

“Because there isn’t a Wizarding prison, anymore,” Harry replied grimly. “Voldemort took Azkaban five years ago. There’s no where to put Death Eaters, now, even if there were enough Aurors to catch them…and there aren’t.”
Houses and Hopes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The three of them stuck together as they got off the train and into little boats to cross the giant lake. Although his parents had told him a little about the journey, Ron couldn’t help but feel apprehensive—Fred and George had made it sound awful, and Percy had just arrogantly told him that he’d find out when it was his turn. Following the humongous gamekeeper with the other first years, Ron couldn’t help but notice that the number of students seemed so much smaller than he had expected it to be. It’s the war, he thought grimly. So many people are still afraid to let their kids go. He tried not to frown as he followed Harry into a small boat, with Hermione right on his heels. No one else entered their boat; there seemed to be more of the little crafts than there were students.

Without warning, the boats sped forward across the lake, and he heard Hermione gasp quietly behind him. It was dark outside, and a little unnerving, so Ron was glad that he wasn’t the only one who seemed anxious as the girl spoke nervously. Her voice sounded tiny against the backdrop of the huge lake.

“So, do you two know what houses you want to be in?”

Ron shrugged, trying not to seem worried. “My whole family’s been in Gryffindor,” he replied. “Both my parents, and all my brothers, too…I don’t know what they’ll say if I’m not. What about you, Hermione?”

“Gryffindor sounds the best to me, too,” she replied quickly, and Ron through he saw her smile in the dim light. “They say that Dumbledore himself was in Gryffindor, too—but I suppose Ravenclaw would be all right, too. And I can’t stand the thought of being a Slytherin! Urgh!”

“No kidding,” Ron agreed. “I bet Malfoy and those other gits will be there, though.”

“Serves them right,” Hermione declared, and Ron smiled.

“What about you, Harry?” he asked, turning to his other new friend, who seemed slightly distracted, staring across the water quietly. “Wasn’t your dad in Gryffindor? I think my brother Charlie mentioned him playing Quidditch.”

“Yeah. My Mum was too,” Harry replied, and Ron could tell that he was trying to pretend to be calm. Harry clearly felt the same way he did—with an entire family in Gryffindor, how would everyone react if he wound up somewhere else? But Harry seemed to be winning the war of nerves. “So was the headmaster.”

“How do you know that?” Hermione wondered. “That’s not in Hogwarts, A History. I would have noticed—I’ve read it three times since I got my letter.”

Unable to help himself, Ron snickered. He had been born in the Wizarding World, and the only copy of Hogwarts, A History that was in the Burrow was currently being used to hold one end of a bookshelf straight.

Harry colored.

“My dad told me,” he said, clearly hiding something.
“Why would he know?” Hermione pressed before Ron could say anything. “I mean, he’s famous and all, but—” She frowned, shaking her head, and Ron had to dodge flying hair. “I thought the Aurors were in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and doesn’t Hogwarts only have peripheral relationships with the Ministry, anyway0..? I can’t remember the rest, but I could look it up.”

“Nah, you don’t need to do that,” Ron managed to get in, exchanging a glance with Harry. Clearly, his new friend felt the same way he did. Hermione was nice, but she sure did talk a lot.

“Dad knows him, that’s all,” Harry told Hermione.

“Oooh. I guess he is important, isn’t he?” she replied immediately, and Harry colored. Poor guy, Ron thought, though he did half-agree with Hermione. His own father worked for the Ministry, but Arthur Weasley’s role was a minor one, whereas James Potter was probably the most famous living Auror.

“Don’t mention it, all right? Whatever house I’m in, I don’t want people thinking I’m the headmaster’s pet or something,” Harry said hurriedly.

Now Hermione’s eyes widened. “Oh! Of course not. We won’t, will we, Ron?”

“Definitely not.” At least that promise was easy to make.

He could understand Harry’s reluctance—Ron was used to people judging him from his hair color and knowing he was a Weasley. For Harry, it was doubly bad, too, because his father was a world-famous Auror. Everyone knew who James Potter was. Currently the head of the Auror Division, Harry’s dad was considered a shoo-in to be the next Head of Magical Law Enforcement, which was one of the highest-ranking jobs in the entire Ministry of Magic.

Harry smiled gratefully at them both, and Ron found himself grinning. There was nothing like conflict to build a friendship.

The boats had reached the other side of the lake without them noticing, and when Hermione gasped in surprise, Ron looked up at the underground harbor that they had arrived in. For a moment, all three children sat spellbound by this first view of Hogwarts’ interior, until they heard the gamekeeper’s voice calling their class.

“C’mon, follow me, firs’ years! This way!” With a sweep of one huge arm, the giant waved them all forward, and they followed him, keeping close together. Step by step, they moved further into the castle, and the gamekeeper pounded on a large door as a horrible thought occurred to Ron. For the first time in his life, he’d found friends of his own (ones that had nothing to do with his brothers or his family), and suddenly he wondered if they might yet be separated. What if we’re in different houses? On the verge of panic, he turned to Harry to share his concerns, but the great door opened Hagrid’s booming voice floating back to him first.

“The firs’ years, Professor Snape.”

“Thank you. I will take them from here.”

The oily voice made Ron’s head snap up. In the doorway stood a tall man with a hooknose and pale features. He wore stylish black robes that matched his greasy black hair and dark eyes. The way those eyes swept over the crowd of new students sent a chill running down Ron’s spine, and somehow he got the feeling that this might not be the best professor to cross. He turned to Harry, hissing in his friend’s ear. “Snape! My father says he’s a Death Eater.”
“Shh!” Hermione shushed him, elbowing Ron from the other side. “He’s talking.”

And indeed Professor Snape was speaking, after having opened the door wide and gestured for them all to step forward. “Welcome to Hogwarts,” he said smoothly. “My name is Professor Snape, and I am the Deputy Headmaster of this school. In a few moments, you will enter the Great Hall to be sorted into your houses. These houses are Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor. You will remain in the same house for all of your time here; your sorting will determine your friends and your future. I hope, for your sakes, that you are chosen wisely.”

His black eyes swept over them once more, and Ron couldn’t help but feel very cold. For a moment, it seemed that Professor Snape’s eyes rested on Harry for a second longer than they did everyone else, but Ron had no idea why. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Harry just stared back calmly, seemingly not bothered by the Professor’s unnerving gaze. Finally, though, Professor Snape spoke coolly.

“Follow me.”

Butterflies rose in Harry’s stomach as they entered the Great Hall. A sea of faces stared at his class as they made their way forward; he could see the colored banners hanging over the four tables, representing each of the four houses. Overhead, the ceiling glittered in a brilliant representation of the night sky, a fact that should have given him confidence, but did not. This is it, he thought to himself. No matter how many times he’d asked his parents, neither of them would tell him how the Sorting was done—all they would say was that he’d know when he got to Hogwarts. Beside him, he could see that Ron and Hermione looked every bit as worried as he, and the red haired boy’s blank look matched his own. It was clear that Ron didn’t know what was going on, either, despite all the older siblings he had at the school.

Professor Snape led them forward, finally halting before the head table. Harry felt the eyes resting on him from that table, but he resisted the urge to look back. Instead, he watched the Deputy Headmaster stride away, returning quickly with a four-legged stool, upon which sat a dirty old hat. Confused, he stared at the ragged wizard’s hat, wondering what its purpose could possibly be—and then the hat burst into song.

“Oh, you may not think I’m pretty,
But don’t judge on what you see,
I’ll eat myself if you can find
A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,
Your top hats sleek and tall,
For I’m the Hogwarts Sorting Hat
And I can cap them all.
There’s nothing hidden in your head
The Sorting Hat can’t see,
So try me on and I will tell you
Where you ought to be.
You might belong in Gryffindor,
Where dwell the brave of heart,
Their daring, nerve, and chivalry
Set Gryffindors apart.
You might belong in Hufflepuff,
Where they are just and true
And unafraid of toil;
Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,
If you’re a ready mind,
Where those of wit and learning,
Will always find their kind;
Or perhaps in Slytherin
You’ll make your real friends,
Those cunning folk use any means
To achieve their ends.
So put me on! Don’t be afraid!
And don’t get in a flap!
You’re in safe hands (though I have none)
For I’m a Thinking Cap!”

Beside him, Harry heard Ron snarl over the crowd’s applause. “I’m going to kill Fred and George! They kept saying that we’d have to wrestle a troll, and all we’ve got to do is try on a hat.”

Harry grinned, trying to cover up his own nervousness. Even though he was fairly sure of what house he’d be in (he couldn’t imagine why the hat would put him anywhere else, anyway), he wasn’t exactly keen on putting that hat atop his head in front of the entire school. Couldn’t they do this in private? But Snape was speaking.
“When I call your name, step forward, sit on the stool, and place the hat on your head,” he said coldly. He glanced briefly at the first years before reading off the first name.

“Abbot, Hannah.”

The hat had barely touched her head before it shouted: “HUFFLEPUFF!”

Harry watched with interest as the girl leapt of the stool and ran to join her clapping housemates. Oh, how he wished he was at the beginning of the alphabet, instead of way down at the end—

“Bones, Susan.”

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Boot, Terry.”

“RAVENCLAW!”

And so the sorting went on, with some students being sorted in seconds, and others taking much, much longer. However, as Professor Snape consulted the roll another time, Harry heard a sharp intake of breath on his right. The Deputy Headmaster’s unsettling eyes had come to rest on one of his companions, and Snape spoke with, if possible, even more of an icy tone. “Granger, Hermione.”

Her wild eyes looked at Harry and Ron, and without knowing why, Harry reached out to squeeze his newest friend’s elbow. “It'll be okay,” he said quietly. “Good luck.”

“Yeah, good luck,” Ron echoed.

There was a final, nervous smile, and Hermione was gone. Soon, she was on the stool, pulling the hat quickly onto her head. It had barely touched her hair when a huge smile split the hat’s “face” and it shouted.

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Grinning, Hermione ran to the table where Harry noticed Percy, Ron’s prefect brother, sitting, and he sighed in relief. He was glad that the hat hadn’t wanted to put her in Slytherin. That would have been so unfair to her...not like everything that had happened on the train wasn’t unfair to Hermione. Harry just didn’t understand why some people were so arrogant that they believed blood was everything...Distantly, he noticed when Malfoy ended up (quite predictably, he thought) in Slytherin, but then Snape was saying,

“Potter, Harry.”

Harry bounded forward. It wasn’t that he was as confident as the stuck-up Malfoy; he just wanted to get it over with. *I hope Dad’s right,* he thought to himself. *I hope I’m not such a screw-up that I end up in Slytherin or something.* A cold feeling wormed its way down his spine. *What if I get put in Slytherin?* he thought suddenly. *What would Dad say? Almost all the Death Eaters were Slytherins...* Before he could talk himself out of it, Harry sat down and pulled the Sorting Hat onto his head. He took a deep breath, and then heard a very quiet voice speaking in his ear.

“Well, now...I know you,” the hat chuckled. “Afraid of being in Slytherin, are you? Someone with your power would do well there...but not someone with your heart. Indeed, I haven’t seen someone with your kind of heart in a long, long, time...”

Harry tried to let out the breath he knew he was holding.
“…Not even your father,” the Sorting Hat continued. “You will indeed have an interesting future, Harry Potter, although it is not as dark as it might have been, had things turned out just a little differently… You’re sure to do well in GRYFFINDOR!”

He could have whooped with delight, but instead ran to his new house’s table, sitting next to a grinning Hermione. “We’re in the same house!” she gasped. “I can’t believe it!”

“Me neither,” he said, letting his relief out in a huge breathless grin. But Minutes later, as one Ronald Weasley joined them at the Gryffindor table, completing their trio.

Soon, the feast had begun, and that, at least, proved to be everything that his parents had promised it would be. Harry dove into the food eagerly; despite the sweets he’d eaten on the train (which seemed to have been a lifetime in the past), he was starving. Even at home, he’d never seen anything quite like this—there were all kinds of foods, even some that he wasn’t sure the name of. The conversation, too, was highly entertaining, from meeting the Gryffindor ghost, Sir Nicholas, to getting to know his housemates. One of them, Neville Longbottom, he remembered meeting several times before. *His parents are both Aurors*, Harry remembered suddenly. *He was in hiding as a kid, too.*

“So, what do you think?” Ron was asking him, which forced Harry out of his reverie.

He blinked. “Sorry. I was thinking. What do I think about what?”

Ron laughed. “Obviously. I was asking—”

Suddenly, the deserts disappeared, and the entire hall fell silent as the Headmaster rose. Like the others, Harry turned to listen as the wizard began to speak.

“Wellcome to Hogwarts,” Professor Remus Lupin said. “Before you head off to your dorms, there are a few start of term notices that I need to announce.

“First of all, all first years, and some mischievous returning students—” here, he looked rather pointedly in the direction of Ron’s twin brothers “—should be aware that the Forbidden Forest is off limits to all students, hence the choice of name.” Lupin smiled slightly before continuing.

“Second, Mr. Filch, the caretaker, would like me to remind you that using magic in the corridors between classes is prohibited. Also, for all those who are interested, the list of forbidden objects has been extended to include Belch Powder and fake wands. The entire list now includes three hundred and ninety nine items, which Mr. Filch will gladly display to any and all interested parties.”

Hearing those words, Harry had to bite back a snicker; if half the stories his dad had told him about his school years were true, half the items on that list were on it with the help from Hogwarts’ current Headmaster…but Lupin was still speaking.

“And of course, I remind all students to stay clear of my office on nights of the full moon.”

A murmur ran through the first years, but it wasn’t as loud as it might have been. It was common knowledge, of course, that Professor Lupin (or Remus, as Harry had grown up calling him) was a werewolf. Once, that might have caused quite a stir, but Lupin had been teaching at Hogwarts for the past eight years, and hardly anyone thought about that, anymore. He’d been Headmaster for the past four years, too, and everyone knew what a good man he was—and that the creation of the Wolfsbane Potion kept him from harming anyone. Harry, of course, was slightly prejudiced in favor of one of his dad’s best friends, but the entire magical community found it hard to dislike Remus Lupin.
“That being said,” the headmaster continued, “If all prefects will lead their first years to the dormitories, it is time for bed.”

Later that night, when Harry dropped into the bed next to Ron, he couldn’t help but think it was going to indeed be an interesting year. *Interesting, indeed.*

Chapter End Notes

The sorting hat song was quite clearly taken from PS/SS, but since it is the same year, I figured the hat might be consistent.
The Order of the Phoenix

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The students were safely in bed, and any sane professor had already quickly followed their example. It was getting on midnight, now, and all had to be up early to distribute schedules or to prepare for class. A few, however, remained awake, sitting around a table in the now warded staff room. A complex set of spells protected them; if anyone had looked inside, they would simply have seen an empty and dimly lit room, not the figures of seven figures seated at the ancient oak table.

At its head was one who anyone would recognize; in fact, he seemed completely at home at Hogwarts. Many would have thought that he belonged there, and in his heart, the old man would have agreed. But other duties had called to him years before, pulling him away from the school that he loved so much. But the others at the table would have willingly agreed that the castle was somehow different without him; with him, Hogwarts seemed stronger and more complete. Thus, there was more than one reason why the man in midnight blue robes sat at the head of the table. His work might have been elsewhere, but Albus Dumbledore would always call Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry home.

To his left was Remus Lupin, whom some would have placed at the table’s head; however, Remus, headmaster or not, would never have dreamed of usurping that position. He was a powerful wizard in his own right, of course, fiercely intelligent and capable of putting almost anyone at their ease, but Remus would always bow to Dumbledore’s judgment. They all would, of course, but for him it was different. He owed Dumbledore so much: first, when the newly appointed headmaster had allowed a child werewolf to attend Hogwarts, and later, when that same headmaster had invited him to teach at the school. When Dumbledore had moved on, it was Remus he’d nominated to take his place, werewolf or not—and Remus was eternally grateful for that. Over his years at Hogwarts, teaching two different subjects and dabbling in a third, he had discovered a genuine love for teaching. That love, however, transferred into a deep and resonating hatred for anyone who would ever think of harming his students.

Next to Lupin was James Potter, the world-famous Auror—and one of Remus’ best friends. The fact that James was now the head of the Auror Division didn’t let anything stand in between them any more than Remus’ condition ever had; although both had separate lives now, and didn’t get to see one another nearly as often as they wanted, they were every bit as close as they had been during their Hogwarts days. Tragedy, they had found, could do that. Smiling slightly, Remus glanced at his friend. James was staring blankly at the table, drumming his fingers lightly against the wood. Undoubtedly, James was mentally reviewing a list of suspected Death Eaters, or trying to figure out who Voldemort’s next target would be—James looked far older than he had any right to be, now; years of losing friends and fighting the worst Voldemort had to offer had robbed him of his carefree and Quidditch-obsessing youth. Now he was an Auror, serious and deadly, yet still immensely capable of love.

The object of his love sat to James’ left; Lily Evans Potter, her name was, and her innocent beauty belied the powerful magic she was capable of. Although not an Auror like her husband (caring and hiding Harry for all those years had made that all but impossible), Lily was no less integral to the fight against Voldemort because of that. Her strengths laid in charms, and while she was officially Dumbledore’s “assistant,” her real duties were rooted in the discovery of Death Eater traps and spies. Lily had an uncanny ability to “see” through Polyjuice Potion; somehow, she just knew when someone wasn’t right. Wards that she created were practically unbreakable, but she was
always able to find the kink in someone else’s armor and destroy their spells through quiet and perfect infiltration. Most people took Lily for nothing more than a pretty face, the trophy wife of the famous James Potter. Remus, however, knew better, as should have anyone who attended Hogwarts during their seventh year. That year, the Head Boy and Girl had battled incessantly for the top grades, both fiercely competitive and madly in love. In the end, though, they’d married without counting points and very nearly lived happily ever after.

The foot of the table was empty, for both convenience and symbolism. Years ago, they’d lost one of their own, one who would have now sat with them in the Inner Circle of the Order of the Phoenix. But that was no more, and Remus had promised himself that he’d not think of that any longer. It hurt too much.

Across from Lily was the steely-eyed Arabella Figg. Her hair and eyes were both the color of gray flint, and her personality was just as hard. Years of working against Voldemort had made her the Head of Magical Law Enforcement; those same years had not made her nice. While Remus had nothing but respect for the older woman, he knew that he’d never love her in the way James Potter, her protégée, did. She’d been James’ Mentor in the Aurors, he knew, so Arabella held a special place in his friend’s heart and always would, despite her stern attitude and her inability to forgive errors. On a professional level, she was as demanding as they came, which Remus supposed was a strength in her field as she struggled to keep the light side ahead in their deadly game of chess. Wizard’s chess was more brutal than its Muggle counterpart, and this game was no different—except for the fact that the eventual loser wouldn’t be doing any walking away when it was over.

To Arabella’s left was Mundungus Fletcher, another former Auror (albeit one who had started his career in on a far less savory side of the law). Dung, however, was on an indefinite leave of absence from the DMLE. Two years before, he’d been captured by Voldemort himself, and had spent two hellish weeks being tortured for information before chance, combined with information from one of their spies, had allowed James and Arabella to whisk him out from under Lucius Malfoy’s aristocratic nose. Since his recovery, he’d been teaching Transfiguration at Hogwarts, and while Remus could not have asked for a better teacher, there were times when he wished that he could convince Dung to take the Dark Arts job. Unfortunately, the onetime Auror was still suffering from the effects of his experience, and wanted absolutely nothing to do with the Dark Arts. That didn’t make him any less of an integral member of the Order of the Phoenix, of course, and nor did it lessen the regard he had for the three people who had saved his life—especially to the spy who had risked everything to do it.

That spy sat on his left; the perpetual Severus Snape, the longest lasting spy that the Order had ever had. For over eleven years, Snape had been playing the double-agent role, somehow skirting the line between light and dark well enough to stay alive. Remus had never asked his Deputy Headmaster why he had turned away from the Dark Lord; he respected Snape far too much to pressure him. Years of working together had cooled their hatred; it wouldn’t even be a stretch to call them friends, now. Throughout the last decade, even James and Severus had come to an informal truce—in private, at least; in public, it was still known that the two loathed one another. Time and maturity (plus some incessant wheedling from Remus and Lily) had cured even that old grudge, and while they’d never love each other, Remus knew that James and Severus at least shared mutual respect. They were both strong and dedicated men, doing all they could to arrest the fall of Darkness, and that was enough.

For anyone at that table, it had to be. His gaze having traveled fill circle, Remus looked again at Dumbledore, and waited for the Minister of Magic to speak. It did not take long.

“Thank you all for being here,” Dumbledore said quietly. He seemed tired, Remus noticed; although he’d always been old, the great wizard had seemed ageless. Now, though, as the very
center and soul of the fight against Voldemort, Dumbledore seemed to be strained. “I know that two of you have classes to teach in the morning, so I’ll try to make this short.”

Their group was the few, the elite, the ones who knew it all. Betrayal from amongst their ranks would have destroyed the Order, they all knew, which was why there were only seven people in that room. There were others they trusted, and loved, even; and many more witches and wizards were members of the Order of the Phoenix, but the seven of them were at the center. They’d all been there for years—Mundungus Fletcher was the newest of their number, replacing his predecessor in the Transfiguration classroom, Minerva McGonagall, who had died long before he’d come to Hogwarts. There once had been eight in the Inner Circle, and they had once been the most mismatched and unexpected group that Albus Dumbledore could have created. But he’d shown remarkable foresight when choosing his companions, and it had never failed him. Those who that had died had carried their secrets to the grave. So would any others if the choice came upon them.

“Fortunately, this meeting is simply routine,” Dumbledore continued with a slightly bitter smile. “There have been no new disasters since Voldemort’s attack on the German Ministry of Magic last week. I’ve been in touch with the survivors, and they have agreed that working together is for the best. I’ve sent Peter Pettigrew over to speak with their acting Minister.”

Heads nodded around the table, and Remus had to suppress a smile. For the little kid who had claimed he’d get nowhere, Peter was sure moving up in the world. At present, he was the Deputy Head of International Magical Cooperation, and also a trusted member of the Order of the Phoenix. Remus was sure that he’d do a great job of convincing the Germans that Voldemort was everyone’s problem, and not just Britain’s—if the Dark Lord hadn’t already done that for himself.

“Also, Lily’s research has come up with some promising results that I think you’ll all be interested in knowing about. Lily?”

The ginger haired beauty smiled slightly. “Well, it took me long enough to nail it down, but I think I’ve finally created the anti-Polyjuice Charm,” she replied. Her words grabbed Remus’ attention immediately; while Lily’s unprecedented ability could be extremely useful, the fact that she hadn’t been able to pass it on had been a pain. Now, though… Lily continued. “Of course, I’ll need some Polyjuice Potion to be sure, but I’m pretty sure that it will work.”

“I will provide the potion,” Severus said immediately.

“And what about the test dummy?” Lily responded sweetly.

“Ask your husband,” came the immediate response. Next to Lily, James only snorted in amusement.

Dumbledore smiled at the usual banter. “Well, now with that settled, onto the next order of business. Severus?”

“Rookwood.”

Eyebrows, including Remus’, shot up at the one word response. Rockwood? the headmaster thought incredulously. Impossible! The worst part about the dark times was guessing who the enemy really was…because Voldemort had as many spies as they did, and like the order, he kept their identities secret from his circle of Death Eaters, even the high ranking ones such as Severus Snape. Only the people in that room, for example, knew Snape’s status as a spy, and even Dung, as trusted as he was, had only been let in on that secret a few years before. There was simply too much to risk.
“Rookwood?” Arabella repeated harshly. “Explain yourself.”

Snape shrugged. “Circumstantial evidence, but convincing,” he replied. “I’m almost certain that he’s the one who sold Bode and Croaker out. There is simply no one else who isn’t in this room who knew.”

“Hmm,” the old woman groused, but she did not argue. She did, however, frown, saying, “I suppose now we will have to find evidence to support that.”

“If you’d rather I just let the spies continue on and spare you the effort of convicting them, Arabella, I will gladly desist,” Snape replied archly.

Her gray eyes flashed dangerously, but Dumbledore cut her off. “Severus, Arabella—now is not the time.”

“Of course,” the old woman grunted.

“My apologies,” Snape nodded. “But it is Rookwood.”

“Speaking of Death Eater spies, Remus, how is Professor Quirrell doing?” Dumbledore asked suddenly, and Remus shrugged as the Minister turned to face him.

“As well as can be expected,” he replied. “Still stuttering and bordering on incompetent—he’s fine for the first few years’ worth of classes, but beyond the forth year, he’s almost hopeless. I can’t imagine that Voldemort finds him very effective, either.”

“He doesn’t.” Snape rolled his eyes. “But he enjoys thinking that he’s slipped not one, but two, spies under your nose.”

Remus chuckled. “Well, I prefer for him to think me stupid, anyway. But to answer your question, Albus, it’s still the same. Fortunately, Severus has authority over Quirrell, so together we’ve been able to keep him from anything important.”

Important things, for example, like that meeting. Dumbledore might have been the Minister of Magic, but he still found it incredibly useful to run the Order of the Phoenix as a separate organization. When the government had founndered the first time, it had been the Order’s existence that had allowed Dumbledore to dig the Ministry out of the ashes, and Remus whole-heartedly agreed that the Order’s survival was essential in the fight against Voldemort. At the very least, the Order didn’t involve bureaucratic chains-of-command or paper chasing, both of which tended to kill initiative and slow crucial plans down.

“Good.” The Minster turned to James. “How goes the Azkaban Project?”

“Slow,” James admitted. “We’ve managed to find out almost nothing—Voldemort doesn’t even encourage his senior Death Eaters to visit the prisoners, so that means our spies have next to no chance of getting in there. He keeps the prison like it’s his private playground…or his own little pocket of hell.”

As James spoke, Remus felt a shiver run down his spine. There were so many good people locked in Azkaban, so many onetime friends and colleagues—ever since Voldemort had taken the prison five years before, the Order and the Ministry had been trying to get it back. But the Dark Lord had taken the island as his throne world, and the concentrated strength of the Dementors and Death Eaters would keep even the strongest of assaults aside. Over the past three years, Voldemort had begun keeping prisoners of war there, as well, which only made the Order more eager to wrestle the island out of dark hands, but there had been little, if any, progress made.
“What I’d really like,” James continued thoughtfully, “is to get someone in there. I know that our spies can’t do it, so we might have to infiltrate someone in…”

“You mean as a prisoner,” Fletcher cut in darkly.

“I think so, yes,” James replied seriously, and then held up a hand before the Transfiguration professor could interject again. “I know what you’re thinking, Dung, and I agree. It’s a hell of a risk for anyone to take, and I wouldn’t let anyone who’s not a volunteer do it—but it’s an idea. That’s all it is right now, but we’ve got to do something. At last count, we knew of twenty-three prisoners who all deserve much better than living in Voldemort’s private version of hell.”

“The worst part about it, James, is that’s a viable idea,” Arabella responded after a moment when they all contemplated the risks in silence. “It’s something we’ll have to look into, at any rate.”

“Perhaps,” Dumbledore conceded, although he looked very unhappy to Remus. “Dung, what do you think?”

Fletcher swallowed. “I think it’s a damn reckless idea. And whoever did it would be in for a world of hell…I don’t think it’s possible, Albus.” The thief-turned-Auror took a deep breath.

“And all the same, I think we’re going to have to try.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long delay between uploads! I lost my master file for a bit there and had to do a search of several computers to find it. Chapters should come much more frequently now that I have.
It was nearly three in the morning before Remus headed for his own quarters, listening to his footsteps ring in the ancient halls as he walked. Even in moments like this, when he was so tired that his eyelids threatened to stick shut, he loved Hogwarts. To him, it had become a symbol of the very thing they were fighting for—freedom, happiness, and of course, friendship. Almost everything that mattered in his life had its roots at the school; first, the best friends he’d ever been privileged enough to have, and now, the wonderful students whom Albus Dumbledore had bequeathed to him. The memories of past and present could mix together at times, and there were moments where he felt he could close his eyes and be eighteen again…

“You know,” Peter said, “We really should be asleep. Tomorrow is only slightly important.”

Sirius laughed. “It’s only graduation, Wormtail. And who wants to stay awake for James’ speech, anyway?”

“Hey!” The comment earned him an immediate elbow in the ribs, and they all laughed. Remus, however, turned to his friend, the Head Boy and Quidditch captain.

“Speaking of speeches, where’s our Head Girl?” he asked. The sight of James without Lily was a rare one.

“She’s asleep,” James replied with a slight (yet completely besotted) smile. Even though they were used to their friend’s obsession with his fiancée, no one could resist the urge to get a final barb in. Anyone of them would have done it; they always did. Wormtail, however, got his mouth open the fastest.

“Awh… Prongsie didn’t want to wake his sleeping angel, did he?” Peter snickered.

James shot him a look that tried to be cross, but failed miserably. He shrugged. “No… I just wanted tonight to be us—the Marauders. Together, at Hogwarts, just like we started. One last time.”

“Tomorrow changes everything,” Sirius agreed quietly, more solemn than he usually was. Of course, Remus knew his friend well enough to know that Sirius could be serious (the pun from which had gotten old when they were still on the Hogwarts Express for the first time and had only known each other for an hour or two). It was just a rare occurrence. Tonight, though, deep in the passageway behind the mirror on the fourth floor, it just seemed right.

A sudden emotion settled over their small group as all four boys thought of Sirius’ words. Graduation was tomorrow, and Sirius was right. Graduation would change everything. Their friendship would last, of course, but it would be more like a never-ending summer holiday—they’d all go home to their families (except in Sirius’ case), or perhaps they’d move away, but they’d never be together in the same way again. Never again would the four of them share a room and live every waking moment together. Never again would they share every meal, getting in food fights just to see how Professor McGonagall would react. Never again would they have to use James’ invisibility cloak to sneak out at night, because they’d be adults…and they wouldn’t be at Hogwarts anymore. They’d be free.
That freedom, however, seemed slightly frightening at the moment.

“We know, no matter where we are, there is one thing we will always be,” James continued. “We will always be friends.”

“Brothers,” Peter supplied immediately.

“No matter what,” Remus agreed.

“No matter what,” James repeated. “We’ll always be here for each other.”

“Even at three in the morning,” Sirius grinned. He always hated to be woken up, even for mischief making—unless, of course, he was the lucky bastard who got to wake the others up, then he was positively gleeful about it. James, however, was continuing, although he seemed a little uneasy.

“I know that what we are can’t really be put into words…but I thought I’d try. So please don’t laugh at me.” He smiled nervously. “I just wanted a way to try and let you all know what these years have meant to me...so I wrote something.”

They all stared at him. For a moment, it seemed certain that someone would pipe up with the inevitable wisecrack (“James, I didn’t even know you were literate!” popped immediately to mind), but there was only silence. Somehow, in this moment, their customary banter and joking didn’t seem to fit. This was a moment of friendship, of love, even—and to cheapen it with a joke wouldn’t have been worthy of all they had gone through over the years. Never before had the four boys tried to put their relationship into words, but this was the last moment—tomorrow would change everything.

“Let’s hear it, James,” Remus said gently.

James shrugged again. “I don’t really want to read it out loud,” he admitted with a sheepish smiled. He held a piece of paper out for Remus to take. His movements were quick, jerky, as if he was afraid he’d lose the guts to carry them out. “Here. Just read it.”

With a smile, Remus did, and as his mind registered the words written on the page in James’ unruly scrawl, he felt a tingle run down his spine. For a moment, the world went absolutely still. Their friendship had always been beyond definition, until now. James had somehow managed to put the essence of what they were into words, and had somehow made those beautiful words stick to the paper. Perhaps another wouldn’t have understood the meaning behind the short poem, but Remus did. He could feel the pure emotion running between the lines.

He read it twice, and then passed it to Peter with a deep breath. Remus watched as Peter’s face changed from slightly skeptical to understanding, and watched his blonde friend’s eyes sweep over the page again, and again. Slowly, a smile dawned on Peter’s face, and he passed the paper to Sirius, who took it with an almost unsettlingly intense look in his blue eyes. Sirius was a faster reader than Peter, and his eyes flew over the page. If Remus hadn’t known him so well, he would have suspected that Sirius already knew what lay on the paper—but the nervous look on James’ face killed that notion before it was even born. No, this was simply a product of James’ hard work, and Remus knew that his friend had poured his heart into the words. It was perfect.

“It’s perfect,” Sirius whispered as he finished, unconsciously echoing Remus’ thoughts.

“It’s us,” Peter agreed.

Remus nodded. “You did great, James.”
“You really like it?” James asked quietly. It had been years since Remus had seen him so nervous (he had in fact only seen it once, back in their fifth year, when Lily Evans had actually said yes to a date with James, and then James had to face actually going on it instead of just badgering her), and it might have been funny if the moment hadn’t meant so much to all of them. But for once in his life, words failed the normally eloquent Remus Lupin as he tried to describe what he felt.

“It’s perfect, James,” Sirius replied for him, handing the paper back to their friend. His smile was soft. “Really, it is. I’ve never been able to figure out how to describe what we are—‘friends’ just isn’t a strong enough word. We’re brothers, really, because like you said, it’s not blood that matters. But I’m not poetic enough, or good enough with words to work out how to say that. You did, and I can’t thank you enough for it.”

James stared; so did Remus and Peter, for that matter. They were so used to Sirius laughing and goofing off that even they sometimes forgot that he could be the most loyal of friends—of brothers. Slowly, James smiled.

“Speaking of thanks,” Peter said quietly, “I don’t think I’ve ever thanked you three enough for helping me all these years…I don’t want to imagine where I’d be if I’d been in any other House. You showed me that I can be more than I ever even dreamed of being.”

There was another silence; this wasn’t really an uncomfortable one, but it was slightly awkward all the same. No matter how close the four of them were, they weren’t accustomed to throwing caution to the wind and letting emotions run free. They were more used to the subtleties of their communication, used to knowing what the others felt without having to say it. They were teenaged boys, too “tough” to let the emotions run wild—but at the moment, that did not seem to matter. What mattered was the moment, this last one, and they were together. Even then, this openness did feel strange, no matter how right it was. James, however, was always great at solving problems. He grinned lightly. “That’s what friends are for, Wormtail.”

Remus, however, swallowed. There was something else that had never quite been left unsaid, but all the same, he had to share it. Feeling his heart pound in his chest, he decided that he’d better speak before he lost the courage to. “And speaking of friends…” he said softly, trying to keep his voice from shaking. “I wanted to thank you, too. Thanks for being my friends. Most people wouldn’t, you know.”

He didn’t have to say why.

“But that’s what we are, Moony,” Sirius said softly. He held a hand out to Remus, who took it. “Friends.”

“Brothers.” James laid his hand on top of theirs.

Peter’s hand joined the other three. “Faithful until the end.”

“Until the end,” they chorused.

Again, there was silence, and Remus felt tears almost prick in his eyes. This was the end of something magical—and while, true, it was another beginning, as well, tomorrow would change everything. The carefree days of childhood and Hogwarts were over. They were moving on in the world, and the roads they took would indeed lead them separate ways. There was no way to tell what the future would bring, and after this moment, there would be no guarantees. But no matter what happened, they would always be friends, brothers, until the end.

Remus felt a lump form in his throat as they sat in comfortable stillness, each thinking of the past.
Sometimes, it felt like he’d known the others forever, but there were moments he could remember like yesterday—the fateful meetings on the Hogwarts Express or the moment when Sirius, James, and Peter had confronted him with the fact that they knew he was a werewolf…and that they didn’t care. He remembered the first night, fifth year, when his friends had become Animagi for him, the wonderful feeling of being understood, and of having friends who knew him for what he truly was. He could remember the successful pranks and the disasters like when Filch had confiscated the Marauder’s Map…and he knew that no matter where his future roads led, he would always remember this moment, sitting silently in the fourth floor secret passageway, grasping hands with the friends he would never forget.

He never knew how long was before they rose and silently turned to leave through mutual agreement. Just as Peter reached to open the passageway, though, Sirius held a hand out to stop them.

“I have an idea,” he said impulsively, his blue eyes shining. Before anyone could react, he reached out and took the paper from James’ hand, raising his wand. Moments later, James’ poem was engraved into the wall for all eternity. Sirius turned back to the friends and returned the paper. He smiled solemnly.

“In case we ever forget.”

Remus stopped cold. His heart contracted. He hadn’t forgotten, but he wanted to remember… Without even making a conscious decision, the headmaster backtracked and strode quickly up a flight of stairs that was polite enough to stop moving to give him passage. There were advantages to being the headmaster, after all—the castle tended to be more accommodating for its head. A short and brisk walk brought him to the mirror on the fourth floor, erasing all the fatigue he’d felt earlier. Every step brought back another memory, but finally he turned down a familiar corridor and reached his destination. He stood before the mirror for a moment, remembering all the times when he, James, Peter, and Sirius dove into this passage to avoid Filch or his bothersome cat, or to sneak into Hogsmeade when they should have been doing homework. Once, he thought to himself, we had everything.

Raising his wand, the headmaster spoke the password. “Abscondum.”

The mirror swung aside, and Remus stepped into the passageway. It had been years since he’d been down here—but from the look of the tunnel, someone else had. Probably, he knew, the Weasley twins—he wouldn’t put anything past them; they were always getting into trouble—but he wasn’t there as their headmaster. Pranks and rule breaking did not matter at the moment. He was there, for tonight only, as Moony. Just once more.

He ignored the soft click of the mirror sliding shut behind him, instead turning to face the far right hand wall. For a moment, his heart caught in his chest and he feared that it might be gone, but as Remus squinted in the darkness, he could make out something. Raising his wand and mumbling a spell for light, he moved closer, until he stood right in front of James’ poem. He hadn’t been there in so long, but now the emotions rolled back on him. Swallowing hard, he read the words:

True friendships never really die
And family isn’t defined by blood
It’s made strong by bonds that won’t break
Tempered and tested by trials and pain
What we are is brothers, and as such we remain

Loyal to one another until the end

And no matter what happens between this moment and then

I shall be always thankful to have had such friends.

James had repeated those words at Sirius’ funeral, and later, he would at every anniversary of Sirius’ disappearance, when the three remaining Marauders came together, no matter where their futures had taken them. When James had composed the poem, Remus knew that he’d never dreamed one of their number might be so cruelly taken from them—but he had. Sirius had. Remus tried to take a deep breath, but it rattled oddly in his chest. Remembering was still torture. The loss and pain could still burn. He bit his lip briefly in regret, and then found a slight smile forming. Beneath James’ work was Sirius’ only addition.

MOONY WORMTAIL PADFOOT PRONGS

Blinking back sudden tears, Remus knelt next to the inscription. Without thinking, he switched his wand to his left hand, and reached up with trembling fingers to touch the third name. The werewolf took a deep breath.

“I won’t forget, Padfoot,” he whispered. “None of us will.”

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters to make up for the long wait. :)
The weeks flew by. In between all the classes, his new friends, and trying to write his parents every day, Harry hardly had time to come up for air. The incident on the train had bound him, Hermione, and Ron together, and already the professors were calling them inseparable. Snape, of course, hated all three of them, and especially Harry, who knew that his father and the Potions Master would rather spit on one another than speak civilly. There were times when he wondered if Ron was indeed right; the slimy head of Slytherin seemed to be everything that a Death Eater would want to be. The other professors, however, were nice enough, even if their own head of House, Professor Fletcher, was a bit distant. Everyone at Hogwarts knew Professor Fletcher’s past, of course, so no one dared comment—even the older Slytherins, like Marcus Flint, ringleader of the “Junior Death Eater Squad” as Ron had taken to calling them, treated him with respect. Perhaps that had something to do with the trio of scars that marked the right side of Fletcher’s face, or maybe it was just his clear abilities and powers, but Harry didn’t really mind the Transfiguration professor’s aloofness. It made sneaking around the castle much easier.

The stories his parents had told him definitely were only the icing on the cake. Although he knew that one of his father’s best friends held the Hogwarts record for most detentions in one term (with his dad a close second, losing only by two), Harry wasn’t determined to eclipse that mark. Rather, he was hoping to have more fun while getting in less trouble. He supposed it didn’t hurt that one of his dad’s other best friends was the headmaster (fortunately, though, none of the other students had caught on to that, because while Harry was sure that Remus would never show favoritism, he knew that jerks like Malfoy would never see things that way), but he was determined to make it on his own, regardless.

The best part by far, though, was the fact that he’d been the only first year allowed to play on his house Quidditch team, and that was due to nothing but his own talents. Harry had, of course, been playing Quidditch since he could walk, but unlike his dad, Harry wasn’t a Chaser. No, he took great pride in being a Seeker, and that was a talent that was all his own. It was different playing Quidditch at Hogwarts, but he loved it just as much…even though it wasn’t the same as playing with his dad, mom, Remus, and Peter on Saturday afternoons behind the house at Godric’s Hollow. Madam Hooch had, however, noticed his talent right away, and had told Professor Fletcher, which had ended up with Harry as the starting Seeker on the Gryffindor team. The world, he’d quickly decided, was about as close to perfect as it could get.

Now, if only he could find what he was looking for…

“It looks like any old piece of parchment,” Harry said quietly to Ron and Hermione. They were sitting at the far end of the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, and several empty seats separated the trio from classmates and curious ears.

“So what’s the big deal about it, then?” Ron wondered. They’d been friends for less than a month, now, but they could still read one another perfectly, and Ron knew the look on his face. The trio had been watching Fred and George Weasley play pranks for weeks, now, and was aching to try their hands at it (or, at least Harry and Ron were; Hermione had taken a bit of convincing, but they’d won her over in the long run).

“Well, it’s not just any old piece of paper,” Harry replied with a sly smile. “It’s a map. It only looks like an old piece of parchment.”

“How do you make a map look like it’s not a map?” Ron frowned. Hermione elbowed him.
“Honestly, Ron. It’s magical.”

Ron rolled his eyes. “Of course it’s magical. I was just wondering how it worked.”

“Right,” she snorted.

“Anyway,” Harry sighed to get their attention off of bickering once more. “It’s called the Marauder’s Map. I don’t really know how it works…but I know it exists. And I know that it shows all of Hogwarts…including the secret passageways.”

Ron’s eyes lit up, but Hermione scowled.

“Don’t we get in enough trouble already?” she asked tartly.

“Where’s your sense of adventure, Hermione?” Ron challenged her.

Harry grinned, adding, “We haven’t gotten detention yet.”

“We got yelled at yesterday,” she replied stubbornly.

“Professor Snape doesn’t count,” Ron retorted.

“Come on, Hermione. You know that you want to explore the castle,” Harry wheedled carefully. “Think of all the things there are that we’ve never even seen. There are probably rooms that no one’s been in for years.”

“Think of it as History class, but more interesting,” Ron continued.

“History class is interesting,” Hermione corrected him, but sighed. “Do you two never give up?”

“Nope.” Harry laughed.

“You know you love us,” Ron grinned.

“I don’t know why I go along with this…” Gotcha! Harry thought gleefully. He was of a mind to make his first real adventure an exploration of the castle that he’d heard so much about (but never enough to spoil the ‘surprises’ as his dad called them), but he hadn’t wanted to do with without his friends. Hermione, however, had finally given in. “So where do we find this map, anyway?”

“That’s the catch,” Harry admitted. “I don’t know.”

Hermione glared at him, ready, he was sure, to launch into a tirade over getting them all worked up about something that he didn’t even have, but Ron only smiled wider. His reply came immediately.

“Fred and George. They’ll know.”

That evening, the trio managed to corner the twins in the Gryffindor Common Room. The
five students sat by the fire, alone and mostly unnoticed—Percy had, of course, asked them what they were doing, but Hermione’s innocent smile had easily led him astray. Hermione, of course, would never create trouble, so the prefect went away without a further comment, believing her when she said that Fred and George were helping the trio with their Charms homework. As the older Weasley disappeared through the portrait hole, the twins grinned in amazement.

“You’re our new best friend, Hermione,” George chuckled.

“He believes you,” Fred added gleefully.

Hermione tried to glare, but Harry thought she looked a little pink. It was good to have friends, and Ron’s older brothers were rapidly becoming just that. But then the twins turned serious, and Fred continued. “So, Harry, what did you want to talk to us about? Ron mentioned mischief making.”

“I was wondering,” Harry took a deep breath, “if you’d ever heard of the Marauder’s Map.”

“The what?” George asked immediately, just as Fred replied, just a tad too quickly: “Nope. Never heard of it.”

Harry raised one eyebrow. He hadn’t been sure before, but the speediness of their denial gave it away. He spoke with gentle sarcasm that they couldn’t miss. “Oh, really?”

Two sets of green eyes studied him very closely, well aware of the fact that Harry had just called their bluff. For a moment, it seemed like they would try to worm their way out of the situation, but no matter what else they were, neither Weasley twin was stupid. After studying Harry closely for one uncomfortable moment, they both took a cautious glance around the still empty common room. Finally, Fred spoke again.

“What I’d like to know, Harry, is how you heard of the map. We’ve never mentioned it to anyone except Lee, and I know he didn’t tell you.”

“I’ll make a deal with you,” he smiled. “I’ll tell you everything I know about the Marauder’s Map if I can see it.”

The twins exchanged glances, and Harry could see them wondering what he might know about the map that they hadn’t already learned. A moment of silent communication passed between them, and Fred shrugged. George nodded. “I’ll go get it.”

Moments later, George returned with a scrappy-looking piece of parchment, and Harry felt his heart skip a beat in excitement. He’d been hearing about the Marauder’s Map for years, but had never seen it. It was almost like seeing a piece of Hogwarts’ very history. Wordlessly, George extended the map to Harry, who took it with a slight smile. He knew this was a test, but he didn’t mind. In fact, he understood why the twins guarded the map so carefully—it was truly a pearl beyond price. He pulled his wand out from inside his robes and raised it, struggling to keep the grin off his face. He couldn’t believe he was actually holding the Marauder’s Map! Harry lightly touched the tip of his wand to the parchment.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.” Immediately, lines began to form on the paper, crisscrossing one another until a beautifully crafted map was created, topped with the words that he had known would be there. There was no hope in holding back that grin now; Harry couldn’t help himself. But he kept from laughing out loud as he returned the map to George, who stared at it, dumbstruck.
“How’d you know how to do that?” Fred demanded. “It took us weeks to figure it out!”

“Easy.” Harry smiled. “My dad’s Prongs.”

“WHAT?” both gasped. Fred nearly fell to the floor in shock, and George jumped to his feet, nearly dropping the Marauder’s Map and having to scramble to catch it before the parchment hit the floor. Even Ron and Hermione were staring at him with surprise; he hadn’t wanted to tell them this unless he was sure that they could find the missing map. Now, though, they were beginning to look very excited, and he could tell that Ron, at least, was starting to consider all the possibilities. Harry, however, only nodded solemnly.

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“But my Mum and Dad talk about him sometimes. He got in a lot of trouble when they were here… Professor Lupin said that he still holds the Hogwarts record for most detentions in one term.”

Fred and George nodded solemnly. The latter replied, “Yet another thing You-Know-Who has to pay for.”

“Yeah,” Ron agreed quietly, and as they all shared a moment of silence, Harry knew what the Weasleys were thinking about. There was hardly a Wizarding family that hadn’t lost a loved one in the war, and the Weasleys were no exception. Two years before, Charlie Weasley, Auror, had fallen at some unknown Death Eater’s hands. His killer had never been caught...and his body had never been found.

“Well,” Fred finally said with a little forced brightness. “Thanks for telling us about the map, Harry. It’s nice to know to whom we owe the secret of our success.” Both twins started to rise, but Harry smiled. An idea had just occurred to him, and he wasn’t the son of a Marauder for nothing.

“Would you like to make that success even greater?” he asked.

Fred and George exchanged a glance. They sat back down. “We’re listening.”

“I propose an alliance,” Harry replied. “Your map and knowledge of the school, plus what my dad told me. The two of you, plus the three of us—we’ll be unbeatable.”

The twins looked thoughtful. Fred replied slowly, “There’s never been an inter-year team of pranksters.”

“So let’s be the first,” Ron grinned. Harry hadn’t shared the idea with his friend beforehand (he’d just thought of it, after all; call it spur of the moment genius), but Ron was clearly enthusiastic. George, however, was more cautious.

“I doubt you know much we don’t know,” he said.

“I know how to get past the Whomping Willow.”

Fred whistled, but Hermione interjected before anyone could reply. “Harry, this isn’t a good idea,” she wailed. “Think of all the trouble we could get in!”

The twins shot a cross look in her direction, but Ron spoke before Harry could get his mouth open. “Think of all the ways you can get back at Malfoy and his goons, Hermione.”

“And I don’t plan on getting caught,” Harry added. The idea of uniting their two groups was very appealing, but he didn’t want to do it without his other friend. Hermione wavered—Malfoy and the others had been heckling her ever since the train ride (subtly encouraged by Professor Snape, more often than not), and he knew how it hurt her. Getting them back in some way would help her, he was sure of that—but George snorted.

“You’re nutter,” Fred replied. “No matter what your dad told you about Hogwarts, it’s going to happen. Nothing will work every time, even with the map.”
“My dad didn’t just give me information,” Harry said. “He gave me an invisibility cloak.”

They stared at him. Fred whistled again. “Wow. I take back what I just said…”

“Think of all the possibilities…” George agreed.

“So, do we have a deal?” Ron’s grin was threatening to tear his face in half. Even Hermione was finally smiling.

“One condition,” George replied. “Lee’s in. We couldn’t have pulled off half our pranks without him.”

“Six sounds good,” Ron said.

“Six sounds great,” Hermione agreed with relish. Harry smiled again. He knew she sometimes felt out of place, even with him and Ron to lean on, and it was good to see that others accepted her—although he’d never doubted that Ron’s brothers would. Hermione, however, was still adjusting to a world where half the wizards viewed her as lowly trash, and sometimes needed to be reminded that not everyone was like that.

“We need a name,” Fred said suddenly.

“Too bad Marauders is already taken,” Ron nodded. “Quite inspired, that.”

“I’ve got it,” George grinned suddenly. “We’ll be the Misfits—the Magical and Invisible Society For Instigating Trouble.”

“‘And there I was, trying to convince the German Prime Minister that magic really does exist,’” Peter laughed. “The poor chap is brand new on the job—the old one had a heart attack—and their acting Minister of Magic has her hands so full that she could barely find time to see me, let alone the head of their Muggle government. So, being the bright ambassador that I am, I offered to speak to him—not the brightest idea I ever had, mind you—and nearly got arrested and thrown in some ‘home for the criminally insane.’”

Lily’s eyebrows shot up, but James laughed. “Fitting, that.”

“What did you do, Peter?” she asked, sparing a moment to throw a dirty glance in her husband’s direction.

“Well, the poor chap was screaming for his bodyguards, saying something about a mad British assassin—he’d a tad paranoid, you see—so I had to act fast. One of them barged into the room and tried to grab me, and the only think I could think to do was turn into a rat. So I did, and I hid under his desk while they all tried to figure out what was going on. Eventually, it all worked out all right.”

“And you’re the one who thought becoming animagi was a bad idea, Wormtail,” James commented with a grin. “Turned out to be damn useful, didn’t it?”

The blonde-haired man smirked. “At least I am a useful animal—not some ugly creature
with horns—”

“Antlers!”

“And no ability at stealth.” His green eyes twinkled. “And I’m legal, now. Legit. Totally above-ground and honest.”

“Legal?” James gaped. His hazel eyes grew to the size of hubcaps. “You registered! You traitor!”

His answer was laughter. “Of course I registered! What else was I supposed to do, what with the entire German Ministry of Magic knowing that I’m an animagus and all? What would you have done, Prongs, obliviated them all?”

“Well…” He trailed off, pouting. “I still don’t believe you went legal.”

Lily joined Peter’s laughter, patting her husband comfortingly on the arm. “Try not to look so disappointed, James. It’s not like you haven’t gotten responsible in your old age.”

“Responsible?” he demanded. For a moment James felt like he was sixteen again; sitting around the kitchen table in the Godric’s Hollow Manner with Lily and Peter brought back so many memories of the old days. They could almost be back at Hogwarts in their seventh year, taking a break from their maddened cramming for the upcoming N.E.W.T.s. If he concentrated, he could imagine that they were sitting in the library, reviewing for Arithmancy, as they’d done so many times before… And if they weren’t careful, Madam Pince would be there soon to scold them for being so irresponsibly loud. He chuckled. “Since when am I responsible?”

“Would you like me to list the recent examples, Mister Potter?” his wife countered. James sighed, looking at her—she was so beautiful, but there was that damned light in her eyes, the one that said she’d never give in.

“Not really,” he admitted. Lily would win, anyway. She always did.

“Good,” Lily grinned. “I’m glad that you realize I’m always right.”

“Always?” Peter snorted. “That’ll be the day…”

“Peter!” She turned her glare on him, and James, for one, was glad to see it aimed somewhere other than at him. He tried not to laugh as she scowled. “I’m trying to help you out! You’re supposed to be on my side here!”

“Against a fellow Marauder? Never!”

“Oh, you’ll pay for that, Peter Pettigrew!” Lily declared royally. “I had made chocolate éclairs, but with the way you’re acting, I’m not feeling very inclined towards sharing them…”

“Ooh, that’s dirty,” James commented, laughing. He, after all, lived in the house—and he knew how to find food when his wife wasn’t looking. But Peter had to leave for Paris in the morning.

“Lily, come on,” the smaller man pleaded. “I’ll be nice, I promise.”

She pointed a sharp finger at him. “You’d better.”

“Hey, it’s me.” He tried his most charming smile, making James and Lily laugh.
“Yes, it is you, Peter,” she admitted. “And that’s the problem!”

“I don’t find a problem with it,” James commented mildly—then “oofed” as a finger poked into his stomach.

“Don’t you start with me, James Potter, or you won’t get any desert either!”

He snickered. “Doubtful.”

“And why is that?” Lily demanded archly.

“Because I know how to con you out of anything,” James replied, grinning and waggling his eyebrows meaningfully. He was rewarded with a familiar gleam shining out of his wife’s eyes, and his smile only grew wider as Lily tried to glare at him.

“Do you now?”

“Um hum.” He leaned forward, kissing her lightly on the lips before she could react. James continued, murmuring, “It’s an acquired talent, you see.”

“Oh, God. Don’t you two start this again!”

They both turned to glare at Peter as he broke the spell, but their old friend showed no regret. He only gave them a very pointed look that James had seen a million times before—mostly back at Hogwarts, but there had definitely been a couple hundred instances in the past year or so—and shrugged. Peter rolled his eyes.

“If you’re so intent on snogging, at least leave the room,” he continued. “After getting the éclairs out, of course.”

James and Lily laughed. It was good to know that some things never changed.
The fire call surprised her; Lily almost dropped her faded and cracked copy of *Ancient and Olde Magics* when the unexpected voice made her jump. Quickly, she looked up, only to see Severus Snape’s face dancing in her fireplace. She smiled. “Severus! Did you finish my potion?”

“I need to talk to you, Lily.” Her old friend’s pale face was drawn.

“Come on through, then.” She knew Severus well enough to know when something was wrong. Her instincts were suddenly on fire, and Lily dropped *Ancient and Olde Magics* onto the coffee table, completely forgetting her newest project as her friend rolled gracefully out of the fire.

“Tell me James is here,” Severus said immediately.

“No, he just left a half an hour ago,” Lily replied, looking at him strangely. James and Severus might have learned to work together, but they’d never quite be friends, and the sight of Severus worrying for her husband was a new one.

He cursed. “Listen Lily, I don’t have a lot of time. But James is walking into a trap.”

“What?” She was on her feet.

“Do you know where he is?”

“No, I—”

Severus cut her off, speaking quickly. “London. A Muggle pub named the Bear’s Paw. He’s meeting Leora Baddock, who claims that she’s willing to spy against the Dark Lord, but it’s a trap. There’ll be at least seven Death Eaters in the pub, and they mean to kill him.”

“In a Muggle pub?” Lily’s mind threatened to freeze. *No, not James… Not James…* “But it’s noon…the place will be full of people.”

“You ought to know by now, Lily, that Voldemort doesn’t care,” Severus replied harshly.

“What do I do?” She wasn’t a warrior by nature, but her brain was working again.

“Go to Arabella. Tell her—I can’t. It would look too suspicious. Blame it on whatever you want. She’ll know.”

Lily nodded quickly. She understood. Severus was taking incredible risks by coming to her—but going to Arabella Figg would have been a thousand times worse for him. He was a member of Voldemort’s inner circle, a long-standing Death Eater from a family whose roots were steeped in Dark magic; few would ever suspect the cruel and heartless Severus Snape as caring so much. The dangers, however, remained. The risks he had taken in the Order’s name over the last eleven years were unbelievable, and yet here he was, taking another one. And this was for a man he didn’t even like.

“Thank you, Severus,” Lily said quietly. She’d never ask him why, but sometimes she wondered. A ghost of a smile fleetned across her friend’s face, though, as he read her expression.

“We need him,” Severus replied simply.

And then he was gone, pitching a handful of Floo Powder into the fireplace and returning to
Hogwarts and classrooms full of students who would never understand the kind of man he truly was.

James Potter nursed a beer, tapping his fingers lightly against the glass. Baddock was late, but he tried to concentrate on his drink as if he didn’t have another care in the world. Some of the Muggle brews were pretty good, he reflected, his eyes scanning the pub and looking for threats almost unconsciously. As the head of the Auror Division, he wasn’t supposed to be in the field, but the war had stretched Aurors tight. There simply weren’t many left, and besides, he knew Leora Baddock from his Hogwarts days. Then, she’d been in Ravenclaw and her last name had been Higgins (he’d even dated her, very briefly, in his fifth year). Now, though, her last name was Baddock, and she was married to Warren Baddock, who had apparently dragged her into Voldemort’s circle several years before. According to the short letter she’d sent James, her love for her husband had kept her there for some time, but it was no longer enough.

Better late than never, I guess. He sighed. There were a million and one reasons why Leora might be late, most of which made innocent and perfect sense, but right now, none of them sat comfortably with him. His instincts, sharpened by years of chasing Death Eaters, were setting off alarms in his head. Something was wrong.

Something was very wrong. James glanced around the pub again, but saw nothing but Muggles out for a late lunch. He’d suggested the Bear’s Paw as a meeting place because it was far away from Diagon Alley or any place that was even remotely magical; there was almost no chance of them being spotted together here, especially by Death Eaters, who hated anything Muggle. James, on the other hand, who had married a dreaded “Mudblood” witch, had acquired a comfort with Muggle technology over the years that he’d never expected to have. He had even gained a definite appreciation for Muggle clothing and beer. That, and he also had an understanding of the other culture that many of his colleagues lacked…which was why he almost always chose Muggle pubs as his meeting places with informants. He knew how to blend in.

But someone else didn’t. Movement caught his eye, and James turned his head fractionally to the right. Without looking like he was doing so, the Auror studied the man in the far corner booth. Long hair simply wasn’t in fashion in the Muggle world…and neither was the wand that protruded every so slightly out of the left side of the gray sport coat. The strange wizard’s dark eyes flickered sideways, suddenly, and James saw him glance at another man—and he felt a chill run down his spine as a third set of eyes focused on him. Two more men entered the pub, then, and these James recognized. Death Eaters. And there was Leora, right behind the other two—he thought to shout out a warning, but when the first man nodded respectfully in her direction, James knew he’d been had. It’s a trap.

He felt himself tense for action as he coiled his legs underneath his body and his hand discreetly found his wand. He was in a pub full of innocent Muggles…should he bluff or fight? Did he have a choice? James felt his heart begin to race, but this wasn’t the first time that he’d ever been in danger, and the sudden rush of adrenaline only made his reflexes faster. Six against one wasn’t exactly good odds…Seven, he corrected himself, noticing another Death Eater at a table in the back of the pub, strategically placed between James and the back door. All were watching him now, waiting for some signal from an unknown source, and none of them looked friendly. How peachy.

When he’d first walked into the pub, James had, through force of habit alone, calculated every possible entrance and exit route from his table. He’d purposefully asked for one that was against the wall rather than one in the middle of the room, but at the moment, that wasn’t much help.
He had three angles of escape—front door, back door, and the window in the opposite wall. Apparating was undoubtedly out of the question, since the Death Eaters would have been sure to put up wards to prevent that. Between James and each route was at least one Death Eater. *I just love being a target!* Resolve hardened in his mind. There was simply no neat and clean way to do this, and if he didn’t act first, they were likely to go and do something stupid, like trying to blow the damn pub up with him in it. A smile tugged at his lips. From his first days as an Auror, Arabella had always drilled one thing into him: when outnumbered, attack.

Do the unexpected.

*“Confundus!”*

He was in motion, spinning towards the Death Eaters in the doorway now that he’d struck the three to his right—James would have used something stronger, but there were innocent Muggles in the way—*The Obliviators are going to get a workout tonight,* he thought irrelevantly. The Death Eater in the back of the pub would just have to wait; he didn’t have time to deal with him right now. Muggles were screaming. James’ wand finally centered on Leora and her companions. With them, there was more room to play. *“Everbero!”*

All three Death Eaters sailed backwards, but even as James started to turn to the Dark witch at his back—instinct made him dive for the ground, and he heard his table shatter. Pieces of wood erupted into the air and fell around him like forgotten kindling; a few landed on James as he rolled away from the carnage, thankful for the years of experience that pointed his wand in the right direction. More Muggles screamed as he finally got a line of sight on his target—and then one confused businessman stumbled over the Auror as he tried to make a desperate escape, tangling his legs up in James’ right arm and blocking his view of the enemy.

With a terrified cry, the businessman fell on top of James, knocking the air out of his chest and pinning him to the floor. *Oh, shit.* Power sizzled, and bracing himself for the attack would never help, anyway.

*“Crucio!”*

The Muggle screeched and went into convulsions. James didn’t know if the spell had been aimed at him and had struck the businessman by pure accident or that had been the Death Eater’s intention, but at the moment, it didn’t matter. He might have used the mistake to his advantage, but as the witch had clearly realized, he was stuck underneath the screaming Muggle, unable to get free of the frightened man. The businessman’s arms were flailing wildly; one struck James in the head, and he saw stars as he struggled to get out from underneath the man. A sudden elbow to his stomach only made matters worse, and the Auror struggled to get his wand arm free while he wheezed for air. Screams rang in his ears. Finally, he wrenched his right hand out from under the man’s body and pointed it at the businessman.

*“Stupefy!”* The Muggle became mercifully silent, and even more importantly, he went still. James tracked in on the startled witch. *“Reducto!”*

It was messy, but he didn’t care. Neither could the witch, now, because she’d been blasted into several hundred smaller pieces, none of which would be feeling anything ever again. James didn’t particularly like to kill, but sometimes in his profession it was a necessary evil. War was like that. Those that you didn’t kill or capture came back to attack you another day, and he had no time for remorse. Muggles screamed as he threw off the unconscious businessman and leapt to his feet, sprinting for the back door.

What he hadn’t counted on was Leora. He had forgotten that the other two Death Eaters
A knock came on his office door, and Severus Snape sighed. Growling under his breath, he looked up from the stack of sixth-year Hufflepuff essays he was grading (“Describe the History, Uses, and Misuses of the Draught of the Living Death” in no less than three rolls of parchment). He really didn’t have time for this. If he ignored them, perhaps his visitor would go away… There was another knock.

“What?” he bellowed.

The door swung open to reveal Mundungus Fletcher, whose scarred face was utterly unreadable (although not to Severus, who knew him well, and could tell he was very unhappy) and a very irritated looking Draco Malfoy. Fletcher’s eyes were what gave him away, of course; they were fairly dancing with anger. Looks like that from Aurors had gotten many a Death Eater killed, but Malfoy seemed oblivious. Perhaps he was really stupid enough to miss all the implications of angering the short-tempered Transfiguration professor, but Severus really suspected that Draco simply didn’t care. What little he knew of the boy’s personality revealed that the Malfoy heir was very much like his father. Just what I need right now, he thought temperamentally. A miniature Lucius in my office. Severus utilized that aggravation to put a scowl on his face. Malfoy would, without a doubt, attribute the expression to the tension present between the respective heads of Slytherin and Gryffindor.

In truth, the two had a great deal of respect for one another. Snape wasn’t in the business of making friends, but if he’d had to construct a list, Dung would have been somewhere near the top, oddly enough. He was a good man, and a brave one—Severus was glad to have helped save his life. I can only hope my most recent attempt at life saving works out as well, he thought grimly. Waiting at Hogwarts was the worst kind of torture—he would rather act openly against Voldemort, would have rathered join the battle that men like James Potter fought on a daily basis, but his role prevented it. He knew what he was doing was right, and incredibly valuable to their cause, but the restrictions he lived by chaffed at times.

He hoped James was all right. He’d hated Potter once, for various reasons, but mostly because of both their personalities and the friends they had…and because of Lily, of course. It was natural for Slytherins to hate Gryffindors, and vice versa—the two of them had just taken it to extremes. Then again, their family histories almost assured that. Potter’s lineage was one that had always stood firmly against Darkness; even before the days of Godric Gryffindor, the family had been famous for it. Snape, on the other hand, had always tried to hide his own half-blood lineage and concentrate on his mother’s line, which was a family of ancient Dark Magic, full of Dark witches and wizards who believed in gaining power at any cost. It had taken Severus a long time to realize how wrong that was.

Looking at young Malfoy, he knew that was a lesson some people would never learn. He turned his mind away from the outside world and pasted his habitual sneer on his face.
“Professor Fletcher.”

“Professor Snape.” Dung had always been a good actor; he sounded nearly as hostile as Snape. An ex-Auror with Fletcher’s history was hardly expected to like a man nearly the entire Wizarding world suspected as a Death Eater, even though no one could prove it.

“What can I do for you?” Severus demanded.

Dung dragged Draco into the room. “Mr. Malfoy here decided that it would be amusing to light Hermione Granger’s hair on fire during my class period. I feel that, since he is of your House, you would do best in dealing with him.”

“Indeed. Leave him here.” He was expected to be short; Dung understood that the rudeness was not directed at him.

“Of course,” the Transfiguration professor replied coolly, and with a final nod, left the office, closing the door behind him. Severus waited for a moment, studying his old “friend’s” child. Malfoy, he noticed, did not look overly worried, but the slight lines at the corners of his eyes showed that he was a little nervous. Good. Snape had yet to deal directly with the Malfoy heir; this would be the first private conversation he’d had with the boy. He knew some Heads of Houses liked to speak face-to-face with all their first years soon after they came to Hogwarts, but Severus was different. Slytherin was different. He preferred to watch from afar first, and see what he could learn through observation.

Six weeks of observation and Potions classes, coupled with his instincts, told him that Draco was another Lucius, simply younger and less corrupted.

The boy shifted under his unsettling glare, and started to move towards the chair across from Severus’ antique wooden desk. The Potions master frowned. “I did not give you leave to sit, Mr. Malfoy.”

Cold gray eyes sharpened, and for a moment, Severus thought he might argue. Draco seemed to be weighing options in his head; he tried the aristocratic sneer on for size, then apparently remembered that Severus Snape was an old friend of his father’s, and not likely to tolerate opposition. The sneer left the boy’s face, and Severus waited patiently for the boy to pay attention. The world has rules, the deputy headmaster thought acidly. Get used to it. Obviously, Draco wasn’t used to listening to anyone other than his father. It was best, however, that he learn to change that here, at Hogwarts, rather than taking his lessons at Voldemort’s hands. Severus leaned forward, folding his hands on the desktop.

“Explain yourself.”

The sneer came back in full force. “Well, sir, the little Mudblood was getting all kinds of—”

“Without the pathetic schoolboy embellishments, if you please, Malfoy,” Severus cut in. His cold voice seemed to take Malfoy aback momentarily, and the boy blinked. He hesitated before continuing, clearly thinking fast and trying to come up with an acceptable answer.

“Professor, she insulted me.” Obviously, that seemed safe enough. Had the tale been true, it might have been. But Severus knew it wasn’t. Liars were easy to spot when you had all the talents yourself. Child’s play.

“Did she now?”

“Yes, sir.” Severus raised an eyebrow, and Malfoy shifted once more. He really wasn’t good
at this; a little common sense would have told the boy that Hermione Granger (the only possible “Mudblood” in the Gryffindor-Slytherin transfiguration class) was not exactly likely to throw a cavalier insult in his direction. The girl was smarter than that. She was already a target, and Granger knew that insulting Malfoy could only make things worse. Even Gryffindor first years weren’t stupid enough to pick that fight—Well, Severus silently amended, some of them are. But that one wasn’t.

He let Malfoy fret for a moment longer, then rose gracefully and stepped around his desk to look down at the blonde boy. His student looked up at him, not quite frightened, but smart enough to be wary. Severus waited until the boy looked away, unable to meet his gaze. He crossed his arms, speaking coldly. “Tell me the truth, Malfoy.”

“She deserved it,” Malfoy snapped. His head came back up, and he looked Snape in the eye, daring his professor to disagree.

Definitely no coward, this one. Severus added the observation to his mental list of Malfoy’s personality traits. “For what?”

“She’s an insufferable know-it-all.” The sneer came back, but this time it wasn’t directed at the head of Slytherin. “And she’s disgusting. Her kind shouldn’t be allowed here.”

And there it was: the creed of Voldemort, agreed with by almost all of the Slytherin House. Mudbloods don’t belong here. Severus did not allow his inner disgust to show. Once, he’d believed that, too…but no longer. Maybe someday he’d run across another Slytherin like himself, but that wasn’t too likely. Not until the war was long over, anyway. So, for the time being, he would be exactly what they expected him to be. It was no longer hard; he’d been playing the role for years, and very few of his students ever saw the real Severus Snape. Most of those who had were dead—he’d subtly recruited them into the Order of the Phoenix (although they’d never guessed that he himself was a member), and like so many other spies that they had sent against the Dark Lord, nearly all of them were dead. They were the kinds of heroes that bards would never sing of—but there was no time for grief. Severus allowed himself a cold smile.

“Those views, Mr. Malfoy, are not wise ones to voice.”

Draco eyed him suspiciously. “But you’re—”

“I am,” Severus cut him off. Obviously, Malfoy was going to say ‘but you’re a Death Eater’—he had no doubts that Lucius had shared that juicy tidbit with his son before setting him on the Hogwarts Express—but Snape had no intention of letting the boy act stupidly. He continued. “And I said that it is not wise to voice your opinions. I did not say that I don’t agree with you, but we do not speak of such things.”

“Why not?” He had his attention now.

“There are advantages, Draco, to appearing as the world would have you be.” He intentionally used the boy’s given name for the first time, and watched Malfoy perk up upon hearing it. “The animosity between you, Potter, Granger, and the Weasleys is well known. Certain actions are therefore expected. Slytherin, however, is not the House of the cunning and the sly for nothing. Schoolboy pranks are below you—especially one of your blood.”

Had any other professor said that to a Malfoy, they would have received nothing more than a doubtful sneer. Snape’s mother’s bloodline, however, was nearly as antique as the Malfoy’s, and young Draco clearly knew that while his father stood in the first place in Voldemort’s circle, Severus Snape occupied the second or third. So he nodded and listened intently as his professor continued in
“There are some who are more worthy of Slytherin than others,” Severus said softly. “Only a select few will rise to the top of our House. I would hate for you, of all students, to realize less than your full potential.”

“I won’t fail you, Professor.” He had him.

Severus smiled coldly. “I should hope not,” he replied. “If you intend to succeed, though, you will heed my advice.”

“Yes, sir,” Draco nodded. Clearly, he liked the idea of rising to the top of his House, and Severus saw his eyes dancing with anticipation.

“Very well.” Severus looked his student in the eye, and let his voice grow hard. “The immature pranks will end. Retaliating in kind against those Gryffindor miscreants will not be accepted. Verbal attacks are tolerable, but all else will take place in a suitably Slytherin manner—preferably in a wood where there are no witnesses save a pair of seconds.”

Draco’s eyes widened. “But duels aren’t allowed, sir.”

“Rules, Draco, are made to be broken.”
Lunch in the Great Hall had, as usual, deteriorated into a battle of wills. On one hand, there were the elder Slytherins, intent on terrorizing anyone with lesser status than their own exalted bloodlines signified—and on the other, there were the senior Gryffindors, who tried their damnedest to defend all those who could not stand up for themselves. The Hufflepuffs tried desperately to walk the middle road and keep friends on both sides, and Ravenclaw tradition dictated that they become the peacemakers. But peace was rare, and moments of reconciliation were few and far between. The Slytherins called it a test, but Harry had come to think of it as cruelty. Perhaps it had started as a simple rivalry, but the battle had become much more than that.

The battle wasn’t limited to insults and pranks. It wasn’t only a matter of simple hexes that even a first year could overcome, either—Hogwarts had changed a great deal since his parents had walked the castle’s halls. Now, dangerous hexes and malicious curses flew whenever a professor’s back was turned or whenever a Slytherin felt that the punishment would not be unbearable. The Gryffindor first and second years were the easiest targets, of course, and the few Muggle-borns had it the worst. The older Gryffindors, however, united to defend their own and those of other houses, although it wasn’t as if the elder Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs did not support their underclassmen. Rather, the Gryffindors were the most obvious about it; theirs’ was not the House of the Brave for nothing. Reckless, perhaps, was another word to describe them, but all in all, Harry felt right at home.

Payback was difficult. It was a matter of House pride not to sink to the Slytherins’ low level; however, no self-respecting Gryffindor could simply stand silently and let it all happen. The Ravenclaws viewed themselves as above the battle, but Gryffindor would fight, even though they would only do so by their own rules. Hexes were acceptable, and even unavoidable at times. Self-defense was a necessity. Striking back when attacked was completely understood—but under no circumstances would a Gryffindor seek conflict. No Gryffindor would give battle on a Slytherin’s terms unless they had no other choice, and then they would strike hard and fast, and win, even by the other House’s rules. Otherwise, though, they retaliated with finesse, and with embarrassment as their prime tool. Fred and George Weasley had been extremely popular from moment one because of their ability to spearhead the House’s efforts to get even, but they’d been greatly outnumbered.

Now there were six willing to hit back with every bit of creativity they could muster. Six students, spanning four families and two different class years, who were willing to fight the battle on their own terms, and to win. Their willingness to ally with the Weasley twins and Lee Jordan had made Harry, Ron, and Hermione Slytherin targets already, and they were only a little over six weeks into their Hogwarts education. Because of that, the seven years they spent at the school promised to be long and trying. On the other hand, those years also promised to be great fun.

Until Professor Remus Lupin swept into the Great Hall, breaking up several minor skirmishes through the force of his presence alone. He was a kind man, but not one to cross, as all the students knew. No one wanted to test him; experience had taught plenty of students what a bad idea that was. His strides were long and powerful, but the intense and unreadable expression on his face was the exact opposite of the easygoing headmaster’s usual manner. He looked anything but happy—and he was heading straight for the Gryffindor table, much to the amusement of the Slytherins on the other side of the hall. Quickly, the six “Misfits” glanced at one another, trying to figure out if anyone had done anything since the incident with Malfoy’s shoes the day before…but the only answer was six sets of shoulders shrugging, so they busied themselves with looking anywhere but at the headmaster and anything but guilty. Besides, didn’t Professor Fletcher usually deal with their pranks? Whatever Lupin wanted, it certainly wasn’t with them. He usually didn’t bother himself
with such minor and harmless details—

Across the table from him, Harry watched Ron’s eyes widen in panic, and he didn’t dare look over his shoulder again. The look on his friend’s face (plus the frown on Fred’s) told him that Lupin was heading their way. The Weasley twins exchanged a quick glance, obviously already planning how to get out of this batch of trouble with only a minimum of detentions; however, the approaching footsteps stopped right behind Harry.

“Whatever it is, Professor, we didn’t do it—” George started just as his twin said,

“Really, sir, it was only—”

“I am not here about any of your pranks,” Lupin interjected evenly. Suddenly, a gentle hand landed on Harry’s shoulder. “I need to speak to Harry.”

He looked up at the headmaster. Something about the expression on Lupin’s face told Harry that something was wrong. “Sir?”

“It’s your father, Harry,” Remus said quietly. “There was a Death Eater ambush. He’s in St. Mungo’s.”

Harry’s insides went cold. “What happened?”

“I don’t have all the details yet,” the headmaster responded. “Your Mum is with him, and I’m heading over to the hospital now. You can come if you like.”

Rising, Harry nodded woodenly. His throat felt like it was glued shut; he didn’t think he could speak if he wanted to, which he wasn’t sure about at all. Remus would have said so if Dad was close to death…wouldn’t he?

Harry swallowed hard, following his father’s old friend without noticing where they were going. Remus’ hand was still a comforting presence on his shoulder, but his heart was twisting in knots. He’d lived most of his life in danger, yet somehow the Potter family had always managed to survive intact, with only a few bumps and bruises here and there. Harry had always known that his father’s occupation as an Auror was dangerous, but James Potter had seemed to live a charmed life—unlike over sixty-five percent of his colleagues, he had managed to come home every night. He’d never even been seriously hurt.

Until now. Harry struggled to swallow the lump in his throat. Not Dad. Something told him that this was indeed serious. Please not Dad.

A short while later, student and professor had arrived at the hospital. Apparently, Remus already knew where he was going, because he bypassed the information desk and kept on walking. Harry kept close behind him, his heart beating furiously in his chest. Not knowing what was going on was killing him. He looked around the hallway, trying to distract himself, but the obsessively clean white walls were no help. He hadn’t spent a lot of time in hospitals, but it occurred to Harry that adding some sort of decoration wouldn’t hurt anyone. Finally, they walked around a final corner to find his mother sitting on a bench outside a closed door. There was another man standing nearby,
seemingly keeping watch. Harry was willing to bet he was an Auror.

His mother rose quickly as they approached, reaching the headmaster first as Harry lagged slightly behind, looking around for any clues to what was going on. “Thanks for brining him, Remus,” she said quietly. “I know you hate to leave the school.”

“It’s not a problem, Lily.”

“Hey, honey.” His mum reached out for him, and Harry let himself sink into her embrace. Lily kissed him gently on the top of the head. “How are you?”

“I want to know what’s happening, Mum,” Harry responded softly, pulling back and looking at his mother’s drawn and tired face.

“He’s going to be okay, Harry,” she replied. “But the doctors say that he needs to stay in the hospital for a week or so.”

“Can I see him?”

“Not yet.” At Harry’s frown, his mum explained, “Minister Figg is talking to him right now.”

“Oh.” Breathing was becoming easier, and when his mother led him to the bench, Harry sat down, feeling a giant sigh of relief escape as everything sunk in. His dad was going to be okay. Everything was going to be okay.

“What happened, Lily?” Remus sat down on Harry’s other side.

“There was an ambush,” Lily replied. “James was supposed to be meeting with an informant, but it turned out to be a trap…Arabella and I arrived just in time to see a Muggle pub blow up. A lot of people were hurt. James was near the door, so he only caught the edge of the blast.”

“How many dead?”

“I don’t know,” she said softly. Her green eyes, so much like Harry’s own, were worried. “Too many. Fudge and the Department of Magical Catastrophes people are there now.”

A sudden thought occurred to Harry, and he frowned. “Mum, how did you know to be there?”

“You know I can’t tell you about our sources, honey.” Lily squeezed his shoulders lightly, and as much as he wanted to know, Harry nodded.

He’d known for years that his parents were both key members of the Order of the Phoenix, but there always seemed to be a lot that they couldn’t tell him. Complaining about that, of course (did they still think he was too young to understand?) got him nowhere, so Harry had learned not to bother, but he still wanted to know. He wasn’t stupid, and he wasn’t a little kid anymore, either. Better than most kids his age, Harry understood the threat that Voldemort still posed to the magical world. Dumbledore’s appointment as the Minster of Magic had helped to stem the tide of terror, but the even great wizard had not yet been able to stop the Dark Lord. His basis of power was far too strong.

Raised voices from inside his father’s hospital room attracted their attention.

“You listen to me, young man—” Mrs. Figg snarled. “This is it, and I mean it! No more
fieldwork, and no more taking foolish chances! There is too much at risk for you go off getting yourself blown up every few weeks—Don’t you interrupt me, James Potter! We cannot afford to lose you, and you damn well know it!”

Harry’s eyebrows rose, and he listened intently; it wasn’t every day that he got to hear the seemingly mild-mannered and cultured Mrs. Figg chew his father out! In fact, he’d never heard anyone talk to his father like that. His mum and Remus exchanged amused glances; it seemed that they, too, thought that his dad deserved to be yelled at.

“’Bella…” his father started.

“Don’t even think about it!” Mrs. Figg shouted. “You are not going to sweet talk your way out of this one! The Order needs you, and I am not going to let you get yourself killed—”

“And I’m not going to let Voldemort back me into a corner,” his father retorted. “You know just as well as I do that someone has got to do what I do, and if you can find someone better than I at it, then good for you! When that day comes, I’ll leave the field, but until then, the Order can’t afford not to have me out there! If what you say is true, Dumbledore himself would be here yelling at me, and I don’t see him here. So put a sock in it, Arabella. You can’t make me stop.”

“I can order you to,” the old woman snarled, and Harry could only imagine the furious look on her face.

“I won’t listen.”
“I’ll put you on report for insubordination.”

“So?” his father challenged, and Harry couldn’t help but smile slightly. His dad had never been one to give in…and the Potter family obstinacy had definitely bred true in the son, too.

“Then I’ll fire your stubborn arse for your own safety!”

“Sure you will.”

“Damn you!”

His dad laughed. “That, too.”

“One of these days, James Potter, I’m going to kill you myself,” Mrs. Figg sighed with exasperation.

“Just make sure it’s exciting. I’d hate to go out quietly.”

“James! This situation is damned serious! Will you stop joking around for once in your bloody life?” She was shouting again.

“Well, it’s not like I can defend myself if you decide to kill me right now, so I’ve got to do something,” Harry’s father replied.

“Such as attempting to annoy me to death?” the old woman demanded.

“If it works, it works. I’ll take all the victories I can get.”

Mrs. Figg sighed again. “I suppose there is nothing I can do with you, is there? You’ll never change.” She was silent for a moment, while Harry figured that she had turned her patented death glare on his father. “Is there anything else you need to tell me before I go?”
“No, that pretty much covers it.”

“Good,” Mrs. Figg replied briskly. “You concentrate on getting better, James. And you will stay in that bed for the entire week!”

“Yes, Ma’am,” his father replied demurely, and a moment later, the door swung open. A rather irritated looking Arabella Figg stood in the doorway; her eyes swept over the three of them expectantly. A slight smile flickered across her weathered features as she noticed the equally amused and exasperated expression on Harry’s mother’s face.

“ Heard that, did you?” Mrs. Figg asked dryly.

“Yes.”

“Well, I hope you can have more luck with him that I did,” the old woman snapped peevishly. “Lord knows, I could never have married the insufferable git.”

Lily laughed. “He is difficult sometimes, isn’t he?”

“Always.”

And then Mrs. Figg was gone, leaving Harry, his mother, and Remus to see his father. When they entered the room, Harry almost stopped in shock; his dad looked pale, and there was a bandage covering the left side of his face. His right arm was also in a sling, and Harry could only imagine what else there was beneath the hospital bed’s covers. He looked horrible. But his dad smiled as they came in, even though Harry thought he saw him squint. Out of habit, he looked around for his dad’s glasses (he knew how unpleasant it was not to have his own on), but they were nowhere in sight. Carefully, he approached the bedside. His father smiled.

“You can sit down, Harry,” he said gently. “I won’t bite.”

Harry felt his face heat up. “I know.” He sat down on the edge of the bed, to his father’s right, and saw his dad smile as he greeted the other two visitors.

“Hello, angel.” Harry’s mother smiled and sat down at his father’s other side, squeezing his left hand as James looked up at his friend, squinting again. “Thanks for bringing Harry, Remus.”

“That’s what friends are for, Prongs.”

“What happened to your glasses, Dad?” Harry had to ask.

“Slightly squished,” James replied. “Or, rather…downright shattered. Irreparable. I’m actually hoping that your Mum brought my extra pair from home.”

“Here.” In a practiced motion, his mother placed the glasses on her husband’s face, pausing, as always, to ruffle his hair as she did so. Harry hated that, and his dad did, too, because James scowled.

“Thanks a lot,” he groused.

“You’re welcome, darling.” Lily and Harry shared the same mischievous smile, and she was making full use of it now. “Be nice to me, or I’ll take them back.”

“No fair picking on people who can’t fight back,” his dad objected.

“You seemed to be doing fine a few minutes ago,” his mum replied.
“Arabella didn’t threaten to take away my glasses.”

Harry’s mum smiled. “I’ll make a deal with you. You stay safely in his bed for as long as the healers tell you to, and I’ll let you keep them.”


“Sorry, Dad. I think I’m on Mum’s side, this time.”

The reply earned Harry a mock dirty look. “Traitor.”

“More like your son is simply smarter than you are, James,” Remus snorted. “Not that it takes much.”

“I see how it is. Even you’re ganging up on me. Thanks a bundle, Moony.”

They all laughed. It was good to know that his dad could still crack jokes and smile, even with all injuries and all the bandages. Harry was almost starting to feel normal again. On the way to St. Mungo’s, he’d been terrified of losing his father, and when he’d first seen him, Harry hadn’t known what to think, but it was now plain that it would take more than a handful of Death Eaters to take James Potter out. As his worries faded, curiosity kicked in.

“So how did you get out, Dad?” he asked.

His dad grinned. “I learned to fly.”

“Dad.” There were times when Harry thought he was more mature than his famous father, and this was turning into another one of them.

“No, really,” his dad laughed lightly. “I was making a break for the door when one of the Death Eaters decided to blow the pub up, and I learned to fly. Without a broom.” He shrugged his left shoulder only; it seemed the right wasn’t working properly. “I need to work on my landings, though, because I hit the ground kind of hard. When I came to, it was with your Mum screaming in my ear. Mrs. Figg was busy chasing the Death Eaters away… Anyway, I’m glad the roles weren’t reversed. If I’d had to wake up looking at Arabella’s face, I’d probably have fainted again.”

Harry laughed; Remus made a strange choking noise that sounded like he was trying to repress a bout of giggles. His mum, though, slapped his dad lightly on the good shoulder. “James, that’s not very nice.”

His dad did the one-shouldered shrug again. “Face the facts, Lily. You make a lot prettier rescuer than Arabella Figg. Besides, if she’d had to drag me out of the rubble, I wouldn’t hear the end of it until Harry was eighteen!”

They laughed together, knowing it was true. Mrs. Figg had become a grandmother of sorts for Harry since she and his father were so close, but even Harry would have to admit that she never gave up on a grudge. She was of the sort that people said let their grudges die of old age, then had them stuffed and mounted on the wall for safekeeping. She gave great Christmas and birthday presents, but was a horribly disciplined baby-sitter; how many times Harry had earned an earful from her over his “wild” tendencies was beyond counting. He’d long ago learned that while she was a very educated lady, her vocabulary could be as wide and as colorful as a professional Quidditch player’s. In fact, Mrs. Figg probably knew more dirty words than any Quidditch player… The door suddenly opened once more, and the inevitable question came.

“What did I miss?”

“Traitor.”
“Peter!” Remus reacted first, rising and offering a hand to the shorter man. “When did you get in?”

The blonde-haired man smiled. “Just now. Dumbledore was kind enough to let me know what happened. I have to be back in France tonight, but I wanted to make sure James was okay.”

“Aside from threats from my wife and rebellion from my son, I’m doing great,” Harry’s father replied, trying to sit up. Lily pushed him back down. “How are you, Wormtail?”

“Good. You look like hell, Prongs.” Peter stepped forward to grasp Harry’s father’s free hand in greeting.

“Peter!” Harry’s mother snapped, glaring at him in a way that would have made either her husband or son wilt.

But the third Marauder grinned roguishly. “I’m sure Harry’s heard the word before, Lily,” he replied. “Right, Harry?”

“I think I’ve heard it once,” Harry deadpanned, but his solemn look was ruined when Peter reached out to tousle his hair. “Hey! You know I hate that!”

“Good seeing you, kid,” Peter chuckled.

“You, too, Peter,” Harry replied. His dad’s old friend turned to give his mum a kiss on the cheek.

“And hello to you, too, Lily,” he said with a grin.

She sighed and smiled despite herself. “Hello, Peter.”

After a moment, the other man’s playful grin faded, and Peter turned serious, sitting down next to Harry on the bed. “You’ve got to quit doing this, James.”

“Hey, I haven’t been in the hospital for years,” Harry’s dad objected immediately.

“That’s not what I mean, Prongs.” Peter looked down at his hands, frowning, and then brought his head up to look Harry’s father in the eye. “What you’ve been doing is dangerous, and you’ve been doing it way too long. Let someone else lead the charge for awhile.”

“I can’t, Peter,” came the quiet reply.

Peter’s frown deepened. “I’m not implying that you should stop fighting. It’s just that you deserve to—”

“I can’t stop,” James repeated. “Not now. There’s too much at stake... I’ve got to keep fighting. People need hope, Peter, and while I can’t do everything, I’ve got to do my part.”

“You’ve done more than anyone has a right to expect,” the other pointed out.

“And others haven’t?”

The question hung heavily in the air, and Harry swallowed thickly, knowing what his parents and their old friends were thinking. For a moment, they were all silent, each thinking their own thoughts—and remembering in their own way. Remus, Harry noticed, had remained silent throughout Peter’s arguments, even though Harry knew he’d had this same conversation with James himself. Actually, his mum had, too; his family was concerned that his dad was becoming a
workaholic. While his dad argued that it was necessary, Harry knew that Peter, Remus, and his mother were right. But his mum and Remus said nothing. They had lost the same battle too recently to think it would work. Finally, Peter spoke in the voice of a man who hated what he had to say.

“It won’t bring Sirius back, James,” he said softly.

Harry’s dad blinked sadly. “I know it won’t,” he replied. “But if I can save just one more person from his fate, it will be worth it.”
Back at Hogwarts, life went on. The unsuccessful ambush was pasted all over the \textit{Daily Prophet}'s headlines—the famous James Potter had survived again. Reporters had started calling him “The Immortal,” and it was well known that the leading Auror solidly held the second highest place on Voldemort’s hit list, outranked only by Albus Dumbledore, the only man the Dark Lord feared to face and who had single-handedly pulled the Wizarding world back from the edge of the abyss four years before. Over the years, Harry’s father had been a constant thorn in Voldemort’s side, and now it seemed that he’d become a target once more. But as the weeks flew by, even Voldemort’s deadliest couldn’t bring him down. There were several incidents that came close enough to set Harry’s teeth on edge (punctuated, as they were, by Malfoy’s inevitable comments about how his parents’ days were numbered) but nothing came to pass. So Harry remained safe at Hogwarts, struggling to pretend that all was right in the world.

His first Quidditch match—versus Slytherin, no less!—made that shamefully easy to do. Harry’s phenomenal natural skills made him even better than his father, who had very nearly gone on to play professionally, and while no other first year had made their House team, he’d become Gryffindor’s starting Seeker. His first match had been nothing short of exhilarating, despite the three broken ribs he’d ended up with after a rather intimate encounter with a very well aimed bludger moments before he caught the snitch. Another bludger had cracked Fred Weasley’s head open, putting both Gryffindors into the hospital wing while their teammates celebrated, but even that could not dull the joy of having got one up on Malfoy’s House. Quidditch was, in many ways, the Hogwarts representation of the war outside. Right now, the light (Gryffindor) and just moved ahead of the dark (Slytherin) for the first time in \textit{years}. Maybe the real world wasn’t so black and white, but then again, they were still young.

Even Hogwarts, though, was not immune to the changes outside, and tragedy struck close to home for the Gryffindor first years midway through November. Moments before the morning mail’s delivery, Professor Fletcher led a very confused Neville Longbottom from the Great Hall, telling the boy gently that he had family there to see him. Moments later, with the arrival of Hermione’s copy of the \textit{Daily Prophet}, they found out why.

\textbf{LONGBOTTOM CAPTURED}

Early yesterday evening, a team of Aurors, led by veteran Frank Longbottom, conducted a raid on a suspected Death Eater meeting place just south of London. The supposed meeting turned out to be a trap, and six Muggles were killed in the ensuing battle between the five Aurors and the Death Eaters, of whom witnesses report there were at least a dozen.

Longbottom, an Auror since 1976, managed to get his team out—but at great cost to himself. When acting as a rear guard for Ernie Jordan, Virginia Wilson, Sam Ackerley, and Oscar Whitenack, Longbottom was cornered by several
Death Eaters. Reports say that he tried to turn his wand on himself to avoid capture, but was stopped before he could take his own life. Rumors say that Longbottom has been taken to Azkaban, formerly the Wizard’s Prison, and now the headquarters of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

There is not much hope for rescue. Arabella Figg, the Head of Magical Law Enforcement comments that “Frank is a good man and an exceptional Auror. Of course, we will do everything within our power to free him…but do not expect miracles. All that can be done, will be.”

To this day, no one has escaped Azkaban. Repeated Ministry efforts to breach the island fortress’ security have all failed, although there are rumors of a top secret organization named “The Order of the Phoenix,” which as also been working tirelessly towards this end. However, there is nothing known about this “order” aside from its name and that it has allied with certain members of the Ministry in the fight against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Frank Longbottom’s wife, Alice, also an Auror, could not be reached for comment. The couple has one son, Neville, who has entered his first year of education at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He is eleven.

“Poor Neville,” Hermione breathed.

“Yeah,” Ron replied, glancing at Harry, who blinked. Of all his friends, he best understood the hopelessness of the situation; Harry knew that his father had been struggling for years to find a way to crack Azkaban open, but had never found success. Doing so would have been a miracle.

“I hope Neville'll be all right,” Harry finally replied, wishing that there was more to say, but there wasn’t.

There just wasn't.

Neville missed their morning classes, and all the afternoon ones, too. In fact, he didn't come to the boy's dormitory that night, leaving Harry, Ron, Dean, and Seamus to worry alone. The next morning, they learned that Neville had gone with his mother and his grandmother for a few days; it was two days before he returned to Hogwarts. When he did, Neville, who had always been a quiet
(although undeniably bright) boy, was even quieter, and was definitely distracted. He started getting forgetful and even clumsy, at times (which he hadn't been before), and the Gryffindor first years had to go out of their way to ensure that disaster didn't follow Neville around too closely. They didn't mind, of course, because that was what friends were for, but as a week passed, keeping their companion out of trouble got more and more difficult. Neville just didn't seem to care.

Potions, of course, was the worst.

Everything had been going fine. Looking back on it, Harry would have said that things had been going too well, and something had been bound to happen. For once, though, Malfoy and his henchmen hadn't been taunting the Gryffindors (although Harry was sure they had some ulterior motive for that), and class was almost over. Just a few more ingredients and they would be finished —

Without explanation, Neville’s cauldron dropped to the floor.

Crashed would have been a better word. Crashed and splashed, all over the place. The boiling green liquid hit Harry, Ron (who fortunately blocked Hermione from being sprayed), Dean and—of course—Professor Snape. It had to hit Professor Snape. Right in the back of his expensive silk robes.

Predictably, the Potions Master spun, his face tight with barely concealed fury. Immediately, his black eyes centered on Neville, who flinched under the pressure from that remorseless gaze. Snape’s lips curled back in a snarl before the deputy headmaster gained control of his features, and his words came out in a clipped, bitten-off manner that hardly even tried to hide the contempt the wizard was feeling. His eyes flashed as he snapped:

“Is self-control a bit too much to ask from you, Longbottom? Have you no situational awareness whatsoever?”

Neville looked like he wanted to sink into the floor. “I’m sorry, Professor,” the boy replied unsteadily. “I wasn’t paying attention...”

“That’s not an explanation!” Snape sneered. “I should expect no less from one of your family. The whole lot of you seems to be inept and incapable.”

Neville went white. Hermione gasped. And Ron cursed under his breath in a way that was decidedly contrary to anything his mother had ever taught him, while Harry couldn’t help but stare. For a moment, he could have sworn that the sneer on Snape’s face wavered ever so slightly as Neville Longbottom’s lower lip trembled, but the Potions master kept his spiteful eyes on the young boy, daring him to contradict the deputy headmaster of the world’s oldest school of witchcraft and wizardry. Of course, given the emotional roller coaster that Neville had been on for the last week, there was no chance of that—and after a moment’s half-hearted struggle to meet the cruel professor’s gaze, Neville turned away. With a shudder, he bolted out of the classroom.

For a moment, none of the first-years knew what to do. Neville’s actions seemed to surprise even Snape, and Harry turned to Ron, taking advantage of everyone’s astonishment. Their eyes met, and his red-haired friend nodded, understanding. Oddly enough, Snape didn’t move as Ron followed Neville out the door, or as Harry stepped forward to keep him from doing so. An uneasy silence reigned in the potions classroom, until Snape’s eyes narrowed suddenly and he turned to the Gryffindors.

“Clean this mess up,” he snapped irritably, turning away. Slowly, the Potions classroom came back to life, and even as he bent over the puddle on the floor, Harry could hear Malfoy and his friends
snickering about Neville’s *cowardice*. As usual, Snape let them get away with it. Amazingly, though, he never said a snide word about it.

Neville would be all right, eventually; for the quiet, newly frightened and lonely exterior hid a strength that few would have foreseen. And in the end, he never forgot the friends who cared for him in those days, such as when Ron chased him down and brought him back to the Gryffindor common room, where his fellows brought him back out of his shell with laughter and jokes—hadn’t everyone, after all, been a victim of Snape’s tyranny at least once? A slimy git, he was, a good for nothing bastard who shouldn’t be allowed to teach. Everything would be all right, in the end—they assured him of this with light-hearted smiles, even though they were far from sure of it themselves. But friends were for the bad times along with the good, and they stood by him. Hermione went so far as to tell Professor Fletcher, their distant and cool head of house—but nothing, unfortunately, came of that, although they hoped the headmaster had had words in private with Professor Snape. Harry assured them that he would. Remus Lupin was simply that sort of man.

All in all, the incident was almost forgotten as the six Gryffindor Misfits struggled to avenge themselves on the professor in anyway they could, and even Neville laughed in the next potions class, when the blackboard began telling Snape (among other things) that he was an ugly, greasy, and slimy git, unfit to tread the sacred grounds of Hogwarts’ dungeons. Slytherins, the blackboard claimed, were in general a bunch of back-stabbing and whining dimwits who were stupid enough to think that power meant something. They also, the blackboard declared, knew nothing of friendship. Then it went back to colorful insults (colorful, of course, in more ways than one, because they hadn’t simply enchanted the blackboard to be rude; they’d used a rainbow of colors to display their creative language). Nothing could stop the blackboard, either, until the spell ran out twelve hours later. It ended in detention, but as the Misfits decided, it was a prank well worth paying for.

In retrospect, if Snape hadn’t given them detention, he might have ended up in a lot less trouble.

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Midnight.

A time for illegal acts, illicit meetings, and prowling around without notice. The dead of night has always held allure for those who desire to avoid attention. The darkness and the stillness breed security, and both aid in creating fear. Not for naught do Muggles call such times the Witching Hour, for throughout history, witches and wizards alike had made skilled use of the dead of night. For good or for evil, midnight is the ideal time. For murder or mayhem, there is none better.
The oldest of the Misfits had found out the latter in their first year. The youngest were currently discovering the former.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had just been released from a nasty detention with Professor Snape, and they meant to make the best of their time. They were up anyway, and for some reason, Snape had let them out early. Such kindness, if it could be called that, was unheard of. So they meant to create mischief in payment. After all, the deputy headmaster was an ugly and bad-tempered git who deserved no less. They’d thought a few of the nosier plants out of the greenhouse would make a fine addition to his office (which Snape had vacated the moment he’d set them free), and they were off to make good that decision. Professor Sprout, kind and trusting individual that she was, never locked Greenhouse Three up. That knowledge, Fred and George had put to good use the year before, and had been kind enough to share with their younger counterparts.

Harry was only hoping to find a plant that bit. Preferably hard. He could only imagine the look on Snape’s face when such a plant sunk its teeth into the Potions master’s silk-clad rear... With a grin, he shrugged the thought away. There would be time to enjoy that later. Now, they had to get in the greenhouse and find what they were looking for—no easy feat when trying to hide three people, no matter how young they were, under one invisibility cloak. As usual, Ron trod on his right foot, mashing his toes into goo, and Harry stifled the urge to curse. “Ron! Be careful!”

“Sorry.”

“Will you two both be quiet?” Hermione hissed. “We’re going to be heard!”

“There’s nobody around to hear us, ‘Mione,” Ron retorted.

“Really?” she demanded, gesturing towards a cloaked figure making its way across the lawn. “Then who is that? And don’t call me ‘Mione. My name is Hermione.”

“Geez, sorry,” Ron replied. But he didn’t sound very regretful.

“Shhh!” Watching the dark shape, Harry quieted them both. He kept his voice in a whisper. “I think that’s Snape!”


Harry opened his mouth to reply, but Hermione beat him to it. “Go?” she asked, reading Harry’s mind. “Why would we want to go? Let’s see what he’s doing.”

“Why?” Ron asked.

Harry grinned. “Good question,” he replied, even though he knew that wasn’t what Ron was asking. “Why is he out here?”

“Especially at this time of night,” Hermione added.

“Who’s that?” Harry’s sharp eyes caught sight of a second figure.

“Where?” Hermione asked.

“There!” Ron pointed at the second figure, also cloaked, who was emerging from just inside the shadow cast by the courtyard’s main gates.

“Don’t point, Ron!”
“Really, Hermione, you’d think we weren’t under an invisibility cloak or anything,” the redhead retorted.

Harry knew she was blushing. “Oh. I forgot.”

“Well, you two both be quiet?” Harry demanded, watching the two figures meet. It was hard to tell from so far away, but he thought they were both male—and he was still certain that the first one was Professor Snape. He strained his ears to hear them speak, and could tell that his companions were doing the same.

Snape approached, and the other figure spoke in shaky voice. “What took you so long?”

“My affairs are none of your business,” the deputy headmaster snapped irritably. “Be thankful that I have consented to meet you at all.”

“Our Master doesn’t...take kindly...to waiting...” the other stuttered.

“Our Master, Quirrell, is well aware of the demands on my time,” Snape replied archly.

Hermione gasped even as Harry felt his blood run cold. There was only one person they could possibly be talking about—-

“I refuse to take the blame for your lateness,” Quirrell snapped. “Anything that happens will come down on your head alone!”

“Shut up, Quirrell.”

The Dark Arts professor jerked up short. Even from far away, they could see his body go tense. “You have—”

In one smooth motion, Snape reached out, grabbing the smaller man by the front of his robes and shook him hard, cutting Quirrell off in mid-sentence. “I said to be silent, Quirrell,” he snarled. “Unless you would care to contend with my wrath before facing the Dark Lord.” The Dark Arts professor shrunk back, and Snape continued acidly. “I assure you, if that should happen, that any penalties for being late will be yours to deal with, as you explain to our Lord how you angered me enough that I was obligated to discipline you before you came into his presence.”

Quirrell stared, and so did they. Harry had always hated Snape, but he’d never heard him sound so...dangerous. Obviously, though, the Dark Arts professor had, and it frightened him into trembling silence. After a moment, Snape’s hand moved to Quirrell’s shoulder, and he dragged the other forward. “Come,” he demanded harshly. “We are expected.”

Together, the two professors stepped through Hogwarts’ gates, and then they were gone. The trio stood in silence for a moment, broken only by Hermione’s whisper. “My God,” she said. “Could they be...?”

“Death Eaters,” Harry said grimly. He felt cold, but there was nothing else it could be. There were no other possible explanations. He didn’t want to believe it. “They’re Death Eaters.”

“Two professors?” Ron said incredulously. “I mean, my dad always said that Snape was one of them, but Quirrell? I’d think he’d be too scared for that kind of thing. This is unbelievable.”

“We have to tell the headmaster,” Hermione said decisively.

She was right. Harry threw the cloak off; it served no purpose, now. Quickly, he stuffed it into a
pocket. “Let’s go.”

Entering the castle, the trio realized immediately that they had problems. First of all, none of them knew the way to Professor Lupin’s office, and it wasn’t as if they could simply walk up to a professor to ask—a clock on the wall told Harry that it was well past midnight, now. Also, there was no foreseeable reason why the headmaster would be in his office at his hour; he’d probably be in his rooms, but they had no idea where those were, either. For several long moments, they bumbled around the castle aimlessly, wondering if they’d run into any professors (at the moment, they weren’t feeling especially picky, and the only two that they surely wanted to avoid were definitely not in the castle right now), but the castle was abnormally quiet. On any other night, they might have been grateful for such silence, but right now, it made life much harder.

So did Filch’s appearance.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione came around a bend in the hallway, desperately searching for anyone who would believe them, when Ron very nearly stepped on Mrs. Norris. And where the cat was, Filch was soon to follow. Ron cursed. Mrs. Norris yowled.

Instinct said to run, and all three spun to do so, until Hermione grabbed Harry’s arm (he was closer), and cried, “Wait!”

“Are you bloody crazy?” Ron demanded, stopping abruptly and staring at her as if she’d lost her mind.

“No,” Hermione rolled her eyes. “Think about it, Ron. Filch can—”

“Well, well, well...” the familiar voice stopped her in mid-sentence, and all three turned to face the caretaker, who held his cat in his arms. “Students out of bed after dark...I wonder what they are doing, my sweet?”

Mrs. Norris meowed.

Hermione tried to smile. “Actually, we were looking for a professor—”

“Sure you were,” Filch snapped, his voice high and angry. “More likely you were looking for another way to destroy all the hard work that I do, cleaning this castle from floor to ceiling! Why, I wouldn’t be surprised if the three of you are in cahoots with the infernal Weasley twins—” The caretaker suddenly blinked, then cut himself off in mid-rant. “Come with me, you three. Professor Fletcher can deal with you.”

There were times when he wondered about Mr. Filch. Harry opened his mouth to object, but stopped short as Hermione kicked him in the shin. Turning to glare at her, he realized with a start that she was right—they’d been looking for a professor, anyway, and Professor Fletcher used to be an Auror. He’d know what to do, and he’d also know how to find the headmaster. Therefore, the trio followed Filch much more meekly than they might have otherwise, and waited patiently in the hall as the caretaker ducked into a room. Moments later, their head of house appeared.
Mundungus Fletcher had blond hair and green eyes, and might once have been called handsome, even if he was almost as short as the third years. However, it wasn’t the scar on the right side of his face that made him ugly—and ugly he was—rather, it was the eternally hostile and cold expression he always wore. Before his capture, Harry had heard that he’d been a kind and light-hearted man, given to laughter, and on occasion, joking, but now he was nothing of the sort. His eyes had become like green ice and were forever haunted by what he had experienced in Voldemort’s hands. No one in Gryffindor (or in all of Hogwarts, for that matter) could ever say he wasn’t fair; Professor Fletcher was fair to a fault, and never played favorites. But nobody had ever accused him of being nice.

And he wasn’t exactly well liked, either.

Harry, however, had never been so happy to see the ex-Auror as when Professor Fletcher, his short hair standing on end and covertly blinking away sleep, stormed into the hallway, demanding, “What the hell is going on here?”

Filch smirked, and Harry decided to let Hermione answer.

“Professor, we were outside and—”

“What were you doing outside?” Fletcher cut in, frowning.

“We were coming back from detention,” Ron answered promptly. “With Professor Snape.”

“Outside?” Unfortunately, the head of Gryffindor didn’t miss much, and Harry watched Hermione ‘accidentally’ trod on Ron’s foot. Hard.

“Sir, why we were outside isn’t important,” Harry said quickly, covering up Ron’s soft and none-too-masculine squeal. “What’s important is that we saw Professor Snape and Professor Quirrell leaving the castle...and they were talking about the Dark Lord. They sounded like they were Death Eaters, sir.”

Fletcher’s eyebrows shot up so quickly that they almost hit his receding hairline. “Did you now?” he asked calmly. “Are you sure you saw what you thought you saw, Mr. Potter?”

“Please, Professor, we need to see the headmaster,” Hermione cut in.

“They left, but we don’t know when they’ll be back,” Ron added, and Harry nodded, trying to support his friends.

Fletcher studied them all carefully, his eyes dark and his face cool. Under his gaze, Harry had to fight down the urge to squirm restlessly—they were wasting so much time! If he knew the way, he’d have already been running for Professor Lupin’s office. Since he didn’t, though, all they could do was wait, and hope that Professor Fletcher believed them. The look he was giving them, however, did not make it seem so. His cold eyes were dark, and showed none of the urgency that Harry knew they should. We’re not just stupid kids, he wanted to cry. We’re not making this up. After a long moment of silence, the ex-Auror finally spoke.

“Very well,” he said gruffly. “Come with me.”

Professor Fletcher’s long strides were hard to keep up with as they made their way through the hallways; somewhere along the way, Filch peeled off from their impromptu group, undoubtedly off to make more rounds through the castle in search of other troublemakers. Harry spared a moment to think of Fred, George, and Lee, and hope that they finished whatever they were planning before the caretaker happened upon them—but he really didn’t have time to worry for them. There were much larger matters to occupy his mind, at the moment, and for once, he was thankful that Professor Lupin
was such an old friend of his father’s. Harry knew that the headmaster would believe them; Remus was a member of the Order of the Phoenix, and no matter how little his parents had ever told him about Dumbledore’s secret organization, Harry knew that Remus was highly-placed in it. And that meant he’d be able to do something about Snape and Quirrell, unlike Professor Fletcher, who just stared at them with dubious eyes and obviously thought that they were overreacting.

Finally, they reached a huge gargoyle, which was set in a recess in the wall. Professor Fletcher stopped there, looking at the stone creature, and saying “Aqueduct.” Immediately, the gargoyle swung aside to reveal a spiral staircase, and without a further word, Fletcher led them up the stairs and into the headmaster’s office. Beside him, Harry heard Hermione’s soft gasp, and he couldn’t help but agree. There was something about the room that spoke of Hogwarts’ long history, and it was suddenly very amazing to be a part of that.

Portraits of past headmasters and headmistresses decorated the walls; all of them were sleeping, and not a one of them awoke as the transfiguration professor led three students into their midst—except for the portrait of Albus Dumbledore, which seemed to not have been asleep at all. Instead, the portrait of Hogwarts’ former headmaster followed them with its uncanny blue eyes, alert and watchful, just like the man who had shepherded the Wizarding world through the last four years of terror. Many said that it was his touch alone that had kept the world from falling across the brink of disaster—but Harry realized he was staring as Dumbledore’s handpicked successor came down the stairs, hastily dressed in an old robe. Lupin’s features were calm and unreadable, except for the lines around his eyes, Harry would never have guessed that a professor and three miscellaneous students did not barge into his office on a nightly basis. One light brown eyebrow rose expectantly.

“Professor Fletcher?”

The ex-Auror waved the three of them forward, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood together in an uneasy line. Fletcher replied in his gravely voice, “We seem to have a problem, Headmaster.”

“A problem?”

“Indeed.” Fletcher’s head jerked towards the trio in a doubtful manner that made Harry want to scream at him. “These three claim that they saw professors Snape and Quirrell leaving the grounds in a...suspicious manner.”

Lupin’s blue eyes studied them carefully. His voice was calm, and betrayed none of the unease that he had to feel. “Explain.”

Harry exchanged a quick look with his friends, but Hermione’s meaningful nod in his direction clearly meant that he was stuck being their spokesperson. He supposed that was a given, since he’d known Professor Lupin for most of his life, but all the same, he wished that Hermione would do it. Professors always believed Hermione. He cleared his throat.

“Sir, we were outside, and we saw Professor Snape and Professor Quirrell. From where we were, we could hear them talking...and what they said made them sound like Death Eaters.”

Lupin had reached the bottom of the stairs. “What exactly did they say, Harry?”

And Harry explained, leaving not a word out—Hermione and Ron interjected only once each to clarify matters. All the while, Lupin listened gravely, his face revealing nothing. He asked no questions, and waited until Harry had finished speaking before he exchanged a somber look with Professor Fletcher. Finally, he crossed his arms and let out a soft sigh. “I’m afraid that the three of you are mistaken,” he said quietly. “I assure you that, appearances, in this case, can be very deceiving.”
Harry felt his jaw drop.

“Professor?” Evidently, Ron was feeling the same sick surprise, and Hermione's eyes were as big as saucers.

“But sir, if this is true, Hogwarts is in danger,” she protested.

“Listen to me, you three,” Lupin said quietly. His blue eyes met each of theirs in turn. “I realize that you have come here trying to help, and I appreciate the effort. Your willingness to do so, regardless of personal risk, speaks very highly of all of you. However, I must repeat that, regardless of what you saw, you are mistaken. I am well aware of the...circumstances that caused professors Snape and Quirrell to depart the grounds tonight, and both of them have my complete confidence.”

Harry felt something cold worm inside his stomach. Although he trusted Remus Lupin—his father’s old friend was like family to him—there was something wrong. He could feel it, and he knew it; something was not right. They weren’t being told the whole truth.

“Might we ask what they were doing, Professor?” Hermione asked quietly.

“I’m afraid that I cannot tell you that,” Lupin replied with another sigh. His blue eyes, usually so gentle and caring, suddenly burned into them. “Furthermore, I must ask you to keep this information to yourselves—all of it. I cannot explain the reasons for this now, but there are many who would think as you do, and you might very well cause a panic in the school by sharing what you have seen. Do you understand?”

Harry swallowed. Something still wasn’t right. But all three of them nodded anyway. “Yes, sir.”

Behind them, Professor Fletcher grunted meaningfully, and Lupin’s eyes flickered up to meet the ex-Auror’s briefly. In the momentary silence, Harry fought to control the urge to demand to know what was going on—he was certain that they weren’t being told the entire truth. He knew that something else was going on, and despite what Lupin said, he understood exactly what Snape and Quirrell had said. There was only one “Dark Lord,” and Harry hadn’t spent almost his entire life hiding from Voldemort without learning a thing or two about him. His father was an Auror, and Harry knew more about Death Eaters than most kids his age. He knew that he wasn’t wrong—he couldn’t be!

And as much as he trusted Remus Lupin, who had always been like an uncle to him, he knew that there was something going on at Hogwarts.

And he meant to find out what.

“I’m afraid that I must ask all three of you to promise me you will say nothing,” the headmaster continued in the same gentle voice. “I will trust your words, but I must have them.”

Ron and Hermione replied immediately, promising to say nothing of what they had seen, but Harry hesitated. Something was wrong, very wrong... “Harry?”

The tone of voice was mild, as were Lupin’s features, but there was something as hard and cold as steel in Lupin’s eyes that Harry had never seen before. A part of his mind rebelled then, wondering how those eyes could belong to the man who had babysat him so often as a child, who had laughingly told him of the Marauder’s Map and some of his parents’ more embarrassing Hogwarts moments. Remus Lupin had always been the best babysitter, easy to get extra sweets from and always willing to let him stay up just a little bit later—but there was no give in those eyes. That gaze belonged to a side of the man Harry had never seen before, a man who had never had the slightest interest in learning how to back down. Looking into his surrogate uncle’s blue eyes, Harry knew he would lose.
“I promise,” he said quietly.

Lupin smiled, and the hard look disappeared as if it had never even existed. “Thank you, Harry.”
To Thine Own Self Be True

“Fidem Praestare.”

Exhausted, Severus Snape mumbled the password to admit himself to his chambers, wishing, not for the first time, that he could simply key the wards to recognize him and be done with the nonsense of passwords. However, common sense, as usual, won out, and he knew that doing so would allow any fool with a cauldron and a copy of Moste Potente Potions to brew up a batch of Polyjuice Potion and wear his form long enough to enter his chambers—which was the last thing he wanted any bastard doing. He valued his privacy. Unlike most of the Hogwarts professors, he had much to hide.

The doors obliged him and swung open, and Snape tried not to stumble inside. Why he bothered to preserve his dignity here, of all places, he did not know—there was no one to see him, after all. But old habits died hard, and his pride wasn’t exactly something he was good at ignoring. A lifetime’s worth of mistakes had taught him that, and Severus had no inclination to forget the hard lessons he’d learned over the years. They’d been too painful in the making for that.

With a sigh, he pushed such morbid thoughts out of his head. A quick glance at his clock, however, didn’t improve his mood. Lovely, he thought to himself. Six hours until my first class. He’d spend it sleeping, of course; breakfast sounded highly unappetizing at the moment. Personal experience told him that trying to eat anytime before he downed an antidote for the Cruciatus curse would guarantee that he saw the food again.

With that charming thought in mind, Severus crossed over to a nearby bookshelf and lifted a silver goblet to his lips, downing the potion in one gulp. Lateness, he reflected, had its disadvantages, no matter what he’d told Quirrell earlier. Voldemort might have been well aware of the reasons why he would often fail to respond precisely when the Dark Lord called, but that didn’t mean he accepted those reasons passively. It was enough that he didn’t kill Snape for his impertinence, for the senior Death Eater did not bother with excuses. Nor did he cower. He never had.

He wasn’t good at cowering, anyway. It always smacked of insincerity. Never had been submissive enough to manage it properly, which was probably what Voldemort liked about him so much, anyway. Snape just plain didn’t care. Oh, he might not like the pain (hated it with a passion, in fact), but generally speaking, he didn’t invest emotion into anything. Sadism, such as practiced by the majority of Death Eaters, fit most of the Dark Lord’s purposes, but Snape’s emotionless outlook on the world was dependable. He was heartless. It made things easier. Much easier.

Severus let his head fall back and eyes slide shut in relief as the potion began to take effect. Tonight hadn’t been so bad. Voldemort wasn’t the understanding type, but at least he was practical. Detentions, the Dark Lord knew, happened sometimes, although Severus doubted that Tom Riddle had ever experienced one himself. He snorted out loud, trying not to laugh at the image that created. For a moment, he indulged himself, thinking of a penitent Tom Riddle serving detention under the critical eyes of a younger Albus Dumbledore—not likely! But he still laughed. Dumbledore remained the only man who Voldemort feared. Everyone attributed it to power, but perhaps the real cause was too many detentions in the transfiguration classroom. Unrealistic as the image was, it was highly amusing. Shaking his head, Snape moved towards his bedchambers. I must be really tired, he thought to himself, opening the door and covering a yawn with the other hand at the same time. To find anything involving Voldemort at all amusing—

Then his tired eyes noticed the figure seated casually on his bed.
He cursed and jumped backwards, wand in hand, ready to do battle with the unexpected intruder—then he frowned as the other man held his hands in the air, signifying surrender. Angrily, he demanded, “What the **hell** are you doing here, Lupin?”

“Bad evening, Severus?” the headmaster asked lightly, rising.

“How could you tell?” the deputy snorted irritably.

“I have noticed, over the years, that I am ‘Lupin’ when you’re angry, ‘Remus’ when you are not, and ‘Headmaster’ in public.” A smile quirked briefly over his features, and the werewolf shrugged apologetically. “I also am well aware of where you just returned from, and of the mindset that usually puts you in.”

“Ah,” Severus replied. What else could he say? He put his wand away and looked at his superior—who was also, yes, his friend, a fact he’d have never thought possible—carefully. Over the years, he had learned to tell when Remus Lupin was worried, and this was definitely one of those times.

“Why are you here?”

All traces of a smile disappeared, and the blue eyes grew hard. “I came to warn you, Severus.”

“Warn me?”

“Tonight, when you and Quirrell were departing the grounds, I believe you had an argument?” Remus’ words were barely a question, and Severus stared at him. He knew for a fact that the headmaster had been sleeping, then... *Oh, no.*

“Who saw us?” he demanded, thinking fast.

“Three students.”

“Shit.”

“Indeed,” the headmaster agreed. And for once, there was no harsh look for Severus’ use of language no mother would wish her child to hear.

“Don’t tell me,” the Death Eater snarled. “It was the Dream Team, wasn’t it?”

“If by that you mean the Weasley twins and Lee Jordan, no,” Remus replied, turning the patented ‘headmaster’ look on Severus for his sarcastic use of the nickname he had unkindly pinned on that trio during their first year. For his part, Severus ignored the look (he was used to it), and asked:

“Who, then?” The look persisted for a moment before Remus gave up.

“Hermione Granger, Ronald Weasley, and Harry Potter.”

“Lovely.” Severus’ mind turned the issue over a few times. Matters could have been worse. Granger’s parents were Muggles, so if she wrote home about it nothing would happen. Potter—well, James and Lily were already well aware of his status, so they could be counted upon to tell their irritating son to shut up and leave it well enough alone. But Weasley would be the problem. His father worked for the Ministry, and would probably call up Arabella Figg to deal with the problem... That problem, so to speak, would stop with Arabella (or James, for that matter), but it would still leave Arthur Weasley, and probably his wife, in possession of more knowledge than Severus was comfortable with—but Remus was continuing.

“Luckily, the three of them had the sense to go to Dung about it, and he brought them to me. All
three have promised to say nothing about it. I told them that appearances can be deceiving, and they
did not see what they thought they saw.”

“Lied through your teeth, I can see,” Severus remarked, trying to hide his relief. “You’re getting
better at that.”

“But no more fond of it,” Remus replied seriously. “So do us all a service and be more careful in the
future, Severus. Not all students would come to Dung or I—can you imagine what would happen if
one of them went to, say, Sibyll Trelawney? We’d be up to our neck in Aurors by now.”

“Point taken,” Severus grunted. “I apologize.” The idea of the paranoid divination professor
controlling his fate wasn’t a pretty one. He frowned, though, as another thought occurred to him.
“What the hell were they doing up, anyway?”

“Please tell me that you hit your head, else I’ll be forced to wonder how you forget your own
detentions.”

He might have blushed, but Severus was pretty sure that he’d forgotten how. “That doesn’t explain
why they didn’t go back to bed when I released them.”

“What do you think they were doing?” Remus cocked an eyebrow at him and smiled ever so
slightly. “Do you really want to know?”

“No, because then I’d be obliged to sit through another detention with the brats.”

“Spare me the nasty professor act, Severus,” his friend replied mildly, making Severus sigh once
more. It irked him to realize that he really wasn’t in much control of himself tonight.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “It’s been a long night.”

Lupin’s expression softened, and he nodded. “I came to warn you; I thought you would want to
know. But now that’s accomplished, and it’s late. Get some sleep, Severus.”

He smiled wanly as Remus moved past him and through the door. “Thank you for the warning. I
will be more careful in the future, and I’ll ensure that Quirrell is as well.”

“I know you will.” With the parting remark, Remus was gone, and Severus stared at the door for a
moment after he had left. It was still strange knowing that Remus had warned him out of concern for
his safety and not only because of the mission that they shared. Once, they had hated one another
with a passion, but now…now things were different. He laughed again, but it sounded forced even
to his own ears. A part of him, Severus supposed, was still getting used to friendship.

*It’s odd,* Severus reflected as changed into his nightclothes, *how things change with time.*

“I’ll do it, James,” Arabella said quietly, and watched her former student’s hazel eyes widen in
surprise with no small amount of satisfaction.
Sunlight was pouring through the nearby window, and it was a welcome sight; they had both, after all, been at work since dawn, especially considering the raids that were planned for that evening. The light made James look younger than he was, almost like he’d been when she’d first met him over thirteen years ago, but it didn’t hide his unhappiness. Before the Auror’s self control could reassert itself, his mouth managed to drop open, and James stared at her as if she’d grown a second head. A moment passed before he began to speak, but she cut him off. After all, she knew exactly what he was going to say.

“You, of all people, certainly cannot do this,” the head of Magical Law Enforcement said sternly. “You know that, James.”

“Why not?” he managed, still staring at her.

She was sitting casually on his desk in a way that most women her age wouldn’t be caught doing. Arabella had initially come to hear out the finalized version of James’ Azkaban Plan—codenamed ICEBREAKER—but hadn’t been surprised at all when he’d volunteered himself. She knew him better than that, and knew the risks far better than he did. Maybe it was simply an advantage of age. She smiled slightly, thinking, I love you like a son, James Potter, but sometimes you can be the stupidest man I’ve ever met. “Well, aside from the fact that Lily would kill me, there’s the fact of who you are.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but she overrode him easily—and gently.

“People need heroes, James. Face the fact that you are one to the Wizarding world. We can’t afford to lose you; not now. I’m more expendable than you are, yet I’m equally believable. Voldemort knows I am of the Order’s inner circle. He’ll hunger for the information that’s inside my head.”

“But you’re—”

“If you even dare say that I’m old, James, I’ll tell you to shove that piece of rubbish up your nose,” she replied tartly. After all, Arabella certainly didn’t consider sixty-three old. Not with the way Dumbledore was running around at his age.

“I was going to say that you’re the Head of Magical Law Enforcement,” her subordinate replied quietly.

It was a good thing that she was too old to bother feeling embarrassment. Open mouth; insert foot, Arabella thought with slight amusement. She spoke quickly to cover up her own foolishness. “Name one part of my job that you can’t do.”

“Now wait a minute—I’m needed in the field!”

“And you could do the Ministry exactly how much service locked up in Azkaban?” Arabella shot back, trying not to smile at James’ befuddled expression. Who had he thought she’d choose as her replacement, anyway? Fudge? The very thought made her want to get sick.

“Plenty,” he retorted.

She looked him in the eye. “As could I.”

“Bella—”

“And you’re not needed in the field,” she cut him off once more. “In fact, you need to get out of the field and stop taking such foolish chances. Next to Dumbledore, you’re the most potent symbol we’ve got, and if we lose you, James, much of what we’ve fought to rebuild in the last four years
will crumble to nothing.”

He stared at her, and Arabella knew that he just didn’t see. Bless his innocent little heart, the boy still hadn’t realized how important he’d become. That, she knew, came because James Potter was a good man, and he didn’t possess the extravagant ego of so many other high-ranking Ministry officials. He was confident—some said arrogant, but they were wrong—and he knew he was good at his job, but James wore his fame lightly. He always had. Finally, he spoke.

“I’m not that important.”

“Don’t argue with me, James.” She softened the hard words with a smile. “We need you. End of story.”

“So why you, then?” he demanded with exasperation.

“Who else?” Arabella snorted. “The only other person I’d trust would be Snape, and he’s not exactly an option. Dung would never do it, and Remus is just too nice. Azkaban would eat him alive—even after all he’s gone through, Remus isn’t bitter enough for that place.”

“Whereas you are.” James sighed. His tone was almost resentful, but not quite; in that moment, she knew he understood. Even if he did not want to. Their options were limited, really, and he knew it. It had to be someone that Voldemort would want, someone in the Inner Circle of the Order of the Phoenix. She watched him mull over the problem, hiding a smile as James’ fingers drummed unconsciously against his desk. He was trying to come up with other options, but in the end he would find the same thing she had. “Damn.”

“Don’t worry, James,” Arabella said lightly. “Didn’t you just tell me a few minutes ago how well your plan would work?”

The look he gave her was acid. “That was when I thought it would be me,” James groused. “I’d rather risk my life than yours.”

Sadness, suddenly, weighed down her heart, although she could not fathom why. For some reason, it became hard to answer: “I know.”

Remus paused in the doorway, but the slight break in his stride would not have been noticed by someone who did not know him well. Less than a quarter hour before, he’d received an unexpected fire call from Lily Potter (ostensibly Dumbledore’s administrative assistant, but actually much more), asking him to meet with the minister as soon as possible, and the wary look on her face had warned Remus that this would not be fun. She hadn’t told him what the meeting was about—there were simply some things that couldn’t be discussed in the open—but Remus knew her well enough to expect problems from the moment he had Flooed to the Ministry. Stepping into Dumbledore’s office, therefore, came as little surprise.

What caused his slight hesitation was the presence of a second wizard in the old man’s office; the sour-faced and beady-eyed Deputy Minister of Magic, Bartemius Crouch. Despite feeling the hostile gaze upon him, Remus strode fearlessly into the room. His was a hard won confidence, but he owed nothing to Crouch, whom he liked not at all. Although he’d never argue with Crouch’s dedication to
Voldemort’s defeat, the methods that the older man employed often disgusted the Hogwarts headmaster. The friction between the pair was well known. Many people, of course, struck sparks with Crouch’s abrasive personality, but Remus was also aware that the Deputy Minister had always opposed his presence at Hogwarts. That wasn’t a personality issue at all; rather, the feelings were due to a prejudice that could still burn at him, no matter how many years he had spent fighting against it.

But there were some battles you simply could not win, and Remus knew when not to bother. Men like Crouch were never worth it. And he could afford to ignore people who were too narrow minded to look beyond what he was, particularly these days. After all, the magical world had come great distances in his lifetime, and he’d never expected to reach the point he was at now.

“Remus!” Dumbledore’s enthusiastic greeting prevented any awkward encounters; he had always known how Crouch and Remus felt about one another. The headmaster took the proffered hand with a grateful smile.

“Minister.” The twinkle in Dumbledore’s eyes told Remus that he understood the formality. It wouldn’t do to let the ever-nosy Crouch understand the how the Order of the Phoenix really worked, and the close friendship they shared.

“Please, sit down.” A gesture pointed Remus towards a green-cushioned chair opposite the desk and next to Crouch; as the headmaster made himself comfortable, Dumbledore settled back behind his desk. Some of the twinkle left the familiar blue eyes, however, as the old wizard continued: “I am afraid that I must place a Silencing Charm on this room, since what needs to be said may to incalculable damage if overheard. Do either of you object?”

Remus shook his head slightly to signify he did not; although he wondered what this could be about, he trusted Dumbledore’s judgment—after so long working for him, how could he not? But he noticed that the Minister’s eyes were focused on his deputy. Crouch hesitated, frowning deeply, but he eventually sighed.

“Of course not.” The look on his face was nowhere near as convincing as his words, though, but Dumbledore seemed not to notice (it often amazed Remus how much the Minister could willfully ignore), and cast the charm with a flick of his wand.

“Very well.” Dumbledore put his wand away. “Barty, would you like to begin?”

The smug look that suddenly colored Crouch’s face set Remus’ teeth on edge, and he knew that his first impressions were right—this wasn’t going to be good. The Deputy Minister nodded in what was probably meant to be a gracious manner. “Thank you, Albus.”

He turned slightly to face Remus, and a hint of a superior smile made his features no more kind. Crouch didn’t even bother to keep the satisfaction out of his voice. “I’m afraid I have bad news for you.”

“Oh?” Remus was determined to keep his voice level, and not to rise to the bait that arrogant expression offered.

“Indeed.” Crouch’s dark eyes glittered. “It seems, Headmaster, that you have a spy in your midst. In fact, among your staff at Hogwarts.”

Oh, crap. His heart started pounding in his ears as he examined the possibilities. But Remus had years of experience in keeping himself under control, and he asked calmly, “Would you care to inform me of whom, Minister, or must I be kept in the dark?”
“I would think, Lupin, that someone in your position would be a little less casual concerning matters like this,” Crouch replied archly, his eyes flashing.

“Do you mean my position as headmaster, Minister, or the fact that I am a werewolf?” Remus demanded, struggling to keep anger out of his voice. He had been dealing with prejudices all of his life, but he wasn’t accustomed to having his loyalty questioned. It left a sour taste in his mouth.

“Should I be concerned about either?”

When Remus received a warning look from Dumbledore, he supposed that he might have gone a tad far. Slowly, he sucked in a deep breath, counting silently to five before he continued. “I may be technically classified as a ‘Dark creature,’ Mr. Crouch, but I am as human as you are—and prone to mistakes, at times,” he replied, keeping his voice level once more. “I am not, however, a creature of Voldemort’s. We have passed over this ground before, and I, for one, am tired of doing so. Please make your point, Minister, and tell me of who has infiltrated my staff.”

He saw the slight smile quirk on Dumbledore’s wizened face, and knew that he’d countered Crouch’s anger perfectly and without disrespecting the trust that the Minister had in him. Remus gazed calmly at the other man, watching Crouch’s eyes narrow in both anger and suspicion. He knew that this would go no further; years before, Dumbledore had made it plain to Crouch that doing so would earn him a quick dismissal. There were certainly reasons why Dumbledore kept the abrasive wizard as his deputy, but love for his personality wasn’t one of them, and the stern look that the Minister turned in his subordinate’s direction made no words necessary. His displeasure was evident in his hard blue eyes.

“Very well,” Crouch replied grudgingly. He paused for a moment, collecting himself, and then a slight sneer crossed his face. “At any rate, we finally have proof of something we have suspected for a long while. One of our spies has confirmed that Severus Snape is a Death Eater.”

“I see.” Remus leaned back in his chair slowly, letting his eyes flicker in Dumbledore’s direction. How to handle this? There were any number of things he could say, but none of them changed the fact that Crouch wouldn’t believe him, because once the deputy minister sank his teeth into something—especially a Death Eater—it was almost impossible to make him let go. Meeting his gaze, though, Dumbledore raised one eyebrow in question, and the Hogwarts headmaster nodded, more than willing to let the Minister handle it. The old man was, after all, the head of the Order.

“I am afraid, Barty, that you only have half of the available information,” Dumbledore said quietly. “And I have known that Severus Snape is a Death Eater for some time.”

“What?” Crouch snapped.

The Minister continued as if he hadn’t heard the other’s objection. “What I fail to understand, though, is why you—or your source—did not bring this matter to Arabella’s attention.”

“What I can’t understand is why you haven’t told me this before,” Crouch countered irritably.

“You had no need to know.”

“I had no need to know?” The demand was punctuated by an angry jerk of his head in Remus’ direction. “I assume he did.”

“I am the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” Remus replied mildly.

“That’s my point,” Crouch snarled. “Why the hell are you letting a Death Eater teach at Hogwarts?”
Remus smiled slightly; he hated to admit that he was actually enjoying himself, but he’d never liked Crouch. “I firmly believe that Severus Snape is the best man for the job.”

“Are you insane?” the other sputtered, and it briefly occurred to the headmaster how nice it was to see Crouch caught off guard. But the Deputy Minister turned to stare at Dumbledore. “Albus, surely you’ve got to see sense. You can’t have one of Voldemort’s spies—Wait a minute! You hired him, didn’t you?”

“Indeed I did,” the former headmaster replied evenly. “Knowing from the first his role in the Dark Lord’s circle.”

Crouch finally seemed unable to speak. His mouth opened, and he spread his hands apart as if to prove a point, but no words emerged. He might have recovered, had Dumbledore not continued:

“Severus Snape is indeed a Death Eater, Barty. However, he has also been spying for me for over a decade. I trust him. Remus trusts him. The reason why you were not notified was for his protection—and I must remind you that if you reveal this, it will mean his death.”

Crouch scowled. “How can you be sure that he’s working for us?”

“Oh, I am sure,” Dumbledore replied.

“I don’t trust him.”

Remus reentered the conversation. “To be quite frank, Mr. Crouch, you do not know Severus Snape. And he is not what you think he is.”

“Then what is he, a redeemed Death Eater?” was the answering snort. But it was Dumbledore who smiled gently.

“You could simply say that he has his reasons.”
It wasn’t quite the Quidditch locker room, but for some reason, he was reminded of those days. Of course, he’d only played during his sixth year (the combined pressure of studying for the N.E.W.T.s and being Head Boy had kept him off of the team during his seventh) but the memories were still pleasant and strong. Memories…there were many of them, some bitter and others sweet, because much had changed since those days. The dreams he’d had at Hogwarts had faded, now, driven under by the weight of duty in dark times. Once, Bill Weasley remembered wanting to be a Gringotts curse-breaker. Now he was an Auror.

Similarities aside, atmosphere in the ready room was different from the Gryffindor locker room at Hogwarts. His companions here were much more serious than his teammates had ever been, even in the aftermath of losing the Quidditch Cup to Slytherin his sixth year. Here, there was more than House points or prestige at stake—theirs was a game of life and death, and in a profession with a death rate of almost seventy percent, one couldn’t afford lapses in concentration. As such, there was little banter while they prepared for missions; there was only silent and solemn preparation. In other situations they were friendlier, but even considering that, Aurors were professionals and formed few deep friendships. Few of them lasted long enough to become more than just casual acquaintances and co-workers, anyway.

Bill Weasley had been on the job for seven years, which was five years longer than the average Auror. It was a statistical fact that most Aurors died during their first six missions. Fully a third of the ones who made it past that point never lived through the mandatory six month long Mentorship. After that, survival rates went up—but so did the number of Death Eaters who held a personal grudge against you. Experience was a double-edged sword, and it cut both ways. Bill Weasley wasn’t quite yet what the others considered an “old timer,” and that was a fact he was very glad of. Most of the old timers were dead.

Unwillingly, his eyes drifted to the far wall with that thought. Over the past decade, that area had become known as the Wall of Heroes. Soon, he knew, they would have to create a second of that kind, though, because the bronze wall was three-quarters covered with the names of the fallen. Bill’s eyes drifted down the list, recalling those who had gone before him. Many names had joined the list when he’d still been in school, but there were others whose loss hit closer to home. Foremost amongst those was five rows from the left: Charlie Weasley.

That one still hurt. Burned, more like. Charlie had been his baby brother, his best friend. Years might have separated them (although very few, when taken in the greater context of the Weasley family), but they had always been close. Despite that, or perhaps because of that very closeness, Bill had been horrified when his brother had followed him into the Aurors—but he’d also been very proud. Charlie had graduated at the very top of his Basic Training class, and then had gone on to be Mentored by none other than James Potter himself—Charlie had created a sensation in the Aurors, bringing the reflexes and work ethic that had made him such a great Quidditch seeker into the field. Charlie had the potential to be one of the best, and he’d been good. He’d burned bright…but in the end he’d burned short. After only two years as an Auror, Charles Weasley had been killed when walking down a street in Muggle London—struck down by a Death Eater who had never been found.

The loss could still tear him apart, and Bill swallowed furiously, struggling to bring his mind back on track. The time for grieving was over. He had a job to do—and revenge to gain. Perhaps that was a sad fact, but it was no less true. Charlie’s death had made the war personal for the Weasley family; now, every victim of Voldemort’s wore Charlie’s face. Bill knew that stopping Death Eaters
wouldn’t bring his brother back, but if there was any hope, any way, that he could prevent that from happening to anyone else—especially one of his *other* siblings—he would do so. Even at the cost of his own life. Some things, he knew, were simply worth dying for.

The other names on that bronze coated wall had been men and women who felt the same. Their numbers were legion and their names were legends; beside each was a date. They ranged from Edgar Bones on March 7, 1971—the name at the top of the far left hand column belonged to the first Auror to fall as the Dark Lord came to power—to the most recent of the fallen. Reading the newest name at the bottom of the last column necessitated taking another deep breath. Estella Cardiel had been a good friend, only a year behind Bill out of Basic Training. Had the world been a little different, Estella might have become *more* than a friend, but Bill had never investigated those possibilities, and now it was too late. The date next to name read December 2, 1991—yesterday.

Shaking his head, Bill tore his eyes away from that name, too. But there were others there to catch his eye, such as the legendary Dennis Montague (July 7, 1976); his classmate, Warren Stormchaser (January 23, 1985); or his Mentor, Alastor Moody (May 15, 1988). He had seen too much death, lost too many friends...but even as he tried to look away, one other name caught his eye. It was different than the others, at the top of the fourth row from the right: Sirius Black (UNKNOWN, 1981).

Somehow, that one always got his attention. Perhaps that was because Bill had always enjoyed solving mysteries, and the name stood out from the rest, for there was no date. They did not know the truth. Even in the *Book of the Fallen*, the official Auror record of every death of their own while on active duty, there was no date. There was no cause of death, even, for they did not really know. It was the one name in the book for which there hadn’t even been the mangled parts of a body found or a witness to the end; yet all the same, Sirius Black had become the epitome of how an Auror should die. Their motto was simple: *Mors Ante Infamia*. It embodied what they were, everything they prayed to be or do: to die without revealing secrets and to go to the grave without betraying trusts. In simpler terms: “Death Before Dishonor.” It was an age-old axiom, but tragic stories like Sirius Black’s drove home the truth inherent in the Auror’s ancient maxim. In the end, Bill only hoped he could be so strong.

And he hoped that end would not come today.

Suddenly, the ready room door opened, and even as his head turned to see who it was, his mind was clicking back into gear. Distractions were gone. Grief was set aside. Feelings were irrelevant—it was game time. Without a conscious effort, Bill Weasley had shut the human part of himself away as he slammed his locker’s door shut. It would be there waiting for him when he got back.

“It’s time, ladies and gentlemen,” James Potter said evenly, standing alone in front of the “drawing board,” which showed every detail of their target and every line of their planned assault. The assembled team had already been briefed twice in depth, but it was customary to do so again before departure. No one minded the repetition. As they all knew, it saved lives. Then the head of their Division smiled somewhat wearily and launched into the mission orders without hesitation. “All right. This one is fairly straightforward, but it’s got every chance to become complicated when we least expect it. There was a rather bright Muggle named Murphy who once said ‘Everything that can go wrong will go wrong,’ and he’s certainly right in this situation.

“What we are looking at is a raid in the classical sense of the word. The reason why we’re going in with two teams of eight each is because intelligence has revealed that there is a meeting of a group of Death Eaters, under the leadership of the Lestrange brothers, who as we all know, are two of Voldemort’s most dangerous supporters. They’re also at least a little insane. They were released after the fall of Azkaban five years ago and have been responsible for some of the worst atrocities
committed in this war. I don’t think I need to point out the positive effect that their capture, or even their deaths, would have for our cause.

“That said, I don’t want anyone taking stupid chances. Intelligence tells us that there are at least a dozen Death Eaters who will be at this meeting, and even though we’ll outnumber them, there’s no room for error. Stick to your roles, and we’ll do fine.” Potter’s hazel eyes burned out from behind his battered glasses, sweeping over the gathered Aurors with an intensity that made a chill run down Bill’s spine. There were some people who simply had a presence, some special quality more felt than seen. James Potter was one of those.

“I’ll be leading Alpha Team through the front door,” he continued after a moment. “Due to a last minute change in plans, Ernie Jordan will not be leading Bravo Team—unfortunately, he’s needed elsewhere right now, and he can’t be with us today. Therefore, Minister Figg will be rejoining us for the duration of this mission, and she will be Bravo Leader, coming through the back way. Are there any questions?”

A whisper of surprise charged its way around the room, and Bill could feel the excitement. But no one argued; there wasn’t an Auror in the Division who would ever doubt the capabilities of that sharp-eyed old lady standing off to one side. They’d wondered why she was present for this pre-mission briefing, but they had always trusted her. Head of Magical Law Enforcement though she might be, Arabella Figg was one of their own. For better or worse, she was still an Auror, and she definitely belonged in that small group of witches and wizards whom the Division called “old timers.” Arabella Figg had been there, done that, and seen it all. Today, it seemed like she was aiming to do it one last time.

There were the usual questions: layout, specifications, angles of attack—all things that experienced Aurors asked without a second thought. As the final preparations were made—a check of wands, a quick glance at a partner—Bill couldn’t help but notice the newbies out of the corner of his eye. Poor kids, he thought. There were two of them for today’s mission, one barely out of Basic and the other just free of Mentorship. He didn’t remember the name of either, but he could see Virginia Wilson standing close to the newest one’s side, watching with the careful eyes of a Mentor. She was one of the “old timers,” incredibly talented and probably too practiced in the field, but Bill could only hope that translated over into having a talented student.

“Apparation point in five,” Potter called, and the time for worries was over. On cue, Bill lifted his wand, and with the others, Apparated.

“There’s been another attack, Hagrid,” Dumbledore said quietly, and the half-giant frowned. Rubeus Hagrid completely dwarfed the chair in the Minister’s office; had he not carefully reinforced it with magic ahead of time, Dumbledore might have encountered a rather embarrassing instance of his old friend shifting and breaking the antique chair without meaning to. Of course, in Albus’ learned opinion, the chair itself was a rather ugly piece of work, and he’d have been glad to be rid of it—but Hagrid would have been devastated by such an accident. So, despite his own feelings about the chair (which had probably been around as long as there had been a Minister of Magic),
Dumbledore had cast the strength spell even as Lily told him that Hagrid was on his way in. She played the roll of “assistant” nicely, he thought with a smile. Few ever remembered how smart and powerful she really was.

And like Lily, Hagrid was much more than he seemed. Most thought him stupid—which was far from true—and others still wrote him off as useless. He was only the Hogwarts’ gamekeeper, of course. What importance could the apparently inept and abnormally large man be? Dumbledore smiled to himself again. What importance, indeed. But he erased the smile as his former student frowned deeply, obviously trying to figure out why he of all people had been called into see the Minister of Magic.

“I’m sorry ter hear that, Professor—I mean, Minister,” the big man replied. Suddenly, though, fear colored his features. “They don’t think that I have anything ter do with it, d’they?”

“No, they do not,” Albus answered calmly. “I asked you to come here for another reason, actually. I need to ask you for a favor.”

“A favor? ‘Course you can, Profess—Minister!” The gamekeeper’s round face lit up, making Albus smile at the innocent enthusiasm that so defined Hagrid.

“You can still call me Professor if you wish, Hagrid,” he said gently. “It makes no difference to me.”

“But I don’t wan’ ter sound disrespectful or anything, sir,” was the answer.

Albus chuckled. “I don’t find it disrespectful at all. In fact, I believe that it sometimes helps people to remind them of the past…especially in days like this. My time at Hogwarts was the finest of my life, and I sincerely hope that I will always be ‘Professor Dumbledore’ to you.”

“But yer the best headmaster Hogwarts ever had!” the half-giant burst out, and then blushed. “I mean, no disrespectin’ Professor Lupin an’ all; he’s a fine gent, but we miss yer, Professor Dumbledore.”

“Why, thank you, Hagrid.” At his age, it was hard to be embarrassed—but some people, such as one Rubeus Hagrid, could still do that. And even a heart that had seen the horrible things that his had could still be touched. It was a good thing to remember.

The half-giant blushed even redder, making Albus further resist the urge to laugh, something that Hagrid would misunderstand. He mumbled, “I was jus’ tellin’ the truth, Professor.”

“We all tell truths in our own ways, my friend,” he replied softly. “But sometimes we must do more than that. I must ask you, Hagrid: can I rely on you?”

“Course you can, Professor!” Hagrid looked mildly offended that he might ask, and Albus softened the blow.

“I know that I can depend upon you,” he responded. “But any secrets I tell you are not fully my own—if you reveal what I tell you tonight, many lives will be at risk.”

“Oh.” The other sobered immediately. “Yer secrets are safe with me, Professor. An’ so are any others.”

Albus nodded. “Hagrid, have you ever heard of the Order of the Phoenix?”

“No, sir. I haven’t.”
“Good.” He smiled slightly. “In short, the Order is a group of witches and wizards dedicated to defeating Voldemort. For the most part, the Order works outside of official Ministry channels, although there are certain key members who are highly placed in both the Order and the Ministry of Magic.”

“Like you.” No one had ever said Hagrid was stupid.

“Like me,” the Minister of Magic nodded. “The reason I am telling you this is because the favor I have to ask you has nothing to do with the Ministry. If you accept the mission I propose, you won’t be working for the Ministry. You’ll be working for the Order of the Phoenix.”

“Mission, Professor Dumbledore?” Hagrid regarded him seriously for a moment, his eyes focused and calm. “I’ll do it fer ya.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “You haven’t even asked what it is, Hagrid.”

“I don’ have ter, Professor. I trust ya.”

For one short moment, Albus Dumbledore’s heart threatened to seize up in his chest. Even at his age, he could still be surprised. And it was in moments like this that he really and truly believed that the war could be won. “Thank you,” he replied quietly. “But you are still free to refuse once you know what it is, Hagrid.”

“I won’. What ‘tis it?” Hagrid smiled, and Albus knew he would succeed. With a heart so large, how could he fail? He took a deep breath, and then replied:

“I want to send you to see the giants, Hagrid.”

Alpha Team appeared in a nondescript street in front of an innocent-seeming building. Ostensibly, it was a restaurant named the Dragon’s Tail (Fine Steaks and Enchanting Dining), owned by one Francis Travers. In actuality, the restaurant was a meeting place for Death Eaters, although the Ministry had never been able to prove it. This time, however, was different—a source had told them exactly when this group was to meet, and it was rumored to include not only the Lestranges, who were Voldemort’s personal “specialists” (otherwise known as expert torturers), but also Travers and Mulciber, two targets very near the top of the Ministry’s list. Heart pounding, Bill glanced around, but the street was quiet—abnormally quiet, in fact, for just before sunset.

Alarms went off in his head.

Something was wrong. So very wrong—on instinct, he spun towards James Potter, but the other man’s hazel eyes met his, and even as Bill opened his mouth, he got a minute shake of the head in reply. He felt his own eyes widen in surprise, and he stared at their leader without understanding, but Potter only said, very quietly:

“We go.”
Then the senior Auror was in motion, gliding towards the restaurant with a grace that Bill could only envy. “Careful, ladies and gents,” Potter called over his shoulder. “They may know we’re here.”

A half-dozen fast steps brought them to the front door. Potter, as team leader and on point, had his left hand on the knob, wand raised in his right; Bill, as the team’s anchor, was right behind him. *Breathe in, breathe out.* This was the short pause that Aurors called the moment of truth. He ran a mental check on his personal shield, ensuring that an unexpected curse couldn’t catch him off guard, and then Bill chanced a look around. To his left and right, he saw both teams on the wings, heading for the Dragon’s Tail’s two largest windows. Their movements, like his glances, were quick and practiced; the team had done raids like this so often, both in drill and reality, that they could find their positions in their sleep. The plan was kept simple, always, to eliminate mistakes—then the signal came, and they burst through the door.

Potter went right; Bill broke left, his wand up and ready even as he watched their team leader deflect a well-aimed curse. The Death Eaters were standing and ready, facing them and firing curses at them immediately. From the left wing, he heard Virginia Wilson swear, but there was no time to figure out why. His shield deflected an Impediment Curse cast hurriedly by Mulciber, and Bill dodged Travers’ Incinerator Curse, hearing it sizzle and burn as it hit the wall behind him even as he spoke the counter to Bellatrix Lestrange’s Reductor Curse. *Damn. I thought she wasn’t supposed to be here!*

Two more steps carried him further into the fray, and a quick “*Stupefy!*” took care of a Death Eater who had been facing Bravo Team as they came in the back way. Suddenly, on the far side of the room, he heard the tell tale beginning, and felt a cold chill race down his spine.

“Ava—”

But the enemy in question went down, unable to finish, felled by James Potter even as the famous Auror avoided Rodolphus Lestrange’s attempt to stupefy him. Something prickled in the back of Bill’s mind, and he realized, *They want him alive.* Deadly curses were the norm for Death Eaters; they had no qualms with killing, but it was becoming very clear that the Killing Curse was not to be aimed at James Potter. As several more seconds ticked by, Bill’s suspicion was confirmed—until something else happened to make him forget all about that.

Leading Bravo Team through the back way, Arabella Figg went down.

For a moment, the world seemed to freeze, and Bill’s mind clicked into overdrive. Arabella Figg was the Head of Magical Law Enforcement. She was a hero in the Wizarding world for her courageous and clear-headed guidance during the war. She hadn’t been an active-duty Auror for years, but she was still a legend. She was important. She was loved—and the cupboard of heroes had been getting bare with a disturbing steadiness, especially with the recent loss of good men like Frank Longbottom. They couldn’t afford to lose her.

Without thinking, Bill bolted forward, taking down a Death Eater who was in the process of levitating the Minister’s unconscious body. Figg fell to the floor with a *thunk,* limp and not moving. The Auror next to her reacted quickly, though, bending down to awaken their department head, only to collapse with a scream as Mulciber threw the Cruciatus Curse his way. Seeing no one else close enough and aware that there was no time to spare, Bill took three quick steps along the perimeter of the dining room, dodging a Suffocation Spell as he went. His focus was so narrow that he almost missed Potter’s command.

“*Fall back!*” the senior Auror called. “*Plan Zulu!*”

Plan Zulu was the bug-out command, the worst-case scenario. It was the signal to get out however
you could and Apparate individually, meeting at the prearranged rally point. Plan Zulu usually meant that Murphy had reared his ugly head and it was time to cut the Division’s losses and get out. Confused, Bill stole a glance around the room—he usually had good situational awareness, and he hadn’t thought that things were that bad yet. Oddly enough, his eyes confirmed what he had sensed; it was getting messy, but the raid was still salvageable. In fact, the only major hiccup in the plan had been the Minister going down…a few others had been struck, true, but no one was dead. In fact, everyone but Figg was still standing, though a few were indeed bloody and bruised.

But Potter was the boss.

Bill knew there was little time to spare; within seconds, they would all be gone. Another Auror reached for Figg, only to be blasted backwards by Travers—the Death Eaters definitely wanted to capture her, because the Head of the DMLE would be the highest ranking person Voldemort had ever been able to hold—and they couldn’t allow that to happen. He knew Arabella Figg well enough to know that she’d rather die than be captured. Bill felled a Death Eater with a quick Freezing Charm and dashed to her side. Neither death nor capture was going to happen while he could help it—he felt power sizzle, and breathed a sigh of relief as his shield ate up a Stunning Spell. Unfortunately, his shield collapsed in doing so, and he was left naked. That was never a pleasant feeling.

There was no time for prettiness or technique; only sheer power. As his Mentor had taught him long ago, Bill channeled all his raw energy and anger into his magic, and grabbed Figg’s limp arm. Apparating another was always tricky, but her unconsciousness ought to have made it easier—at least there was one less factor to worry about. To his right, Bellatrix Lestrange raised her wand, the Killing Curse on her lips—

And they were gone.
“Little rat!”

“Muggle-loving scum—Ouch!” The blonde boy clutched his broken left arm to his chest, struggling not to double over in pain. His wand lay on the ground several feet away.

“Serves you right for what you did, Malfoy!” came the snarled reply. “Are you going to cry, now, Draco? Run to your Death Eater father for help?”

Gray eyes flashed angrily, and Malfoy straightened, stepping menacingly towards his opponent. “You want to find out, Weasley?” he demanded furiously. “Would you like to know what happens to people who anger a Malfoy?”

“Give it your best,” Fred sneered, staring down at the Slytherin. He was so angry that he could hardly breathe; the edges of his vision were threatening to go red, and all he could think about was how wonderful it would be to smash the arrogant little prat’s face into goo. Heaven knew, he deserved it…

“You’ll regret this, Weasley!” he hissed painfully.

“You think so? At the moment it’s you who’s—”

“Weasley! Malfoy!” Mundungus Fletcher’s voice suddenly roared over Fred’s taunt. “What the hell is going on here?”

Both turned; Fred was tempted to hex Malfoy first (preferably with something else nasty, excruciatingly painful, and absolutely disgusting looking), but he knew better. His fury didn’t cool, but he struggled to contain it, anyway. Professor Fletcher wasn’t exactly the forgiving type, and Fred knew from experience that it was best to shut up and let him speak. Malfoy, however, did not share his view of the head of Gryffindor House.

“It’s his fault, Professor!” the Slytherin first year spat. “He hexed me! I was only trying to defend myself—”

“Be quiet.”

“He ought to be expelled!” Malfoy snapped importantly. “A third year attacking a first year. Why —”

“Silence!” The bellow startled the boy into silence, and Fred resisted the urge to smirk—until Professor Fletcher’s angry green eyes burned into his own. He shivered, unable to help himself, as Fletcher growled, “Explain.”

There was nothing to do but tell the truth. “He attacked Angelina.”

“I did not!” Fletcher’s scarred face swung around to stare at Malfoy once more. Infuriated, the blonde boy snarled, “He’s lying!”

“And I suppose she’s lying on the ground over there for fun!” Fred’s temper boiled over, and he stepped towards Malfoy once more, no longer caring that a professor was watching. He needed to pound the little brat into goo. Fred didn’t even want to use magic anymore; he just wanted to make Malfoy hurt—but Fletcher stepped in between them, his face tight with anger.
“You stay where you are, young man!” he thundered. Fred froze, and watched his head of House wheeled back on the Slytherin boy. “Now, Malfoy, you’re going to tell me the truth, or we’ll go take this up with the headmaster right now.”

The look on Malfoy’s face said that he was anything but afraid of Remus Lupin, but as Fletcher’s green eyes burned into him, and the Slytherin seemed to finally realize that he had much more immediate problems than the headmaster—like an ex-Auror who wasn’t exactly pleased with him. However, Malfoy remained stubborn, even if his reply was a bit less arrogant. “He attacked me.”

“Weasley?” Fletcher must have realized that he wasn’t going to learn anything more from Malfoy, because he looked at Fred once more. “The truth.”

“We were coming back late from Care of Magical Creatures—Angelina and I stayed back to help Professor Kettleburn—and Angelina bumped into Malfoy by accident. She said excuse me, but he called her…well, he called her something nasty, and when Angelina told him to grow up, he hexed her.” The words had all come out in a rush; Fred had to take a deep breath when he’d finished. He hoped that Fletcher believed him. There were times that being a prankster wasn’t to your advantage, especially when you wanted someone to trust you.

“What did you call her, Malfoy?” Fletcher’s voice was hard.

“I didn’t call her anything.” There was clearly no give in the boy’s gray eyes; he wasn’t going to tell. Fletcher hadn’t even bothered looking at Malfoy. He had probably expected this, after all.

“Weasley?”

Fred sighed. His mum would kill him if she ever heard him say the words, but obviously Malfoy’s mother wasn’t so strict. “A Gryffindor bitch, sir.”

Fletcher’s eyes flashed. “And then what happened? What did he hex her with?”

“A Fully Body Bind, Professor,” he replied. “But then he started to say something else. It started with ‘Cruc—’.” And Fred really didn’t want to think of the only curse he knew with that beginning.

The professor’s face tightened, and he spun around to face Malfoy, fury etched into every line of his scarred features. The look in his angry eyes told Fred that, no, he hadn’t been mistaken—and now he didn’t regret breaking Malfoy’s arm one bit. The Slytherin boy’s face tightened under Fletcher’s relentless gaze, but he still clutched at his broken arm. There was pain in his eyes, but Fred didn’t care—besides, that was what happened when your arm got hit by a rather large rock.

He half wished it had been Malfoy’s arrogant little face he’d smashed instead.

“I’d like to go to the Hospital Wing now, Professor. Do I really have to listen to this?”

“Ferula,” Fletcher snapped, jerking his wand in the direction of the boy’s broken arm. Bandages and a splint quickly worked their way around Malfoy’s arm, but Fletcher snarled all the while. His patience (never available in large quantities) was obviously wearing thin. Then he gestured edgily at both boys. “Come with me. The Headmaster needs to hear of this.”
James had never heard so many curse words strung together coherently in one sentence.

It was hard not to laugh. Arabella Figg had woken up, opened her eyes, and started to swear. Violently, dirtily, and with ten times the amount of salt employed by a veteran sailor. His boss took one look at his face, and her lips curled into an ugly snarl, her eyes flashing, then flickering rapidly around the room. Once Weasley had brought her back, James had immediately transferred her to the cot he kept in his office—Lily hated for him to even have it, because she said it encouraged him not to come home on late nights, but it was turning out to be rather useful at the moment. ‘Bella immediately recognized her surroundings, though, and turned her gray-eyed glare on James.

“What the hell happened?” she demanded.

“You were stunned,” James explained as levelly as possible. Lord, he’d seen her angry before, but this ranked right up with that mission he and Sirius had shared, when they’d managed to destroy an entire building. They’d brought the suspects in, of course, but that hadn’t mattered to Arabella Figg. Innocent little things like mistakes never had. He took a deep breath and prepared to continue, but his Mentor cut him off.

“Of course I was stunned!” she snarled. “What the hell else happened?”

“Well, things went downhill, and I ordered a Plan Zulu—” Just like I was supposed to, he added mentally—“And Weasley here Side-Along-Apparated you back.”

Arabella’s eyes filled with gray fire. “What?” She snapped her head in Bill Weasley’s direction, seeming to notice him for the first time. Faced with her full fury, all the poor kid could do was look back with confusion; James understood that Weasley had been trying to do the right thing. In any other circumstance, he would have been doing the right thing—been acting heroic, even—but dammit, ‘Bella was supposed to be caught! There were some things that simply weren’t covered in the manual. “What the hell were you thinking, boy?”

“Easy, ‘Bella,” James cautioned as Weasley gaped. “He doesn’t know.”

That clamped her mouth shut in an unhappy line, but the Minister still glared. “Dammit!” she swore. “All that goddamned work for nothing. Fucking Murphy. Goddamned Death Eaters. Goddamned Aurors with hero complexes—”

James’ laughter cut her off. Some people didn’t change, even when you made them wear the cloak of responsibility, and Arabella’s language could still make a Drill Sergeant blush. But then she turned the angry glare on him.

“What the hell is wrong with you, James?” Arabella spat. “Don’t you realize how much work has just gone to nothing? In one goddamned moment of misguided heroism, this boy has just managed to throw Operation Icebreaker right down the fucking drain!”

Sighing, James sat down in his desk chair after dragging it over next to the cot. “I know, ‘Bella,” he said quietly. “It’s been my brainchild, after all. But that’s for another time—are you feeling all right?”

“Of course I’m all right.”

“I’m glad. Contrary to popular belief, I don’t relish the thought of you in Azkaban,” James admitted.

“We’ve all ready gone over that ground,” his boss glared. Then Arabella relented, and shrugged
slightly, sitting up as she did so. “And it’s a moot point, now, anyway.”

“True.” She swung her legs over the side of the cot, and heated the glare as James opened his mouth to protest. “Don’t you start with me, boy. Someone has to go explain to Dumbledore why this fancy plan of yours failed, and I think that had better be me.”

He could have objected, but disagreeing with Arabella Figg was like arguing with a brick wall. So James shrugged, and rose, opening the door for her like a proper young gentleman. “Talk to me when you get back?”

“Of course. How else are we going to resurrect this mess out of the ashes?”

And then she was gone, leaving James alone with a very confused Bill Weasley. The younger Auror had remained respectfully silent throughout the exchange between his superiors; in retrospect, James supposed that he should have sent him away. But he hadn’t, and confusion still colored the other’s face. James knew Weasley well enough—not enough to call him a friend, but enough to know that he was a powerful wizard and a talented Auror. To survive as long as Bill had, talent and power were necessary; so was a great deal of luck. Luck…luck like his brother Charlie, the only Auror James had ever mentored, did not have. Charlie’s death still hurt when he stopped to think about it, but he pushed it aside. He didn’t have time to think of that. Not now.

“Sir, if I might ask, what in the world is going on?”

James sighed. He supposed that he did owe the kid some explanations, especially after ‘Bella had yelled at him that way. “Let’s just say that things didn’t exactly go as planned.”

“I gathered that much,” Bill replied dryly.

An uneasy silence passed, in which James studied the younger man. An idea was starting to form in his mind—a dangerous, stupid, and probably insane idea, but one that might just work. Possibly. If they were lucky. The question really was how much Weasley had caught on in those few seconds of unguarded conversation. Quickly, he ran over what he knew of Bill Weasley, calling up a mental picture of the other’s service record in his mind. Quidditch player for one year. Head boy. Mentored by Alastor Moody. Lived through the failed Mulciber raid back in 1989, when so many others did not. Oh, yes. He was good. Probably one of the best—and irrelevantly, James realized that he’d probably have to talk to the kid about Mentoring someone soon. Influence like that needed to spread. Finally, the younger Auror continued.

“Is this something you can tell me, or should I not ask?”

*Smart, too,* James added to the mental list. “Probably not—not yet, anyway,” he answered. “But if there’s anyone who deserves and explanation, it’s you. Ask me again sometime.”

“All right.”

The door slid open, but Remus very consciously did not rise. Spells woven into the castle itself had
warned him of the visitor’s approach; Snape’s use of this certain password merely confirmed it. Long ago, Remus had discovered that it was useful to have “special” passwords, which worked only once and then only for certain individuals. Snape, of course, ranked highly on his list for such entries. After all, he had a habit of causing emergencies.

Remus drummed his fingers lightly on his desk, exchanging a grim smile with the portrait of Albus Dumbledore hanging on the far left wall. This would not be fun—in fact, any mistake on his part could prove to be downright dangerous—but a little care would probably make the situation bearable. He had already dealt with one set of parents, who were noticeably relieved that their son had escaped with a couple dozen detentions. The second pair of concerned parents had been notified as well, but their daughter had not been punished. Reassured that Angelina would be fine, the Johnsons had coped very well. However, it was the third set of parents that worried the headmaster, and their child had certainly been the guiltiest.

Lucius Malfoy strutted into his office, and Remus fought the urge to snarl. The wolf in him wanted very badly to do so, but he restrained himself, aided by long years of practice. Although everyone knew Malfoy was a Death Eater, there had never been any actual proof. He was as slippery as the mascot of his old school House, having been charged several times but always coming up smelling like a rose. Part of that, the headmaster knew, was due to his massive fortune and the excellent lawyers it enabled him to buy. The rest, though, came from the fact that Lucius Malfoy was ruthlessly intelligent and wielded his power well.

Remus just wished that the bastard wasn’t on his school’s Board of Governors. Unfortunately, only testimony from spies like Severus Snape could tear him out of that position—and the Order just couldn’t afford to burn their best. The sad but true fact was that, even though Albus Dumbledore knew that Malfoy sat at Voldemort’s right hand, they could not prove that to the law’s satisfaction without risking more than it was worth. Their adherence to the law was what separated them from the Dark, and there were some lines that could not be crossed. Spies like Snape had bigger fish to fry, anyway. In the end, taking Voldemort down would prevent even the likes of Malfoy from taking his place.

Besides, the headmaster had his own hole card on the Board. The other Governors might be bullied by Lucius and his threats, but James Potter would only laugh in the Death Eater’s face. Remus’ best friend had as much back down in his body as a centaur when it came to Malfoy—much like his son when it came to that family’s heir. Come to think of it, the werewolf mused, I’m rather surprised that Harry isn’t mixed up in this mess.

“Lucius,” he greeted the Death Eater with a smile the fooled neither one of the wizards. “Do sit down.”

“I prefer to stand, thank you,” Malfoy replied haughtily, and once again, Remus was struck by the similarities between this arrogant face that the permanent sneer etched into the features of the son. “Very well.” Remus did not stand. If Malfoy thought staring down at the headmaster lent him power, then so be it. He did not care. “What brings you to Hogwarts?”

Severus, he noticed, was gone. Smart man. He obviously did not want to be stuck between his old friend (and the loyalties inherent in his status as a Death Eater) and his role as the school’s deputy headmaster, duties for which he took very seriously. This was one battle that even Malfoy would see the sense in keeping Snape out of. In truth, Remus was very grateful for that, even if not for the reasons Malfoy envisioned. The werewolf did not relish the idea of a final confrontation between Severus and his Death Eater brethren—he knew that Snape’s betrayal of his oldest friends had been a complicated and guilt-ridden matter, and while he trusted Severus completely, he preferred to save
him the pain his inevitable unmasking would bring. Remus knew he could not protect him forever, but he’d take every moment that he could beg, borrow, or steal.

“I have come to speak with you about yesterday’s...incident.” Lucius’ upper lip curled into a very familiar sneer. “It is my understanding that the boy who attacked my son has not been expelled?”

“He has been properly punished for his actions,” Remus replied levelly. He very purposefully did not say how. It wasn’t Malfoy’s business, on the board or not.

“Has he?” Lucius asked sarcastically. “Then you of course believe that my son’s punishment was appropriate as well?”

“I do.”

“Indeed.” The sneer grew in force. “I am afraid, Lupin, that the Board of Governors does not agree with you.”

“Oh?” Remus let his eyebrows arch innocently. This wasn’t the first time he’d dealt with Lucius Malfoy, but as always, he devoutly hoped that it would be the last.

“Yes,” Lucius snapped, obviously irritated by Remus’ calm. “I, for one, am very intrigued by why you have not expelled the Weasley boy for his unprovoked attack on my son. Understandably, your sorry lack of control over the school, and your failure to properly punish those responsible has made the Board of Governors very concerned about your capability to handle the vast responsibilities of Headmaster.”

The other’s voice was dripping with contempt.

“Speak for yourself, Mister Malfoy—do not speak for the others,” Remus replied in clipped tones, fighting to keep his temper in check. That wasn’t as hard as it once had been, though; he had learned a lot over the years. “And as for your son—I would hardly call Weasley’s attack unprovoked. Your son had already assaulted a third-year Gryffindor, Angelina Johnson, and was in the process of casting another curse when Weasley intervened.” Remus’ voice grew very, very cold.

“And if I were you, Mister Malfoy, I would count myself very lucky that Weasley acted when he did. Your son was in the process of casting something...Unforgivable.”

Dangerous gray eyes widened in shock, but Malfoy gained control quickly. His previously cold gaze then became heated with anger. His voice was stiff. “I cannot believe that.”

“Nor can I,” Remus gave him a frosty smile. “After all, I can’t imagine where he could have learned such a thing.”

“Tell me what you’ve heard about Operation Icebreaker.”

“Operation what?” Bill echoed, staring strangely at his superior.
The two of them were locked in a very small room that he’d never even known existed; they had gained access to it through James Potter’s office, and he strongly suspected that the one and only other door led to Arabella Figg’s private domain. The entrance had been carefully concealed behind a bookshelf, and Bill was smart enough to realize that he was one of the very few Aurors who had ever been in this gloomy and windowless hole. There wasn’t even any magical lighting; a few candles were scattered on shelves or the table in the center of the room, but they were definitely of the Muggle kind and were busy dripping wax all over the polished oak tabletop. That alone was enough to tell Bill that this abode was a closely held secret—there was no magic present, save for the silencing charms he had heard Potter enact upon entry. There was nothing for anyone to trace.

Not for the first time, he wondered why he was here.

“Good,” Potter smiled. Something mischievous flashed in his hazel eyes. “Azkaban, I presume you have heard of?”

A heated reply came immediately to mind, but seeing the grin, Bill knew he was being teased—and gently, so far. “Once or twice,” he replied dryly. “Perhaps.”

Potter chuckled briefly, but then his expression sobered. “You were in the Aurors before Voldemort took the prison, correct?”

“I was.” He well remembered the Dementors, and struggled not to shudder at the thought. Like many of his fellows, Bill hated the creatures.

“Have you ever been there?” the leading Auror asked. “Delivering prisoners or the like?”


Thinking of his mentor still hurt, even after four years. Alastor Moody, another Auror whose body had never been found. His death had been shrouded in mystery ever since it had happened, but the one thing they knew for certain was that he had been slain by the Dark Lord himself.

“Good,” Potter replied after a moment. His face had become grim. “I assume, of course, that you are aware of the Ministry’s efforts to retake the prison?”

Bill was still trying to figure out where this was going. “I am.” He frowned. “If I may ask, sir, what does that have to do with this ‘Operation Icebreaker’?”

“Everything, in that Icebreaker is the best chance we have to crack Azkaban open and take the first steps towards winning this war.”

Bill felt something snap and twist inside his gut. He knew all the reasons for taking Azkaban back, for the possibility of doing so was a constant topic of discussion within the Aurors, but this was different. Potter wasn’t trying to belittle the importance of Azkaban; his not mentioning those reasons only underlined how crucial it was to take the island back. Ever since its loss, Azkaban had been Voldemort’s throne and base of operations; it was the one place that the Ministry’s spies had never been able to breach. It was also, in short, the Dark Lord’s private little hell, and the Wizarding public knew it. Azkaban was the most potent symbol of Voldemort’s power. But Bill wasn’t surprised by those facts, or the Ministry’s desire to regain the prison. What shocked him was Potter’s words.

There were few who dared to speak of winning the war. Not these days. Merely surviving seemed enough for everyone else. Bill tried to frown—optimism, in his experience, was overrated—but it was hard. Something about Potter’s words had struck a cord inside him. Here was hope. “So what
you’re saying is that Azkaban is the first step toward the end?”

“Yes. Or it can be, anyway,” the other Auror replied. “The Ministry has been trying to penetrate the island for years, but I don’t have to tell you what the result of those efforts has been.”

The hope threatened to plummet, overcome, as always, by reality. Bill answered grimly. “Nothing.”

Potter nodded. “The Ministry’s security leaks worse than a sieve.”

“Is it that bad?” He had to ask, but then something clicked. “This isn’t a Ministry operation, is it?”

“No, it is not,” his boss replied. Suddenly, his hazel eyes settled on the younger man with startling intensity, acknowledging the perceptiveness of Bill’s question even as they drilled down into his soul. “Tell me what you know about the Order of the Phoenix, Bill.”

His heart did a stutter step. “It really exists?”

Potter nodded silently. His eyes were still focused unerringly on Bill, who had to take a moment to sort the facts out in his head.

“Mostly what the rumors say,” he admitted. “It is a secret organization that stands against the Dark Lord, but no one really knows who the members are…” There was an unspoken question that Bill did not dare ask.

“If you choose to accept this mission, you will be one of them,” was the quiet reply.

“What is it?”

This was the only thing left to ask, really. He knew he would accept. While many would spend time considering the risks involved, Bill could only think of the good witches and wizards were left trapped inside Azkaban, tortured for information until Voldemort had drained them dry and left them to rot in the Dementors’ tender care. The Dark Lord’s servants made no secret of what happened in the prison or of the horrors the inmates faced. First and foremost of those horrors, of course, were the Dementors, but worse still were the Lestranges, Voldemort’s trio of “specialists.” Rabastan, Rodolphus, and Bellatrix Lestrange had been rather twisted before they were sent to Azkaban in 1981, but when the Dark Lord had taken the prison five years later, none of the three had not been amongst the sanest of the released Death Eaters. What little sanity they had ever possessed seemed to have left them, and they now rarely left the island. Azkaban had become their private playground to implement sick and twisted tortures in service of the Dark Lord.

And Bill wasn’t a fool. He knew that everyone broke eventually.

“Operation Icebreaker,” Potter continued without preamble, “was originally intended to be the infiltration of Azkaban by a member of the Order’s inner circle. The idea was to send someone who was too tempting of a target for Voldemort to kill right away—someone who knew secrets that the Dark Lord could not resist. However, your unexpected…interference changed that.”

Now he understood Arabella Figg’s anger! “The Minister,” Bill said with surprise. “She meant to be caught?”

“Yes,” the other replied dryly. “But unfortunately, that ruse won’t work twice, even for another member of the inner circle. So now we must improvise.”

“Why me?”
“First, because of your talent at curse-breaking. Once you reach Azkaban, if you choose to accept this mission—and make no mistake, this is voluntary—you will be on your own. There is nothing we, as in the Ministry or the Order, can do to aid you once you are inside. Second, you already know of the operation’s existence, thanks to Arabella’s ill-timed outburst.

“However, the first one is the most important of our reasons. Whomever we send will be supplied with two transfigured items: their own wand and a Portkey to a predetermined safe location. The spells used to transform each item are old and complicated magic, and should be undetectable, even for Voldemort. They are also time specific, and neither the Portkey nor the wand will appear until a certain number of days have passed.”

The older man paused for a moment, letting Bill contemplate what he had said. It was a good plan, even if it was completely insane and incredibly dangerous. But then again, when could walking into the lair of the Dark Lord ever not be so? When Bill nodded, Potter continued.

“At that time, the agent will have three options. The first is to simply escape, hopefully bringing with them essential information that will allow us to crack Azkaban once and for all. Second is to attempt a rescue of other inmates before making their own escape. The third, and most dangerous, is the option of opening the Portkey to allow others to use it as a reverse beacon, thus clearing the way for an all-out assault on the island.”

Bill could have done a little soul-searching, could have considered the possibilities and the risks involved. But in the end, there was only one answer he could give, and it would not change over time.

“When do I start?”
The Impossible

The year of 1991 was winding down, and they had the perfect prank to end it all. They prepared diligently for the last few weeks leading up to the Christmas holidays, even going so far as to substitute George in for Fred for one night of the latter’s detention; one would think that Filch could tell the twins apart by now, but even the grumpy caretaker had been fooled. That had turned out to be a good thing, because the Misfits had needed Fred’s strength in Charms—George was better at Transfiguration, and Lee preferred Potions, while the three younger pranksters simply did not have enough experience to work the all spells required for their complicated prank. Even then, they had all breathed a huge sigh of relief when George came back unscathed. The twins had never found a reason to exchange detentions before (especially since they usually served them together), but it was nice to know that worked when necessary.

Snape’s classroom in the dungeon was the hardest to break into; the Misfits were very glad that they had started early, because it took them three nights to sneak into the Potions classroom, and even then they had almost been caught. Hermione’s quick Stopping Charm had saved them, of course, and the Misfits continued on their merry way, transfiguring and charming everything within reach—and a great many things that weren’t within reach, too. Finally, the night before the last day of classes (which would more appropriately have been called the morning of, since they had finished barely two hours before dawn), they crept back into the Gryffindor common room, exchanging tired but victorious grins as they’d stumbled into bed.

The morning, however, came far too quickly. Anyone who watched the group at breakfast would have thought that the Misfits were suspiciously subdued, but Harry was unable to care. He simply couldn’t wait for Transfiguration class to begin—and for once, he envied Fred, George, and Lee, who had Potions first. This was the one and only day that he had ever been eager to see the look on Snape’s face.

Once they reached Professor Fletcher’s classroom, it proved nearly impossible to concentrate. Harry fidgeted endlessly in his seat next to Ron, earning a dirty look from Hermione as she struggled to pay attention. She was faring only a little better than Harry was, but then again, Hermione never had problems concentrating in class. Ron was another matter entirely; he was doing worse than both of them put together, and his eyes flickered around the room, focusing briefly on every item they had worked on over the past two weeks. By this time, the trio’s classmates were beginning to notice Ron’s behavior (and some were even more alarmed by the fact that Hermione’s hand hadn’t shot into the air to answer every single question), and Harry was trying his best to seem innocent as his classmates sent piercing looks in his direction. Even Neville, who had become distracted and preoccupied ever since his father’s capture, seemed to notice, which finally caused Harry to dig an elbow into his friend’s ribs.

“Pay attention,” he hissed under his breath when Ron looked at him.

His red haired friend stared at him blankly, so Harry jerked his head in Neville’s direction. The other boy was still looking at them suspiciously, and Ron finally nodded in understanding. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “But it shouldn’t be long, now…”

“What shouldn’t be long, now, Mr. Weasley?” a voice demanded, and Harry gulped as he looked up.

Neither boy had noticed Professor Fletcher approach, but now their hard-nosed Head of House was standing in front of Harry and Ron, staring down at them with a very pointed expression. In the back of the room, Harry overheard Malfoy snickering, and he groped around in his mind for a
suitable excuse. Fortunately, Ron beat him to it.

“I’m just eager for the Holiday to begin, sir,” his friend replied quickly. “You know, to go home for awhile. I guess I got a little impatient waiting for class to end. I’m sorry, Professor.”

Harry had never known that Ron was such a good liar, but Fletcher was clearly convinced. “I see,” he grumbled. “Perhaps you’ve yet to realize, Weasley, that paying less attention does not make class go faster. If you please, begin reading from page seventy-seven so that the rest of the class can hear you…”

The minutes dragged by, and Harry found it very hard to keep his eyes focused on page seventy-seven and not on his watch. It was so very tempting… Class continued, though, and Malfoy’s voice droned on from the back of the classroom (normally, Harry would have thought it fantastic that Fletcher had made the stuck-up Slytherin read because Malfoy was being obnoxious) and Harry hardly cared for a word that he was saying. It wasn’t that he didn’t like Transfiguration, because he did, but he was waiting for it to happen… Now!

The classroom exploded into song.

Red and green lights twinkled.

The chalkboard began flashing holiday greetings.

And little green and red elves began dancing everywhere.

The elves were on the shelves. They were on the desks. They were hanging from the ceiling. They were on the floor, and they gleefully bounced around in the window frames. Now, they weren’t house elves. Rather, they were a simpler breed, more like something out of a strange Muggle Christmas story about a fat man who lived at the North Pole—but they were recognizable enough as elves. Dressed in red and white jumpers with green skin (and bright gold hair), the elves replaced textbooks, chalk, erasers, plants, and everything else in sight—and they were singing. Very merrily, in fact, with great Christmas joy…but each was singing a different song, and they were belting them out at the top of their lungs. They sounded, Harry thought, much like drunken leprechauns.

Not that he’d ever met a leprechaun, but it was the thought that counted.

Most importantly, though, there were hundreds of the little monsters, and as they sang (very merrily, mind you), the elves began tearing around the room at breakneck speeds. Very carelessly, they upended tables, chairs, books, bags, and even ran up the legs of a few disgruntled Slytherins, who screeched until the elves merrily bounced away, unoffended by Salazar’s protégés’ miserable senses of humor. Four of the bravest elves grabbed the bottom edge of Professor Fletcher’s robes, creating an impromptu marry-go-round with the ex-Auror in the center—until a roared spell from Fletcher sent the elves flying. Again, they jumped up, happy enough to find a new target. They were, after all, quite simple creatures, created only to create mayhem. But even the transfiguration professor’s shouting was hard to hear over the Gryffindor’s merry laughter.

Still, though, Mundungus Fletcher wasn’t exactly the quietest of gentlemen, even at the best of times.

“WEASLEY! POTTER! GRANGER!” Nor, unfortunately, was he stupid. “GET OVER HERE! NOW!”

There really weren’t many options. They could run—Harry momentarily visualized himself, Ron, and Hermione ducking through the halls, chased by an irate Professor Fletcher—but they couldn’t hide. There was no way that the trio could avoid their own head of house until the Hogwarts
Express left the next morning, and even the Christmas Holidays weren’t long enough to make Fletcher forget. No, they had to own up eventually—so they might as well do it now, and with pride.

Exchanging quick glances, Harry, Ron, and Hermione approached the professor, pausing to sidestep a few elves that were doing the two-step to a rather peppy version of “Silent Night.”

“Yes, Professor?” Hermione asked innocently.

“Make. These. Go. Away.” If Fletcher had been any redder, his face would have been a volcano. But was that laughter that he was holding back? “Now.”

“We can’t,” Ron replied honestly.

“What?” No, it couldn’t be laughter. Fletcher didn’t have a sense of humor… But his pale green eyes were dancing, weren’t they?

Hermione responded earnestly. “You see, Professor, the spell works on a time delay. We can’t make the elves go away…but they will.”

“Eventually,” Harry added under his breath, but regretted it the moment that his professor’s gaze focused on him. The elves were still singing. The closest quartet was now working on “It’s a Small World.”

“What was that, Potter?” Fletcher demanded.

“Uhh… Nothing, sir.”

One blonde eyebrow arched menacingly. Still, there was something in those eyes…and there was now a group of elves dancing on top of Professor Fletcher’s desk, singing “Jingle Bells.” Yet the ex-Auror was still studying the trio. “Indeed.”

The bell rang.

Every student with a shred of common sense bolted from the transfiguration classroom. Some—most—were laughing, but others (the Slytherins, of course) were vowing revenge. Harry heard a few interesting words out of Malfoy that he was sure Draco’s mother wouldn’t appreciate him using as the trio followed the others out of the classroom. Surprisingly enough, Fletcher didn’t call after them, or bellow anything about detentions, but they weren’t about to question the good luck. Perhaps Christmas cheer struck even the grumpy of the Hogwarts’ professors…

A six-legged and six-armed blur rushed by them, with hair that was two-thirds red in color and one-third black.

“WEASLEY! JORDAN! WEASLEY!” a voice roared from down the hallway. “GET BACK HERE!”

It was Snape’s voice, and he didn’t exactly sound cheerful.

Without a backward glance, Harry, Ron, and Hermione shot after their fellow mischief-makers. It was going to be an interesting holiday.
“Mum! Dad!”

Arthur and Molly Weasley looked up from their game of Wizard’s chess, surprised to see Ron unearthed from his pile of Christmas presents. It was December 28, after all, and weeks usually passed before their youngest son could be torn away from his newest toys and games. The same held true for the other Weasley children—even Bill, who, Auror or not, delighted in Christmas (even if he’d left the day before to prepare for some mission or another) would spend days reveling in Christmas gifts and his younger siblings’ toys. Last Molly had known, Ron had been buried underneath a stack of Chocolate Frog Cards (sent by his friend Hermione) and a newly-published book, *Flying With the Cannons* (a present from his friend Harry, who had somehow managed to obtain a copy signed by beater Joey Jenkins). Ron hadn’t let go of the book since he’d unwrapped it, and Molly was glad to see that he was so happy. Less promising was the crate of Dr. Filibuster’s Fabulous Wet-Start, No-Heat Fireworks that the twins had received from their friend Lee (who had sent Ron a set of Gobstones, too), or the book Fred had received from Ron’s friend Hermione, *Saucey Tricks for Tricky Sorts*. She’d also sent George a Muggle joke set, which Molly had been tempted to confiscate. She could only guess how much trouble they could get into with that.

But it was good to see that her children were enjoying themselves so much. Ron’s friend Harry had sent the twins a gift certificate to Gambol and Japes, too—it seemed that Ron’s friends were sending the twins gifts and vice versa. Molly hadn’t ever expected her youngest boy to fall into Fred and George’s circle of friends, but it certainly seemed that he had, for which she was very glad. In times like this, it paid to keep one’s friends close.

And enemies closer, too, come to think of it.

“Yes, dear?” she asked with a smile. If Ron had come running into the kitchen, it had to be good. Besides, Arthur was winning.

“I just got a fire call from Harry, Mum,” Ron replied, grinning.

“And?” she prompted. Ever since Ron had gotten off of the train, all he’d talked about was his new friends and all the fun they’d had…but Molly still knew almost nothing about the two. She knew, of course, that Hermione was Muggleborn (Ron had made some choice comments about the Malfoy boy, who seemed to delight in picking on the poor girl), and she knew that Harry was on the Quidditch team already, but other than that, it had been one long string of “you’ll never believe what we did!” or “Harry’s got the best broom!” and “the look on Malfoy’s face was so priceless!” The fun she had heard about; the friends she had not.

“Well…uh…” Suddenly, Ron’s smile wavered, and he seemed hesitant. “Harry’s parents want to know if we can go over to their house for New Year.”

Molly looked at Arthur in surprise. He stared back. Surely they had heard wrong. “All of us, dear?”

“Yeah.” Suddenly, the words poured out, as if Ron was afraid they’d say no. “Harry said that they were thinking about having a party, and his parents said that he could invite whoever he wanted and so he wanted to invite me and Hermione and his mum and dad said that he ought to invite our parents, too, because none of us you have met. Hermione’s already said yes—he called her on the fellyphone—can we go too?”

Molly blinked. For some reason, Ron seemed sure that they would say no. Arthur, always the sensible one, asked, “What about Percy, Ginny, and the twins?”
“Oh! Fred and George know about it—they were there when Harry called. And he said that Percy can come too, even though he’s a Prefect. And Ginny, ‘cause she’s our sister.”

“Ron!” Molly admonished him. The younger boys were always making fun of their older brother because he was a prefect, and she would never understand why.

“Sorry, Mum,” he replied too quickly. “Can we go? Please?”

“Ron, are sure Harry’s parents know about this?” Arthur asked.

“Yeah, of course they do!” Ron said. “Harry wouldn’t ask, otherwise.”

Molly looked closely at her younger son. Something was up. “What aren’t you telling us?”

Ron went red. “Ummm…”

“Ron…?”

“It’s nothing, really, Mum. Really.”

But alarms were ringing in Molly’s head. “I want to talk to Harry’s parents about this. What did you say his last name was?”

“Uh…” Ron mumbled something under his breath.

“Well?” Arthur demanded, clearly sharing her suspicions that something was wrong. What were they planning this time?

Ron sighed. “Potter.”

“What?” The word escaped before Molly could stop it. Surely he wasn’t talking about… “As in James Potter?”

“Yes, Mum. As in James Potter,” Ron replied sullenly. But Molly didn’t have the energy to correct his sarcasm, and besides, Arthur was replying.

“Why didn’t you tell us this before, Ron?” her husband asked sternly.

“Because I knew you’d react like this!” Ron snapped, suddenly angry. Molly sighed quietly; she hated to see him unhappy, but this was important. Couldn’t Ron see that? Obviously he couldn’t, though, because her son forestalled Arthur’s answer. “What does it matter? Harry is my friend!”

“Ron, I don’t think you understand,” Arthur replied quietly, and Molly silently blessed him for his patience. “I know that things are different at Hogwarts, but the Wizarding world has certain… divisions. The Potters are one of the Fourteen Families. They are not going to socialize with people like us.”

“They’re not like that,” Ron objected.

“You don’t know Harry’s parents,” Molly tried to reason, but her son exploded angrily.

“I know Harry, Mum, and he’s not like that! He doesn’t care—why should we? And they asked Hermione over, too, and her parents are Muggles! It doesn’t matter!”

_I wish the world were really that simple_, she thought to herself. _Or that fair. And I wish that my son didn’t have to learn that it isn’t at such a young age._ The anger on Ron’s face made her want to
cry. He really did not understand, and it broke Molly’s heart.

“Unfortunately, it does matter—” Arthur began, only to be cut off.

“Why?” their youngest son demanded. “You work at the Ministry. So do Harry’s parents. What is the difference?”

“Ron, James Potter is one of the most famous wizards of this age,” Arthur explained quietly. “And the Potter family is—”

“Rich, I know. So?” Ron snorted. “It’s not like Harry is the descendant of Godric Gryffindor or something. He’s just Harry.”

Molly opened her mouth to point out how irrelevant the lack of a legendary ancestor was when Ron’s friend came from one of the Fourteen Families, but Fred and George came boiling into the room.

“Dad, Ron’s right—” Fred started.

“Harry isn’t like that, Mum—” George contributed.

“And I bet his parents aren’t either,” Fred finished.

“Won’t you just talk to them?” Ron demanded.

Molly exchanged a helpless look with her husband. What could they do when faced with three of their boys, all united in one cause? Even little Ginny was hanging onto the doorframe, waiting to see what would happen. She sighed once more, and shrugged. What could it hurt?

“I suppose we can do that,” Arthur finally replied.

The boys exchanged triumphant glances, but it wasn’t over yet. Molly looked sternly at the trio—and at Ginny, who was unsuccessfully trying to fade into the background. “Why don’t you four go outside while your father and I deal with this?”

For once, they did not argue, and within seconds, the youngest half of her brood was flying out the front door. Percy, of course, was behaving very nicely in his room, immersed in a good book, no doubt. There were times she thought that it was too bad the others weren’t more like him.

“How in world do you deal with six of them?” Lily asked her with a smile. “I have my hands full between only James and Harry.”

Molly chuckled at the younger woman’s amazement. Despite her earlier misgivings, the Potters were very likable people, and even if the enormous house at Godric’s Hollow could make her uncomfortable, Mrs. Weasley was rapidly discovering that her youngest son did indeed have good taste in friends.

At the moment, all the children were in the Potters’ spacious living room, eagerly examining Peter Pettigrew’s new puppy. Somehow—Molly was still not quite sure how—the puppy (strangely
enough, named Joe) had been left with James and Lily when Pettigrew had departed for Brazil. She
didn’t know Pettigrew well, but Arthur, who knew him from work, said he was a nice enough
fellow. At any rate, she gathered that he was an old friend of the Potters’—looking at the puppy, she
decided that he had to be. Leaving that rambunctious bundle of energy with anyone other than close
friends would be akin to courting disaster! Harry had said something about Pettigrew having
acquired it in America, and the puppy being a Siberian Husky, but all Molly knew was that the dog
was a black and white ball of child-loving enthusiasm. She chuckled.

“I don’t know, really,” Molly replied. “Often they occupy one another.”

“I bet,” Lily laughed. “I could say the same about James and Harry, especially when it comes to
Quidditch. Sometimes, I swear that I’m the only adult in the house.”

“I know that feeling,” she said with relish. “With all his gadgets, Arthur can be the same way.”

Lily smiled. “No wonder why they’re getting along so well!”

And indeed their husbands were. Once discovering that James had a “tellyphone” in his office (Lily,
Molly had learned, was Muggle-born), Arthur had been delighted. James, who Lily claimed still saw
the phone as a toy, had only been too eager to comply, so off they had gone ten minutes before,
leaving the two women in the kitchen. Meanwhile, Percy was engaging in a technical discussion
about Magical medicine with the Grangers, who had been rather uncomfortable in a Wizarding home
at first, but had managed to relax after a few drinks, due mainly to the Potters’ easy-going attitudes.
These days, it was hard to find people who were as open minded as Lily and James, especially
amongst the oldest and richest families in the magical world. Then again, James had married a
Muggle-born witch, and to Molly, that said a lot.

Suddenly, she became aware that she had been silent for too long, and Lily was watching her with
uncanny green eyes. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” Molly replied lightly, shaking her thoughts away. “I was just thinking how nice it is for Ron
to have such good friends.”

“And you were thinking that we aren’t what you expected us to be,” Lily finished gently.

Molly blushed. “Is it that obvious?”

“Maybe not to some,” the other said quietly. “But I have found that there are three types of people in
the magical world: those who act, those who do not, and those too frightened to do either.”

There was something different about Lily’s voice, and Molly found it hard to meet those piercing
eyes, now. Something had changed. “What are you saying?”

“Tell me, Molly, what do you know about the Order of the Phoenix?”

“Have you ever heard of the Order of the Phoenix, Arthur?”

The question made Arthur Weasley’s head jerk up in surprise. One moment, he and James had been
discussing the oddities of Muggle technology—about which, Arthur had discovered, James knew much more than he—and the next moment, the Auror’s voice had become serious. Startled, the older man looked up at his companion’s now solemn face, and wondered what had brought the question about.

“Pardon?”

“The Order of the Phoenix.” James nodded towards a copy of the *Daily Prophet*, which lay folded neatly on the desktop. Arthur had read it that morning, of course, but his eyes flirted over the front-page story once more as he wondered if this was only an idle question. However, he read the article again, more out of curiosity than anything else.

‘ORDER OF THE PHOENIX’ – REVEALED!

*by* Rita Skeeter, *Special Correspondent*

For years there have been rumors of a top-secret organization constructed to battle the forces of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, but never before has anyone been able to verify if such an organization exists. Now, however, there is concrete proof that the “Order of the Phoenix” is indeed real, and what’s more, this reporter has details about the purpose and members of this group of witches and wizards.

As many surmised, the so-called “Order” was formed to fight You-Know-Who. Records are sketchy, but it seems that the Order has been in existence since before You-Know-Who’s seizure of Azkaban Prison in 1986. Although the Ministry adamantly denies it, sources imply that the Order’s influence was what kept the Ministry on its feet following the murders of Minister Bagnold and her first two successors. Apparently, the Order of the Phoenix has also been working hand-in-hand with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for years to counter the Dark Lord’s threats.

This is possible because, as reliable sources tell us, James Potter (Head of the DMLE’s Auror Division) is a prominent member of the Order, possibly even its
second-in-command. Oddly enough, Minister Arabella Figg is supposedly not a member of this select few, which might account for the friction lately apparent between the Head of Magical Law Enforcement and her supposed protégée.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for cooperation between the Ministry and this Order is the identity of the head of the Order of the Phoenix. Unconfirmed sources tell us that none other than Bartemius Crouch, the Deputy Minister of Magic, is the leader of the Order, and it is his vision and perseverance that has kept the Order alive during these dark years.

Another highly secret part of the Order is the so-called “Unicorn Group,” which is supposedly an elite research group, aimed at discovering new magic. The Unicorn Group is supposedly concentrating on a “Project Hairball,” the purpose of which is not currently known.

One project which occupies much of the Order’s time, however, is an attempt to breach the defenses of Azkaban and wrench the prison out of the Dark Lord’s hands. The status of this project is not known, but rumors hint that a crucial part of the plan was recently foiled by unwitting Ministry members who are not privy to the Order’s secrets.

It remains to be seen if such disasters will happen in the future, or if the Ministry and the Order of the Phoenix will learn to work more closely together—provided that the two are fighting for the same goals, after all.

Arthur frowned, and glanced up at Potter once more. “Why are you asking me that?” he wondered. Then he sighed. “Is it because you haven’t? Is Skeeter making up stories out of hot air again?”

“Well, no—and yes,” James snorted. “She has a remarkable talent for getting the facts wrong, doesn’t she?”

“Definitely.” Several past articles came to mind, but Arthur pushed those thoughts aside as James
held up the paper.

“This,” he said, “is mostly a load of trash. *Mostly.*

“What do you mean?”

“I will explain that to you, Arthur, if you would please answer my question first,” James said quietly. “What do you know about the Order of the Phoenix?”

Arthur shrugged. “I’ve never put much stock in rumors,” he admitted. “I know it exists, and that some members of the Ministry are definitely involved in it, but other than that…” He shrugged again. “For all I know, the article could be telling the truth.”

“Not exactly,” the other chuckled. “But Skeeter is right about one thing: the Order *does* exist. For that matter, so does the Unicorn Group. And we *are* trying to get into Azkaban. Aside from that, this article is absolute nonsense.”

“We?” Arthur hadn’t missed that pronoun.

“Yes. I am a member of the Order—I have been for quite some time, in fact. But the reason why I am telling you this, Arthur, is because we would like you to join us.”

Arthur felt as if something heavy had just been dropped on top of his head. He had spent an entire career at the Ministry being passed over and ignored, mainly because of prejudices evident in his department. Still, he had to frown. “Me? Why?”

“You and I both know that Addams is on his way out,” the Auror replied. “There are several people poised to replace him, and you are amongst them. In our estimation, you are most likely to get the position, and the Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office would be an asset to our cause. Your office deals with a great deal of Dark objects, and we feel that it would be much easier to work *with* you than try and work around you.”

“Who is ‘we’?” Arthur had to ask. He’d learned a long time ago not to simply jump in the water without checking how deep it was first.

“I can’t tell you that, yet.”

“Then how do you know I’ll get the job?” he pressed. “I’ve been quite sure that Perkins is going to get it.”

Potter smiled ever so slightly. “I can’t tell you that, either,” he replied quietly. “Unfortunately, this isn’t a proposal that you can take home with you, Arthur. I can’t give you time to think it over. It all comes down to if you want to see Voldemort go down or not, and what kind of world you want to have left when it’s done.”

Molly still wasn’t quite sure what to think. In few short moments, Lily Potter had confirmed the fact that the rumored Order of the Phoenix did indeed exist, and had invited her to join it—then had promptly gone on to describe the Unicorn Group, which Molly was soon to be a member of. The
Unicorn Group was apparently a sub-section of the Order, which was working on dozens of projects under Lily’s direction, including everything from a Reverse Imperius Curse to a way to kill Dementors. Lily had also informed Molly that James had made the same offer to Arthur—and by the semi-bewildered look on her husband’s face as they entered the Auror’s office, Molly knew that Arthur had accepted.

She smiled helplessly in Arthur’s direction. It wasn’t that she was regretting her choice; it was just that everything was happening so fast. Molly felt like someone had sent her through a Muggle blender and forgot to turn the machine off afterwards. Be that how it may, though, she didn’t miss the significant look exchanged between the Potters, and the slight nod Lily gave her husband in reply to an unspoken question. James turned to Molly with a smile.

“Glad to have you with us,” he said.

“Thank you…I think.” Next to her, Arthur shrugged, and Molly knew he was feeling the same way.

James chuckled, but Lily replied seriously. “Don’t thank us, Molly. We all do what we’re needed to do.”

“Indeed,” Arthur said quietly, and Molly nodded, watching James throw a handful of glittering powder into the nearby fireplace.

“Albus?”

The Minister of Magic’s head appeared in the office fireplace, much to Molly’s surprise. When Lily had said that they were going to Fire Call someone, she had never expected Dumbledore.

“Hello, James, Lily,” the old wizard smiled. “Ah! Arthur and Molly as well. I’m very delighted to see you both.” His blue eyes turned back to James. “I suppose they said yes?”

Potter nodded.

“Excellent!” The ancient blue eyes twinkled with energy. “I shall have to speak with you in the future, then, Arthur, but I suspect Lily will bring you up to speed, Molly. For the time being, though, do either of you have any questions for me?”

Briefly, Molly considered asking if Dumbledore was the head of the Order, but there was no reason to. Obviously, that darn Skeeter woman had mixed up her facts again. It certainly wasn’t the first time. She shook her head, but Arthur spoke.

“Is there anything that we should do now?” he asked.

“Do?” Dumbledore asked. “My dear boy, you have done quite enough for now. In the future, I shall have to ask more, but for now all I ask is that you loan me your trust. I will have to earn it, later, but for now, I simply ask for patience and time. I will be in touch.”

Just as suddenly as he’d appeared, Albus Dumbledore was gone. Molly watched the flames for a moment longer, thinking briefly how the world could look so different when you only say it through another light. With Dumbledore at the helm of the Order of the Phoenix, suddenly it seemed that there was hope after all…and maybe, someday, her children could grow up in a world without fear.
“Damn.”

The muttered curse made James look up from the letter he was reading to the person across from his desk. Distantly, he noticed that the Daily Prophet delivery owl was flying out the window once more, having dropped the paper in his visitor’s hands. “Read the front page, did you?”

“Yeah,” Bill Weasley replied glumly. “Damn!”

“I know,” James replied quietly, wishing that he didn’t feel so drained. James wished he could still feel the pain that Bill felt, that he could still experience that burning desire for revenge—but he could not. It had been too long. He had grown numb to the loses after so many friends had fallen. “I know.”

“Liz and Roger…” Bill said softly. “And their kid. Bastard.”

James sighed. He agreed, of course, but there was nothing else to say. And there were statistics to add up in his head. Another Auror had gone down.

“How did you know?” the other suddenly asked.

“You know I can’t tell you that, Bill.” But he had known; James had known of the attack at the Woods’ home in the early hours of the morning. He also knew that Oliver Wood had been a school friend of his son’s, and that the fifth year Gryffindor had been the Quidditch captain for Harry’s team. He knew that Elizabeth Wood had been an Auror, experienced and solid—one of the few famed “old timers” left. Her husband Roger had worked in the Department of Magical Transportation. Both had been good people, James knew.

And both had died hard.

Damn.

“They didn’t deserve that,” Bill remarked quietly, fingering his ponytail absently. In the two months that James had been working closely with the younger man, he’d come to realize that was a habit Bill had when he was worried. Or depressed.

“No, they didn’t,” he agreed. “No one does.”

Bill looked up from the paper. “The Prophet says they were tortured. Tell me that’s wrong.”

“It’s not. Mulciber and Flint were responsible.”

Bill’s green eyes went dark. “Someday, those two are going to pay.”

“For that amongst many other things,” James agreed, leaving many words unspoken, but both Aurors heard them anyway. Scott Mulciber and Lloyd Flint were the Dark Lord’s bounty hunters, experts at finding and killing anyone. The only black mark on their record, so far, had been James Potter…and even he wasn’t such a fool to think that would last. But then again… He sighed quietly. “There’s something I ought to tell you, Bill.”

“What?”

“You know they killed Charlie.” He hated to ask, for it hurt them both, but…
“Yes.” The other’s voice was tight.

“Do you know why?”

Bill blinked. “No. I’ve tried to guess, over the years, but I can’t imagine why. I mean, Charlie was a good Auror, but…”

“He was working on the Azkaban Project with me, Bill.”

“He was?” Weasley asked with surprise, and James nodded. He took a deep breath before replying:

“I’ve been trying to crack Azkaban for years,” he said. “We thought we had it, then. We had a source who was willing to help us, one of Voldemort’s inner circle who had seen something they claimed to have turned them against him. Charlie met with the spy, and was killed on his way back to headquarters. Whatever he knew, Voldemort could not afford to let out.”

“So the spy turned out to be a double agent,” Bill snarled.

“It appears so,” James replied quietly, wondering why that didn’t sit well in his mind. “I’ve always thought, though, that there was something more to Charlie’s death, something that doesn’t quite meet the eye.”

Something dangerous flashed in Bill’s eyes, but he obviously knew better than to ask for the spy’s identity. Personal revenge was not acceptable; Aurors were held to a higher standard. Instead, the other asked, “Something about Azkaban?”

“I think so,” James allowed. “But it’s just a hunch.”

“Well, we’ll find out soon, won’t we?” Bill asked, smiling bloodlessly.

There were few things left to say, and nothing left to ask, for he knew the answer before the question could be formed. “Are you ready?”

“Tomorrow,” Bill nodded confidently. There was just enough fear in his eyes, though, to reassure James. “I’m ready.”

Footsteps echoed on cold concrete. It had been some time since Severus had visited Azkaban—although visiting was a rather inappropriate word. At any rate, though, he hated the place. At the very least, he hated Azkaban for the cold and the dark; he might have been a Slytherin (and lived down in Hogwarts’ dungeons, to boot), but the black nature of the island was enough to quell his spirit. Despair was heavy in the air, enough so that he could smell it with every step he took. Somewhere along the way, Snape had lost the ability to revel in others’ pain and sufferings—or perhaps he had never quite had an aptitude for that. Much of his youth, after all, had been the life of a lie.

Especially to himself.

He scowled, taking care that his features betrayed none of his inner feelings. Snape knew that his face was grim and not a little bitter, but that was to be expected. The others feared him, he knew, nearly as much as they feared Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange, or Voldemort himself. He was
practically a legend amongst the Dark Lord’s followers: the sarcastic and bitter Severus Snape, whom Death Eaters crossed only once. If they survived the experience, not a one of them had been stupid enough to do it twice. Such risks were not worth the pain, and Voldemort wasn’t likely to discipline the man who stood at the third place in his circle. Unless, of course, Severus thought ironically, he realizes that I have been spying on him for twelve years.

How he had lived so long, Snape would never know. That he would eventually be found out, and thus die a very painful death was a given, but the gamble was worth the price he would someday pay. Although Severus still grated under the weight of his nightmares—hardly a night passed when he did not dream of the atrocities he had committed; he could remember every murder, rape and torture session with no effort—at least he did so on his own terms. He was damned, true, but at least his soul was his own. His choices were his own, and he had chosen, once and long ago, to go to Albus Dumbledore, seeking not forgiveness, which even Albus could not grant, but a way to atone for the horrible things he had done. He would never be able to fully do so, of course, but he wouldn’t have been much of a man if he hadn’t tried.

And he never would have been able to save the best friend he’d ever had, either, and warning Lily was one thing he would never regret.

But no matter. Every day was another step in that effort, and so was today’s call. Severus glanced half-heartedly around himself and felt his scowl deepen as he viewed the finery of the Dark Lord’s inner abode. Azkaban, he knew, had not always been this way. The chief warden’s house hadn’t been so luxurious, but on the other hand, the atmosphere inside it had never been so dark, either. Then again, the house—it was more properly called a palace—had also been expanded right up to the prison itself. Snape snorted quietly to himself. He would never have been able to live there, because it didn’t take much effort to hear the screams coming out of the prison, no matter where you were in Voldemort’s palace. The Dark Lord, however, seemed to view it as paradise.

Severus stepped through the door to—well, calling the room anything but the Dark Lord’s throne room would have been an exercise in futility. Personally, he found the use of a throne just a bit presumptuous, but Snape was certainly not stupid enough to tell Voldemort that. He hadn’t lived so long by being stupid, after all, and had no desire to hasten his own demise.

The Death Eater strode forward and knelt at the Dark Lord’s feet. “My Lord.”

“Severus,” the hissing voice replied coolly. There was a moment, and then another, and for a moment Snape wondered if he had done something wrong. He kept his head bowed, waiting, and finally heard the distant command. “Rise.”

He did so, noticing the pinched expression on Voldemort’s face, and taking a careful mental note that the Dark Lord was not happy. In fact, rage was dancing behind the red eyes, and Severus sincerely hoped that he hadn’t been the one to so anger his master. He had plenty of experience at the receiving end of Voldemort’s wrath, and had no wish to repeat the process. Still, though, he did not speak. Snape’s patience was also a legend amongst the Death Eaters. He’d wait for Hell to freeze over if he had to, and judging from the temperature at the island in that dismal January, that wouldn’t be long in coming.

“What have you learned?” Voldemort finally asked.

“My Lord, it seems that Rosier has not yet cracked,” Snape replied immediately. “He remains true to you, despite being in Ministry custody. However, even without a confession, there is ample evidence against him, and he is sure to be executed soon.”

The words threatened to stick in Severus’ throat. Rosier had once been a friend, and a good one,
back at Hogwarts in a life long passed.

“Potter…” the Dark Lord hissed quietly, rising convulsively from his throne. Anger radiated off of him in waves, and Severus was very glad not to be the object of his fury. He knew, too, that he was somewhat privileged (albeit in an odd way) to see Voldemort’s frustration. Usually the Dark Lord kept it hidden from his subordinates, but Snape hadn’t risen to the forefront of his peers for no reason. Voldemort did not precisely trust him (the Dark Lord trusted no man completely), but he knew that Snape had more to lose than any other Death Eater aside from Lucius Malfoy. The crimes he had committed were worthy of at least a millennium in prison, and those were only the ones that the Ministry knew of but were unable to prove.

In his time he had done much worse.

Voldemort paced forward several steps, and finally halted, skewering Severus with a cold and angry gaze. “He must die.”

“Yes, My Lord.” Snape pulled in a deep breath, and then took the plunge. It was a gamble, but...

“If you would permit me, I could—

“No,” the monster cut him off with a wave of the hand. “I would willingly entrust you with this mission, Severus, but you are needed elsewhere. Quirrell is too much the fool to trust alone at Hogwarts.”

Thank God. “Muciber and Flint, then, My Lord?”

“Yes.” Red eyes flashed, but the anger was directed at James Potter, who had captured yet another Death Eater who had been sent to kill him.

“I will notify them, My Lord.” Severus bowed his acquiesce, but did not leave. To do so before dismissal would be the ultimate foolery.

“See to it,” Voldemort snarled. “You have the potion?”

“Of course, My Lord.” Snape felt a flash of irritation, and let it show on his face. Rare was the occasion when he failed to deliver as promised, and he had never neglected to provide a potion when so commanded by the Dark Lord. But he withdrew the vial from within his robes without having to be told, and handed it over.

His irritation gave way to a tinge of regret. Evan Rosier had once been his friend, but it was just like Voldemort to demand Snape’s deadliest potion to give to a man who was doomed anyway. There would be no effort to rescue Rosier from Ministry captivity; there never was for Death Eaters who were caught and could not save themselves. And the fact that Rosier would inevitably be executed did not matter—the Dark Lord took no chances, and Rosier would be expected to take the potion and die before secrets could be forced from him. It was a cold outlook, but accepted. Voldemort took the vial without a word. However, when Snape expected dismissal, there was suddenly:

“Walk with me, Severus.”

“Yes, My Lord.” Without any hesitation, he fell into step at the Dark Lord’s left. What Voldemort wanted, he did not know, but it was sure to be interesting.

“You are dissatisfied, Severus,” Voldemort hissed.

His heart thundered in his throat. “Forgive me, Master. I am—”
Again, Voldemort waved off his response. “Your enmity with Potter is well known, but it will not interfere with my plans.”

“Yes, My Lord,” Severus breathed, trying to hide his relief. For one moment, he had thought… But that no longer mattered. His secrets were still safe, so he concentrated on looking like the loyal Death Eater the entire Wizarding world assumed he was.

“I trust there will be no...problems?” the Dark Lord pressed threateningly.

“Never, My Lord.”

Together, they exited the throne room, walking down the long and silent corridor. However, Severus was surprised when they took a right at the end of the wide hallway and passed through the entrance to the prison itself. Azkaban was the Dark Lord’s private playground, and Death Eaters seldom entered that domain, save for the likes of the Lestranges, all three of which in the prison itself and only left the island in Voldemort’s service. Severus, because of his position at Hogwarts, rarely came to the island, save when summoned. And he hadn’t been in the prison for years.

“The werewolf,” Voldemort said suddenly.

“No progress.” Snape scowled. “The fool will not change allegiance, no matter what the offer—and the only way to kill him discreetly would surely point directly to me.”

“Then do not do it. Quirrell I will sacrifice, but your removal would only place Hogwarts in Sprout’s hands, for which I have no use,” the Dark Lord replied.

“Should I give Quirrell the order?” Severus asked, dreading the answer.

“Not yet. Potter first...then Lupin.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“And as for Quirrell—”

“My Lord!” Rodolphus Lestrange’s voice cut Voldemort off abruptly, and both Dark wizards swung to face the approaching Death Eater, who hurriedly knelt at the Dark Lord’s feet while Severus resisted the urge to step away from Voldemort’s anger—and the wand that was suddenly in Voldemort’s hand.

“What is it?” the Dark Lord demanded angrily, and Severus estimated that Lestrange had fifteen seconds before he was in a world of pain.

Lestrange flinched. “Forgive me, Master, but the experiment has...failed. Again.”

“What?”

“Yes, Master,” Lestrange responded very quietly. “The—”

“Crucio.”

Severus watched impassively as the Death Eater screamed and twitched on the floor. He had no idea what ‘experiment’ that Lestrange was talking about, but it hardly mattered. Failure carried a very high price in their world, and he felt no pity for those who incurred the Dark Lord’s wrath. They had chosen their own paths.

Finally, Voldemort released the other from the curse, and after a moment of panting on the floor,
Lestrange clambered back to his knees, shaking.

“Why?” Voldemort hissed.

“The prisoner resisted too long, Master,” Lestrange replied timidly. “He is now unconscious… Further attempts would probably kill him.”

Severus filed those words away for future reference. Anything that earned Voldemort’s fury was certainly worth watching, and he was indeed furious—within seconds, Lestrange was screaming again.

Arthur answered the knock on his office door with a shouted “Yes!” He was knee-deep in paperwork, thanks to his new promotion—Addams had retired just two days before, and Arthur already swamped. However, he did spare a moment’s worth of attention to look up at his visitor, and his blood ran cold. It was Arabella Figg.

He and the Head of the DMLE were old friends. In fact, they had dated once, back in their early years at Hogwarts, and the relationship had managed, somehow, to end on good terms. But ‘Bella was a busy woman, and not prone to making social visits in the middle of the work day—which could only mean one thing. His heart racing, Arthur tried to stand up, but found his legs would not work. Something had happened, and her voice only solidified that suspicion.

“Sit down, Arthur,” ‘Bella said quietly. She came around the side of his desk and faced him squarely. It took him a long moment to find his voice.

“It’s Bill, isn’t it?” Arthur finally managed.

“Yes, it is,” ‘Bella replied. She wasn’t the type to mince words, and Arthur felt like someone had knifed him in the gut. His breath was coming short, suddenly, and all he could think was that it couldn’t be true… Arthur blinked hard, and swallowed even harder. Not another one, he thought desperately. Please not another one. Not now. Not Bill—Arabella took his hand gently.

“I know what you’re thinking, Arthur,” she said softly. “But he’s not dead.”

“Not…dead?” Hope seized up inside him, but ‘Bella shook her head slightly.

“Bill’s in Azkaban, Arthur,” she said gently. “He was captured two hours ago.”

Azkaban. The very mention of the word made Arthur go cold. His son. In Azkaban. God, no. Not Bill. He was shaking, but Arthur was unable to care. Bill was in Azkaban.

‘Bella squeezed his hand. “We’ll go everything we can for him, Arthur, but…”

The unspoken words left a hole in his heart. But. But no one had ever made it out of Azkaban alive. But the Ministry’s former prison was the Dark Lord’s throne world. But there was no hope.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

Visions of all the horrors Bill had to be experiencing swam before Arthur’s eyes. It was hard to
breathe. First Charlie, and now Bill…he swallowed. The news was going to hit his family very hard. Molly… His mouth suddenly very dry, Arthur swallowed again. “Does my wife know yet?”

“Not yet. I thought you would rather be there for it.”

Arthur nodded woodenly. “Yes.”

“We can use the fireplace downstairs.” Very gently, ‘Bella pulled him to his feet. “Let’s go.”

Arthur followed her mechanically. Oh, Bill… In Azkaban. His son was going to die in hell. Only Arabella’s hand on his arm kept him walking straight, and Arthur stumbled more than once going down the stairs. It was hard to care. Bill had been captured… Mixing with the horrible visions now were the memories of all the good times. He wanted to hate someone, anyone, for his son’s capture, but there wasn’t enough emotion to feel angry. He felt drained. Bill was gone. Arthur bumped into a doorframe along the way, but he couldn’t care. He’d lost another one.

“It’s done?”

“Yes,” James said quietly. “Early this morning.” Part of him felt guilty over sending another man into danger, and there was nothing anyone could say to make him feel better about this. Risks, James knew, were necessary, especially in his line of work, but sometimes he really wished that he could have stayed a professional Quidditch player instead. Life certainly had been a lot easier, back in those days—but there was no fooling himself. Life would have meant less if he had taken the easy way out, and James knew that he’d chosen the right career path. There were just moments when it was hard. Like now.

He could only imagine what Bill might face in Azkaban. They had sent him with every possible warning, and had tried to give him every advantage they could—but in the end, James knew that his friend would face torture. Voldemort did not just lock up Aurors, even those who, like Bill, knew very little that could help him. Torture, James knew, was standard operating procedure. Bill knew it, too, and he’d said he was ready, but James wouldn’t wish that on anyone. Especially a volunteer.

“One week, James, and then we will know,” Dumbledore said quietly, reading his mind.

He sighed. “I wish it could be sooner.”

“As do I. But you agreed that a week was the least amount of time we could wait,” the old man pointed out.

“I know.” James shrugged. “I just hate doing this… I hate watching them die.”

“Perhaps Peter is right, then. Perhaps it is time for you to leave the field,” Dumbledore suggested gently, but James shook his head.

“Not until he’s gone,” the Auror answered grimly. “I can’t stop until Voldemort goes down.”

The old man smiled ever so slightly. “I knew you would say that,” he replied, much to James’ relief. “But I had to offer.”
“Thanks,” James said quietly, meaning it. Then he forced a smile. “You know, it might not be much longer…this could be it.”

“The chance to break open Azkaban, you mean?” Dumbledore’s blue eyes found James’ brown. His voice was grim. “Don’t fool yourself, James. You and I both know that Azkaban won’t end this.”

Something cold and angry flared inside him. “Oh, I know,” James admitted. “But it might start something. And then, at the very least, we’ll know what he’s been hiding in there all these years.”
Strategies and Sacrifices

As fate would have it, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were the first to find trouble.

The second term had hardly begun, and the trio had started it quietly. Part of that came from the school-wide grief over the loss of Oliver Wood (whom everyone, excepting the Slytherins, had liked very much), and still more came from having seen the world outside. It was easy to become isolated at Hogwarts, and many students had managed to forget how bad things really were. This realization, in addition to Oliver’s death, hit hard. The Gryffindors, especially, were quiet, and the Misfits were no different from their classmates. Although one week had passed, no pranks had been played.

The one they had started to plan had been killed by that morning’s headline: **BILL WEASLEY CAPTURED BY DEATH EATERS: ANOTHER AUROR FALLS TO AZKABAN.**

That took the heart out of the Misfits. In some ways, though, it pulled Gryffindors of all years together in support of their friends. Yet all the support could be suffocating, too, and when Ron simply needed to get away, Harry and Hermione went with him. Together, they walked the grounds on that chilly Wednesday evening, not speaking, but simply depending on one another’s presence for comfort. There were times you needed friends, Harry reflected silently, kicking a stray stick out of his path as they walked. It was an unusually warm night for late January, with a minimum of snow on the ground. This winter was promising to be shorter and warmer than the year before—irrelevantly, he wondered if there was any significance in that. But probably not.

Harry stole a glance at Ron. The red haired boy scuffled along slowly, with his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his robes and his head down with eyes staring unseeingly at the still-frozen ground. His friend had been very quiet since that morning, when Professor Fletcher had pulled all four Weasleys aside on their way into the Great Hall for breakfast. Moments later, when Hermione’s copy of the *Daily Prophet* arrived, Harry had understood why. He had been there for his friend the entire time, had ridden the storm of Ron’s uncharacteristic outburst about how unfair it was, had waited with Hermione when Ron had wanted to be alone, and had dragged him to class afterwards, knowing that isolation wouldn’t help him. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had visited that morning, Harry knew, but they couldn’t stay forever. So, while Lee and the other Gryffindor third years struggled to cheer Fred and George up (and the fifth years tried to do the same for Percy), Harry and Hermione stuck by Ron’s side. It was the least they could do. He was their friend.

And that friendship brought the trio to the edge of the Forbidden Forest, walking in companionable silence. Once, Harry had asked his father to explain the relationship he and his fellow Marauders shared. James Potter had replied that he couldn’t, that their friendship was beyond definition. Now, Harry understood.

There was a sharp *crack*, like a twig snapping, yet louder and somehow larger. The trio stopped.

“What was that?” Hermione asked.

A cold chill ran down Harry’s spine. “I don’t know…”

Then, a gust of wind blew, carrying with it a whispering that sounded much like voices. Something was wrong. He knew it. Ron’s head came up. “There’s something really weird here…” He shivered. “I can feel it.”

“So can I,” Harry agreed. The wind kept howling, and with a little imagination, he could hear grunts and laughter.
“It’s just the wind,” Hermione said. But she didn’t sound like she believed herself, either. “Isn’t it?”

The voices grew louder, almost understandable now. Ron’s eyes grew wide. “That’s no wind.”

There was a crash. And then another. Suddenly, a loud creak made them all jump, and in the distance, they heard a tree fall to the forest floor. Harry had to shout to be heard over the rising wind.

“What is it, then?”

“I don’t know!” Ron shouted back.

There was another crash, and then a second tree fell. This one was close enough that the trio could see the forest shake.

“Something’s coming!” Hermione cried.

“But what?” Ron demanded.

Harry’s heart started pounding in his ears as the crashes increased in frequency. Trees were falling every few seconds, now, and the wind was blowing madly, making their robes whip around their bodies. A sudden gust caused Harry’s scarf to take flight, and only a quick grab kept him from losing it. Likewise, Hermione was having terrible problems with her hair, which was trying to flee like a wild animal. Still, she pulled one hand away from the desperate battle to point into the forest.

“Look!” she shouted. “There!”

Dark shapes were moving through the Forbidden Forest. Giant shapes, lumbering forward with long strides that ate up the ground with no effort at all. As the three Gryffindors watched, the figures began moving faster. Moving towards them.

“Oh, no…” Ron whispered, even as the same fear entered Harry’s mind. A quick glance told him that Ron was thinking the same thing he was; his friend was pale.

“What is it?” Hermione demanded, but for a moment, all Harry and Ron could do was stare. This can’t be happening, Harry’s rational mind objected. Not at Hogwarts!

“Giants,” Harry finally managed to say through the lump in his throat. “They’re giants!”

Hermione’s mouth dropped open, and Harry knew what she was going to say. She was going to say exactly what he was thinking—Not at Hogwarts. It’s impossible. But impossibility was staring them in the face. The giants were coming closer, and they stood frozen.

“Come on!” Harry forced himself to move and grab his friends. “We have to warn everyone!”

Together, they raced towards the castle, praying that they wouldn’t be too late. It was hard not to look back as their feet pounded over the frozen ground, but Harry tried not to. There were several reasons for that. First of all, he was sure that looking back would only slow them down. More importantly, though, he was afraid of what they would see.

Suddenly, there was a shadow in front of them, and Harry barely had time to hear Hermione scream before the ground shook and chaos erupted. Instinct drove him, and he dove to the left, testing his Quidditch-honed reflexes to the limit. Distantly, Harry sensed that Ron had done the same, but he heard Hermione scream again, and knew the worst had happened. Still rolling, Harry threw out his left arm to stop himself, grabbing his wand in the other hand at the same time. Then, trying to ignore the sound of his heart thundering in his ears, he looked up to see Hermione held in a giant’s huge
Perhaps the giant had grabbed Hermione because she was a girl, and therefore seemed weaker than
the other two. Perhaps her reflexes were slower, and she hadn’t been able to move in time, so the
giant had decided that she was an easier target. Or maybe it simply that Hermione had been the
closest, and therefore the easiest to reach. But whatever the reason, the giant had picked the wrong
kid. Hermione might have been slower on her feet than the boys, but she was far from stupid.

Once she’d stopped screaming, Harry’s friend very calmly stuck her wand right between the giant’s
eyes and cried “Stupefy!”

Unfortunately, giants are rather large creatures, and the spell was not as effective as it would have
been against a human being. He staggered drunkenly, but did not fall. Blinking, the giant glared at
Hermione and struggled to shake off the spell—but by then Ron and Harry had raised their wands,
and cast the spell together while the giant’s attention was still on Hermione—who yelped as he
tightened his grip—and the giant staggered again, almost falling this time. But after three stunning
spells, the monster was still on his feet.

Harry narrowed his focus and tried again—if they waited much longer, Hermione would be crushed
into goo! “Stupefy!”

Again, the giant did not fall, although he looked rather woozy. Suddenly, Ron was at his side,
angrier than Harry had ever seen him.

“Damn you!” the other boy cried. “Stupefy! Stupefy—” The giant shuddered, and Harry joined in.
“STUPEFY!”

Finally, the giant crumbled to the ground with an earth-shattering thud. Hermione bounced free,
rolling away. Harry and Ron rushed to her side and helped her to her feet. Harry looked at her with
concern. “Are you all right?”

“Of course I’m not all right! I just had a giant try to crush me like an egg, and you’re asking if I’m all
right?” But Hermione was grinning, despite the miniature rant she’d just aimed the boys’ way.

“Here.” Ron held out her wand, and she took it with another smile.

“Thanks—oh, no!”

“What?” Ron asked, just as Harry demanded:

“Don’t tell me that stupid thing is awake already—”

But Harry’s mouth shut with a snap as he and Ron turned to face the forest once more, and he felt his
eyes grow large. Dark shapes were streaming out of the forest—in the light of the setting sun, Harry
could count eight—no, nine—ten, at least. More giants were heading towards them. Towards
Hogwarts.

This time, Hermione reacted the fastest. “Let’s go!”
The first teacher they ran into had to be Professor Snape. The day had already been going terribly; it only figured that things would become even worse. After all, Snape hated Gryffindors. And especially them.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had rushed through the castle’s doors and nearly bowled over the deputy headmaster. Even as Snape bit off a startled curse, jumping out of their way and struggling to keep his balance, he turned his angry black eyes on them and Harry had to struggle not to flinch under that hate-filled gaze. But it was less of an effort than usual; he knew they had little time to waste. Harry and his friends had run for all they were worth, but there were only moments to spare before the giants were upon the castle. He opened his mouth to speak, but Snape cut him off.

“What in the world do you three think you are doing?” the Potions master demanded. “Fifty points from Gryffindor for reckless behavior! Each!”

Harry stared. Here they were, trying to save Hogwarts, and Snape was subtracting points?

“But Professor, there are giants outside—” Hermione tried.

“There are no giants near Hogwarts, you silly girl,” Snape snapped. “Go to your common rooms before I take more points—”

Thud.

Snape’s face changed from disbelieving to coolly focused in the space of a second. “Get behind me!”

There was no time for more. The great wooden doors flew wide, silhouetting a giant in their opening. Behind him, the sun was setting rapidly, and light was fading from the sky, lending a rainbow of colors to the giant creature and almost disguising the horrible expression on its face. Harry watched with misguided fascination as his least favorite professor stepped forward, placing himself between the trio and the giant. Snape’s right hand moved inside his robes with surprising speed and emerged with his wand as his black eyes narrowed. For a moment, Harry feared that the greasy professor might try to talk with the giant, but he realized very quickly that those worries were unfounded.

“Everbero!” Snape thundered, and a giant hand seemed to lift the giant up and throw him backwards. Distantly, Harry heard a howl of anger.

But Snape was moving. A flick of his wand slammed the doors shut, and without pause, the deputy headmaster set a sealing spell upon them. Then, he spoke a word which Harry had never heard before, but knew instinctively to be a word of power—the lights in the castle flickered once, then twice, and after a third time, became steady once more. Somehow, Harry knew that Hogwarts’ wards had just been locked into place. For a long moment, he stared at Snape, whom all his instincts told him not to trust, and realized that they would have to. Running footsteps were headed their way, and closing fast.

Remus Lupin skidded around a corner, his gray robes flying wildly behind him. His blue eyes were alert, yet somehow were very cold in a way that Harry had only seen them once before. Remus’ gaze was on Snape.

“What happened?” he demanded.

“Giants,” the other replied shortly, sliding his wand into his robes once more. “I presume more than one.”
Hermione picked up where he left off without prompting. “At least eleven,” she said quickly. “Harry and Ron stunned one when we were on our way back, but they were coming out of the Forbidden Forest. We didn’t stop to see if there were any more.”

“Well done,” the headmaster said quietly to the boys, and to Harry’s surprise, Snape jerked his head in agreement. But Remus continued: “It is very hard to stun a giant. I’m surprised you managed it; not many spells work on them.”

Harry smiled sheepishly. “Yeah, we found that out the hard way.”

Snape and Lupin exchanged a significant look, but the deputy headmaster only shrugged. Suddenly, Remus wondered, “Where’s Dung?”

“Here,” the head of Gryffindor emerged from the same corridor that the headmaster had come from, accompanied by several other staff members.

“Quirrell?” Remus asked next, leaving Harry to wonder what his dad’s old friend would want with the inept Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. Quirrell would probably faint at the mere sight of a giant! But the answer wasn’t long in coming.

“Rii—iight hee—rree, Head-master,” the turban-wearing professor stuttered.

“Take all the students to the Great Hall. Keep them there until told otherwise by Severus or myself.” The headmaster waited for an understanding nod, and then continued. “Go with him, Sprout. Keep them safe.”

“Right,” the dumpy head of Hufflepuff nodded and quickly turned to the trio, and waved an impatient hand in their direction. “You heard the headmaster! Come along!”

Although he knew it was hopeless, Harry couldn’t help sending a pleading glance in Remus’ direction. He was sick of being protected. Hadn’t he, Ron, and Hermione defeated a giant all by themselves? Yet they were going to be shut up in the Great Hall while the fate of Hogwarts hung in the balance. Even though Harry knew—when he was being honest with himself, which he didn’t particularly feel like being a the moment—that luck had played a critical part in the trio’s defeat of that giant, he couldn’t help but feel slighted. Why did adults always underestimate them? This was just like the situation with Snape and Quirrell back in November. They were ‘too young’ to be trusted. Harry resisted the urge to groan. He was sure that the grown-ups wouldn’t understand that.

And of course, Remus shook his head, and Harry had no choice but to join his friends in following Quirrell and Sprout to the Great Hall. It figured. One moment they were saving Hogwarts from giants, and the next they were being babysat.

Hours later, Remus fell more than sat in the chair by the fire. He ached. The pain wasn’t as bad as his transformations, but he was more exhausted, which he would not have thought possible if he hadn’t lived through a past attack on Hogwarts which had been even worse than this one. Remus had spent years living with monthly pain and exhaustion, though, and knew very well how to push through both. Functionality, he knew, had little to do with personal comfort.
“That,” Mundungus Fletcher breathed, “was messy.”

“You have a certain aptitude for understatement,” Severus responded dryly.

“And you one for sarcasm,” Dung retorted.

“Really?” the Potions master arched one black eyebrow. “I’m shocked that you even noticed.”

Dung snorted with laughter, and Remus found himself chuckling despite his fatigue. Dung and Severus had extremely contrasting personalities; there were times that how they managed to remain friends mystified the headmaster. However, there were some things that could overcome even such diverse characters and bind them together. Remus smiled grimly. Today had been one of those days.

He cleared his throat before Snape and Fletcher could launch into another playful argument.

“Forgive me for interrupting,” Remus said quietly, “but I’d like to get this done before daybreak, personally.”

His companions nodded in agreement. “No kidding,” Dung breathed.

“Quite,” Severus grunted.

“Well, let’s start by saying what we could not earlier, then,” Remus continued.

It was late, and they had already held an after action review with Hogwarts’ entire staff, going over what had happened during the giants’ attack. Unfortunately, Remus, Severus, and Dung had borne the brunt of the battle, but they were the only ones trained for such things. The other professors simply hadn’t ever encountered that kind of fight, and when he’d formed his battle plan (which had been a seat-of-the-pants affair if there ever had been one), Remus had improvised accordingly. He’d had no doubts about his, Dung’s or Severus’ ability to kill, so they had provided the offense, leaving defensive spells to their less-practiced colleagues.

In the end, their exhaustion stemmed from their success. The plan had worked, but it had cost the three professors heavily. Four hours after the first giant sighting, all of their opponents were dead. Remus did not take pleasure in killing, but he had no pity for those who would hurt his children. After a moment, he continued.

“First of all,” Remus said, “do we have any question about who was behind this?”

He had asked the same question earlier, and the general consensus had been to lay the blame at Voldemort’s feet. However, Snape had merely sat silently with a scowl on his face at the time, so both Remus and Dung knew that there might be more. Besides, for wizards as practiced in dealing with the Dark Lord as they, they were well aware that all the pieces didn’t quite fit. Something odd was going on.

Severus was silent for a long moment. “Yes and no,” he finally replied. “Yes, I am sure that it was the Dark Lord. No, I do not understand why. It’s his intent that bothers me.”

“And I,” Dung agreed. “He couldn’t possible have thought it would work. A dozen giants? You’d need ten times that many to take Hogwarts, and Voldemort knows that. So why attack if he knew it would fail?”

“Fear,” Remus replied quietly, watching the others’ heads swiveled in his direction. “Hogwarts has not been attacked directly since 1984. Dumbledore beat Voldemort back that time, although both of them were seriously injured in the process, and Hogwarts suffered heavily—but the defenses were
never breached. He’s out to prove that they can be.”

“Because you’re not Dumbledore,” Severus agreed, shooting Remus an apologetic look. “No offense intended.”

“I know what you mean.” Remus gave him a half-hearted smile.

But Dung was less enthusiastic. “So has he succeeded?” the former Auror wondered. “He has plainly tested you, Remus. But what has he learned? And what was the point?”

“He’s learned that Remus won’t roll over and die easily,” Severus answered for him, sneering slightly. “You’re right, Dung, in that Voldemort is testing the headmaster. Remus has always been of great interest to him because he’s an unknown quality. Now he has learned that he’s not as passive as reputation claims.”

“And the point was to fail, yet at the same time prove that Hogwarts can be attacked,” Remus finished.

“But why waste the resources in an attack you know is going to fail?” Dung replied. “Voldemort is anything but stupid. There has to be something more here.”

Severus shrugged. “There is and there isn’t. Sometimes you forget, Dung, that Voldemort does not place the same value on life that we do. Others—especially giants, who are beneath his notice because they are non-wizards and non-human—are only tools. They are resources to be expended, not protected. He doesn’t care, Dung. Not at all, and not about them.”

Molly almost dreaded opening the door, but in the end, she did it anyway.

Arthur was at work. Ginny was downstairs, reading a book—although Molly suspected that her youngest was paying as much attention to that story as she had been to her own knitting project a few minutes earlier. The Burrow was, oddly enough, quiet. It was almost peaceful, could have been—if not for that dreadful emptiness residing in her soul. Three words began and ended her sorrow: Bill was gone. She had lost another one.

Slowly, she looked inside the room. Bill’s room. Once, it had been his and Charlie’s, but after Charlie died… They had kept the room for him at the Burrow, even though he had his own flat. In troubled times like this, one always needed a place to come home to, and Arthur and Molly Weasley had promised all of their children that the Burrow would always be that place. No matter what, they would always be family. Family… Oh, Bill… Tears threatened to spring to her eyes, and Molly shook her head angrily. She had promised herself that she wouldn’t grieve until she knew he was dead. Not yet. Not yet.

The yellow walls were still the same shade—why he insisted on keeping that ugly color, she would never know—and the bedspread was askew, just like Bill always left it. Both pillows, though, were laid neatly on the bed, which was made with Bill’s usual precision. Always the same. Every time. So predictable, her Bill—was that how the Death Eaters caught him? Molly shook her head again. She wouldn’t think of that. Not of her first child, her baby boy, whom she would always remember pulling her hair and then saying his first word—“Muum.” It wasn’t quite perfect, but it was close
On the wall there was the dragon poster that he and Charlie had both loved so much. While Charlie had been the one with the dragon fascination, Bill had always loved the creatures, too. Before he’d joined the Aurors, Bill had taken to wearing that infernal dragon’s tooth earring…and she’d chided him for it. Molly winced. She would never know the real reason why he’d stopped wearing it—Bill claimed that it was because the Aurors frowned upon such things, but his mother had never been sure. She could only hope, now that he’d told the truth. Sighing, she entered the room for the first time since she’d learned of her son’s capture. It didn’t get any easier with time.

There was a book on the nightstand, left facedown and open. _Sites of Historical Sorcery_, she noticed with a bittersweet smile. Some things never changed. Even though he’d become an Auror, driven to do so out of a desire to make a difference, Bill would never stop loving historical mysteries. But that thought brought less happy ones along with it.

Molly had lost two sons to the Aurors, now. First Charlie, dead for what reasons no one knew, and now Bill, in Azkaban—would it ever end? They deserved so much better… Again, she had to force back tears. No tears, she reminded herself. _I will not cry until he’s dead. Until then, there is still hope_. Molly tried to smile, but she felt her lower lip tremble. Yes, she would hope, even though common sense told her not to. She’d hope, even when there was no reason left to do so, because Bill had been her little boy, and she wasn’t about to lose him too. Not now.

But she’d be damned if she’d let another one of her children become an Auror. The Weasleys had given enough.
Bill opened his eyes slowly, and then tried to remember if he had done so at all. Everything was dark. He blinked once, then twice, and finally his surroundings began to slide into focus. Vaguely, he could make out four walls, three of cold stone and one of bars. He blinked again, trying to recall where he was through the confusing haze of pain in the back of his skull. Images flashed through his mind too quickly for him to follow, and foolishly, Bill shook his head in an effort to clear it. Pain flared and his vision went black. Biting his tongue so hard that he tasted blood, he struggled to keep from crying out—and in doing so, came to remember where he was.

_Azkaban._

Dual emotions rose within him. The first was inevitable, an Auror’s natural reaction: despair and not just a little bit of fear. The second, however, would have been foreign to his captors: triumph. He’d done it. He was in Azkaban, and he was still alive. Step one had been accomplished. Despite the situation, Bill smiled slightly. It was a crazy and risk-filled plan, but perhaps it would work. Maybe they had a chance after all. Sighing quietly to himself, he rolled to his knees. His head was still spinning, and now he knew why—but it was best not to think of that. The moments of memory were clear, now, and Bill completely understood why the Lestranges were so feared. He shook his head again, more carefully this time. They had wanted to know about the Order of the Phoenix, of course, but what he did not know, he could not tell. He was certain that that nightmarish session wouldn’t be the last (how long had it been, anyway? It had felt like a lifetime), but for now, he would put it aside. He had a job to do.

Clambering to his feet, Bill shuffled to the front of his cell. A quick glance with eyes that were now well accustomed to the gloom let him estimate its size; he seemed to be in a standard sized Azkaban cell, which wasn’t exactly spacious, but was no surprise, either. He wasn’t particularly interested in his own surroundings, though. There were much more important things in Azkaban—more important people. Bill focused his attention outwards, squinting so that he could see down the passageway.

There wasn’t much to see. The aisle was dark, but in the shadows, Bill could pick out several doors that seemed like his own, barred with reinforced steel—and hot to the touch, he quickly found out upon testing it. Magically reinforced, too, no doubt, which would certainly in part explain why no one had ever made it off the island. Fortunately, he had a way to get out of his cell—and he had a week in which to figure out how to use it. Or less, perhaps, if his interrogation session had lasted more than a day. In truth, Bill did not know, and he had no way to guess.

In the distance, he heard screaming.

Bill listened closely, but there were no audible words, only the faint sounds of a man in pain. He leaned forward, trying at the same time to avoid burning himself on the bars—

_Coldness swept over him._

A black shadow drifted towards him, and he recoiled instinctively. Deep within the hood, Bill caught a glimpse of a gray face and sightless eyes—

_Voices._

_Coldness._
“Get down!”

“Run!”

Seventeen years old. The summer holiday. A Death Eater attack on the Burrow.

His father had nearly died that day.

Ginny was crying.

Coldness.

Rough, gray hands reaching for him.

“Go with your mother, Bill!”

“I’m not leaving you!” His father went down. “Dad!”

Cold hands on his arms. Bill heard screaming. Was it his own?

“Crucio!”

Pain.

He was screaming.

Coldness.

Pain.

“Bill!”

“Run!”

In reality, Aurors had come. In his nightmares, they never did. In his nightmares, the pain never ended… In his nightmares his family’s lives came to a screeching halt. Bill didn’t realize he was shaking as he relived the nightmare. He didn’t know that he was screaming. He only knew cold, and despair—and fear.

When it ended, he lay shaking on the cold floor for he knew not how long. Slowly, he returned to consciousness, and became aware of his surroundings, but the coldness did not leave. Bill could not stop shaking.

In the distance, the screams continued.

“Get down!”

The shout startled James into motion even as he stepped out of his office door. Green light flashed as he dove to the floor, and shouts rang loudly throughout the Auror Division’s Headquarters, deep in the basement of the Ministry of Magic. Instinct took control, and the famous Auror rolled, crashing
into an unyielding set of legs as he did so. With a yelp, Ernie Jordan fell on top of him, and James kept rolling madly, not knowing what he was escaping from, but realizing from the sudden volume in headquarters that it had to be bad. Finally free of Jordan, he reached inside his robes and whipped his wand out, twisting onto his stomach and preparing to leap to his feet.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Green light flashed from somewhere on his right.

As angry voices cried out curses, James rolled to his feet, tracking in on where his target would be. He didn’t know how a Death Eater had gotten into Auror Headquarters, but at the moment, it didn’t really matter—

“Impedimenta!” From his left.

“Texifomeus!” A cloud of smoke formed directly across from James, on the other side of the office. The curse had come from his right—

From within the cloud. “Avada—”

James’ wand came up, and he aimed at the cloud, wishing that whoever had cast that spell had the sense to pick something other than the Smoke Screen Spell. “Glacialium!”

He missed, and knew it even as he spoke the word, but there was Ernie, flying in from the right and speaking at the same time.

“Stupefy!”

Thunk. Something fell to the ground from within the cloud, but the dozen Aurors in the room were taking on chances. Several other voices cast the stunning spell before anyone moved, but as the smoke began to dissipate, the shadowy figure inside the cloud remained still.

Finally, James took a moment to look around his headquarters. It looked as if a tornado had ripped through the main room at high speed. Papers were everywhere, desks were overturned, and Ernie Jordan’s prize plant was lying on its side by the front entrance. Every Auror in the room was on their feet, staring at the fading cloud of smoke with wands in hand, and a buzzing noise to his right told James that the Dark Detectors just inside the front doors were going mad. For a moment, there was utter silence, and then everyone began talking at once. But there was a hush to James’ right, and he frowned up seeing the motionless form of Virginia Wilson. He’d noticed the green flash, and knew full well what it meant. Unlike many others, James did not head towards the body of his old friend. He already knew what he would find.

Instead, he stepped forward and waded grimly into the remaining smoke. His attacker—and James had little doubt that the wizard had been aiming for him—had landed face down on the floor, unconscious. Something about the man’s white hair set off a warning bell in James’ head, but he did not recognize the short cut as belonging to any Death Eater he knew. Frowning, James used his foot to flip the other over.

The hush became silence. All those who hadn’t been looking at Virginia’s still form had been watching him, and there was no mistaking the recognition. The unconscious wizard was Sam Ackerley.

One of their own.
Arabella strode through the hallways of Hogwarts, feeling the young and eager eyes upon her. What were they thinking? Did they dream of future fame and glory, or think of the power to be gained in the world outside? Or did they remember the war’s cost and mourn for those who had been lost along the way? Arabella Figg had never wanted to be famous, although she’d somehow become that way. She’d become somewhat of an icon throughout her work as an Auror and in the DMLE, first in cleaning up the leftovers of Grindelwald’s supporters and then later in the war against Voldemort. She’d done her job with more skill and luck than most, though, and regretted it very rarely. Despite that, she hoped that the children watching her would remember the humanity behind the fame, and realize that once, she hadn’t been much different than they were now.

She flashed a quick smile at two Ravenclaw girls; they looked to be about sixth year and reminded Arabella very strongly of her own past. It was strange how coming back to Hogwarts brought the memories back again. Her smile turned wistful. Things were simpler back then.

Reached a closed oak door, she shook herself free of the past and knocked. After a moment, a familiar voice told her to come in. Arabella did so, taking care to close the door behind herself before meeting the professor’s gaze. When she finally did, Arabella noted the surprise in his eyes.

“’Bella,” he greeted her warmly, offering first his hand and then a comfortable chair.

“Mundungus,” she replied. To her knowledge, she was the only one who called him by his first name, now that his father was long dead. Even his mother had called him ‘Dung.’

Something in her eyes must have given her away. “So what brings you to Hogwarts?” Fletcher asked warily. “Something tells me this isn’t a social call, is it?”

“No, it’s not,” Arabella replied quietly. She’d intended to warm him up to the subject, but Mundungus’ no nonsense attitude killed that idea. As he arched one blonde eyebrow (the left one, which was split by a small scar), she decided to get straight to the point. “I need you, Mundungus.”

“Beg pardon?” He had the good grace to look surprised.

“You knew this would come,” Arabella responded calmly, meeting his gaze. “And I don’t mean right away. Finish the school term, first, but then we need you. The Aurors need you back, and soon. I’m sorry, because I know it’s hard, but—”

“You have no idea,” Mundungus cut her off in a gravely voice. “You don’t know what you ask.”

“No, I don’t,” she admitted, feeling a flash of pity for her old friend that she’d never show; Arabella knew it would only anger him. “I’ve never been where you have, and I can’t imagine how it feels, but I do know where I am, and I’m struggling to keep our side alive in this war. James is, too, although he’d never say it to you—but he needs you. We all do.”

“Bella…” Fletcher trailed off in a low voice. “You don’t know what you ask.”

She hated to do this to him, especially so soon. Arabella kept her voice gentle. “Then tell me.”

“I’ll try,” he sighed. “The thing is, I don’t know if I could even be an Auror again. I’ve got the skills and the experience, still, but I don’t have the mindset anymore. I can’t keep that kind of calm now. I told you two years ago that I needed time, and I still do. I’ve got to find myself, because I
lost something while in Voldemort’s hands…something important.

“And I’m not sure if I’ll ever get that back.”

Arabella wished she could have said that his brutal honesty surprised her, but in truth, only his worlds did. Yes, Mundungus had been grimmer and more nervous since his capture, but… Could it really be so bad? She held her silence for several long moments, trying to sort her thoughts into a proper order. “Are you certain?”

“I wish I wasn’t, but I am,” her old friend replied. “I’m sorry, ‘Bella. I really am. I just can’t be what you need me to be right now.”

“Remus said you handled yourself well against the giants.” It was worth one last try.

“Of course I did. But I had a case of the shakes afterwards like you wouldn’t believe…I haven’t been that bad since I was a rookie, either. But those giants weren’t Death Eaters, which made a difference. And they weren’t Voldemort, either.” Something strange lit off in his eyes, and Arabella knew he was telling the truth.

“All right, then,” she replied quietly. “If you are ready—when you are ready—let me know.”

He nodded gravely, and they both rose and shook hands. Why did it feel as if it was the last time? “I promise.”

They’d had to lock Sam into their most secure holding cell, which wasn’t exactly long on creature comforts, but was warded extremely well. A room full of Aurors couldn’t mistake what had happened to him, especially when, upon awakening, the veteran Auror had immediately lunged at his long time friend, James Potter. They had restrained him only with difficulty, for Sam had been nearly driven mad with the need to kill the senior Auror. Thus, for the last three hours, the assembled team of experts fought desperately to break through the layers of Imperius curses laid upon their friend and colleague.

James paced restlessly outside. He agreed with the assessment that his presence only made matters worse, but it was hard to wait. Even though he knew intellectually that such complicated work took time (especially with such an unwilling subject), he was ready to start bouncing off the walls. They could have called in a team of curse-breakers to deal with the problem, of course, but the head of the Auror Division had made the call. They would keep this one in-house. There was no need to let Rita Skeeter get a hold of this tragedy; within minutes it would be all over the headlines, if she had her way.

James frowned. He would have liked to ask Arabella for advice, but she was at Hogwarts, talking to Dung and then sharing lunch with her counterpart from the Dutch Ministry. His superior would be out of touch for hours, and he wouldn’t interrupt her unless a true emergency dawned—which hadn’t. Quite. So he paced, wondering when the others would finally be done, and trying not to think about the funeral he had to arrange. God, this is going to kill Virginia’s daughters, he couldn’t help but think. Such nice girls, and the oldest is only a year out of Hogwarts. What am I supposed to tell them?
Well, you see, girls, your mother was killed by another Auror, only it wasn’t his fault—

“James!”

He turned to face Francine Hoyt, who was far and away his best curse breaker with Bill Weasley in Azkaban. She was standing, drawn and pale, just inside the previously closed door that led to Holding Cell 2. Her eyes were tired and sad, but her smile was triumphant.

“We’re done.”

Three long strides carried him into the room, and Francine did not try to stop him. James’ quick senses noticed three other Aurors leaning tiredly against the walls, and Sam, who was sitting in a single chair in the middle of the room with his head in his hands. His shoulders were shaking, but he looked up as Francine touched his elbow gently. “James is here, Sam.”

His old friend’s brown eyes were bloodshot, and Sam suddenly looked twice his thirty-six years. Their gazes met for a moment, and then Sam looked away. James grabbed a nearby chair and dragged over to face his friend. He sat down while the other Auror made an intensive study of the floor.

“Sam?” A moment passed, and then two. “Sam?” There was still no answer, and James reached out to touch his friend’s arm. “Sam? Talk to me.”

Sam shook his head. “I’m so sorry, James,” he mumbled, tears streaming down his face. “I didn’t know—I didn’t mean to…” He gulped. “I’m so sorry… I killed Virginia… I didn’t mean…” He kept shaking his head.

“I know you didn’t mean to, Sam,” James said gently, choking back fury that wasn’t aimed at his old friend. “But I need to know what happened. Who put you under the curse?”


James winced. It was Monday, and Sam hadn’t been on duty over the weekend. Then it was entirely possible that Voldemort’s pet bounty hunters had two entire days to work on him, and break the Auror down until there was nothing left. He heard Francine’s whispered curse behind him, and had to swallow back his own horror. He hated to ask, but really had no choice. “What happened?”

The story came tumbling out with little more prompting, and James sat quietly through it all, listening as Sam described the horrors he had gone through for the past forty-eight hours. Mulciber and Flint had to work hard to break him, but in the end they had—few didn’t break over time, and after what they had done to Sam, there was no wonder that he had. Enough pain would make a man do anything, and James only wished that he hadn’t heard the same story before from many a captured Auror. In recent memory, Mundungus Fletcher was the only one who hadn’t broken under torture, and even Dung had come out of it with horrendous emotional scars.

In the end, Sam only been able to sob out that he was sorry, and James had wished that he could tell him everything would be all right. Unfortunately, he couldn’t. One Auror was dead at another’s hands, and the other had been broken. The Division was down by two, today, and they hadn’t even taken any Death Eaters in payment for it.
“Do you remember Julia Malfoy?”

Lily nodded slowly. “Vaguely. But I never knew her well.”

“I did. Do. Whichever.” Severus sighed and leaned his head back, resting it on the top of the Potter’s sitting room couch and staring up at the ceiling. It didn’t help, and he still felt Lily’s unsettling green eyes upon him. While he hesitated, she spoke again.

“What does she have to do with anything?”

He sighed again. “Well, she’s the problem I wanted to talk to you about.”

“You’re looking for advice on women?” Lily burst into laughter. “I should be the last person to ask about that!”

“You are a woman.” Severus brought his head up and eyed her expectantly, trying to fight his growing irritation. It wasn’t like he had any other female friends. Who was he supposed to ask—Hooch? That would work really well. Besides, he trusted Lily, even when she was being a pain. She had been the first real friend he’d ever had, and in some ways, still was the only one who understood him completely.

She chuckled. “Last I checked, yes.”

“Well, then tell me what the hell I’m supposed to do when Lucius Malfoy wants me to marry his sister,” Severus snarled.

“Oh dear.” Lily’s expression quickly became more serious. “So this isn’t your idea of a romance then, huh?”

“Hardly.” He sighed and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I don’t know what to do, Lily. I have no desire to marry the woman—she’s been one of my best friends for as long as I can remember!”

“There could be worse things than marrying a friend, Severus,” Lily replied quietly.

“Not when the friend is a Death Eater, there isn’t,” he retorted. Like almost all of my old friends are.

“Oh my.”

“Yeah.” Severus sighed again. He hadn’t met Julia until she came to Hogwarts, but by the time his second year had rolled around, the purebloods in Slytherin had come to accept Snape’s Prince heritage as good enough, and the Princes and the Malfoys had been tied together for generations. Julia wasn’t even a full year younger than he, either, so she had been one of the first purebloods in the class behind him. Their ages were much closer than his and Lucius’, actually, and Severus had grown up almost thinking of Julia as his younger sister. Sure, she was smart, and she was pretty—although he valued the former more than the latter in a woman, anyway—and she was, overall, a very desirable woman who wielded a great deal of power. But she was Julia, and that only made matters worse. Not to mention the fact that she’d followed in her brother’s footsteps and entered Voldemort’s service two years after graduating Hogwarts.

1981 had been a bad year in a lot of ways.

“So this is Malfoy’s idea, and not hers,” she finally said.
“Undoubtedly. I haven’t seen Julia in several years,” he replied. “Last I heard, she was in South America, digging up some ancient Dark artifact for Voldemort.”

“So why don’t you just tell him no?” Lily wondered, and Severus had to resist the urge to roll his eyes. Lily was Muggle-born, after all, and there were plenty of purebloods who didn’t understand the inner politics of the higher Wizarding families.

“It’s not that simple,” he explained patiently. “I am the last remaining member of one of the Fourteen Families, and I am thirty-two years old. I am also unmarried. Lucius knows this, and what’s more, so does Voldemort. What makes matters worse is that Julia is thirty-one, and likewise free—and the Fourteen nearly always marry amongst their own.” And I can’t afford to marry elsewhere, not with the fact that I inherited the Prince position through Voldemort’s sufferance alone.

Lily smiled slightly. “Unless they’re Potters.”

“Well, that entire line has always been a little off, if you know what I mean,” Severus retorted lightly, letting his eyebrows rise purposefully. Lily laughed for a moment, but then her expression turned serious.

“You don’t love her, then.”

“Marrying her would be like marrying my sister, Lily.”

“You don’t have a sister,” Lily pointed out.

“He did miss Julia, but not like that. Not like that at all!

“So say no.”

Severus rolled his eyes. Why did people always think things were so simple? “Easier said than done,” he groused. “I need a legitimate reason, and thinking of her like a sister isn’t one. Unfortunately, I ought to be highly complimented that Lucius would trust me with his sister, but I’m rather disgusted at the very thought.”

“You talk about her like she’s a piece of property,” Lily remarked unhappily, frowning.

“As far as Death Eater politics go, she might as well be. Voldemort has, apparently, approved the match. Neither she nor I will have much say if he decides that we are getting married.”

“Has he?”

“Not yet.” Thankfully. He had a lot more important things to do with his life than get married. Besides, being a spy and marrying a Death Eater wouldn’t exactly work well together, after all.

“So you’re just dealing with Lucius right now,” Lily said thoughtfully.

“Yes.” The prat. Why is it that he manages to get involved in all the major decisions of my life? “And I can handle Lucius…I’m just trying to figure out how to do so politely. Without starting a blood feud.”

“And you really don’t want to get married to anyone at all,” she replied lightly.

“No, I don’t.” He tried to ignore the teasing expression. He hadn’t come here to get teased.

“Would it be so bad, Severus? You might find that you like marriage.” Lily smiled. “And I’ve seen
“Yes, it would be that bad!” Angrily, he bit back his irritation. Lily was trying to help, and she was his friend. She deserved better than getting yelled at. He sighed. “Sorry.”

She chuckled. “Don’t worry about it. I’m used to you.”

“Unfortunately,” Severus replied dryly. “I’m sorry for that, too.”

“I’m not.” Lily reached out and put a compassionate hand on his shoulder. “We’ll find a way.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so,” she said pointedly, but her green eyes were shining. He hated that optimistic smile. Somehow, it always meant that Lily was going to get her way…and Severus had a sudden feeling that reminding her of his unmarried status had been a very bad idea. “And I even know where to start.”

“Where?” he asked cautiously. If Lily even thought about hooking him up with some friend of hers, he was going to—

She looked at him strangely. “By talking to her, of course.”

“Oh, great,” Severus mumbled.

“What?”

“I can only imagine how Julia is going to react to this,” he drawled in reply. “If she doesn’t Crucio me on the spot, it’s going to make one hell of an interesting conversation.”
The voices drifted in on his consciousness, and it took him a long time to realize that they weren’t part of a nightmare. Once he did, it took Bill even longer to recognize the speakers, but once he did, he felt a chill run down his spine.

The voices were accompanied by footsteps. They were moving in his direction.

“Our master,” Lucius Malfoy said acidly, “was wondering why you never saw fit to share the fact that you are an Animagus, Peter.”

There was a long pause, and finally, Peter Pettigrew replied: “It…never seemed important…Lucius.”

“Really?” the senior Death Eater demanded.

“Well, um—”

“Crucio!” There was a thump as Pettigrew hit the wall, and the screaming lasted for thirty seconds or so. When it stopped, Malfoy snarled, “That is but a taste of what our master will give you, fool. Get up!”

Bill heard Pettigrew scramble to his feet, and only then did his befuddled mind comprehend what he was hearing. Pettigrew? he thought suddenly. A Death Eater? But he knew Peter Pettigrew, if not well then well enough. Of all the people Bill Weasley would have expected to be a Death Eater, Pettigrew was not one—the voices were continuing.

“Have you found out anything useful for a change?” Malfoy demanded.

“Not…not really—” Bill heard the flinch in Pettigrew’s voice.

“Not really?” Malfoy mocked him angrily. “What is the use of having Potter’s best friend as a spy if you learn nothing?”

They were passing his cell, now, and Bill huddled back into the corner, attempting to seem as unobtrusive and harmless as possible. In Azkaban, and to Death Eaters, the prisoners were only scenery—or toys. With a grimace, Bill tried very hard to just be scenery. Being a toy wasn’t nearly as productive. Pettigrew was walking very stiffly, and watching Malfoy warily.

“Well, it’s not like James really brings his work home—Lucius don’t!” There was panic in Pettigrew’s voice, and Bill guessed that Malfoy had been about to utilize the Cruciatus Curse again.

“I’m telling you the truth, and no amount of threatening will change that! I don’t know anything!”

“We shall see about that.” With a grandiose sweep of his robes, Malfoy increased his pace, and Bill watched Pettigrew struggle to keep up as they passed his cell. Rounding a corner that he knew led to the prison’s inner sanctum, the two Death Eaters—it was odd to think of Pettigrew, harmless Peter Pettigrew, as one of them, though—were gone. They continued in silence, but after a moment, their faded voices came back to him, although Bill could not understand the words. Finally, even that company was gone.

Their absence left his world empty again, and a cold chill swept down his spine. Bill shivered, and then winced as pain racked his body. Azkaban had been aptly called Hell by more than one Auror, and he could not find a better word to describe the place. Five days, he reminded himself. Then he could act, when the wand and Portkey that had been transfigured into harmless seeming fingernails
would appear. He didn’t have to wait much longer. Soon, he’d be able to break free, and help the twenty-eight others who were had been consigned to his hell with him.

Five more days.

They stood together on the largest balcony at Domus Archipater, the ancient Prince family residence that Snape had inherited when his mother’s last surviving sibling had conveniently died during the early days of the war. Far in the distance, the sun was setting, but darkness had never held fear for either one of them. A poet might have referred to each of them as a creature of darkness, or a least claimed that they were born of it—and in truth, Severus supposed, there would be no arguing that. He, like his companion, was a child of darkness.

“Well,” Julia drawled thoughtfully, “I certainly hadn’t expected this.”

“Nor I,” Severus grunted.

She turned her cold smile on him. “No offense intended, Severus, but I certainly do not intend to marry you. No matter what brilliant ideas my brother has.”

“None taken,” he replied. “The mere thought of it is…disturbing.”

“Tell me about it,” she breathed. Julia’s frosty smile cooled by several hundred degrees. “I’m glad this was not your idea.”

“Do you think I’m mad?” One elegant blond eyebrow arched quizzically, and Severus continued quickly before she could reply to that one. “Fine. Do you think I have a death wish?”

“Now that, I know you do not,” she chuckled.

Severus snorted. “Perhaps next week.”

They laughed together, and a corner of his mind fought to study her dispassionately, and not as the (almost) sister he had known. Severus understood why any normal man would be downright flattered if Lucius wanted them to marry his sister—by any wizard’s standards, Julia was a beauty. She had the classical Malfoy blond hair and gray eyes, and the finely chiseled features of an ancient Roman statue. She was cold, of course, to those she did not know well, if she spoke to them at all, but such, as always, was the Malfoy heritage. Right now she was smiling, without the icy and distant expression that he had seen so often on her face, and it was good to see her laugh. It had been too long.

“So how do we deal with this?” Julia asked.

“Honestly, I suppose.” He shrugged, amazed at the oddity of those words. Honesty? From two Death Eaters? Severus resisted the urge to laugh out loud until she snorted in amusement.

“As odd as that sounds, you are probably right. The truth, in this case, can harm neither of us,” she replied.

“In this case,” he agreed.
She smiled. “You realize, when you asked me to share dinner with you tonight—making me Apparate all the way from South America—I never imagined this being the reason.”

“I do still intend to feed you, if that’s what you’re afraid of,” Severus said.

“I am rather hungry. Digging through Aztec tombs is hard work.”

“How is your recent project faring, by the way? I should have asked sooner.” He knew, of course, that Julia was Voldemort’s agent in many ways, but most recently, she had been employed in uncovering Dark objects from all over the world. Her love of Ancient Runes, History, and Archeology had served her well in that respect, but her habits of traveling far and wide (while consciously avoiding Death Eater meetings) meant that he didn’t see her often, and he missed his friend. She was one of the few people who had ever accepted him as he was, even if she did not know the goriest details.

“Well enough,” Julia replied, and her shining eyes reminded Severus of just how much she loved her work. Lucky her, he thought to himself. She hasn’t yet found out how disillusioning working for Voldemort can be. “The Aztecs had some extremely powerful witches, it turns out—and only witches, mind you; I haven’t found evidence of a single male magic-user among them—and they guarded their secrets well. Right now, I’m still trying to find the one tomb that I’m certain has what I’m looking for, but it’s getting complicated. The most promising lead I had turned out to be a dead end this morning.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said sincerely.

“What, that there were no wizards in Aztec society?” Julia grinned. “You are a chauvinistic pig, Severus Snape.”

“My students would probably agree with you,” he chuckled. “Shall we go inside?” He held the door open for her.

“I’m hardly a lady that you need to open doors for, you know,” she said, preceding him, however, without argument. After all these years, she knew better.

He arched one eyebrow. “Really? I would never have noticed.”

“And what was it that gave me away? All the dirt under my fingernails, or was it those five years that I played Quidditch back at Hogwarts?”

“I was thinking of the time that you knocked me over the head with my own cauldron, but either example will do,” Severus replied dryly, and they both laughed. He knew, of course, that Julia could be a lady if she wanted to—but her family heritage’s oppressive influence only made her rougher around the edges as the years went by. With friends, anyway. To a stranger she always appeared the perfect Malfoy.

After several moments of walking in companionable silence, Julia asked, “So how is Hogwarts? Still the same as always?”

“Aside from the recent giant attack, yes,” he replied honestly.

“I hear that the Dark Lord was not too happy with the role you played in that,” she said quietly.

He shrugged. “There wasn’t much else I could do without revealing myself.”

“True,” Julia conceded. “I just wish you’d be more careful. From what Lucius tells me, it wasn’t
nice.”

“Our Lord’s temper rarely is,” Severus replied dryly, trying not to shudder at the thought. Not nice was a rather tame way of putting what he’d gone through for that one, even though Voldemort knew he hadn’t had a choice. She must have seen the look on his face, though, because she changed the subject.

“Still hating every Gryffindor you come across?” she asked playfully.

“I’ve yet to find one worth liking, if that’s what you mean,” he growled. “Fools and glory-hounds, the lot of them.”

“Well?” she arched an eyebrow at him as they walked into the dining room. “I’ve found that not all of them are that bad.”

Severus felt a shot of anger that he knew he shouldn’t, especially after all this time. It was just wrong when it was one of your worst enemies with one of your best friend (after the other worst enemy had already started dating the other best friend, no less!). “I remember,” he replied evenly. “Sirius Black. You went to Yule Ball with him in seventh year.”

“My sixth.” She met his gaze levelly, as always, without an inch of give in her.

“I know that,” he snapped. But then he paused, making a conscious effort to lower his voice. “You loved him.”

Something dark and forgotten flashed in Julia’s eyes. “He’s dead now, so that hardly matters.”

“True.” Severus shrugged, trying to sound nonchalant. “You did, though, and that I never understood.”

“That’s because you never understood him, either,” Julia responded with a mirthless laugh. “But I’ll give you this much, Severus. He hated you as much as you hated him—and neither of you ever understood one another.” Again, something glinted in her eyes. Her voice grew cold. “Let’s not talk about that.”

He nodded, but that something in Julia’s face made Severus think. I wonder… Few were the fellow Death Eaters that he recruited for the Order, but there was something about Julia that made him realize that everything was not how it seemed. He knew why she’d become a Death Eater eleven years ago: the loss of Black had broken all her ties to the light, and there simply hadn’t been another side for a Malfoy to be on. However, until that moment, he’d never even gotten a hint that she was unsatisfied—and now he wondered.

He’d have to be careful, but Lucius’ ideas might just have some merit after all, even if it wasn’t in the way the senior Death Eater had intended.

Remus knocked loudly on the door to Hagrid’s hut, knowing that the gamekeeper was probably asleep, but having to awake him anyway. After a moment, he saw a flicker of light from inside, and then the door opened to reveal Hagrid, clad in his pajamas and with his umbrella in hand.
“Headmaster!” the half-giant exclaimed. “I hadn’ expected ter see yeh this late.” Hastily, he set the umbrella aside, making Remus smile. Officially, of course, he didn’t know a thing about that umbrella—but Dumbledore had warned him, ages ago, that it contained the remnants of Hagrid’s broken wand. The gamekeeper hurriedly stepped aside. “Come in, Headmaster. Has somethin’ gone wrong?”

Remus stepped inside. “No, nothing has gone wrong, Hagrid,” he reassured the other. “I’m sorry to wake you up so late, but I have a message from Albus Dumbledore for you.”

“From Dumbledore?” Hagrid closed the door behind the headmaster, looking at him strangely. But Remus only nodded. “Can I offer you somethin’ to drink, Headmaster?”

“No thank you, Hagrid. This won’t take long.” Taking out his wand, Remus cast a quick silencing spell on the hut, which earned him another odd look from Hagrid. He took a deep breath, though, and began to speak.

“Two months ago, Dumbledore asked you to speak to the giants on his behalf. Unfortunately, your initial contacts fell through, and you returned to Hogwarts. Shortly after that, Voldemort caused a group of giants to attack—”

“Wait jus’ one minute,” Hagrid cut in, and Remus watched his eyes flicker briefly to where his umbrella rested next to the door. “How d’yeh know this?”

Remus smiled slightly. “From Dumbledore, of course.” Then he let his expression grow serious. “You are not the only member of the staff, Hagrid, who is part of the Order of the Phoenix.”

Understanding dawned on the gamekeeper’s face. “What does Professor Dumbledore wan’ me ter do?”

“The same thing as before,” the headmaster replied. “We need to make contact with the giants—now, more than ever before. Another attack like the one here will destabilize the magical community, especially if it succeeds.”

“Uh, I hate ter tell yeh, Professor, but they weren’ too keen on me talkin’ to them in the firs’ place. I don’ think that a second time will be any better,” Hagrid said honestly.

Remus nodded. “Normally, we would agree with you. But certain…sources have told us that the giant community is unhappy with the way Voldemort has wasted their lives, especially in the failed attack on Hogwarts.” He paused to let Hagrid mull that one over for a moment. Contrary to popular belief, most of the giants that joined Voldemort did so out of a desire for freedom and equality, not out of pure hatred or spite. But with the way Voldemort had sent them on a suicide mission, some of them had to be thinking twice. He continued: “If we act quickly, there is a chance that we might be able to sway them to our side.”

“When d’yeh need me to leave?” Hagrid asked immediately.

“Next Wednesday, if you can,” he replied.

“What about the gamekeeper duties here?”

Remus smiled. “I’ll find someone.”
“Horribly,” Lily replied in response to his question, looking up from the pile of work in front of her.

The old man chuckled as he peered at her over the rims of his half-moon glasses. “Things cannot truly be going that badly, Lily.”

“Would you care to take a bet on that?” she arched her eyebrows expectantly, and watched Dumbledore smile, gently shaking his head and gesturing that he admitted defeat. After a moment, she returned his smile with a tired one of her own, and sighed. “Perhaps Project Guardian is not going entirely amiss…but mostly would not be an understatement.”

“How so?” There was no expression on his face, save mild interest, but Lily couldn’t shake the feeling that she had somehow disappointed him. Albus Dumbledore was such a kind man, always so patient and so caring, yet she knew how important her work was, and she hated failure. Too many people were depending upon the Unicorn Group.

“Well, to start with, we aren’t much further from where we were three months ago when we conceived the entire idea in the first place. Furthermore, the more research we do, the more complicated the project becomes, and of the four people who would know how to actually pull a stunt like this off, the one we need the most is dead.”

“Sirius Black.”

Lily sighed. The name alone brought back too many memories. “Yes,” she replied quietly. “Unfortunately, he’s the one who enabled the Marauder’s Map to identify people, and neither James, Remus, or Peter can remember exactly what spells he used. Molly and I have worked out how to focus spells over a large area to detect Dark magic use, but without being able to pinpoint who is doing it, Project Guardian isn’t going to do us any good. Peter was a big help in figuring out how to restrict the information that we do receive, and James and Remus have been giving us tips in their free time, but I’m afraid we’re stuck right now. No one can figure out how to identify people.”

“Yet you are doing rather well, all things considered. Mapping all of London and focusing a Dark Detecting spell on an entire city is no mean feat of work, Lily,” Dumbledore pointed out.

She shrugged. “Only if it works.”

“You’re beginning to sound like James,” the old man said with a smile.

“We are married, you realize. We’ve even been that way for awhile.”

“Indeed you are. And you are both admirably dedicated to your work, but go home, Lily!” The Minister of Magic leaned over her desk (the real desk, which was hidden deep within the unplottable basement of the Ministry, not the one where she played secretary all day long) and looked her in the eye. “It is nearly midnight, and you have done quite enough for one day. Get out!”

Startled, Lily glanced at the clock on the far wall, and noticed that it did indeed read Too Late! in brilliant yellow lettering. She’d been so engrossed in her research and spell diagramming that she hadn’t realized that so much time had passed. For a moment, she thought to argue—after all, the work was important, and she obviously wasn’t the only one staying late—but then Dumbledore’s words sank in. He’s right, she realized. I always accuse James of being a workaholic, and yet here I am, pushing eleven fifty-seven at night, with my nose buried in paperwork. Lily groaned out loud. I’m never going to hear the end of this.
“You’re right, Albus,” she sighed. “I should go home. James is probably worried about me.” If he’s even there.

He smiled. “I have it on reliable authority that James will be leaving the Auror Division in about ten minutes.” Dumbledore’s blue eyes twinkled mischievously. “If you hurry, you can still beat him to Godric’s Hollow.”

“You’re the best, Albus.” Smiling, Lily leapt to her feet and planted a kiss on the Minister’s cheek. It was such a small thing, really, but even after all these years of marriage, she loved be home to greet her husband when he came home from work. There were few moments that she and James could simply be themselves, though, and she would beg, borrow, or steal every one of them that she could get.

In a flash, she was gone.

Four days later, angry shouts woke him from a nightmare. Or was it unconsciousness? Bill could not tell; everything was beginning to blend together, and it was a struggle to figure out how much time had passed. Sinking into oblivion was beginning to seem a very tempting possibility, and he had to fight against the urge to give up. He sucked in a shaky breath. He’d been in Azkaban for what, six days? It was almost impossible to believe that men and women endured still longer without going utterly insane. But he only had one day left to go. One day, he told himself repeatedly. One day and I can end all of this.

He shivered, but it was just from habit. As near as he could tell, there were no Dementors nearby—they gravitated towards emotion, and the angry shouts hinted at a feast. Someone, or something, had set the Lestranges off; Bill had been in Azkaban long enough to recognize Bellatrix’s voice easily, and where she was, either her husband or brother-in-law was sure to be nearby. A part of him shuddered, thinking about Voldemort’s torturers, but Bill pushed the thought aside. The interrogation sessions had all started to blur together, anyway, and it was no good thinking of that…

He shivered again. His cell had a small window, and the icy wind was blowing in.

Bill curled up and tried to go back to sleep. His body ached, and it was hard to keep his eyes open in the few moments of peace that he had. It was impossible to sleep with Dementors around, and the Lestranges seemed intent on continuing his sleep deprivation eternally. He’d need all the rest he could get, come tomorrow. He closed his eyes…

And awoke to laughter.

It was high pitched and evil laughter, though, not something that he was accustomed to. Confused, Bill pried his eyes open just soon enough to realize that he was back in an interrogation room. They must have stunned me while I slept! he thought desperately, testing the chains out of habit, but finding no give—but when he realized who stood in front of him, Bill felt fear shoot through his body. He couldn’t help it. He’d never come face to face with Voldemort before.

And the Dark Lord was laughing, which couldn’t be good. Bewildered, the Auror glanced around himself, and saw the triumphant grin on the face of Bellatrix Lestrange. He couldn’t understand why they were so pleased—and then he saw what Voldemort held in his left hand.
His wand.

Bill felt his eyes grow as wide as hubcaps, but he couldn’t help himself—his eyes flashed wildly around the room, and then he realized. He saw what the Dark Lord held in his other hand.

The Portkey.

_Oh, damn._

But Bill hardly had time to register the implications of all this—or of how they’d realized he even _had_ a transfigured wand and Portkey. Had he been betrayed? Fear wormed its way into his belly. The transformations were not supposed to happen for another day…unless he had lost track of time. Had he miscalculated? Had he doomed them all because of his own stupidity and—

_“Crucio!”_
“There’s somethin’ I have ter tell yeh three,” Hagrid said suddenly, causing Harry, Ron, and Hermione to look up. There was something serious in his voice, a sober quality that the trio had never heard before from the gamekeeper.

“What is it, Hagrid?” Hermione asked. They had gone to pay him a visit in lieu of Harry’s normal Quidditch practice (because of Oliver’s death, the Quidditch season had been canceled, which had caused the Slytherins to rise in uproar, but Harry definitely agreed with. He couldn’t imagine finishing the season without Oliver). Contrary to popular belief, Hagrid did make excellent hot chocolate, even if the rest of his cooking was horrible. At the moment, though, having drunk their fill, the trio’s ears perked up as the gamekeeper’s mood changed.

“Well, yeh see…I’ll be leavin’ for awhile. Leavin’ Hogwarts, that is,” the half-giant replied. “I was suppos’ ter go awhile ago, but things got delayed a tad… Anyway, I wanted ter tell yeh because the three of yeh are so nice about visitin’ me an all.”

“Leaving?” Ron asked.

“Where are you going?” Harry said at the same time.

Hagrid puffed up his chest importantly, and Harry had to fight back a smile as the gamekeeper beamed. “I can’ tell yeh that.”

“Can’t tell us? Why not?” Hermione pressed, ever curious.

“’Cause it’s a secret, that’s why. Now don’t go askin’ me more, ‘cause I really can’ say.” But Harry was almost positive he could guess who Hagrid was working for, if not where he was going. There was, after all, only one answer that made sense.

“A secret?” Ron echoed dubiously.

But Harry looked up at the big man, whom much of the magical community treated with outright disdain but he had come to love. Most people that hated Hagrid didn’t know him at all. Still, he couldn’t resist asking, “Is it about the giants, Hagrid?”

“What?” He was rewarded by a widening of the eyes and a shocked expression that Hagrid’s reflexes weren’t quick enough to cover up. “What gives yeh that idea, Harry?”

“I was just thinking,” Harry shrugged. “I mean, if they’re going to send someone, you’re the most logical—”

“Wait jus’ a minute!” the gamekeeper cut him off. “Who’s this ‘they’ yeh keep talkin’ about, Harry?”

He’d gone too far. Even his parents didn’t realize how much Harry knew about the Order of the Phoenix, and revealing that to a stranger wasn’t a good idea. “Uh… No one?”

“An’ what makes yeh think that I’d be the one to send?” Hagrid eyed him suspiciously.

“Umm…” Fortunately, Hermione came to his rescue. As usual.

“Hagrid, we know you’re a half-giant,” she said quietly, quickly continuing before he could reply.
“But we don’t care. Professor Quirrell was talking about giants one day in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and—”

Harry cut in, trying to spare Hagrid a lengthy explanation that he didn’t want or need to hear. “It really doesn’t matter,” he reassured the gamekeeper, whose expression had become very strained. “We don’t think of you differently because of it.”

“You’re still our friend,” Ron added, much to Hagrid’s surprise. It took the gamekeeper a long moment to reply.

“Yeh don’ care?”

“Why should we?” Hermione asked innocently, and Harry did not add the list of reasons that he could think of to care—because none of them mattered. They were only old prejudices that Hagrid had nothing to do with, and didn’t deserve to be blamed for.

“Well…” the half-giant started.

“We don’t care, Hagrid,” Harry cut him off. “Really.”

“Thank yeh.” Hagrid blushed slightly, and started blinking rapidly. “Yeh don’ know how much it means ter me ter hear yeh say that…” Suddenly, the gamekeeper sneezed noisily. He smiled. “It means a lot, an’ yeh three are special. Don’ ever let anyone tell yeh otherwise.”

It was nearly sunset by the time the trio headed back from Hagrid’s hut, having said their goodbyes for how long they did not know. They would miss Hagrid, but the children understood that there were more important things for him to do than remain as Hogwarts’ gamekeeper. Who would replace the half-giant, they could not guess—even Hagrid did not know, although he assured them that Professor Lupin would find someone, and Hogwarts would manage fine. Their worst nightmare, however, was acquiring a gamekeeper who was as bad as Filch. Hagrid was wonderful, because he didn’t mind their pranking, and wouldn’t have wanted to catch them, even if he saw them wandering around at night. A new gamekeeper, on the other hand, could prove seriously detrimental to the Misfits’ midnight activities.

And then there was Professor Snape, who could prove detrimental to anything the trio wanted to do, including walking peacefully across the grounds. Spotting him from far off, they took the long way back, skirting around the outer wall to avoid him. The last thing they needed was to ruin a perfectly good day with Snape.

“So who were you talking about, Harry?” Hermione asked as they trekked towards the castle’s main entranceway.

“Huh?” Harry blinked.

“They,” she responded, eying him carefully.

“Oh, that.” Harry shrugged. Then he smiled. If you couldn’t trust friends, who could you trust? “Well…I probably shouldn’t tell you, but…” Both Hermione and Ron stopped, watching him now,
as curious as he’d ever seen them. “I meant the Order of the Phoenix.”

“So your dad is a part of that,” Ron whistled.

“Yeah.”

“Then what is it, really? What do you know? Who’s in it? What do they do?”

“Ron!” Hermione grabbed the red-haired boy’s arm before he could get carried away. “Harry’s right. He shouldn’t tell us.”

Ron scowled. “Sometimes, Hermione, you are absolutely no fun.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, retorting, “Sometimes, Ron, you really need to—Oh, look!”

“Where?” Ron asked. He and Harry both followed the line drawn by Hermione’s pointing finger, which led straight to the Hogwarts gates. At first, Harry had to squint to see in the fading light; the nearby trees put the gates in shadow and a cloud had just passed over the sun, which made it hard to figure out what she was pointing at. However, Harry was able to see what she was talking about after a moment’s study.

A giant black dog was limping through the front gates.

“Come on!” Hermione bolted forward while both boys stared. “It looks like it needs help!”

“Hermione, wait!” Harry made a futile grasp at empty air as she shot away, trying to tell her that in the Wizarding world, not every animal was what it seemed. Ron apparently had the same idea.

“It might not even be a dog, you stupid girl!” the redhead howled. “Get back here!”

Of course, she didn’t stop, and having no choice, both boys took off after their friend. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry noticed Snape’s head snapping around to face the dog, and to his surprise, the deputy headmaster broke into a sprint. But the students had less ground to cover, and the boys caught up to Hermione just as she slammed to a stop. Dreading what he would find, Harry tore his eyes away from her and looked at the dog, just in time to see it stagger one more step, and then transform into a man.

And collapse.

He might have been a tall man, but it was hard to tell when he was on the ground. His hair was long and black, tangled and dirty from years of misuse. His skin was a ghostly shade of white where it wasn’t discolored by bruises, and it was stretched tightly over his thin frame. A second glance revealed to Harry that there was blood matted in with the dirt in his hair, and the right side of his face was caked in dried blood. The filthy robes the man wore were in tatters; gaps in them revealed more bruises and half-healed or open gashes and cuts. His right arm was at an odd angle, too, and—

“My God,” a soft voice whispered from Harry’s right. It was Snape, whose features were nearly as pale as those of the man lying on the grass.

Pale blue eyes flickered open, blinked, and then slid shut once more. “Dumbledore…” the man rasped. “James…”

He shuddered once, and then slumped, unconscious. For several long seconds, the trio and their least favorite professor stood frozen, their minds working in overdrive as they tried to figure out what was going on. Snape swung into action first, his hand landing heavily on Hermione’s shoulder.
“Granger, get the headmaster,” he snapped. “The password is Procopius. Go!”

Hermione flew off like lightning as Snape knelt by the stranger’s side, checking carefully for a pulse. If Harry hadn’t stepped forward at that moment, noticing how shallow the pale man’s breathing was, he would not have heard the professor whisper under his breath, “This is impossible…” But then Snape was rising, and his wand was out.

“Transferocorpus.” With a flick of his wrist, the deputy headmaster conjured a stretcher and levitated the unconscious man onto it. He glanced briefly over his shoulder. His dark eyes were sharp, yet still unreadable. “Weasley, run to the Hospital Wing and alert Madam Pomfrey.”

Some other time, Ron might have argued, but like Hermione, he raced away to do Snape’s bidding. Harry, on the other hand, kept his eyes fastened on the stranger, having been given no tasks to complete and having nothing to do except watch the deputy headmaster. The closer he studied the mystery wizard, the worse his condition appeared to be. For example, as he watched, the man seemed to twitch slightly, his face tightening in pain. There was more than dirt covering his robes, too, which might have once been gray but now seemed to be a sinister shade of grimy—and bloody—brown. Most of those dark patches, Harry was coming to realize, were not dirt. The man’s bony wrists were torn and raw, and there were ominous marks around his neck, too. But then Harry had to jog to catch up as Snape strode forward, levitating the stretcher behind himself and taking the shortest path toward the Hospital Wing.

Hermione reached the stone gargoyle in what she felt had to be record time, grateful that she had managed to remember the way without mishap. After all, she had only been to the headmaster’s office once, and there wasn’t time for mistakes. Panting, she spat out the password, but nothing happened. For the first time in her life, she resisted the urge to swear as she struggled to catch her breath. There wasn’t time for this! A man’s life could depend upon how fast she was! Stupid password!

“Procopius, already! Pro-cop-ius.” she snapped. Finally, the gargoyle began to move. “Hurry up!”

Ever so slowly, the gargoyle rotated aside, revealing the spiral staircase behind it. Without hesitation, Hermione jumped onto the stairs, taking them two at a time until she reached the top and then had to wait for the staircase itself to finish moving upwards. Impatiently, she tapped her foot, wishing that generations of Hogwarts headmasters had chosen a slightly speedier way to enter their office. Sure, it was graceful and dignified, but what did people do when they were in a hurry? Finally, the doorway slid open.

“Professor Lupin!” Hermione burst in, already shouting. “Professor Lupin!” She glanced around desperately. “Oh, please be here! Professor Lupin!”

“What is it Hermione?”

She looked up to see him at the top of the staircase, leaning on the railing and looking down at her with surprise. Lupin was dressed simply in plain work robes; clearly he hadn’t been expecting visitors. Hermione supposed that students didn’t burst into the headmaster’s office everyday, madly shouting his name. However, she didn’t have time for niceties. “Please, sir—you’ve got to come.
Professor Snape said to get you—"

Lupin was already in motion, his long legs taking the stairs two or three at time as he rushed down. “What happened?”

“There was a dog—an Animagus, or at least I’m pretty sure—he came through the gates and collapsed. He looks like he might die—” The words were all coming out in a rush, and Hermione struggled to control herself. “Please Professor, you have to come. He’s in really awful shape and I think Professor Snape is taking him to the Hospital Wing.”

But Lupin had stopped cold and had become even paler than the man they had found outside. For a moment, it seemed like he had to struggle to speak, and when he did, his voice came out in a strangled whisper. “A dog?”

“Yes,” Hermione tried not to sound impatient, but she knew she failed.

“What kind of dog?” Professor Lupin asked shakily. His knuckles were very white, gripping the staircase’s railing.

Hermione frowned. What did that matter when they were wasting time? “I’m not really sure. Big, and black…but what does that have to do with—”

“Like a Newfoundland?” the headmaster whispered.

“Yes, I suppose so—"

Suddenly, Lupin was in motion again, leaping down the remaining stairs and bolting through the doorway. Startled, Hermione followed, trying to understand the taunt expression on the headmaster’s face as he waited anxiously for the stairway to spiral downwards. He looked ready to explode, and fairly well did so the moment that the gargoyle swung aside, forcing Hermione to run as hard as she could to keep up with his longer strides. Heedless of her failing efforts, Lupin raced through the castle’s passageways, scattering confused students as he went. Many eyes followed his frantic journey, but the headmaster paid them no heed, and his lead over Hermione lengthened as they grew closer to the Hospital Wing.

As they entered the Hospital Wing, Harry witnessed Madam Pomfrey nearly succumbing to a heart attack. The matron stared at the man on the stretcher with wide eyes, deeply shocked despite the warning that Ron must have provided. However, she started moving quickly enough, and gestured at the nearest bed in the empty Hospital Wing. “Put him here, Professor.”

Snape complied, and Harry tried to keep out of the way as the stranger winced slightly upon making contact with the bed. Pomfrey bent over her patient immediately, checking pulse and studying him in a professional manner, but even that could not hide the surprise and disgust on her face. The matron was abnormally pale, but she cast her diagnostic spells in a steady voice. The results, however, made additional horror wash over her features.

“What happened to him?” Pomfrey demanded.
“I don’t know, but I can venture a guess, and it is not pleasant,” Snape replied shortly. The stretcher had disappeared.

“And?” the matron inquired sharply, gesturing with her wand until a tray of medical supplies and potions floated her way.

“Voldemort.” Snape yanked a vial out of her hand even as Pomfrey pulled it off of the tray. His face tightened darkly as the man on the bed moaned softly. “Don’t use any potions I’ve brewed.”

“What?”

“Just trust me,” the deputy headmaster replied cryptically. However, his response was obviously not good enough for her, because Pomfrey’s face colored with anger.

“Who is he?” she demanded, reaching for a different vial.

“I’m not sure.” Snape glanced down at the stranger, his face oddly blank. He studied the other as the man twitched again, awakening slowly and painfully.

“Guess.” Pomfrey’s voice was harder than Harry had ever heard the kind woman be.

“If I’m right, a dead man,” Snape replied, moving around the bed suddenly. He reached for his wand once more. “But this isn’t the time for explanations—”

A sudden noise cut him off, and Harry turned to see the door fly open with a crash, and Remus Lupin standing frozen in the entranceway, as pale as a ghost. The headmaster’s blue eyes were as large as saucers as he stared at the stranger, and unless Harry was mistaken, Lupin seemed to be shaking. Hermione appeared behind him, then, out of breath and with her hair all disheveled. Remus shot forward.

“Sirius!”

Haunted blue eyes flickered open once more as Lupin reached the stranger’s side, but they slid shut again immediately. Far to the side, Harry heard Snape’s sharp intake of breath from where the deputy headmaster had moved out of his superior’s path to the bedside; a quick glance revealed to him that Snape was far paler than usual, yet his dark eyes were intense and still unreadable. Lupin, on the other hand, was just as pale, but his anxious eyes searched the face of the stranger—

“Sirius?” he whispered tightly. He bent over, touching the stranger’s bloodied face with a shaking hand. The headmaster looked ready to collapse. “Padfoot?” Finally, the other man’s eyes opened tiredly.

“Remus…?” His left hand moved slightly, and Lupin grasped it in his own.

“Oh, God…Sirius…” Seemingly close to tears, Lupin sat down on the hospital bed, still holding his friend’s hand in his own. “We thought you were dead…”

“Almost,” Sirius coughed; his breathing was strained. “But not…quite.”

“What happened?” the headmaster asked quietly.

“Voldemort…” A shudder ran through him, and he winced in pain. From the side, Pomfrey started forward, only to be stopped as Snape grabbed her arm, shaking his head minutely. The patient coughed, and Harry thought he saw blood come up. “Need to…talk to Dumbledore.”
Remus did not question him; the headmaster merely looked up and met Snape’s eyes, getting a jerky nod in return. The deputy headmaster’s voice was hard. “I will go.”

He swept out of the room as Sirius spoke in a whisper. “Don’t tell James.”

“What?”

Lupin’s startled question produced an echo in Harry’s mind. He sensed both of his friends staring at him, but his mind whirled in response—could this really be his father’s old friend, Sirius Black? Harry had grown up believing that Sirius, the godfather that he hardly remembered, had died to keep his family safe. But what if he hadn’t? What if this was him? Harry didn’t have time to consider the possibilities before the skeletal figure on the bed spoke once again.

“Not yet,” he whispered shakily. “Promise me.”

“But why?” the headmaster asked.

Sirius shuddered painfully. “I don’t trust myself.”

“I promise,” Remus replied quietly, emotions whipping across his features to fast for Harry to read them.

“Thanks.” Sirius’ eyes slid shut, and he slumped in exhaustion. Moments later, Pomfrey was at the bedside again, and Harry knew what her frown meant before she even spoke.

“Out, all of you!” She shot an especially stern glance in Harry’s direction, and even though he wanted to stay—Could this really be my godfather?—he knew Madam Pomfrey would never allow it. However, still sitting on the bed, Remus was replying:

“I’m not leaving, Poppy.”

His voice was quiet, yet very few ever made the blunder of mistaking Remus Lupin’s quietness for weakness. He wasn’t a screamer; when he spoke softly, you knew you were going to lose. She scowled at him, but from the unhappy expression on the matron’s face, Harry could guess that she had previous experience of running into the wall that was Remus Lupin. Sirius coughed again, and this time there was blood.

“You don’t have to stay, Remus,” he whispered.

The headmaster looked down at him and smiled sadly. “Call it payback, Padfoot,” he whispered as Sirius smiled slightly in return as he opened his eyes. The expression seemed almost alien on his battered face. “Unless you want me to go…?”

“No.” Something haunted and pained flashed in Sirius’ eyes. “Don’t go.”

“I won’t,” Remus replied, squeezing his friend’s hand. “You’re not alone, Sirius.”

“I know.” He shuddered. “It’s just been a long time…”

But the headmaster’s reply was drowned out as Pomfrey’s attention returned to the trio. “Out you go!” she commanded, pointing at the door. Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged glances, but they knew that they would lose. Still, in the back of Harry’s mind, the question lingered: Could this really be Sirius Black? Reluctantly, they departed. “And close the door behind you!”
Sirius’ grip on his hand was both very tight and very weak at the same time. His eyes told Remus all that his words had not said; they were haunted in a way that Remus had never seen a man hurt. Voldemort, Sirius had said. What he hadn’t said, hadn’t needed to say, was ten years. Ten years ago, he had been captured—but it was more, actually, if the truth were told. Today was the twenty-ninth of January, which made it ten years and three months…but the headmaster did not have the time or the inclination to worry about particulars—Sirius tensed as Pomfrey lifted her wand. Remus glanced at him anxiously.

“Sirius?”

Something old and pained flashed in his friend’s eyes. “Sorry…” Sirius replied quietly. “Habit.”

His voice was hoarse, and for a moment, Remus wondered why, until he realized how foolish that question would be to ask. Probably from screaming, you idiot, he thought angrily. Where do you think he got hurt like this? Remus had to bite back a surge of fury that wouldn’t do Sirius any good. His sensitive nostrils picked up a lot more than the eye could see, or perhaps even Pomfrey’s spells could identify. This didn’t happen escaping. He was tortured.

And Remus didn’t know what to say to that ‘habit.’ All he knew to do was squeeze Sirius’ hand and be there for him. It’s been a long time, his friend had said. Sirius had been alone for ten years. No wonder why he flinched when someone pointed a wand in his direction. But Pomfrey was frowning mightily.

“What is it, Poppy?”

“There’s something wrong.” The matron’s eyes were narrowed in concentration. “My diagnostic spells are coming up…odd.”

“How so?” Remus felt his breath grow short with concern. For a moment, he considered the notion that this wasn’t really Sirius, but discarded it just as quickly. There was no denying that this was Sirius; there were things that could be faked, but the number of people in the world who knew about Padfoot could be counted on one hand—and even then, there was no way Sirius’ grim-looking form could be faked. No, there had to be something else wrong.

Sirius’ shaking became more pronounced. Remus smelled intense pain. Pomfrey replied softly, “If my spells are correct, there is no way he should have been able to walk.”

“They’re not wrong,” Sirius whispered. He shuddered again.

I almost don’t want to know what those spells are turning up, Remus thought to himself, but he glanced at Pomfrey. “What can I do?”

“Not much.” She frowned, biting her lip in concentration. “I need to deal with the internal injuries, first…” Poppy’s eyes darkened with compassion. “You realize, Sirius, that this is going to hurt a great deal.”

“I figured,” the patient responded softly. Remus winced to hear the exhaustion in his friend’s voice. How long had he been on the road? Where had he come from? Remus could only think of the hell that the journey had been for Sirius…especially if he had come from Azkaban, which Remus was almost afraid to ask. Later, he told himself. Right now, he had to be there for Sirius, and do what he could—even if it was, in truth, very little. Instinct, however, propelled him to take the next step, and
Remus pulled Sirius upright ever so slightly, wrapping his arms around his friend. Sirius tensed at first, but after a moment, Remus felt him relax. Then, ever so slightly, he felt Sirius’ left hand tighten on his shoulder.

“You’re not alone,” Remus whispered. Sirius nodded silently, and Remus released him with reluctance, taking his hand once more. He had a feeling that his friend would need it.

He was right. Sirius shuddered as Poppy went to work, leaving the headmaster to simply give him something to hold onto and inspect the damage done. Magical medicine was an advanced art, he knew, but even then, some things took time—and others caused pain. Ten minutes into Poppy’s complex spell work, Remus almost stopped her to ask why she couldn’t give Sirius something to numb the pain, but then his sensitive nose answered the question for him. Sirius reeked of potions, so many that Remus couldn’t even begin to separate the scents from one another and figure out what they were. But the pain he could not miss, nor the obvious injuries.

The reason why Poppy had thought her diagnostic spells wrong was because by all rights—or for someone who did not take Sirius’ native stubbornness and Animagi form into account—Sirius shouldn’t have been able to walk. His right leg lay, even now, at an odd angle, and a tear in his trousers showed Remus a bloody and mangled knee and lower leg. His right shoulder, too, was definitely broken; Remus could see the way it laid at an odd and wrong angle. The fact that his right arm was also broken did not really surprise Remus; Voldemort clearly subscribed to the old theory of how breaking the wand arm disabled the wizard.

Sirius’ body jerked suddenly, and Remus had to grab his friend tightly to hold him on the bed. However, when he tried to avoid the broken shoulder, Sirius’ sharp intake of breath warned him of broken ribs. Remus swallowed hard. He hated being useless and helpless, and all he could do was whisper an apology and say, “Hang in there, Sirius.”

All he got was a tense nod in reply, but at least it meant that Sirius was listening. Several minutes later, Poppy finished healing Sirius’ internal injuries—the number of which Remus was almost afraid to ask—and moved onto the more obvious problems as Sirius shuddered in pain. After they stripped the disgusting robes off (Remus promised himself to have them burned if Poppy didn’t see to it), the matron used almost an entire bottle of Wound Cleaning Potion on Sirius’ numerous cuts and gashes. Too many of those looked like whip marks to Remus, especially on his friend’s back. Later, he promised himself. Now is not the time. But he didn’t like the way Sirius tensed at any touch.

Poppy spent a great deal of time on Sirius’ torn wrists, and had to bandage both heavily even after she cast a Blood Clotting Charm on them. Then, she moved on to splinting both Sirius’ leg and arm, at which point they learned his shoulder was merely dislocated, and not broken. Finally, Poppy fed Sirius a liberal dose of Skele-Set to help speed his broken bones’ healing. By that time, Remus noticed that his friend had to blink to keep his eyes open, and he was shaking weakly.

“Sirius?” His friend blinked dizzily. “What’s wrong?”

“Tired…”

And it hurts, but you still don’t want to admit that, Remus thought. A little corner of his mind marveled at the fact that Sirius was there at all, that he had lived through that hell… “Rest, Sirius,” he said quietly, reaching out to brush a clump of filthy hair away from his friend’s eyes. Sirius’ waxy paleness matched the snow-white sheets too well.

“Dumbledore…?”

“I’m sure he’ll be here soon,” Remus replied. “Try to rest until then.”
“I’d rather…not,” Sirius whispered. His eyes were open again, with that haunted and hurt look that Remus had never seen from him before. Once, Sirius had been so carefree and happy—even as an Auror, having seen the war’s atrocities first hand, Sirius had been a happy man.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Nightmares.” In a word. Sirius shivered.

“Were you in Azkaban?” He hadn’t meant to ask, but the question just escaped.

“Yeah.” The pale blue eyes scrunched shut once more, but Sirius shook his head, trying to push it away. He shuddered.

“I’m sorry for bringing it up,” Remus said quietly. What else could you say to the friend who had just defied death and returned from hell? Words just didn’t seem to suffice, but Sirius understood. His eyes opened once more.

“It’s okay.” There was a moment of silence, and then Sirius blinked up at him in confusion. “Why are you at Hogwarts?”

Remus stared at him for a moment, and then forced himself to remember that Sirius really didn’t know. He had been gone for ten years. He forced himself to smile through the melancholy that threatened to overtake him. “I work here.”

“Teaching…?” Something flickered in his old friend’s eyes, yet this time, it wasn’t deep and dark. It was an older feeling, one that harkened back to the unbreakable friendship shared by four boys in the best years of their life.

“Since 1983.” He nodded. “Actually, I’m the headmaster, now.”

Sirius’ brow wrinkled, but even as his mind tried to work, his voice was weak. “Where’s Dumbledore?”

“He’s the Minister of Magic,” Remus explained. “McGonagall’s death drove him out of Hogwarts. He was needed there, and he couldn’t stand it here anymore. So he went.”

“Oh,” his old friend said softly, assimilating the information. Something dark flashed through his eyes, and he shuddered. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me, too.”

Finally, Sirius smiled slightly, which seemed genuine even if it was a little forced. “Thanks, Moony. For everything.”

Remus had to swallow. “You’re welcome.”
Tempered and Tested

He was not, perhaps, the most expected of appointments. Technically, of course, he did not have an appointment at all, but one would never tell that from the way that Lily deftly dealt with his presence, rising gracefully from her chair as Severus approached. She smiled.

“Professor Snape, how good of you to come. The Minister will see you right away.”

Severus nodded jerkily in her direction, and he watched her green eyes flash. Lily had always been an expert at reading body language, and he was sure that his was telling her volumes about his stressed state of mind. But there were others watching, and appearances to be kept up, so neither spoke. Severus merely allowed her to open the door for him—an oddity he hated to permit, but in this world, she was the secretary and he the guest—and waited to hear it click shut behind him. Immediately, Albus’ head rose from the pile of paperwork Severus’ old mentor had been working through, and the professor saw him frown. “What is it, Severus?”

“Silentium,” he hissed, flicking his wand impatiently and casting the silencing charm before another word was spoken.

A hint of wariness crept into Dumbledore’s voice. “Severus?”

“Sirius Black is alive.”

“What?” Albus was on his feet immediately. Severus had rarely seen the old man shocked, and had never seen him frightened, but something lit off in those blue eyes that examined the possibilities and the consequences of four little words—“You are certain?”

“Quite. Remus was, surely.”

Albus’ composure returned as quickly as it had departed. “Tell me what happened.”

“A dog stumbled into the courtyard,” Severus began, turning the facts over in his head for the first time, and finding them very strange. But odd stories and circumstances were something he dealt with every day, even if the dead didn’t usually return to life. He ran through the entire tale quickly enough, though, down to repeating the words passed between Remus and Black verbatim. It was an incredible tale, if true, if possible—

“Of course, it can only be him if Black was an animagus before his capture,” he finished. “And I don’t recall his being one of the eight from this century, so he would have to be unregistered—”

But Albus was thoughtful, and then the old man sighed with a slight smile. “I should have known,” he said quietly.

“What?”

“Peter recently registered. James is unregistered, a fact even I did not know until recently. It stands to figure—but I never asked.” Dumbledore shook his head with something almost like a smile on his face. “Amazing. You are sure it is him?”

“I didn’t know,” Severus looked his old mentor in the eye. “I swear to God, Albus, I did not know.”

The Minister came around his desk and placed a hand on Snape’s shoulder. His eyes understood perfectly the chaos ripping through the younger man’s mind. He spoke gently. “I did not mean it
that way, Severus.”

Severus blinked. Any other man would have asked how he, as a Death Eater, couldn’t not know, but Albus never would. Albus had always trusted him, yet he knew that some things, even the legendary hatred that spanned every thing between Severus and Sirius Black, would never keep him silent. Had he known of Black’s continued existence, he would have spoken long before now. Even the deepest of hatred could not cause that kind of silence.

“What do your instincts tell you?” Dumbledore asked after a moment.

Severus hesitated. “As I left, he asked Remus not to tell James,” he replied quietly. “That makes me think it’s him. Anyone else wouldn’t still be trying to protect Potter, even after all these years. And he asked to see you. I don’t think he trusts himself.”

“If you’re right, Severus…” Albus’ intense blue eyes studied him for a moment as he cut himself off. “But never mind that. Let’s go to Hogwarts.”

“Harry, look!” Ron grabbed his arm so tightly that it was painful, forcing Harry to twist in his direction. Two figures had just entered the castle, rolling out of the Great Hall’s fireplace, one immediately following the other, and moving quickly towards the exit. The first, of course, was instantly identified by his hooked nose and greasy hair, but the other was far more interesting, and much less hated, even if he was just as recognizable. After all, it wasn’t every day that the Minister of Magic came tumbling out of Hogwarts’ fireplace.

A murmur ran through the Great Hall even as Snape and Dumbledore left by way of the closest exit, heading, Harry noticed—

“They’re going to the Hospital Wing,” Hermione whispered.

“Of course they are,” Ron replied, looking at her as if she were daft. “Don’t you remember? The man asked to see Dumbledore and said not to tell—wait a minute! Harry, was he talking about your—?”

“Shh!” Harry hissed, glancing around the hall. Fortunately, no one seemed to be listening to their conversation, but just to be safe, he pulled his two best friends off into a dark corner. Ron, at least, took the hint and lowered his voice.

“He said he didn’t want to see James, Harry. Was he talking about your dad?”

Harry’s stomach did a back flip. He bit his lip, but there was only one possible answer. “I think so.”

“But why?” Hermione wondered. “And who is he?”

“Sirius Black, I think,” Harry replied quietly. This is impossible.

“Who?” Ron asked.

“The fourth Marauder. Padfoot. My dad’s best friend.” Harry took a deep breath. This is not possible. “My godfather.”
“You said he was dead,” Hermione remembered.

“He’s supposed to be.” And I don’t remember him, but Dad never forgave himself for him being the Secret Keeper when I was a baby. Harry glanced impatiently in the direction that Snape and Dumbledore had disappeared to. He wished he could follow. He wished he could know. It would mean the world to Dad and Mum if this is real.

“What if this is some kind of trick of You-Know-Who’s?” Hermione asked.

Ron frowned. “Professor Lupin seemed pretty certain.”

“I think that’s why Dumbledore’s here,” Harry cut in, trying to appear more nonchalant than he felt. He hated waiting! Why was it that Pomfrey had to kick them out of the Hospital Wing just because they were children? Their age didn’t make them stupid, and it didn’t mean they knew nothing. Why did adults always underestimate them?

He sighed. Being left in the dark was awful. If that was his godfather in there, Harry felt that he deserved to know. Sirius Black had saved his family ten years ago. Didn’t they owe him the same now?

Out of the corner of his right eye, Remus noticed Poppy tense irritably when two more wizards swept into the Hospital Wing. Severus ignored her, of course, with his perpetual scowl in place, but Dumbledore’s charming (although somewhat tight and tired) smile won the day.

“Will you excuse us please, Poppy?” the Minister of Magic asked gently.

She frowned, letting loose a glare that would rival even Snape’s, but the matron knew better than to argue, especially as Remus nodded to encourage her to leave. On the bed, Sirius’ eyes blinked open; he’d been resting for the past few minutes, and part of Remus wished he could have longer, even if Sirius was right and he didn’t want to sleep. He sure looked like he needed it, at any rate.

Pomfrey stalked out of the room as Dumbledore met Remus’ eyes, and the headmaster nodded slightly. He understood the silent question, and had an answer ready. Yes, I am sure this is Sirius, his eyes said. I know this is insane, and I know it’s impossible, but this is Sirius. The old man smiled slightly in return, pulling a chair close to the bedside and sitting down.

“Hello, Sirius,” he said gently.

“Hi,” Sirius whispered weakly, but the lack of flippant response told Remus far more than any soft voice ever would. Usually, he’d be sure of the quip I bet you didn’t expect to see me here, or something of the sort, but now there was nothing. That told him that Sirius was still in considerable pain, and very weak—and that a decade in Azkaban had left their mark—and some of those scars ran deeper than mere eyes could see.

“Severus said that you asked to see me.” And there was Remus’ deputy, standing behind Dumbledore’s chair—but his expression had softened, and he was watching Sirius closely. Oddly enough, Remus didn’t detect any hatred there, although he was sure that would come later. Seemingly sensing his gaze, Severus met the headmaster’s eyes, and Remus saw his friend’s lips
move slightly.

*I didn’t know,* Severus’ pained expression said.

Remus smiled ever so slightly. *I know.*

Relief washed over Severus’ features, and Remus was glad to see it. They might have hated one another as children, but he had grown to trust Snape. He knew him better than to think petty hatred would leave Sirius in Voldemort’s hands. Even Snape wasn’t that vindictive. Not even on his worst days.

But he returned his attention to Sirius, who was answering Dumbledore quietly. “Voldemort tried to put me under the Imperius Curse…several times.” Somehow, Remus had the feeling that the last part was one hell of an understatement. “I fought it, but I don’t know if I succeeded…” Sirius shuddered. “I need to know,” he whispered. “I won’t endanger my friends.”

Dumbledore frowned. “Do you think he succeeded?”

“I don’t know,” Sirius whispered in response. “Ten years in Azkaban have made me believe a lot of things…and question others.” He hesitated, and Remus watched his haunted blue eyes search Dumbledore’s face. “Can you tell if I’m under the curse?”

“The fact that you’re asking tells me a lot,” the Minister finally replied, but Remus couldn’t miss the tense lines around his eyes. He’d never seen Dumbledore so befuddled…and somehow, he felt that the feeling was unrelated to Voldemort—for the moment.

“But not enough,” Sirius finished for him.

“You know such things are complicated, even at the best of times…” *And painful,* Remus thought, but no one needed to say such things. Sirius knew.

“It doesn’t matter.”

The hardness of Sirius’ voice almost masked the pain behind his words. Outwardly, he might have appeared different from so many years of pain and abuse, but the determination in his eyes was still the same. Somehow, despite the inner turmoil that Remus could all but sense, he met Dumbledore’s gaze levelly, with a long-forgotten spark of defiance glinting in his eyes. He was loyal, as always, until the end. Remus could read it on his face. Sirius Black had almost died once to save his friends; he would not endanger them through living once more.


The Imperius Detecting Charm was not a new spell, or at least nor precisely so. Technically, it had existed for centuries, having been created shortly after the Imperius Curse was invented; however, that did not necessarily mean that the charm *worked.* In fact, it hadn’t, or a least the way to make it do so had been lost for over three hundred years. Fortunately, the research of Lily Potter and the Unicorn Group had uncovered the roots of that mystery, as well, and even though they hadn’t been able to completely fix all the problems with the charm (it was, for instance, a spell that took up an inordinate amount of time and energy from both the caster and the subject), at least the Imperius Detecting Charm functioned. Under good and/or ideal circumstances, anyway.

Of course, Sirius wasn’t exactly in the best condition for the spell, but that couldn’t be helped. Remus knew the stubborn look in his friend’s eyes, and knew that there would be no avoiding it. Besides, Sirius was anything but stupid. He’d asked for Dumbledore for a reason. *Because if anyone can pull this off, it’s him,* the headmaster admitted to himself, feeling his friend tense as the
spell went to work. Remus would have gladly taken the charms consequences upon himself for Sirius, but he wasn’t entirely confident in his own ability to control such old and powerful magic. To his knowledge, Dumbledore, Lily, and James were the only ones who had ever been able to make it work. Even Arabella had failed in the effort, and repeatedly. His own efforts were hardly worth thinking about—but he tried to, in order to pass the time, and to keep his mind from worrying over every little twitch that Sirius’ face made as the spell explored his psyche. Having a spell poke around in your head was never very fun. Or comfortable.

Finally, Dumbledore finished, and sat back as Sirius slumped—either in exhaustion or relief, Remus could not tell. The Minister took a long breath before speaking. “As difficult as it is to believe, Sirius,” he said quietly, “I can find nothing but the remnants of failed curses upon you.”

Sirius blinked. “I had hoped…” He trailed off.

“What I do not understand is how,” Dumbledore continued gently. “No one should have been able to withstand that for so long, especially in Azkaban.”

“I don’t know how I did,” Sirius whispered. “I just didn’t… I guess I just had something to hold on to… friends I wouldn’t betray.” He hesitated, and Remus watched his eyes flicker around the room as he struggled to find words. “Maybe if it had been something else, I would have given in…but Voldemort wanted something I would never give. And in the later years, when he gave up trying to get the Secret from me, that’s what he wanted. He wanted to use me against my friends…and I wouldn’t. I couldn’t. I would have rathered die.”

Remus squeezed his hand, and there was silence. No words could form in the face of what Sirius had done, where he had been, what he had lived through…and for. A long moment passed, in which Remus could only stare at his old friend, and he heard the ghost of a whisper running through his head. ‘And no matter what happens between this moment and then, I shall always be thankful to have had such friends.’ They had come full circle. The Marauders were back.

Behind Dumbledore, Snape suddenly cursed and clutched at his left forearm. The mark burned, and Peter tensed, knowing what it meant. Knowing that it had been his choice, all those years ago, did not make the situation any better, but he knew what he had to do. Life, at times, wasn’t pretty, but that was life. And he’d been a fool for most of it, perhaps excluding seven years, so he had to live with the consequences. Taking a deep breath, Peter Pettigrew Apparated, and found himself on Azkaban a mere second later.

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Popular theory and common knowledge said that Azkaban was not only unplottable, but no one could Apparate there, either. Unfortunately, while the first was true, the second wasn’t—not quite, anyway. There was one spot on the island where Apparation was possible, although that wasn’t exactly a place that any sane witch or wizard would go to. The Dark Lord’s inner sanctum was, after all, reserved for the sick, ambitious, or insane. In truth, Peter couldn’t think of a Death Eater who didn’t fit under one of those three categories, or hadn’t once…especially if he added stupid to the list. Then it would have described him perfectly.
I don't want to be here, he thought for the millionth time. But it was only his soul thinking, and he'd learned to ignore that a long time ago. One had to, in order to survive in Voldemort’s service.

The circle gathered around him as more Death Eaters Apparated. Although they were all masked, Peter’s eyes picked out many of them by habit—he wasn’t nearly as stupid as most of his colleagues believed him to be, after all—even though most of them had little or no idea who he was (just as he, in truth, couldn’t identify more than half the people in the circle). Peter tried to conceal his anxiety. He hadn’t been expecting this summons, and judging from the body language of the others, they hadn’t been, either. Voldemort liked to keep his followers on their toes by calling them at odd hours, proving, as always, that he was their master, but there was a bit of a schedule to things. This unexpected meeting, however, was as far out of the ordinary as things could get.

The empty spaces in the circle worried him, too. Usually, when Voldemort summoned them, those who were always present at Azkaban arrived first. Now, however, the key positions at the head of the circle were empty—most noticeably, that of Lucius Malfoy, who always stood at the Dark Lord’s right, and the Lestranges, who stood at his left. Less conspicuous was the absence of Severus Snape, who was almost always late. That, and Quirrell—who suddenly Apparated at Peter’s left, startling him. He jumped, partially out of habit, but mostly to let the others think he really was the nervous fool they took him to be. Finally, Snape arrived, seemingly angry and out of breath, but that, too, was nothing new. They were only waiting on Voldemort, Malfoy, and the Lestranges.

Peter frowned beneath his mask. Odd, he thought to himself. Malfoy is usually one of the first, eager to prove—yet again—his devotion to the Dark Lord. Or perhaps his job is merely to keep the rest of us in check, although Snape does manage that rather well. Peter scowled in Snape’s direction. Being a Death Eater would never change how much he hated the greasy git, no matter how long he spent in Voldemort’s service. That thought prompted a bloodless smile. I doubt dear Severus would believe I am part of the fold, anyway, Peter thought darkly. With what he’s always thought I am, and what I have really turned out to be... But that thought brought pain with it, so he pushed it aside. Peter had been a Death Eater for almost twelve years, now, and had hated the choice for at least eleven of them. At the time, it had seemed like the right thing to do...and as usual, he’d proved himself wrong.

He contained the sigh that threatened to rise. One might think he’d have pride at being Voldemort’s longest lasting spy in the Order of the Phoenix, but all he’d ever felt was shame. The shame, however, had been tempered by the knowledge that there was no way out, so he’d managed as best as he could. On one hand, he’d served Voldemort, and on the other hand...he hadn’t. Years ago, Dumbledore had asked him to join the Order’s inner circle, and Peter had refused. He’d cited his own fears, but really, he hadn’t wanted to give the Dark Lord that window into Dumbledore’s secrets. Keeping secrets from the Dark Lord was a costly business (as he’d found out two weeks ago with the animagus incident), but at least it kept his conscience in check. Sort of.

The last four arrived together, with stormy temper carved deeply into all three Death Eater’s faces. However, Peter focused on Malfoy and the Lestranges’ anger for only a moment; Voldemort’s obvious fury made them insignificant in comparison. Peter had to fight the urge to take an instinctive step backwards, and noticed, out of the corner of his eye, when Quirrell was less successful in overcoming the same desire. The turban-wearing Death Eater stumbled as he tried to cover up his mistake, fooling no one in the circle but somehow avoiding Voldemort’s attention. After a moment, it was clear that was because the Dark Lord had more important matters to consider.

“My loyal Death Eaters...” Voldemort’s high voice seemed sharper than usual, and his red eyes were burning fire. “I have a most urgent mission for you all.”

There were the usual whispers coming from around the circle, and Peter joined in, mumbling what
was to be expected, about how they were at his service, ready to do his bidding…the same old thing. He’d been doing it for years.

“A prisoner has escaped Azkaban,” the Dark Lord hissed.

A ripple of shock ran through the assembled Death Eaters, and this time, the whispers were real. They were shocked, and Peter felt a flash of fear—who might it be? Who could manage such a thing? Escaping Azkaban was impossible, and everyone knew that.

“I want him found.” Voldemort’s voice grew dark and hard. His eyes scorched any who were foolish enough to look at his face. “I want him brought back. Alive, if possible, but dead if not. Immediately, and at any and all costs. Do not fail me!”

There was silence for a long moment as their master’s fury lashed at them all. Peter shivered in the emptiness, wondering who would break it, and face the Dark Lord’s wrath. Finally, it was Snape who dared to ask the question, but Peter never expected the answer to turn his world upside down.

“Forgive me, Master, but whom are we seeking?” the second ranking Death Eater asked in his icily smooth voice.

“Sirius Black.”

Peter felt his soul do a back flip. He felt ten years of sorrow and regret come crashing down into reality. Suddenly, everything that had ever mattered didn’t matter anymore, and he found himself wondering in helpless disbelief. But he’s dead! his head wailed. You killed him! But it was his heart that responded with wild beating that Peter couldn’t hope to calm. Sirius was alive. Sirius was alive, and out there somewhere, having escaped Azkaban somehow—thank God that Voldemort didn’t know about Sirius’ animagus form. It would give him at least a chance of a sort, something that no one understood or expected…

The meeting was breaking up, and Peter felt his head spinning too wildly to Apparate, but he had to leave quickly, before it occurred to Voldemort that he might know something of use. Absent mindingly, he found himself rubbing the still burning mark on his left forearm as he watched Snape walk off, alone, with the Dark Lord. The mark would never fade, he knew. It was too late for him; there was no way out. But for others…it wasn’t too late for others. Not for Sirius, or for James, or for Remus… He’d entangled himself in this horrible situation in the oddest of fashions, by trying to protect the friends who had spent so long looking out for him. He’d been promised, the day that he took up the mark, that his friends would live and remain unharmed, and had the promised betrayed not a year later, when Voldemort had sought to kill Lily and James, and had in turn taken Sirius…

Peter took a deep breath and stilled his raging mind. He had to leave. No matter what road lay before him, he knew what to do now. He knew where he had to go.

With a conscious effort, he tore his right hand away from the mark and Apparated.
True Friendships

The moon still shone brightly over Godric’s Hollow as Peter Apparated onto the front walkway of the Potters’ home, just shy of the wards. He knew the ward-key, of course, but in his current state, he hadn’t quite meant to end up so close. He’d almost bumbled straight into them, a mistake that would have left him unconscious or worse—given the state of the war these days, James wasn’t taking any chances with his family, and Peter wouldn’t have been surprised if the wards were designed to kill intruders and ask questions later. Again, he forced himself to take a deep breath, and started walking towards the Potters’ front door. It was time.

A silver disc materialized before him with a flick of his wand, and the message spell sped on ahead as Peter strode forward. Unimpeded by mere physical boundaries, the disk flashed through the green front door and sped onwards, now out of sight. He felt better somehow, now that he had decided. A decade and more of regret still paced him with every step, but it had become bearable—somehow, the knowledge that he might yet make a difference changed things. That didn’t right the wrongs, of course, but at least it was a beginning. He reached the door, raising his right hand to knock even as James appeared in its opening.

Sleepy and squinting, his old friend stared at him in surprise. “Peter?” he asked unnecessarily, pushing his glasses further up on his nose. “What in the world are you doing here, mate?”

Peter felt his hands shake. Not now, he told them angrily. “I need to talk to you, James.”

“At this hour?”

The hard-working and never-quitting James Potter had clearly been asleep, evidenced by the fact that he wore nothing aside from a faded pair of plaid slacks and was shivering in the cold January air. His black hair, too, was standing straight up on end, but that was very little different from his waking hours, so Peter paid it no mind. Nor, he suspected, did James care a wit about what he looked like—although Lily, who was coming down the stairs, looked a bit more decent than her husband, having clearly paused to put a robe on while James bolted down the stairs.

“Yeah.” For the first time, Peter realized it was after one in the morning. “It’s important.”

“Well come on in then, Wormtail,” James smiled, clearly now wide-awake due to the worried tone of Peter’s voice. Years ago, James would never have been the one to notice those things, but time had changed them all.

Peter stepped inside the house and allowed James to lead him to the living room for what had to be the millionth time, but tonight he felt an unaccustomed chill race down his spine. This was it. This was either a beginning for truths or an end of everything he had cherished for his entire life…but it had to be done. No matter what the outcome, it would be worth doing, and he owed it to his friends. He owed it to the Marauders, but especially to the one who had suffered for ten years, and now might just have a chance at life. And I was so close, and never even realized… He grimaced, and James must have noticed, because he asked:

“What is it, Peter?”

He sighed and took the offered seat. “Promise me you’ll listen, James, before you say anything.”

“Of course I’ll listen to you—”

“Just promise me, please.” He’d never imagined this could be so hard, but now James was
frowning, and Lily was watching him with concerned eyes. For Sirius, he reminded himself. I owe this to Sirius. God, I owe this to all of them. I owe them so much, and I betrayed their trust…

“‘I promise.’ So noble and trusting, James Potter. Willing to promise even when he didn’t understand why. He’d always been that way, and even a dozen years as an Auror hadn’t made him cynical enough to change that. Peter had always admired that, but now it hurt.

He couldn’t even think of any words to say, so after a moment’s hesitation, he only pulled back the sleeve of his robe, revealing the Dark Mark.

James and Lily’s sharp intakes of breath were the only sound in the room, but he felt his friendship dying then and there. Slowly, he began to speak: “I became a Death Eater in June of 1980,” Peter said quietly, unable to look at them and finally coming to stare at the floor. “It seemed like a good idea at the time…I was so sure that the Dark Lord was going to win. I thought that somehow—”

God, it sounds so stupid. So foolish. “—that somehow I could protect my friends that way, that when the end came, by being on his side, I could save your lives.

“It wasn’t long before I realized how stupid I’d been, but by then there was no way out. I didn’t know what to do, or where to go, and I was sure that if I told anyone on the light side, it would land me in Azkaban, or much worse. I was mostly a spy, feeding You-Kno—Voldemort—information, and because they thought I was stupid, they never thought I knew much. I traded on being dumb and scared, and gave just enough information to stay in the circle. Most of the Death Eaters didn’t even know who I was because I was a spy. Only Malfoy and the Lestranges really knew.”

He swallowed hard. Still James was silent. He blinked. Grown men did not shed tears.

“I didn’t want to be a Death Eater,” Peter whispered. “But when Malfoy made the offer, claiming that it could save the rest of you—” With a shuddering breath, he cut himself off. He wasn’t there to plead; he was beyond that, now. Whatever happened was what he deserved to happen. “But that doesn’t matter. Not now.”

“What does?” James’ voice sounded empty and pained, like it came from beyond the grave.

“Sirius does.” Peter’s head came up, and he forced himself to meet James’ eyes, and startled confusion colored his friend’s features immediately.

“What?”

“I was summoned to a meeting tonight, and Yo—Voldemort said that he had been in Azkaban, and he’d escaped. He’s alive, James, and out there somewhere—all the Death Eaters are searching for him, now, because he wants Sirius at any costs. But he’s alive.” The words sounded foreign to his own ears, even though he’d heard them before. “He’s alive.”

“Alive?” James had gone a ghostly shade white as Peter spoke, and now his words came out in a strangled whisper. “Sirius is alive?”

Beside him, Lily squeezed her husband’s hand, but as she looked at Peter, her words were cold. “Voldemort knows his animagus form, doesn’t he?”

Peter shook his head. “I never told him,” he whispered. “James…” He waited for his friend to look up before continuing. “I’ll understand if you hate me, but at least know this:

“I never wanted to betray my friends. I was too cowardly to correct my mistake, but if there’s one thing I never did, it’s betray you…or Remus, or even Sirius, even when I thought he was dead. I meant what I said when I swore that we were brothers. I wasn’t worthy of your trust, but I never did
betray you. And I won’t, no matter what happens.” He had to look away as James studied him with deep and expressionless eyes. “I wish it hadn’t taken something like this for me to realize that I can’t do this any more…but at least I can hope to help Sirius before it’s too late. No matter what happens to me, he deserves better.”

A long moment of silence reigned. Finally, Lily whispered, “A lot of things make sense now…”

Keeping the tears back was impossible, and Peter stared at the floor again. He wished someone would say something, anything, even if it was just to kick him out of the house and tell him to never come back. The renewed silence was killing him, and Peter just wanted to sob. I don’t have the right to cry, he told himself firmly. I’m not the one who was betrayed. Finally, his friend spoke, making Peter jump.

“Peter.” James’ voice was low. He swallowed, but couldn’t speak. Suddenly, it was too hard. How do you say I’m sorry for such a horrible breach of trust? There weren’t words, and he knew it was over. He shook his head, struggling to rein his emotions in.

“I—”

“Wormtail.” Suddenly, James was standing in front of him, gripping his shoulder, and Peter looked up, mystified with what he heard in the other wizard’s voice. “I believe you,” James said quietly. “And I trust you, if you say you’re finished with Voldemort.”

“I am,” he whispered in a shaky voice. Oh, he was. No matter what happened, that, he was sure of.

“I know you’d never betray us. I know you haven’t,” James whispered. “You’re still my friend, Peter, no matter what happens. And I’ll stand by you, brother, until the end.”

Peter stared, but allowed James to pull him to his feet and embrace him. After a moment, he returned the embrace. Finally, he allowed his tears to flow freely. James might not have completely understood—but he forgave him. He forgave him. He didn’t hate him, even though Peter still couldn’t figure out how not to hate himself.

“I don’t know how to thank you—” he started to whisper after a moment, but James pulled back.

“Just help me find Sirius,” he said quietly. Again, he squeezed Peter’s shoulder. “I know Remus will agree. Let’s just find Sirius.”

Darkness and pain.

All else was a blur now. It was hard to differentiate between the rest. Days, perhaps, had passed since he’d been discovered—or maybe it was even weeks. Months? He didn’t quite think so, but Bill wasn’t thinking too clearly at the moment. Or too often. He drifted in pain, now, shuddering as the Dementors closed with him, and reacting with instinctive terror when they entered his cell. A part of his mind fought the mindless fear, of course, but now there seemed no reason to. When they came to take him, they brought him to be tortured. How many times he’d endured it, Bill no longer knew. Counting required too much effort to bother.
Yet a corner of his soul resisted, buried deep where the Lestranges couldn’t reach. He’d been betrayed, he knew, but how, Bill could not fathom. Something had gone wrong. There were no lucky guesses involved. Voldemort had known. He knew where to look, knew of Bill’s mission and when it was supposed to begin.

But how, Bill still could not understand. Yet his head hurt to think about it, so he did no longer. He lay curled in a ball at the back of his cell, willing the moments between hell and more hell to lengthen interminably. The part of his mind that still considered itself intelligent wondered why he was still alive—he didn’t know enough to be useful, and he realized that, even in his current state. Why did they want him to live? Why did they torture him still? They wanted something, and for a while, he had thought it was merely to wear him down under the constant grind of pain and hopelessness, but now Bill wasn’t sure. Perhaps there was no purpose, and he was merely an outlet for the Lestranges’ maniac anger.

And they were angry, furious over something that had nothing to do with him. Mere hours after Voldemort’s startling discovery the Portkey and his wand, Bill had heard enraged voices.

Coldness crept in, and he shivered uncontrollably, scrunching his eyes shut against the memories. But the Dementor came no closer, and after several long moments, he tried to take a deep breath and calm himself. It no longer worked, but the voice of his sanity still echoed in his head.

Voldemort knew.

Bill tried to think, tried to understand, but his mind was so often not his own. Everything was a blur, except for the moments he would rather not think about. But he was missing something.

How?

He had been betrayed, somehow, by someone—but by who? Even in his sorry state, Bill knew that very few had even been aware of the Azkaban Plan in its final details. James certainly had, as had Dumbledore, but who would expect the two men who were Voldemort’s greatest targets to betray him? Likewise with Minister Figg. So if it hadn’t been one of those three, then who? Perhaps the Order of the Phoenix’s inner circle had known, but surely those individuals would not…

Coldness. Dementors were coming once more, and this time he knew without a doubt that they were coming for him. Bill shuddered, and tried to focus—but his thoughts fled, carrying with them his sanity and then there was pain.

Poppy’s Dreamless Sleep Potion helped a great deal, Remus saw, watching Sirius’ face as he slept. He looked so peaceful, now, and if one overlooked the gauntness of his features and the dark purple bruise on his left cheek, he could almost be the Sirius of old. By daydreaming for a moment, Remus could imagine the cheerful smile, or the innocent way in which Sirius would always claim that it wasn’t his fault—but not quite. It was always tempting to slip into the past, but right now, the present seemed much brighter for the first time in years.

“You should be sleeping,” Poppy said quietly from beside him.

Remus shrugged. “Later.”
“I had forgotten how much trouble the four of you could be,” the matron replied, and the softness of her voice made him turn his head. Poppy smiled slightly. “I never could get them to leave when you were here.”

“That’s what friends are for,” Remus whispered. Brothers. There was no sleeping at a time like this, he knew. Right now, his head was spinning too fast, and his heart going insane—it was still hard to grasp the fact that this was Sirius, and Sirius was alive. As usual, the wolf inside him made matters only worse; it wanted to yip, and howl, and dance in joy. The Marauders had always been the wolf’s pack brothers, and the Marauders were whole once more. For the first time in a decade, there was no missing link. Padfoot was back.

Poppy’s hand landed on his shoulder, and the headmaster smiled as he squeezed gently. A part of him, he supposed, would always be the frightened eleven year old boy who just happened to have a werewolf stuck inside and was desperate for the comfort and understanding that the matron could provide. Out of all his staff, he spoke perhaps the least to Poppy Pomfrey, but in some ways, he would always be closest to her. There were some things that simply didn’t need saying, and she understood. After a final caring smile, she left Remus alone with his friend, trusting that he’d call her if anything was needed. Silence followed her departure, but it was a comfortable one.

Remus glanced at the time, and was surprised to see that it was almost four. In the morning, he’d fire call James and Peter, presuming, of course, that was all right with Sirius. But Dumbledore had left an hour before, very sure that there was (somehow) no Imperius Curse on Sirius, which meant that he had no reason to fear for anyone, and it meant that things could finally be right. Perhaps he was dwelling too much on the possibilities, but Remus felt younger, all of a sudden. Years of age and pain were suddenly lighter to bear, because Sirius was back. He’d been fighting for years beside his two best friends—but had never forgotten having lost the third. It was nice to be wrong for a change.

Now all he had to do was wait for Sirius to wake up so they could share the news with the others.

They spent the wee hours of the morning tracing every possible route from Azkaban, and wondering where Sirius might be now. Unfortunately, the possibilities were endless…and every now and then, James found himself marveling at the fact that he and Lily were willingly working beside a confessed traitor. What really surprised him, though, was that he didn’t care. Maybe he was simply too obsessed with the fact that Sirius was alive, but there was also the fact that it was Peter. Wormtail was a fellow Marauder—and for all the truth in Peter’s confession, he had heard the pain. Perhaps he should have seen the signs sooner (and he had, really, if he thought about it), but he saw the reasons, and he understood. Peter’s choice wasn’t one that he could have made himself…but in the dark days before Dumbledore’s rise to the Ministry, James could understand the fear that would drive a man to Voldemort.

He only wished that Wormtail had understood that there was always a way out, and that his friends wouldn’t have hated him. But he does now, and that’s all that matters, James reminded himself. Pouring over maps, he’d spoken quietly with Peter, and slowly, his friend was coming to understand. To remember.

Becoming adults had forced distance and space between the Marauders. Leaving Hogwarts had
changed things. They were every bit as close, but they weren’t always there—James was constantly at the Ministry, and Remus was at Hogwarts, and both had forgotten how much Peter could need them. In a way, James had told his friend quietly, it was as much their fault as Peter’s. And he admired the courage it took to come forward, even after so long.

At six in the morning, a fire call interrupted their work. Lily had taken the call because neither James nor Peter was willing to move from the kitchen table, which they’d completely covered with maps and pages upon pages of notes—but her voice had changed when she’d called James’ name.

“James! Get in here!”

“Be right back, Wormtail,” James said, clapping Peter on the shoulder on his way out. Sometimes, there was just no arguing with Lily, and judging from her tone, this was one of them.

He was however, surprised to see Remus’ face dancing in the fire. “Moony?”

“Sit down, James.” The other Marauder’s blue eyes were shadowed by fatigue, but they were lit with a fire he couldn’t yet comprehend. James sat, wondering what this could be about; his own tired mind was still working too slowly, after having been up for most of the night—Remus continued. “You’re not going to believe this, mate, but Sirius is alive.”

Snape must have told him. “I know,” he replied quietly. There was no time like the present to break the news. “Peter told me.”

“What?” Something dark flashed in Remus’ eyes. “Peter’s there?”

“Yeah. He—”

“He’s a Death Eater.” Moony’s voice was hard. Deadly, even.

“I know,” James said softly; then he frowned as his brain clicked. “But how did you find out?”

“Sirius is here, James.”

“What?” He felt his heart leap out of his chest and start bouncing around somewhere on the floor, but it didn’t matter. Sirius was at Hogwarts—he was safe! How he had made it all the way to the school was beyond James, but it hardly mattered. Sirius is at Hogwarts. Sirius is safe. His mind was whirling, but even then, he didn’t miss Lily’s soft exclamation or the sharp intake of breath from the doorway. James turned to see Peter slumped against the doorframe in relief.

“He knows, doesn’t he?” Peter asked quietly.

Remus eyed him warily, but nodded.

“Peter’s with us, Remus,” James explained gently. “He came here of his own volition, to tell me—he didn’t know before. And now Voldemort has every Death Eater hunting for Sirius’ head.”

“Not surprising,” Hogwarts’ headmaster replied to the last part, but his eyes were still on Peter, who flinched slightly, but met his gaze. Finally, Remus nodded. “Okay.”

“How is he?” Lily asked for them all.

“Awful,” Remus said. “Looks like bloody hell…but Poppy says he’ll be all right, and Dumbledore’s all ready been here. He’s not under the Imperius Curse, either.”

The cynical part of James’ brain wondered how anyone could escape Voldemort’s clutches without
being under an Unforgivable or ten—but the rest of him accepted that as truth easily enough. With Sirius, he’d learned long ago, nothing was impossible. Still, there were other possible problems, aside from the obvious curses and physical injuries. He asked, “But how is he?”

“Haunted.” Remus hesitated. “Hiding a lot. Other than that, I don’t really know. He hasn’t been here for too long, and we’ve been trying to get him to rest. I’d have told you sooner, but Sirius wouldn’t let me—”

“What? Why the hell not?”

Remus gave him a sour look. “He was afraid that he was under the Imperius Curse. I don’t think he’d have wanted to talk to me, either, but I showed up before he could object. I live here, after all.”

“Oh.” There was so much more he wanted to ask, but James hesitated, timid for one of the rare moments in his life. What now? He puckered his lips up in a face and tried to find words for what he wanted to say.

“Prongs, are you going to come to Hogwarts or talk to me all day long?” Moony suddenly demanded; then his eyes flickered over to Peter. “You’d better come, too, Wormtail. I don’t know what he’s going to say to you, but you should be here for this.”

“All right,” Peter replied quietly as James leapt to his feet, grabbing Lily’s hand. She might not have been one of the Marauders, but this was her moment, too.

“We’ll be right there.”
Brothers

James Potter had never been so frightened in his life. Face him with Dark Magic, Death Eaters, or even the Dark Lord himself, and he wouldn’t quail, but the prospect of seeing his best friend alive after so many years terrified him. His hands were shaking; he knew it. He was torn between excitement and apprehension: triumph made him want to jump up and down and spit in Voldemort’s eye and terror made him completely unsure of what to say. Ten years ago, he had sent Sirius into hell. James had asked him to be their Secret Keeper, and set off the following chain of events. It was his fault, and his best friend had suffered for a decade because of it.

He, Peter, Remus, and Lily walked the quite halls of Hogwarts together. The hour was still just shy of seven in the morning, and so far, the group of friends had managed to avoid contact with any students. Their presence, added to Dumbledore’s from the previous night, would certainly have caused a few whispers, but James could hardly care. On one hand, he wanted to sprint to the Hospital Wing as fast as he could—and on the other, he couldn’t bear to get there so soon. He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know what to say.

Fleeing would have been so much easier.

As they walked, Remus told them the story of Sirius’ arrival, and James smiled slightly upon learning that it was Harry and his friends who had found Sirius. In addition to Severus, of course—Sirius’ survival had to gall Snape quite a bit, but James didn’t care. Every now and then, something needed to light a fire under Severus’ arse...but they were rounding the corner before the Hospital Wing, and all pleasant thoughts fled from his head. Remus had to say his name twice before James noticed.

“Just talk to him,” the headmaster said quietly. “He’s not going to be angry with you.”

“How do you know?”

Remus’ blank look was proof that he didn’t, but by then they had reached the doorway. James didn’t miss the significant look traded between his two friends, and Peter’s nervous stance, but Remus’ hand planted itself between his shoulder blades and didn’t give James time to argue. Without warning, he found himself propelled into the Hospital Wing with a gentle shove, and heard the doors close behind him.

He tried to take a deep breath and calm himself, but this wasn’t a simple little thing like an Auror raid. Glancing around, he realized that Madam Pomfrey was the only one there; James supposed that mid-week had grown quieter over the years, or there just hadn’t been any recent Quidditch matches. Pomfrey, though, was no help. She merely gave him a smile and made herself scarce, leaving him to walk towards the first bed on the left. Curtains were closed around it to keep prying eyes out, so James had to walk around to the opening before seeing his oldest friend.

He froze.

Remus had been right; Sirius looked like hell. Oh, someone had certainly given him a shave and a haircut, but there was no hiding his sick pallor or the bruises on his face. Likewise, James quickly noted the splint on his right arm, and the bed sheets could not hope to cover his thinness or the unnatural straightness of his right leg. His blue eyes were sunk deep into his face, and he looked to be more skeleton than man—but his gaze tracked James just like it always had.

“I’m not contagious, Prongs,” a voice from the past whispered.
His world rocked, tilted, and turned right side up for the first time in a decade.

“Sirius…” He was in motion before he realized it, and James’ legs carried him forward to embrace his friend. Without hesitation, a bony left arm wrapped around him in return, and they hung onto one another as if each was afraid the other would disappear. James was crying, babbling, but he could not care. “Oh my God…Sirius…I’m so sorry. You’re alive… I’m so sorry, Sirius. This is all my fault—”

Suddenly, Sirius jerked back. His left hand grasped the side of James’ face tightly, and his blue eyes blazed.

“Don’t even say it, James Potter,” he whispered fiercely. “I made my choice. This is not your fault.”

He stared. “But—”

Sirius shook him harder than James would have credited him with the strength to do. “Did you hear me?” he demanded. “I made my choice.” His voice lowered once more. “And I’d do it again, if I had to.”

“Sirius—” James’ mind was whirling, but he knew that Sirius shouldn’t be saying that. This was never happening again, not in a lifetime, or even in a thousand lifetimes. It shouldn’t have happened in the first place, and he was damned right that it was his fault. Once more, his oldest friend cut him off.

“Just as you would for me. As Remus would. As any of us would do for each other, even Peter.” Sirius’ hand dropped to his shoulder and squeezed. “I knew the risks, and I’d have died for you—and Lily and Harry—if I had to. So don’t argue. It’s not going to work. Don’t even think about blaming yourself. If you want to blame anyone, blame Voldemort.”

Oh, I will, a cold corner his mind promised, but the rest of James just stared at his friend, looked in his eyes. He could see no hatred in Sirius’ gaze, no blame. There was only the old fire, blazing out from ten years in the grave and daring him to disagree. Behind the intensity, though, there was something deeper, something darker and haunted and pained, but James could see the strength that had carried Sirius through a decade of hell—and had still left him with a soul afterwards. No matter what had happened, this was still Sirius. His friend was alive.

Finding words was damn near impossible. “Welcome home,” he finally whispered. It was so inadequate. “It’s good to see you again.”

They embraced once more, and Sirius even managed a ghost of a smile. “Yeah. It’s damn good to be back.”

“Hello, Peter.”

His voice was softer now; propped up by pillows, Sirius appeared even more thin and pale than James had originally thought him to be. He looked terrible, almost like a stranger, despite the familiar cut of the hair and goatee, but several moments of conversation had proved to James that he was still the same inside. He was terribly scarred—both physically and mentally—but deep inside,
the same soul resided. He’d never be unmarked by his experiences in Azkaban, but he would heal in time. So Sirius had said, anyway, and James knew him too well to doubt him.

“Hi, Sirius,” Peter whispered.

He and Remus had joined them, now, bringing the Marauders together for the first time in over ten years. The gathering brought back memories, so many memories, but while most of those remembrances were good, there was still a chasm separating them. For the first few moments, they were not truly together. At the moment, they were simply four men. There was still a moment of truth to come that would determine if they were still brothers.

Both Remus and James were silent. This decision was not theirs to make; James had already told Sirius what had happened the night before. Quickly, James looked to his friend, but the headmaster’s blue eyes were as worried as he imagined his own to be. Remus had accepted Peter’s explanation, but he hadn’t spent a decade in Voldemort’s tender care.

Sirius’ eyes were dark and unreadable, but James saw that the hidden pain was swimming closer to the surface now.

“I didn’t know you were alive,” Peter finally whispered into the silence. “Whatever else I might have been, I couldn’t—”

“Shut up, Wormtail.” Pain crossed Sirius’ face. He let out a shaky breath. “I know that. And I guess I owe you an apology. Or a thank you, even.”

“Huh?”

All three Marauders were staring at their bedridden fellow in confusion. Perhaps Azkaban had addled his wits a little. But Sirius smiled slightly, although the expression seemed out of place, given the monster bruise that still covered the right side of his face.

“You helped me get out of Azkaban, after all.”

James’ head snapped around to look at Peter, but his shorter friend only stared. “But I didn’t…”

“I heard you talking to Malfoy,” Sirius explained quietly. “Hearing you made me remember that there was a world outside of Azkaban. It made me stop drowning in the pain and look for opportunities…” He hesitated, and James saw something haunted fill his eyes until Sirius fought it back. “And when I found one, I took it. So I guess, in a backwards way, you helped me out. Even if you didn’t mean to.”

“I’m sorry,” Peter whispered. James knew it was directed at all three of them, but it was Sirius who held up his left hand. His was the right to respond.

“We know, Wormtail.” Peter took the offered hand. “What matters is that you made the right choice in the end.”

Breakfast started as usual, but it didn’t end that way. Bleary eyed and groggy (he and Ron had somehow managed to wake up later than usual), Harry took his seat at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall without looking around. It was, after all, just a normal beginning to a normal day at
Hogwarts. It was Friday, which meant their first class was Transfiguration, and things could have been much, much, worse. At least they weren’t third years and starting with Potions. Urgh.

All in all, Harry didn’t even get the chance to start wondering about the mysterious animagus they’d found last night before things began to get strange.

“Harry, is that your mum sitting next to Professor Snape?”

Ron’s question made Harry look up from his food with surprise. “What?”

“Right there. At the head table—”

“Don’t point, Ron!” Hermione hissed from the red head’s other side. Ron rolled his eyes, but Harry hardly noticed. Instead, he took out his wand and muttered a cleaning spell for his glasses, which were still sprinkled with pink paint from their last prank. But he wasn’t seeing things after all.

“Yeah,” he replied with confusion. “I wonder what she’s doing here.” And it’s not like Mum to forget to tell me she’s coming to Hogwarts, he added mentally.

“And I wonder why she’s sitting next to Snape,” Ron added, making Harry sigh.

“They’re friends,” he explained unhappily.

“What?” Ron exclaimed, just as Hermione gaped.

“You’re kidding.”

“I wish,” Harry replied dryly. “I dunno why, really. Dad and Snape hate each other, but Mum and he were friends at school. Before school, really. Mum said they met as little kids.”

Ron scowled. “But I thought your Mum was a Gryffindor, Harry.”

“She is.”

“I guess things were different back then,” Hermione shrugged, but her clam response only mad Ron frown harder.

“Really, Hermione! He’s a Slytherin!”

She shook her head and sighed in exasperation “Ron, does it really take someone who didn’t grow up here to realize that the Wizarding World hasn’t always been this way?”

“Perhaps if you got your head out of a book often enough to look at the rest of us, you’d realize that the world is that way,” Ron retorted. Harry groaned.

“Perhaps if you opened a book more often, you wouldn’t get in so much trouble!”

“Trouble? You’ve gotten nearly as many detentions as I have—”

“Will the two of you be quiet?” Percy Weasley suddenly demanded, leaning in their direction from further down the table. “Some of us have studying to do!”

“Studying, smudying,” George snickered as he sat across from them, leaping immediately to his fellow Misfits’ defense. “As if an extra five minutes are going to make a difference in your grades, Oh Perfect Prefect Percy.”
Percy glared, but Fred neatly overrode his reply by stepping ‘accidentally’ on his foot. “Oh! So sorry! Were those your toes?”

“Yes, those were my toes, you clumsy excuse for a brother,” Percy snapped. “If the six of you—” Lee had joined them along with the twins “—don’t be quiet, I’m going to speak to Professor Fletcher.”

Fred rolled his eyes and sat down. “Grow up, Perce.”

“Grow up?” Percy echoed. “Who are you to—”

“Hey!” Lee exclaimed. “Is that your father, Harry?”

Heads swiveled and the argument was forgotten. After all, although to Harry, James Potter was just his dad, to everyone else at the table, he was a hero. Even though the Weasleys and Hermione had met him before, they still couldn’t help thinking of him as somebody famous, and the Ministry’s most senior Auror didn’t simply visit Hogwarts on a day trip. However, James Potter had indeed just entered the Great Hall, making Harry’s day even stranger. He was preceded by Remus Lupin and followed by another familiar face.

“Who’s that?” Ron asked.

“Peter Pettigrew,” Harry replied, wondering when exactly Peter had come back into the country. Last he’d known, Peter had been in Norway…but then again, if the mysterious wizard was indeed Sirius Black, Harry could understand his presence.


“Wow.” Fred’s eyebrows rose, and the twins exchanged glances as the three Marauders took seats at the head table.

But Harry was hardly listening. Instead, he was staring at his parents and their old friends, noticing the quiet words exchanged between Peter and Snape. Both men were oddly cordial about whatever they were speaking of, and it made Harry wonder. Remus and his father were also speaking, and he saw Professor Fletcher exchange a nod with his dad as well. His mum, on the other hand, seemed perfectly at ease among them all, sitting between Peter and Snape with an oddly soft expression, and smiling slightly as the two of them seemed to come to some agreement or another. But it was his father who interested Harry the most; James Potter seemed exhausted, with dark circles ringing his eyes and tousled hair that could only come from missing hours of sleep. However, his hazel eyes were bright and his smile genuine as he spoke to Hogwarts’ headmaster, pausing at one point in the conversation to meet Harry’s gaze and wink happily.

That did it. Harry glanced at the time, and realized that he could make it—just barely. With a mumbled excuse to his friends about having forgotten his copy of *Dark Forces: A Guide to Self Protection*, he pushed away from the table and headed back to Gryffindor tower. Once there, he immediately started rummaging around in his trunk, finally uncovering his dad’s old invisibility cloak.

If they wouldn’t tell him, he’d find out for himself.
The world spun around him, and only a supreme effort made it stop. The last twelve hours had been, to say the least, *enlightening*. A sense inside him told him that everything had changed. Nothing was the same. Or, perhaps…? Maybe nothing had changed, and everything was the same. Visions of darkness—and of light—of past, present, and future—were haunting him now. Everything was different. Everything had changed.

Albus Dumbledore blinked, and when that did not work, shook his head in a vain attempt to clear it. The action helped in part, but as he’d learned so many years ago, the only way to truly escape these visions was to let them pass—but he had not the time to do so. Not now. Too much was changing. Everything was the same. Promises that had not been broken had the ability to warp fate. He blinked again, and in frustration that he rarely betrayed, rose to pace around his office.

He hated the visions.

He wasn’t a seer; rather, he was anything but. He had neither the talent nor the inclination for Divination. However, he was different, mostly in ways that none would imagine, and fewer still would understand. And he didn’t see the future—or rather, sometimes he did, but he rarely understood it. He only saw images, pieces, and assembled them the best he could. He grasped at straws, and hoped, prayed, to be correct. He’d been wrong too many times, and right far too many as well. Yet in the most important expectation he had been wrong, and Dumbledore was not sure if his world was better or worse off because of it.

But he wasn’t a seer. His was a power far older, and much less welcome. Not to mention more powerful—but he tried not to think of that. Dumbledore was not a man who dwelled upon power, except as a means to an end. He never had, even back in the days when he had sought it.

As he paced, he thought, and his mind cleared slowly. *An end…?* Unconsciously, he found his left hand toying with the end of his long beard, and wondered why he kept it so lengthy. Was that because long and flowing silver hair was what people expected from such a venerable old wizard? He’d spent too much of his life conforming to expectations. Then again, they needed him to be ancient and wise. *But an end…? Is it truly achievable, after so long?* Possibilities swept through his mind, and Dumbledore thought far into the future—but then he considered the past, and a prophecy they had all thought broken. The present beckoned, then, bringing his thoughts to Hogwarts.

And to a man he had thought would break them before.

Unfortunately for Harry, a very familiar figure cut him off on his way to the Hospital Wing. Anxiously, he broke stride, trying to pause in mid-step and make no further noise, but the frown on her face told him that he’d been caught. *How did she know?* Harry wanted to demand, but he knew better. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe…?

“Take the cloak off, Harry,” his mother said sternly.

*How did she know?* Sighing, he did as he was told, but Lily must have seen the dejected look upon his face. She smiled slightly.

“How did she know?” his mum explained. “You need to be more careful about draping that cloak.” Harry scowled. “Besides, I watched you leave the Great Hall.”

Harry angrily balled up the cloak in his hand. Fat load of good it had done him this time. “Why
doesn’t anyone ever tell me anything?” he demanded, fighting the urge to stomp his foot like a five year old. “I just want to know what is going on.”

Unexpectedly, his mum smiled gently. Usually, Harry wasn’t likely to get away with such an attitude, especially with his parents, who, although they loved him, were not about to spoil him. In fact, the opposite was usually true. “All you had to do is ask.”

“What?”

“Harry, there are some times when we may judge it best not to tell you things, but your father and I would never keep you away from Sirius. He is your godfather.”

“Oh.” He swallowed, chastised. It seemed that he’d spent too long breaking the rules to remember that sometimes you only had to ask to get what you wanted.

But his mum only smiled again, squeezing his shoulder. “Come along, Harry. Let’s go meet your godfather.”

Harry had always experienced the Hospital Wing as a quiet place—it was, after all, Madam Pomfrey’s domain, and she ruled with an iron fist when it came to peace and tranquility in her domain. At the moment, however, the place was anything but quiet; Harry’s father sat at the bedside, his features full of laughter and his eyes light.

“Do you remember,” he was asking, “the time when we charmed the chairs at the Slytherin table to —”

“Send everyone that sat in them flying into the air,” Peter finished for him with a grin. “And when they tried to change them back—oh, that was perfect!”

“The rainbow colored hair was a nice touch, I’ll admit,” Remus added dryly. Then a naughty snicker escaped the headmaster. “Especially on Snape—”

“Oh, but you’re forgetting Avery’s attempt at revenge,” Peter cut in. “I’ve never seen a prank so botched—”

“Except for your attempt to hex Rodolphus Lestrange in our first year,” a quiet voice cut him off, drawing Harry’s attention to the man on the bed. He blinked quickly, for although his godfather (it was still odd thinking that his long-lost godfather was alive) was still pale, ragged, and grossly underweight, he looked different. There was something alive in his blue eyes, and the attempt at a smile, no matter how pained it seemed, lit his face into that of a different man. For the first time, Harry recognized the Sirius Black his parents had known.

“That wasn’t really a prank, you know,” Peter attempted to defend himself as the others laughed; after a moment, he finally gave in and chuckled as well. “And if it hadn’t been for you—” He trailed off as Sirius’ eyes focused on Harry and his mother.

“Hello, Lily.”
“Sirius…” Harry stood back as his mother approached the bed, sitting down on its edge and taking the left hand Sirius offered. Her voice was very soft. “We owe you so very much.”

“Don’t,” his godfather said quietly, cutting her off. “I already had this argument with James over there, and I’m not going to go over it another time. I made my choice, Lily, and I’d do it again.”

“But—”

“No.” The voice might have been weak, but there was no give in it. Lily must have heard that, because she sighed.

“All right,” Harry’s mother replied after a moment. “Let me at least say thank you, though.”

At first, it looked like Sirius would argue, but after a period of silence, he smiled slightly. “You’re welcome, then.”

Harry watched his mum smile and lean over to kiss Sirius on the cheek; his father, however, seemed less than pleased. “How is it,” James Potter demanded, “that I can argue with him until I’m blue in the face over this, and Lily says fifteen words and gets her way?”

Peter snorted. “Welcome to married life, Prongs.”

“I would think you’d be used to that by now,” Remus added philosophically.

Lily only smiled innocently at her husband and rose. Harry snickered, but his dad wasn’t willing to let it go. He glared at Sirius. “Well?”

“She asked nicer.” Something twinkled in Sirius’ eyes for a moment, but before Harry could figure out what, his mum was dragging him forward. Her hands fastened on both his shoulders, too, preventing him from hiding away, as he suddenly felt the need to do.

“Sirius,” she said, “I want you to meet Harry.”

Blue eyes met his own, and Harry tried not to squirm. His dad’s best friend was staring at him as if he’d never seen an eleven year old before, silent and...if not shocked, something, then. For his part, Harry had no idea what to do—What do you say to a godfather who’s supposed been dead for almost all of your life, anyway? In the long moment of silence, he felt all eyes in the room upon him, and Harry knew he should do or say something, but for the life of him, he couldn’t figure out what. Finally, though, Sirius broke the stillness.

“You grew,” he managed.

What in the world should he say to that? Finally, he settled upon a safe: “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You don’t remember me, do you?” Sirius asked quietly.

“Not really,” Harry admitted.

“That’s all right. I used to baby-sit you when you were little…” He smiled slightly. “You puked all over my robes once, right before I had to go to work…made my day very interesting, that.” The adults chuckled.

“What did you do?” Harry asked with interest. He remembered Sirius in a few flashes of memory, but didn’t recall ever associating an occupation with his godfather.

The pale man’s eyes flickered over to meet James’ briefly. “I was an Auror, like your father.”
“Oh.”

“So you play Quidditch, I hear,” Sirius said next, making Harry forget nearly all his discomfort. He grinned.

“Yeah. I’m the Gryffindor Seeker, even though I’m only a first year. Professor Fletcher let me do it because he says I’m a natural.”

“I’m not surprised, given how your dad played when we were here,” Sirius replied with a smile. “And I also hear that you and some friends of yours have managed to get in considerable…trouble here at Hogwarts?”

Harry had to remind himself that Remus was the headmaster before he replied as he wanted to. “We’re…ah, um…continuing a few traditions, yeah.”

“Oh, God, Sirius—don’t encourage them,” Remus cut in.

“Why ever not, Moony?” his godfather asked innocently. “Besides, I never recall you needing much encouragement—”

“I’m the headmaster, now, for crying out loud!”

Sirius’ eyes glittered. “Oops.”

They all laughed, and Harry suddenly realized how much potential fun his godfather could be. Sirius Black didn’t hold the record for most detentions in one term for nothing, he supposed, and then… Obviously, Remus realized it, too, because as the others chuckled, he groaned. Finally, though, Lily spoke seriously.

“You realize that as much as we are all enjoying this reunion, we should probably not all be here. All our presences at Hogwarts will undoubtedly give Sirius’ location away to Voldemort—”

“He already knows you’re here.”

The flat voice belonged to Snape, who stood silhouetted in the doorway, his black robes and dark tone of finality making his figure seem even more threatening and evil than usual. As Harry stared, feeling his anger build, Snape continued, “Forgive me for breaking up the charming family gathering, but he does already know.”

“How?” Peter asked cautiously.

“Because I told him.” The deputy headmaster strode into the room, nodding briefly at the assembled party. No one seemed willing to say anything as an uneasy silence reigned, and Harry spoke before anyone could stop him, full of indignation and anger.

“What?” he demanded. “You told him? That means you’re a—”

“Of course I’m a Death Eater,” Snape cut him off smoothly, rolling his eyes, and turning to Lily to speak, but Harry returned the favor, and cut him off in turn. All the while, his mind spun, wondering why anyone wasn’t doing anything? Hadn’t they heard? Fury shaped his words, and he really didn’t care that he was speaking to a professor.

“You tra—”

Snape scowled. “Be quiet, you foolish boy,” he snarled. “Do not speak of that which you do not
understand!"

“Severus!” Harry’s mother snapped back.

The deputy headmaster paused. “My apologies, Lily, James.” But his eyes were still dark. “Perhaps we could continue this discussion without children in the room?”

“I’m not a—” Harry started to respond hotly, but was stopped by his father’s hand on his arm.

“You’ve already wasted that chance, Severus,” Harry’s father replied wearily. He suddenly seemed very tired. “It’s better that he now know the whole truth, and not just part.”

“Ah, but can I trust him not to share with his insufferable little friends?” Snape’s dark eyes zeroed in on Harry, now, and he struggled not to flinch or explode in anger, both of which he felt like doing. However, his father’s now very tight grip on his shoulder told him that would be a bad idea. What was with Snape? Why did he hate him so much?

“I know how to keep a secret,” he shot back.

“Enough.” Remus forestalled all replies in a hard voice, and indeed, both of Harry’s parents had opened their mouths to speak, as had Snape—although if Lily and James were going to reprimand Harry or the Potions master, Harry would never know. He scowled. He’s a Death Eater. He’s one of them. He’s one of the kind who killed my grandparents before I could ever know them. He’s one of the kind who tries to kill my Dad almost every day. But it was Sirius Black who next spoke in a tired and weak voice.

“I suppose you’re meant to kill me then.”

He seemed oddly unfrightened by that prospect.

Snape shook his head. “No. Not I. But someone will try, certainly.”

“How comforting,” Sirius replied dryly, but Harry saw worry cross his father’s face.

“I could post some Aurors here—“

“No,” Sirius said softly. “Why uncover Snape when we don’t have to? Hogwarts is safe, and I’m not incompetent, James—just injured.”

“Badly enough that I don’t want to see you hurt more,” Harry’s father retorted.

Harry watched their eyes lock. His father and his godfather stared at one another for a long moment, each demanding that the other back down—but he did not see any give in either of them. Blue eyes burned into hazel, and finally, he sensed that Sirius was winning, despite the pain and exhaustion in his gaze.

“I’ve lived this long,” Sirius said quietly. “I’m not going to die now because of some two-bit Death Eater.” He shot a glance at Snape that was anything but friendly. “No offense.”

“None taken,” the Death Eater replied dryly. “I’ve always been a three-bit Death Eater myself.”

Several of the adults chuckled, but Harry felt his jaw drop open. Had Snape just made a joke? Impossible. But they weren’t angry with him, and they weren’t surprised, which meant—

“You’re a spy?” Harry blurted out.
“Admirable deduction, Mr. Potter,” the deputy headmaster responded sarcastically. “Ten points to Gryffindor.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but his dad cut him off with another warning squeeze of his shoulders. Then James turned back to Snape. “Thank you, Severus.”

“Don’t do anything stupid, Black,” Snape said to Sirius in reply. “I’d hate to attend your funeral again.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “I sincerely doubt you went in the first place.”

“You’re right. I didn’t.” With that, the deputy headmaster strode out as quickly as he’d come, leaving, however, the room with a somewhat lower temperature. After a moment, Lily finally spoke.

“Well, I have to get to work——”

“So do I,” Peter said quietly. “Shall we go to the Ministry together?”

“All right,” Lily replied. “James…?”

“I’ll handle it,” Harry’s father replied, and somehow he had the feeling that they meant him. Sometimes he felt like a Muggle ping-pong ball being bounced between his two parents. “I’ll see you later, Sirius, all right?”

“Count on it.” The two clasped hands, and then Harry followed his parents and Peter from the room after saying goodbye to his godfather as well. Quickly, his mum and Peter disappeared down the corridor, heading, undoubtedly, for the nearest Floo-connected fireplace. Harry, on the other hand, simply followed his father in the opposite direction, until finally they found themselves in a little-used classroom that Harry had never been in before. His father cast a silencing charm on the room and then turned to him.

“You know why we need to talk, right?”

Harry sighed. “Professor Snape,” he replied glumly, waiting for his father’s nod. “I’m sorry that I was rude, Dad, I was just so mad…”

But his father surprised him by laughing. “Harry, the world isn’t going to end because you exchanged a few harsh words with Snape. In fact, if a Potter and a Snape weren’t feeling out of joint with one another, I’d think there was something wrong—but as your father, I do need to tell you to respect your professors accordingly.”

“Yes, Dad.” At least his father understood. Dad was much easier than Mum for things like this, and Harry knew that he was trying to hide a smile.

“However, that isn’t really what I need to talk to you about,” his dad continued. “What I really need, Harry, is your promise that you won’t tell anyone, even Ron and Hermione, about Professor Snape being a spy. It could cost him his life.”

Harry frowned. “But he’s a Death Eater.”

“So he is. But he’s on our side, and has been for a long time.”

All the odd little things were starting to make sense, especially Snape’s little midnight journey back before Christmas… “So, does that mean Quirrell is, too?”
“You know I can’t tell you that,” his dad said after a moment’s hesitation. The smile, he noticed, was gone now.

“This is an Order of the Phoenix thing, isn’t it?” Harry sighed.

“You’re not supposed to know about that, Harry.”

“I’ve got ears, Dad. And eyes,” he replied. “I am eleven, you know.”

James chuckled and ruffled his hair playfully, making Harry scowl. “So you are. Promise me you will keep the secret?”

“I promise, Dad.”
Classes continued as usual, despite the slight air of tension that all the professors seemed to share. The rumor lapped around the castle and back again that the mysterious wizard in the hospital wing was Sirius Black, newly escaped from Azkaban and now at the top of You-Know-Who’s hit list. Some, of course, thought that the story was absolutely false, but there were others (Harry included) who knew better. He’d had to share that information with Ron and Hermione, of course, and hadn’t had to share it with Fred or George; the twins had guessed, and what the Weasleys knew, Lee Jordan knew. So the Misfits were a shade ahead of the rest, and only laughed when Malfoy and his cronies claimed that no one could ever escape Azkaban.

Harry visited his godfather three times in that first week, originally with Remus, but later on his own. The contrast in Sirius was odd: there were times when he could laugh and joke like he had when Harry had first met him, and there were others where he grew quiet and haunted, where his eyes were distant and his mind trapped in its own hell. Harry never asked, and Sirius never told, but he understood that his father’s oldest friend had been in places where nightmares were real, and in still darker ones, too, where plain nightmares would have been the stuff of fantasies. Despite that, life went on at Hogwarts. The slow crawl of the school year was back underway, and things were as usual as they could be in the midst of a war between light and dark.

But a ripple ran through the Great Hall one morning, when the headmaster entered with another man at his side. He wore robes of such a dark blue that they were almost black, and walked with a slight limp that favored his right leg. His features were still gaunt, but they bore more color now, and his shoulder-length black hair seemed fuller as well. His humor, too, seemed to have improved as he argued good-naturedly with Remus over something or another.

“Is that him?” Fred asked from his right.

Harry grinned. “Yeah.”

Suddenly, his godfather caught his eye and smiled; Harry waved in return. However, Sirius’ smile disappeared quickly as he traded a poisonous look with Professor Snape, and Harry watched the two of them with interest. Although they might have been on the same side, the two clearly were not friends, for if looks could kill, both would have been felled in a second, along with anyone standing in between.

Snape sneered.

Sirius snorted.

Remus intervened.

“Sit.” The hard hand that yanked Sirius’ chair away from the head table revealed Remus’ irritation; the headmaster had—forever the peacemaker, both in childhood and now—sensibly placed himself between his old friend and his deputy.
“I’m not an invalid, Remus,” Sirius groused. But he sat. There was no arguing with that expression.

“No, but you’re close enough,” his old friend replied quietly. “You’re lucky you didn’t lose that leg, you know.”

Sirius sighed. The complicated break and the old infection had almost made Pomfrey take it off, and the fact that he still walked with a limp was enough to drive him insane. “I know.”

“Pity,” Snape mumbled from Remus’ left. Sirius, for his part, was unsurprised, but the headmaster swung in his chair to face the other man.

“I will not sit through a battle over breakfast,” he hissed. “Be civil.”

Amazingly enough, Snape relented. But he did scowl. “I will do so if your hot-headed friend agrees not to provoke me.”

Provoke? Sirius nearly laughed out loud, but he stopped himself in time. He’d spoken only a handful of words to Snape in the last decade; he had no intention of provoking the git—or at least not over breakfast, anyway. Besides, after the last ten years in Voldemort’s hands, any childish insults or pranks either he or Snape might indulge in seemed very, very, minor. Sirius had spent a decade provoking Voldemort, and after that, Snape seemed like small change.

Instead of replying, he merely raised his eyebrows, giving the Potions Master what he knew was a superior glare. “Gladly.”

Remus’ pointed look told Sirius that had he had read what was behind the reply, which meant: I hate your guts, but I have bigger problems than you. Without a further word, Snape turned away and engaged Mundungus Fletcher in conversation, clearly willing to deny the fact that Sirius even existed—which, by the way, was just fine by Sirius. He was too worried about learning how to live again without forcing one Severus Snape into the equation.

Breakfast arrived in the proverbial blink of the eye—otherwise known as typical Hogwarts house-elf fashion: perfectly. To Sirius, of course, any amount of normal food would have seemed perfect; it had taken him the entire week he had spent in the Hospital Wing to remember what real food was like. What he’d been fed in Voldemort’s keeping hadn’t been worthy of the name, and the richness of Hogwarts’ fare still could throw him for a loop and upset his unexpectedly delicate stomach. So Sirius picked at his breakfast rather carefully, listening to the murmur of conversation in the Great Hall, and reflecting upon how little things had actually changed.

In Azkaban, where he’d spent five hellish years (having the dubious honor of being the first prisoner delivered by Voldemort into the place), it had been hard to remember that there had been a world outside. Towards the end, it had been nearly impossible…until he’d heard Peter, and felt bitterness well up inside him like he hadn’t imagined possible. But he had forgiven his friend, not for the least of reasons because the other Marauders needed him to. Peter had made the right choice, albeit a little late—and Sirius couldn’t deny his friends their complete and restored fellowship. In truth, he couldn’t deny it to himself, either, for it was the thought of his friends that had kept him alive for so long, first in Voldemort’s private domain, and later in Azkaban. Hell.

A shiver ran down his spine, and Sirius fought to control it. He didn’t want to deal with it. Not now, with the sun shining and children laughing within the hall. Laughter—hope—innocence. He’d been robbed of all three for too long, and began to wonder if he’d ever get them back.

There were moments, of course. He’d surprised himself by laughing with James, Remus, and Peter on that very first day. True, they had been far more jovial than he, but he’d smiled, and done it
without meaning to. There was much to be said for the healing power of friendship—and yet, despite the strides he’d made, Sirius knew even that wasn’t enough. He was far from healed, and would not come close for a very long time. He knew his demons. He’d been living with only their company for a decade.

Pain.

In the flash of a second, he was back there.

“Tell me,” the cold voice demanded, but as always, he denied it. He had to be strong, strong for his friends, for James...

“Tell me.”

Pain.

“I won’t betray my friends.” Again, pain. It was nothing new, but still, his soul struggled not to crumble under the onslaught. He could withstand it. He had to.

A cold, cold hand on his face.

“Betrayal? What is betrayal, for friends who have left you for dead?”

“Sirius?”

With a start, he snapped out of the memory. He shook his head. In truth, he didn’t remember the exact moment that was from; it could have been one of a million. Voldemort had desperately wanted the Potters in those early years. Later, of course, his focus had shifted elsewhere.

“Are you all right?” Remus’ hand was on his shoulder, and Sirius had to force himself not to shudder. He was still trying to remember that a human touch need not be equated with pain.

“I’m fine,” he said quietly, blinking the memories away once more. “Just thinking.”

“Right…”

The unspoken question, the unspoken offer. We are here if you need us, Remus’ concerned look said, and Sirius forced a smile for his friend’s sake. He knew. He even understood. He just wasn’t ready yet. It had been too long. Remus squeezed his shoulder, once and gently, but then the touch was gone. Remus understood demons. He faced his every month.

But the silence reigned between them, becoming uncomfortable. Remus clearly didn’t know what to say, didn’t know how to react around him—just as Sirius was still trying to remember how to be human. They were brothers, yes—but this brother had been gone for a long time. Finally, when he could bear the quiet no longer, Sirius spoke quietly.

“It’s odd,” he mused. “How so many things change, yet so much remains the same.”

“All things change…but not everything,” Remus responded softly. It was something they used to say, in that life gone past.

“I hope,” Sirius mumbled.

He picked at his breakfast listlessly. He knew he should eat, really, but he wasn’t very hungry; Pomfrey, however, would have lectured him to high heaven if she saw how little he’d eaten. Fortunately, she wasn’t in the Great Hall at the moment, and Sirius was home free. He knew he had
to gain his weight back (and had recovered some of that already, thank you very much), but at the moment, looking out at the smiling and laughing students—shadows of his happier past that he had clung to for so long—he simply had no appetite. On one hand, it was relieving to see that even in this dark world, Hogwarts carried on…but on the other, when his eyes rested upon the Slytherin table, he was reminded of how many of his classmates followed the dark path, and wondered how many of these children would follow in their parents’ footsteps.

He hoped not many, but wasn’t fool enough to count on that. But as before, Hogwarts was the middle ground, the neutral territory—firmly on the side of the light, yet the choosing ground for so many. Here, their lives’ decisions were made. Upon the day of his graduation, when so many paths were taken, Dumbledore had said: “Today you leave us, and enter a world much different from the one you left seven years ago. You are men now, and women, and it is to you that the decisions fall. And there may come a day, either soon to come or far in the future, when you must choose between what is right and what is easy…”

He had chosen. So had many others.

“Sirius?” Remus asked again.

He turned his head slightly. “Yes?”

“I’ve got to go,” the headmaster responded. “Severus and I have a meeting with Crouch in a half hour.”

“Crouch?” he asked in confusion.

“The Deputy Minister of Magic.”

So much had changed…“Who’s the head of DMLE, then?”

“Arabella Figg.”

Because Moody was dead. He knew that much. Voldemort had made sure to tell him that personally, four years ago. It was one of his clearest Azkaban memories, aside from the pain. The Dark Lord had always rejoiced in slaying the strong. And Alastor had been his Mentor, all those years ago. What will the Aurors be like without Mad-Eye Moody? He didn’t want to know. All he could manage to reply was, “Oh.”

“Are you going to be all right?” Remus asked with concern.

Illogical irritation rose. For a moment, Sirius had to resist the urge to snap back at him—I’m not an invalid, dammit!—but he stayed his tongue. Remus only asked because he cared, Sirius knew, and it wouldn’t be very nice to argue with that. Having someone care about him just such an alien feeling. “Yeah. I’ll be fine.”

“You’re certain?”

“I’m certain, Moony,” Sirius replied with a bit of a warning glare. It wouldn’t do to let Remus take it too far, after all. But he had to relent a tad. “I’ll lie down after breakfast, I promise.”

One eyebrow arched; only Remus could make doubt look so elegant and polite.

“Really. I promised Pomfrey I would, and if I don’t, she’ll hex me six ways ‘till Sunday,” he clarified.
Remus smiled. “Ah. I see.”

“I bet you do,” Sirius grumbled as his friend rose.

“Shall we, Severus?” the headmaster asked politely.

“Indeed,” Snape replied dryly. Remus nodded to Sirius in farewell, but Snape ignored his presence entirely, thus proving that not everything changed. An odd smile threatened to rise on Sirius’ face, but he shook his head, wondering at his own obscure sense of humor. If nothing else, ten years in Voldemort’s hands had changed him into one hell of a cynic.

Slowly, the head table emptied as professors left to prepare for their classes; finally, only Sirius, Sprout, and Quirrell remained. Sprout, he figured, had little to do to make a greenhouse ready (what could one do to prepare plants, anyway?), but the poor woman must have become lonely quickly, because she all but fled only seconds after Fletcher departed. Of course, Sirius wasn’t exactly a conversationalist—he was anything but, busy as he was, staring off into the distance and still struggling to come to terms with the world—and Quirrell, judging from his stuttering attempts at conversation earlier, wasn’t much better. After the dumpy head of Hufflepuff’s departure, then, Sirius was left in utter peace, sitting near the center of the table when Quirrell was all the way down the at the left end. A perfect situation, to his mind.

He half-heartedly picked at his eggs and decided that they needed more salt. However, when he reached for the saltshaker, he found, much to his surprise, that it was significantly lighter than it had been when he’d used it only a few minutes ago. He shook it slightly, staring blankly at the shaker, but it turned out to be empty. Sirius scowled. Why me? Sighing, he turned to Quirrell, and noticed that there was indeed another saltshaker down at that end of the table.

“Would you pass me the salt, please?” he asked, surprised how normal the question felt.

How long had it been since he’d asked someone to pass the salt, anyway?

“Of…c-course,” the professor replied, and Sirius wondered how his students learned anything through that stutter. It had to be impossible to understand. Regardless, the saltshaker came sliding smoothly down the table towards him, propelled by a quick flick of Quirrell’s wand.

Instincts long in the grave flagged. Instead of touching the shaker, Sirius reached out and used his glass of orange juice to stop its journey. A soft clink sounded as the shaker touched the glass, and Sirius make a conscious effort to turn casually to the Dark Arts professor.

“Thank you,” he said politely, even as his instincts fairly screamed for attention. A sharp feeling prickled on the back of his neck. Cautiously, Sirius sipped his orange juice, placing the glass down precisely in the same place where it had started.

A shiver raced up his spine, and he felt it. Felt it—Dark magic. The longer he was exposed to it, the more attuned he became—

Again, instinct reacted far faster than his outclassed brain could handle, and as motion caught the corner of his gaze, Sirius dove from his chair and to the left, hoping to use the table as a temporary shield. His healing bones wailed in protest, but he had moved just in time. Red light flashed over his head, and his chair exploded, spraying wood fragments everywhere—some hit him, but he hardly cared—students were screaming and shouting—Quirrell was on his feet—

Sirius grabbed Remus’ chair and threw it with all his might. In his weakened condition, it would never have reached Quirrell, but it was distraction enough. The Death Eater—he had to be a Death
Eater!—paused to blast the offending piece of furniture into smithereens before refocusing his attention on Sirius. Oh, shit. This was his first duel in ten years, and he didn’t even have a wand. I am so dead. Time slowed down to a crawl, and he no longer felt the pain. Instinct and training reawakened.

“Stupefy!”

He rolled, thanking his lucky stars that Quirrell obviously didn’t intend to kill him, and the sturdy head table proved to be his salvation. Without quite meaning to, Sirius had ended up mostly underneath the table, and it shielded him from Quirrell—but only for a moment. Through the white tablecloth, he spied feet coming around the table’s end, and knew that he didn’t have long. Where the hell is everyone else, anyway? The remaining students were probably only staring, but they were just kids, and this was one of their professors against some stranger they hardly knew—if any of them did jump in, it would probably be on Quirrell’s side, anyway! Gritting his teeth, Sirius devoutly prayed that they’d leave this one to their elders.

Irrelevantly, the thought came to mind: I’m going to kill Snape! He might have mentioned that the stuttering idiot was a Death Eater!

Growling in a fashion that bore an uncanny resemblance to his animagus form, Sirius desperately reached up with his right hand, groping on the tabletop for anything of use. At this point, he’d be willing to try anything, be it plates, forks, or even pepper shakers (but not that infernal saltshaker, which had started this whole debacle and the corner of his mind was certain had some purpose)—finally, his frantic fingers landed on something hard and cylindrical.

Beachwood, very firm, and something around eleven inches.

His fingers closed on it, and his mind went blank. Frantically, Sirius rolled out from under the table (which could only now hamper his movement), grabbing a plate with his left hand as he went. It, along with Sirius’ former breakfast, flew at Quirrell, and due to some extraordinary stroke of luck, hit him full in the face, fried eggs, bacon, toast and all. The professor snarled and jumped away, momentarily blinded and distracted.

Sirius’ mind raced as he rolled into a familiar crouch with his left hand forward and his wand held close by his right side in a ready position. It was the unorthodox dueling stance he’d favored so many years ago—Spell, spell, I need a damn spell! His memory was irritatingly empty, and he could only watch in helpless fascination as another wave of Quirrell’s wand made the shattered remnants of his breakfast cease to exist. The wand came around and zeroed in on him as his mind turned over, jumped, and did a little jig as it struggled to remember the magic it hadn’t been called upon to perform in ten years.

“Impedimenta!” Once, he would have been a lot more creative, but there was no time for niceties, now. Quirrell stopped in mid-movement, but struggled against the curse, which wasn’t, in truth, strong enough to stop a determined and experienced wizard. Sirius was damned rusty, though, and Quirrell shook off the spell within a few seconds.

Wanting him alive seemed to limit the professor’s options. Either that, or he wasn’t very original. His wand came up as Sirius’ memory finally suggested an effective spell. “Stup—”

“Everbero!” No time for being nice. Sirius’ wand snapped up and Quirrell went flying, hitting the back wall hard enough to leave a dent. He thought the other wizard was unconscious, but there was no telling. “Expelliarmus!”

Quirrell’s wand flew neatly into his left hand, and the professor did not move. Sirius rose cautiously
from his crouch, painfully aware of the throbbing pain in his right leg now that everything was over. He glanced around, and time sped up once more. *Bang.*

To his right, the teachers’ private door burst open, revealing Remus, who was followed very closely by Snape and—*Oh, this will make my day*—Barty Crouch, Senior, the Deputy Minister of Magic. Both Remus and Crouch had their wands out and ready, although Snape did not… Realization dawned, and Sirius glanced down at the wand he still grasped in his right hand. *How interesting*… He would have never thought Snape’s wand would suit him so well—although he certainly would not have liked to try complicated spell work with it, even if he hadn’t been so out of practice. But for simple spells…it was surprisingly effective.

Snape’s dark eyes were focused on him, making Sirius sure that this had been no accident. *Well, this certainly proves he’s on our side, anyway,* he thought wryly. He met his old rival’s gaze evenly.

“I believe you left this behind, *Professor,*” he said coolly, trying not to favor his right leg. *Life sucks,* he told himself acidly. *You should be used to that by now.*

“Indeed.” Snape’s tone was positively frosty.

Sirius allowed himself a slight smile. “I would thank you for the loan of it, although I’m sure that was not your purpose in misplacing it.”

“It was not *precisely* my intention,” Snape sneered, but Sirius could have laughed. Oh, he hated the man, and probably always would—but perhaps he was a better man than Sirius had ever given him credit for. He’d never thought Snape was *stupid,* after all. Only a greasy and insufferable git.

Odd how some things never changed.

From his right, Remus asked: “Are you all right, Sirius?”

Sirius nodded after a moment, staring once more at Quirrell. “Yeah.” His eyes narrowed, and he felt an old focus flirt with his consciousness. “I need a wand.”

“Tell me about it,” Remus breathed so only they could hear, and Sirius tore his eyes away from Quirrell’s unconscious form so that they could share a slight smile. But then the headmaster looked towards Snape, and Sirius watched the moment of silent communication pass between them as Remus’ eyes flickered towards the assembled students and back once more. The Deputy Headmaster nodded.

“I will deal with them.”

Without even waiting for Remus’ reply, Snape strode forward, speaking to the students as he went and telling them to go to class. Out of the corner of his eye, Sirius noticed Harry start forward, presumably to speak to him, but Snape intercepted him and sent him on his way. Sirius frowned momentarily, reading intense dislike on both Harry and the professor’s features, but let it pass. Harry was, after all, James’ son, and perfectly entitled to hate one Severus Snape. That, at the very least, could be expected—but Remus was speaking, so he refocused his attention hurriedly.

“What happened?”

“The saltshaker,” Sirius responded absently.

“What?” His friend was looking at him very strangely.

Sirius made his way back to the half-destroyed head table, hating the way he limped as he did so.
His leg was rather enthusiastic about reminding him that he wasn’t healed, and now his aching ribs were chiming in, too. “I asked him to pass the salt,” he explained, gesturing. “I think it’s a Portkey.”

“Ah…” A flicker of Remus’ wand brought the saltshaker floating into the air; neither of them were foolish enough to touch it. His eyes grew concerned. “He wants you badly, Sirius.”

“Yes.” His throat was suddenly tight, and dark memories surfaced. Four years he’d been an Auror, and a good one, but never such a threat that he was near the top of Voldemort’s list. Now, however, he had an eerie feeling that he _was_ the list.

The reasonable corner of Sirius’ brain pointed out that thought should frighten him, but it could no longer. He was beyond that, far beyond. Even with the nightmares that haunted him day and night, Dreamless Sleep Potion or no (about which he hadn’t told anyone and had no intention of doing so), he could no longer fear Voldemort. Or, at least it wasn’t an all-encompassing fear, and it was nothing approaching terror. He hated the monster too much for that. Maybe it was foolish, but years of pain and torture could have done only one of two things to him: either broken his hear and soul, or burned the fear away.

In a colder outlook on life than he’d ever had, Sirius had chosen the second.

He had only regretted that when he’d realized that he could never again quite be the man he had been before. Perhaps some day he would heal, he knew—possibly. Or maybe he wouldn’t. Either was possible, and he had Voldemort to thank for that. He had Voldemort to hate for a lot of things.

“Sirius? Are you all right?” Remus repeated, touching his shoulder lightly.

He flinched without meaning to. “Sorry. I was thinking.”

“Brooding, more like,” was the light reply. But his friend was frowning worriedly. Remus didn’t miss much.

“That, too,” he tried to force a smile but failed. It usually did. _Burning, more like_, Sirius thought to himself.

“Let’s go to my office,” Remus said quietly. “I think we have some…questions to answer.”

“Oh?” He arched an eyebrow; then he noticed the untrusting way in which Crouch was watching him. But the hostility radiating from the older man rolled off Sirius without mattering. After staring Voldemort down, there were few things that could bother him, and Crouch was nowhere on that list. They’d never liked one another much, anyway—probably due to the way Moody and Crouch felt about one another back in another lifetime. “Right.”

Together, the headmaster, deputy minister, and former prisoner made their way to Remus’ office, speaking very little along the way. Snape, in the meantime, was locking Quirrell away—something that, as Remus informed Crouch with a slight snarl, he could be perfectly well trusted in doing. Sirius frowned slightly, thinking that he’d never expected to have anything in common with the detestable head of Slytherin, but it seemed that Crouch was willing to trust neither of them. Then again, that wasn’t very new; Crouch was a highly obsessed and suspicious individual. Sirius had known that ever since he became an Auror.

At least Crouch had the good grace to wait until the door was shut and they were all seated before speaking. “I am glad to see,” he remarked acidly, “that battles are served for breakfast at Hogwarts these days.”

Remus bristled, but Crouch continued:
“I’m especially gratified to see that you have continued your predecessor’s record of hiring Death Eaters as members of your staff.” His gray eyes flashed over to Sirius. “And I can tell that you harbor them as well.”

“What?” Remus got the word out a half second before Sirius could speak, so Sirius took a calculatedly deep breath and sat back with forced calm. This was Remus’ battle…but God help that bastard if he went too far.

“Oh, come now, Headmaster,” Crouch snapped. “You can’t honestly think that a man can spend a decade in the Dark Lord’s hands without becoming his creature? That is,” he continued darkly, “if he even is who he claims to be.”

Sirius felt his temper rise, but he choked an angry response back. Those ten years had taught him that, taught him self-control like he’d never believed he’d have. Instead, he let the anger boil under the surface, carefully managed, yet always there. “I am,” he said very quietly, “Sirius Black. And I am not, as you so aptly put it, one of Voldemort’s creatures. Nor am I a Death Eater. I’d rather be dead.”

“I would also think,” Remus continued smoothly, picking up where he left off, “that you would have more confidence in your superior’s abilities to detect a curse than you imply. Dumbledore has, of course, already agreed with me in this matter.”

Crouch’s eyes burned into Sirius now. “I’m not implying that there are any curses in play here.”

“Then it’s simply an issue of trust, isn’t it?” Sirius met his angry gaze evenly, and didn’t bother not to smirk.

“I suppose you’re going to trust him just like you trusted Quirrell, then, aren’t you?” the deputy minister snapped at Remus.

“No,” the headmaster replied evenly. “I knew Quirrell was a Death Eater.”

“What? And you didn’t see fit to notify the Ministry about this minor fact?”

“I didn’t see fit to notify you. There is a difference.” Sirius had to appreciate Remus’ ruthless streak. It almost made him feel sorry for Crouch, but Sirius wasn’t sure he really cared about the bastard enough to pity him. His friend continued: “Besides, you can’t have it both ways. I doubt that that Dark Lord would want to capture one of his own, if, as you claim, Sirius is a Death Eater.”

“Camouflage,” Crouch snorted.

“I find that extremely likely.”

“I suppose you know his mind then, do you Lupin? Perhaps we might want to investigate you next.”

“Threaten me all you want, Minister Crouch. It won’t get you very far,” Remus replied evenly. But his eyes were narrowing, which Sirius knew from long experience was a very important warning sign—but Crouch missed it completely.

“I’m not threatening anything,” the deputy minister bristled. “I am simply expressing concerns about the running of this school.”

“Then I ought to be grateful that I don’t work for you, shouldn’t I?”

“Hogwarts is subject to Ministry oversight.”
“From the Minister, yes,” Remus replied. “Not you. And the school governors are the only ones who could remove me, if they found reason to do so, which they have not.”

“Don’t think there aren’t other ways, Lupin,” Crouch growled.

Remus’ nostrils flared in anger just as Snape entered the office. “What I think is that I am beginning to understand your purpose in coming here, Mr. Crouch. I assure you that any plot you advance against Dumbledore will not succeed—and you will find no support at Hogwarts for such a thing. Do not be a fool and doom the entire Wizarding World merely for the sake of your ambition!”

“How dare you—” Crouch was on his feet.

“How dare I what?” Remus demanded furiously. He suddenly standing as well, and his blue eyes were flashing dangerously at Crouch.

In the doorway, Snape stood frozen, probably transfixed by the display of his headmaster’s rare yet very dangerous temper. There was a tense moment of silence as the two stared each other down, but finally, Crouch opened his mouth to speak.

“I believe this meeting is over, Minister,” Remus cut him off. “You are no longer welcome at Hogwarts.”

“You have no authority over me,” Crouch snapped.

Remus’ voice grew quiet. “Get out.”

The deputy minister stared for a moment more, and then, suddenly unable to meet Remus’ implacable gaze, left in a flash of sweeping robes and angry strides. Snape stepped out of his way with a characteristic sneer—but for once, Sirius agreed with him completely. Crouch attempted to slam the door behind him, but Snape caught it in time and closed the door quietly as Remus let out a quiet breath, clearly struggling for control of his temper.

“Remind me,” Snape said philosophically into the growing silence, “never to make you that angry.”

“It doesn’t happen very often.” Remus scrubbed a hand over his tired features.

“What happened?” Snape asked.

Remus sighed. “You might as well sit down, Severus. It’s going to be a long story.”
“Why did you leave the wand?” Sirius asked suddenly. He’d been quiet until then, merely listening to Remus and Snape discuss Crouch’s inevitable power play, but as the conversation dwindled, he spoke up.

“Because Voldemort wants you,” Snape answered simply.

“I’m well aware of that, thank you,” Sirius replied dryly. Images flashed through his mind’s eye.

A room. Once an interrogation room in Azkaban, now a torture chamber. Voldemort was waiting, as he so often was.

“Crucio!”

His body convulsed, and Sirius screamed. As soon as the curse was lifted—

“Imperio!”

The inevitable battle left him drained and reeling. Another curse hit him, but he could tell which. Sirius only knew that he’d won, somehow, again. His soul was still his own.

Anger and more pain. Voices talking—he could no longer make out words. More anger. Yet when Voldemort spoke, the tone was very cold and precise.

“Mandatus Pros—”

Suddenly, Sirius realized that Snape had replied while he wasn’t listening. He swallowed, shook his head. “Sorry, could you please repeat that?” he said quietly through dry lips. “I was…elsewhere.”

Remus’ worried eyes were focused on him again. Sirius forced himself to ignore it.

“As I was saying,” Snape replied with a trace of irritation, “I doubt that anyone could be more aware of the Dark Lord’s desires than you. However, I did not think it prudent to leave you without a wand. Even with that numbskull, Quirrell.”

“You’re still risking him tracing it back to you,” Sirius replied.

Snape shrugged. “Pure accident.”

“He won’t believe that.” Why the hell was he concerned for Snape? Sirius frowned. Perhaps it was simply because Snape had helped him, but maybe it was just because he didn’t feel anyone deserved to face Voldemort’s wrath. Or, at least not anyone on our side, anyway. He shivered.

“I’ve faced worse,” the spy replied archly. “Besides, Black, I can take care of myself, thank you very much.”

Sirius bristled. So much for trying to help the bastard. “I never thought you couldn’t.”

“Indeed.” Snape rolled his eyes.

In their youth, they might have taken the argument further, but now it just wasn’t worth the energy
required. Besides, Remus spoke before either could:

“Do you know why he wants you so badly, Sirius?”

“You will break and you will die,” the cold voice hissed. “In the end, you all do…” He shook his head, struggling to clear it.

“No,” Sirius whispered quietly, staring at the floor. “Not really.”

The words weren’t quite a lie. A part of him knew why Voldemort wanted him back so badly, and yet it still wasn’t something Sirius understood. A moment of silence followed his statement, but Snape finally filled it, speaking thoughtfully. “Aside from the fact that his escape has shattered Azkaban’s legend of security and proved that the Dark Lord is not infallible…” He let out a hissed breath from between clenched teeth. “There has to be something more.”

“Do you have any idea, Sirius?” Remus pressed gently. “Anything at all?”

“I don’t… I don’t really remember.” He scraped a tired hand through his hair, pushing it away from his eyes. Sirius tried to explain. “I mean, I remember too much…but not enough. I don’t know. I just can’t remember. And what I remember I don’t always understand. It’s fragmented.”

“Perhaps it’s related to something you’ve seen…?” Remus wondered.

Sirius shrugged, but Snape suddenly asked. “Where were you before Azkaban?”

“Casa Serpente.”


“Where?” Remus asked with slight confusion. After all, Sirius knew as well as he did that Casa Serpente was supposed to be a legend—but fortunately, Snape explained.

“Salazar Slytherin’s ancestral holdings,” he clarified. “Made Unplottable in 1473 and ceded to the Gaunts in the sixteenth century as the last of the Slytherin line. Legal reasons kept the Gaunts out of Casa Serpente for several generations—I don’t remember what happened, though some serious crimes were implied—but I do know that Voldemort reclaimed the place in the early seventies. However, I recall any Death Eater who has been there.”

“Malfoy. And Nott,” Sirius said quietly. More memories surfaced, but he forced them aside. Now was not the time.

“Could that be it?” Remus wondered. “The location of Casa Serpente?”

Sirius shook his head. “I couldn’t lead you there any more than he could.” He jerked his head towards Snape. He shivered again, and tried to hide it behind calm words. “I was brought there unconscious, and moved to Azkaban the same way.”

“Ah.”

“There’s something you are not saying,” Snape remarked, making Sirius’ head come up suspiciously.

“What do you mean?” he frowned.

“I have never seen the Dark Lord so furious over one individual,” the spy replied quietly. “Not Potter, or even Dumbledore. Either you or he has done something that has made this important. Or
personal.”

“Great,” Sirius whispered dryly. He knew it was personal. He just didn’t want anyone else to know how much it was.

“You don’t remember why, though, do you?” Remus asked.

“No,” he lied.

“Do you remember anything?” Snape continued to question him. “Words, images, incidents…?”

An angry voice spoke the final spell. “Mandatus Prospico—” Sirius shook his head, forcing the memories aside.

“No.”

Bill awoke to a tapping sound coming from near his right ear. Startled, he jerked awake, immediately regretting the abrupt movement as his head began to pound, but the tapping didn’t stop. In fact, it seemed real, unlike most of the sounds, the memories, he had been hearing as of late. Blinking, Bill frowned and tried to follow the sound to its source.

He’d been in the darkness for so long now that his eyes were well adjusted. The only light he ever saw was the one inside a torture chamber, and he had no desire to remember that unless he had to —Focus, Weasley, he told himself firmly. But that was getting harder to do as the days went by, and his body ached as he moved. As near as he could tell, he didn’t have any broken bones (although at least one of his ribs was certainly bruised), but he hurt. Everything hurt, and his limbs weren’t exactly eager to respond to his commands, but after a bit of convincing, Bill managed to make his body shift along his cell’s right wall until the tapping grew slightly louder. Feeling cautiously with his fingers, he finally found a small hole.

It was almost impossible to see, even with his eyes used to the lack of light. However, he could feel it—and Bill fell back with a startled yelp as his finger suddenly made contact with not stone but another finger. Flesh and blood.

Someone else.

His heart pounded in his ears, and Bill had to force himself to breathe normally. There was absolute silence for a moment, perfect stillness…it was hard to believe that he hadn’t imagined things, but as he cautiously felt for the hole once more, he found that it was still there. Maybe I’m just hallucinating, he thought, but my hallucinations usually aren’t this kind. Bill shivered again, but only with memory. The longer he spent in Azkaban (although he had no idea how much time that had been), he became more attuned to the Dementors, and he knew that there were none nearby right now. After all, Voldemort needed sane prisoners for information, so he kept the Dementors from doing anything more severe than torturing them.

As if that wasn’t enough. He swallowed, and refocused on the situation at hand. Had he really felt someone else, or was he only dreaming? Maybe he was going insane, but there was only one way to tell. Bill pulled his finger away from the hole and leaned his head towards its opening.
“Hello?” he whispered cautiously.

“Hello…?” another voice echoed his own, but this one was deeper and scratchier than Bill’s. For a moment, it seemed impossible to breathe.

“Who are you?” he finally managed to ask.

“Who are you?”

Bill hesitated, knowing that this could be a trap. But what use could it be? Surely he wasn’t important enough to put so much effort into tricking, and besides, he need not say anything that the Death Eaters didn’t already know… He let out a shaky breath. Common sense told him not to answer the question, but the promise of human companionship—of no longer being alone—was far too tempting. Even for the strong, Azkaban was terrifying, and even the week he would have spent would have been too long.

“Bill,” he answered.

There was a pause, and he began to think that he was hallucinating and there was no one there. Horrible emptiness welled up inside him, and Bill closed his eyes, trying to shut the loneliness and despair away. In Azkaban, either could kill him—but finally, there was a response, and the scratchy voice whispered:

“Frank.”

“You realize this is one hell of an unbelievable coincidence, James.”

James sat back in the comfortable leather chair across from his superior’s desk. “Yeah,” he shrugged. “Probably.”

“Probably, hell!” Arabella spat. “First, we have Sirius Black return from the dead—miraculously escaping Azkaban under circumstances that even he can’t—or won’t—fully explain. Second, we have Peter Pettigrew suddenly and simultaneously growing a spine and a conscience, and deciding that he doesn’t want to be a Death Eater any more. You think this chain of events is anything other than strange?”

“No,” James said quietly. “But I know that it’s real.”

“Look, I know they are your friends, but you’ve got to look at this objectively.” Arabella’s voice had gone gentle and soft, and James hated it when she did that. It reminded him of his mother.

“Objectively?” he echoed. “Let’s try this for objective: how many people know I’m an animagus?”

She frowned, unable to see the connection. “A handful. Why?”

“Eight, to be exact. You, me, Dumbledore, Lily, Harry, Remus, Peter, and Sirius,” James responded. “Hell, you don’t even know when I became one, do you?”

“No.” Arabella eyed him suspiciously. “Get to the point.”
“Fifth year at Hogwarts. Me, Peter, and Sirius become Animagi so we can be with Remus when he transforms. Peter registered, but the number of people who knew of Sirius is even less, and you can’t fake a big black dog that looks like a Grim.”

“We’ve established that it’s him. That’s not the problem.”

James sighed and tried not to look betrayed. Her concerns were justified, no matter how much he hated them. “You think Voldemort broke him.”

“What else can I think? You and I both know what that place does to people, and no one has ever escaped Azkaban—not in two hundred years! And after a decade in Voldemort’s hands, with probably five of them spent in Azkaban, any witch or wizard would break. Look what two weeks did to Dung, James.”

“Sirius didn’t break,” he replied stubbornly.

“How do you know?” she challenged him. “How can you be sure? I just can’t believe that he could come out of that place sane and free. Why now? And why him?”

“I can’t answer that, but I know him, ‘Bella,” James said, trying to contain his temper. “I know Sirius like I know myself. I know he’s telling the truth.”

She frowned. “He’s your friend. I understand why you want to believe him, but—”

“But what?” he echoed, cutting her off. “If you’d taken one look in his eyes, you’d know that he didn’t come out of Azkaban unscathed. I’ve never seen someone so haunted or so hurt by what’s been done to them. You can’t fake the pain in his eyes, or the determination that it took him to get to Hogwarts—he won’t even talk about that, but I know it had to be hell. He almost died doing that, ‘Bella, and Voldemort certainly wouldn’t have done to him what he did if he wanted him to be able to move.”

James took a deep breath before continuing. “Add to that the Voldemort wants him captured more than he wants anything—which we’ve learned from both Peter and Snape—and the evidence becomes insurmountable. Dumbledore believes it, too.”

“All right, then,” his old Mentor sighed. She wasn’t happy, but then again, James knew that Arabella hadn’t survived almost fifty years in Magical Law Enforcement by being trusting and careless. Her instincts were usually right in situations like this—but for once, James was glad to know she was wrong. “Albus is talking to Pettigrew now, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

She sat back unhappily. “Then I guess we wait.”

“What can I do?” Peter asked.

Dumbledore arched one silver eyebrow, but Peter found it hard to meet his eyes. Then again, he
hadn’t been able to do that since he’d walked into the Minister’s inner office over an hour before. That intelligent gaze was unnerving. “What do you mean, Peter?”

He let out a careful breath. “I know I’m not the most powerful or courageous wizard in the world,” Peter said quietly. “But I want to help. I’ve done so much wrong…I just want to do what’s right. I want to help.” He hesitated. “If you’ll let me.”

“If I’ll ‘let’ you?” the old man echoed softly.

Peter could only shrug.

“Why would I not?” Dumbledore replied gently. “I think you fail to recognize what good you have already done, Peter. Although you may not realize it, you have shown exceptional courage in deceiving Lord Voldemort. Over the course of the last twelve years, you might have belonged to him in mind, but not in soul. In keeping faith with your friends, you have also remained loyal to the Order, and told him nothing he could not learn from other sources.

“So of course I will accept your help,” the Minister continued. “But I must ask you if you understand the risks you will be taking.”

Peter swallowed. “I do.”

And for once in his life, he did. He even accepted them. Hours and hours of thinking had brought him to this point—years, really, if he considered it that way. This choice would also be his own, and it would probably damn him, but at least it was the right one. Finally, after over a dozen years of following false pathways, he had found the one he had wanted all along. Looking back, his decisions seemed so foolish, so naive—but he couldn’t change those now. He could only walk forward with his head held high, and never look back.

“Then tell me what you would like to do,” Dumbledore replied.

“Whatsoever you need me to.” It took an effort, but Peter finally looked him in the eye. Seeing faint surprise on the old man’s face, he tried to clarify: “I have so much to make up for—”

“Let us not speak of that.”

Peter frowned. “Why not? It’s true, and I know it. I don’t even understand why my friends forgive me.” He swallowed convulsively. “But I want to be worthy of their trust again. Of your trust. I know it will take time, but I’m willing to do whatever is necessary.”

“And you claim not to have courage, Peter?” Dumbledore chuckled gently. “What else do you call this, then?”

“Regret.”

The Minister sighed. “Very well. The choice, however, is still up to you. On one hand, you may continue as others before you have, as a spy within Voldemort’s circle, gathering information and passing it on to the Order. Or, on the other, you may chose the more dangerous route.”

“More dangerous?” Peter’s heart was pounding. Off the top of his head, he couldn’t think of anything more dangerous than being a spy, but something in Dumbledore’s voice told him there certainly was.

“Indeed. You can renounce the Dark Lord.”
Something exploded inside Peter. Suddenly, he felt short of breath. “Is it possible?”

“With a great deal of courage, I believe it is.” Dumbledore laid a gentle hand upon his arm. “I don’t believe I need to tell you the risks in doing so, Peter—and remember, the choice is yours to make. I cannot choose for you. Nor can anyone else.”

Freedom. The word soared into Peter’s mind upon the wings of a prayer. For a moment, he allowed himself to luxuriate in the fantasy of true and absolute freedom. What would it feel like to be free of Voldemort’s control? Could he truly be the master of his own fate again? He could hardly dream of never again responding to the burn of the Dark Mark—yet the thought of the mark brought him immediately back to earth. It would never stop burning, he knew, not until Voldemort was defeated. And with betrayal, he suspected that the burn would grow even worse. Betrayal, he knew, would probably mean his death—but might it not mean freedom as well? And would he not rather to die free than as a slave?

Yet, however intoxicating the idea of freedom was to him, Peter knew that it would not help the Order’s cause. Yes, it would release him from his foolish choices (possibly to make even more foolish ones, but at least they would be honest decisions, now), but his own freedom had little importance when compared with that of the rest of the Wizarding world. He’d come here to help, not gain for himself.

Suddenly, a thought struck him. His freedom wouldn’t serve, unless…

“What if I went public with it?” Peter asked on impulse.

Dumbledore, he saw, had the good grace to look surprised. Or perhaps the old man actually was surprised. With him, it was hard to tell. “What do you mean, Peter?”

“I could publicly renounce He-Wh—Voldemort,” Peter explained. On second thought, it didn’t seem like a good idea at all—but in his heart, he knew it was the right idea. His heart was pounding like the ocean in his ears. “I could prove that it’s possible. Maybe, combined with Sirius’ escape, people might realize that he’s not infallible… It could help, right?”

“Indeed it could.” Dumbledore’s blue eyes were shining. “But are you sure you want to do this?”

From somewhere deep inside Peter, a forgotten soul answered without hesitation. “Yes. I am.”

The paper dropped on top of the tray that held his lunch, very closely missing his pudding in the process. Sirius looked up curiously from the hospital bed he occupied once again (Pomfrey had threatened to tie him down after she heard about what had happened over breakfast), immediately noticing that Remus’ face was rather grim.

“It’s out,” the headmaster said unhappily, causing Sirius to finally glance down at the copy of the Daily Prophet in front of him.
SIRIUS BLACK ESCAPES AZKABAN

by Eric Dummingston, Special Correspondent

On November 12, 1981, Sirius Black, a well-known Auror, was captured by agents of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. At the time, he was serving as the Secret Keeper for James and Lily Potter, and their then eighteen-month-old son, Harry, in the performance of the immensely complicated Fidelius Charm. Like so many others captured by Death Eaters, he was assumed dead. Ten years later, he escaped Azkaban Fortress.

Once the Ministry of Magic’s high-security and inescapable prison, Azkaban became the headquarters of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named over five years ago. Since that time, many witches and wizards associated with the light side have been held within its walls, yet none had managed to escape—until now.

Perhaps, Black has become a new word for hope.

Despite how impossible the feat may seem, sources indicate that Black managed to make his way to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry upon his escape. Reports are sketchy at this time, but he has apparently received prestigious visitors already, ranging from James and Lily Potter to the Minister of Magic himself. He is rumored to be in near-critical condition at the present, yet all signs suggest that he is not under the influence or control of the Dark Lord.

Although this may seem unlikely to many, the facts must first be considered. Before his capture, Sirius Black was perhaps the rising star of the Ministry’s Auror Division, mentored by the legendary Mad-Eye Moody and reputed to be...
the best of his generation, which included even the present-day head of the Auror Division, James Potter. Even though it remains to be seen how a decade in Death Eater hands may have affected Black, it is apparent that he retained enough power and foresight to break out of the fortress that the Dark Lord would have the world believe unbreachable.

Wizards of this type have been sorely needed in the Wizarding world in recent years, and there are certainly many who will look to Black as a hero, and with seemingly good cause. His example might yet be proof of what the Ministry has been claiming for some time; He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is not all-powerful. In such a dark era, it is good to be reminded of the light once in a while, and this miraculous escape seems to have done just that for many.

Sirius Black is the last surviving member of one of the famous Fourteen Families, the very oldest and most powerful families in the Wizarding World. His younger brother, Regulus Black died under suspicious circumstances in 1981. Neither Hogwarts nor the Ministry could be reached for comment.

The headline attracted others’ attention as well.

She was staring at it with unreadable gray eyes, and Severus had the sense to let her read it several times before he even tried to speak. Julia wouldn’t have heard him before that, at any rate, and he was willing to wait. She was his friend, after all, and he knew how hard this had to be hitting her. Even his animosity with Black didn’t blind him to Julia’s feelings as she sat frozen and speechless before him. Finally, though, he judged that the time was right.

“There comes a time,” Severus said softly, “when every Death Eater has to make a choice.”

“A choice?” Julia echoed quietly. She was still sitting at Domus Archipater’s kitchen table with the Daily Prophet spread out before her, but at least she had looked in his direction.

“A choice,” he confirmed, leaning lightly on the back of her chair. “About the dark road we tread. We must look at the decisions we have made, and chose to either stand by them—or to strike off on a new path.”
Ever so slowly, Julia reached up to brush a tangled strand of blond hair away from her eyes, which burned into his own. She wasn’t a fool, Severus knew. Julia understood exactly what he was saying. Why, however, she could not yet know.

“And what did you do?” she asked cautiously.

“I chose.”

Both eyebrows rose expectantly; her features were cold, but pain and betrayal were dancing in her eyes. “Chose?”

“Yes,” Severus replied. I can trust her, he told himself. If I can’t, I’m a dead man. He forced himself to let out the breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “Do you remember what Dumbledore said the day of my graduation, about choosing between what is right and what is easy? I realized that he was correct, and I made my choice.”

“But you…?” Confusion flickered across her features. He knew this wasn’t what Julia had expected. In fact, it wasn’t what he had expected. He’d never before told another Death Eater the truth, had never been that foolish. And Severus knew full well the consequences if Julia could not be trusted, knew the painful and slow death he would face—but he could trust her. Snape took a deep breath and felt it rattle around in his chest. He had to.

“I am a Death Eater, yes. And I have been spying on Voldemort for thirteen years.”

She was on her feet as his white knuckles gripped the back of the chair that now formed an unbreachable wall between them. All pretense at coolness was gone, too, and Julia stared at him with eyes that were wide with shock and—yes, admit it to yourself, Severus—betrayal.

“You what?” she demanded.

“I decided,” Severus said very precisely, “that doing the right thing was more important to me than power.” Something in her wounded eyes pushed him to cross a line he’d only ever touched once. “I chose to walk another road, to—for the first time in my life—protect others instead of abusing them. I will never make up for what I have done, but I am willing to sacrifice heart and soul, if necessary, to try.”

There was a long moment of silence following the confession he’d only made once before, and that in far different circumstances. His life was in her hands, and they both knew it. Finally, Julia spoke in an awed voice. “You have been spying on the Dark Lord for thirteen years?”

“Nearly, yes.” He looked her in the eye. It was the least he could do.

“But why…?”

“I got sick of pretending that I liked it,” Severus replied honestly. “I grew tired of lying, even to myself. I couldn’t revel in the death and pain any longer. I had to act, or go insane. And…and I could not let a good friend die, nor her family.”

She stared at him, reading, judging—and for once, Severus wondered what Julia saw until she looked away. She had always been one of the few who had known the real Severus Snape, but now she was seeing a side of him that he never released. This was the soul he tried to pretend he no longer had, and it was odd to let it show. Julia’s voice was very small when she spoke, but her words were not what he expected after so long a hesitation.

“It must be very lonely,” she whispered.
He blinked, and then shrugged. “Someone has to do it.”

“But you will probably die.” Her eyes searched his face, begging him to prove her wrong. However, he could not.

“This is worth it.”

Julia sat down, staring again at the Daily Prophet’s headline story. “Is it?”

“Yes,” he nodded.

“You tell me this because you want me to do the same,” Julia stated flatly. “Why? What makes you think I’d want to?”

“I’m not a blind man, Julia.” Very gently, Severus laid his hands on her shoulders and was very glad when she did not pull away. “Do you think I missed the tears in your eyes when you learned that he lives? Do you think I’ve ever not known that you love him? And you didn’t join Voldemort for the same reasons I did. You never sought power. You simply wanted revenge on the world for taking him away.”

She let out a very small sigh that sounded suspiciously like a quiet sob, but Severus would never dare make the comparison. Julia forced a laugh. “You hate him.”

“So? That doesn’t change what you are, and you’ve always been my friend.” Even when so many others proved false.

“What do I do?”

He came around to kneel beside her, keeping his right hand on her left shoulder. “What do you want to do?”

There was a hesitation, the unavoidable moment of doubt and fear. Julia bit her lip briefly, catching it between her front teeth as if that could hold her emotions back, but when she looked up at him, her gray eyes were clear. They met Severus’ without flinching, and then grew cold.

“I want revenge,” she said simply.
Returns and Remembrances

Traveling by way of Floo Powder after not having done so for a decade proved to be an interesting experience, and Sirius came tumbling into Diagon Alley with something far less than grace. He clambered to his feet, scowling and cursing under his breath, even more angered by the hand that reached out to help him up. But he didn’t bother to pull away as the other wizard hauled him to his feet, aching leg and all. After all, if you couldn’t look the part of a fool in front of friends, who could you trust?

“Thanks,” he grumbled, brushing himself off and consciously putting just as much weight on his right leg as his left. As much as he was touched by it, his friends’ constant worrying was beginning to drive him insane—

“Are you all right?” James asked with concern.

“I’m fine.” Perceptive hazel eyes studied him, and Sirius relented. “As fine as I’m going to be for awhile, anyway. Don’t worry about it, James.”

Something pained flashed in his friend’s eyes. “I just…”

“Feel guilty, I know.” Sirius turned to face him, and put a hand on James’ shoulder. “And nothing I say is going to change that, is it?”

“No.” James swallowed. “Every time I look at you, I think about what you went through and—”

“Shut up, James. Don’t say it. Don’t even think it. This isn’t your fault.”

“But after what Voldemort—”

The name brought back memories, too many memories, and Sirius closed his eyes, struggling to shut them out. For a moment, he was back there, back in either Azkaban or Casa Serpente, and he couldn’t hold back the whirling pain that filled his mind, or stop remembering the constant psychological grind of fighting daily to keep his soul his own…but he fought the memories back. It’s over, Sirius told himself. It’s over, and I’m home. I’m home. James must have stopped talking when he saw him close his eyes, though, because his next words came very quietly.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to remind you.”

Sirius forced his eyes open. “I know,” he replied. He swallowed the emotion back “Let’s just talk about something else, all right?”

“Sure.”

Their conversation drifted in topics as they made their way down the street, ranging from Quidditch (Puddlemere United was on top once again) to old school friends. They consciously avoided darker subjects; his week laid up in bed had allowed Remus to inform Sirius of how many old friends were gone—claimed by Voldemort, by death, or by both. Their progress was somewhat slower than Sirius would have liked, but James seemed to be able to tell how much his leg was hurting him, and adjusted his pace accordingly. Sirius didn’t argue; James was, after all, there to look out for him (no matter how galling that thought was), and he was grateful for the concern. It had been a long time since he’d been with friends, and the feeling was still new enough to be novel.

A feeling he appreciated less, however, was the knowledge of how many eyes followed their
progress. Most, Sirius realized (intellectually at least), were simply curious onlookers who recognized him from the front page of the *Daily Prophet*. Others, however, looked his way with less kindly smiles, and his instincts flagged once more.

“Comforting, isn’t it?” James remarked dryly, having obviously felt the same creepy feeling on the back of his neck.

“I wish I had a wand,” Sirius grumbled quietly.

“Tell me about it.”

Together, they mounted Gringotts’ white marble steps, walking past the scarlet and gold clad goblin and through the bronze front doors. After passing through the silver second set of doors, Sirius found himself staring at the vaulted ceilings and long counter—it had been a long time since he’d encountered civilization. Hogwarts had, of course, been different, although he’d done a bit of staring there, as well. But now… He shook his head and forced his eyes to stop staring like he was some poor Muggleborn wizard who’d never seen a goblin before. He turned his head to face James.

“I meant to tell you before,” he said quietly. “But thanks for coming with me.”

“I could use the time off,” James replied lightly. “Besides, what else are friends for?”

Finally, they reached a free counter, and Sirius fished the small golden key out of his pocket, thankful that he’d entrusted it to Dumbledore before going into hiding so many years ago. “Sirius Black,” he said quietly. “Vault seven hundred and eleven.”

The goblin had to be the only nearby being that didn’t swing around upon hearing his words. Every witch and wizard within hearing distance turned to stare at him, and Sirius heard the excited murmur pass quickly around the vast marble hall. To his right, he heard James’ quiet sigh, which made him shrug.

“You’re famous, mate.”

He rolled his eyes. “Lovely.”

“Everything seems to be in order,” the goblin remarked as if nothing unusual had happened and half the hall wasn’t staring at them. He gestured at a nearby goblin. “Eliphed will take you to the vault.”

“Thank you.”

Sirius and James followed Eliphed in silence, and soon they were in a Gringotts cart, traveling deep beneath the surface of London. At first, Sirius’ traitorously delicate stomach objected to the high-speed journey, but after a few minutes, it seemed to calm down, despite the mad twists and turns. As many times as he’d been down this way, Sirius had never been able to remember every change of course they took, and this time was no different—at least in that respect. However, the darkness did bring back memories that he’d rather forget, and unlike his childhood, when he’d enjoyed such journeys, Sirius found himself wishing this one would be over soon.

“So,” James asked over the noise of the cart, “where to next?”

“Ollivander’s,” Sirius replied immediately. “If I have to go much longer without a wand, I’ll hex myself.”

James chuckled. “Hard to do that without a wand, you realize.”
“Shut up.” But he had to smile. “No offense, but I do not enjoy being babysat. And especially not by you.”

“I’m hurt, Sirius! And here I was, thinking that I made a perfect nanny.”

“You would,” Sirius snorted.

The cart screeching around another bend drowned out James’ reply, and in the following silence, Sirius felt carefully at his right leg. Pomfrey had assured him that it was healing fine, but her definition of healing was still far too slow for his tastes. He hated feeling vulnerable. Too many years had passed while Sirius had been completely unable to act, only capable of surviving and fighting where he could. But he was done being helpless.

“Vault seven hundred and eleven,” Eliphed declared as the cart skidded to a stop before the familiar door of a very old and high security vault.

“Here.” James had climbed out first and offered him a hand, which Sirius took, albeit a bit reluctantly. He hated feeling weak.

“Thanks.”

James’ smile told him that he understood perfectly, and both watched in companionable silence as Eliphed unlocked the door. A flash of green smoke filled the corridor, but it dissuaded neither of them, and Sirius quickly collected the currency he’d come for. It was somewhat of a comfort to pause there, back in his family’s old Gringotts vault; this was one of the last connections that he had to his childhood. For a moment, he closed his eyes, and brought images of his parents to mind—but that, too, brought darkness. He did remember early childhood as a happier time, remembered running and playing with his brother before time had driven them apart… Sirius frowned. He’d run away from home at sixteen and never looked back. In some ways, he could blame that on Voldemort, whose rise had encouraged his parents to cling to their prejudices more strongly than ever before, and had driven Sirius away as he came to learn that the world didn’t have to be so narrow. Hogwarts had encouraged and taught him to fight monsters like them. From the day he’d left home forward, Sirius had known he’d be an Auror.

Sirius opened his eyes, and his lips curled into a silent snarl. As he turned to depart, he looked over his shoulder one last time at the only physical legacy his parents had left him, apart from the family home he’d not visited in over fifteen years. He had, however, inherited a great deal of power from both of them, and the temper to match it. Now, he could blame the Dark Lord twice over. First, for making him—and now, for shaping him.

_I sincerely hope that comes back to haunt you, you bastard._

Together, he and James left the bank and headed to buy Sirius’ second wand. He didn’t need to look back again.

Unfortunately, trouble found them in front of Gambol and Japes. Of course, the witch in question wasn’t exactly the biggest threat that either James or Sirius had ever faced (given their careers, after all, that would have been a lot), but she was certainly the largest annoyance. Her blonde hair curled tightly and green eyes staring out from behind jeweled spectacles, she approached them with an ingratiating smile that set Sirius’ teeth on edge.
In retrospect, he would have much preferred Death Eaters.

“Sirius Black!” She rushed forward, holding out a manicured hand as if she expected him to take it.

He didn’t.

She hardly missed a beat. “Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet,” she said briskly. “You don’t mind if I ask you a few questions, do you?”

“Now that you ask, actually—”

“You story has captivated thousands of witches and wizards across the world,” she went on, speaking over him as if he hadn’t objected at all. “Your miraculous escape from Azkaban has many heralding you as a sign of hope. What would you say to all those who look to you as an example in the coming days?”

“Look, I hate to be impolite, but I really don’t have time for this,” Sirius replied. Floating in the air next to Skeeter was a paper and quill; the quill was moving furiously over the page, even though he’d said almost nothing. He started to walk away. “Perhaps another time.”

“What was it like in Azkaban, Mr. Black?”

He froze.

Pain.

“You won’t hold out forever, you know.”

Blood blurred his vision. When magic failed, the Lestranges always found something more creative to play with, and there were times when he thought Rabastan was even worse than Bellatrix.

“Why even bother? Why prolong your own suffering?”

Everything hurt. Blood was dripping down the side of his face.

“No…”

“Cruci—”

Skeeter stepped in front of him, her expression intent. “I’m sure there are many families would desperately like to know what their kin face inside the prison—”

Sirius blinked. “No.”

“But can you deny them that knowledge? Don’t they deserve to know?” Skeeter pressed.

“There are some things,” he finally managed through the tight feeling in his chest, “that people do not need to know.”

“But—”

“No.” Now it was James who cut her off in a hard voice, stepping in between Sirius and Skeeter. “He gave you his answer.”

She scowled at James. “The public has a right to know.”
“Just like he has a right not to answer,” James replied. Suddenly, he reached out and plucked her paper right out from under the Quick Quotes Quill. “And I’ll take this.”

“That’s my personal property!”

James pulled his wand out. “I intend to give it back. Pariocum.”

Despite whirling his state of mind, Sirius almost smiled as James innocently returned the now blank sheet of parchment to Rita Skeeter. She took it angrily, but he saw a strange light in her eyes as she undoubtedly figured that she’d be able to resurrect the information later. However, she obviously underestimated the Marauders’ pranking ability—and clearly had no idea that parchment would only ever tell her dirty jokes.

“Good day, Ms. Skeeter.”

Together, James and Sirius walked away, ignoring the staring crowd and making their way towards Ollivander’s. After a few moments, the gathered witches and wizards began to go back to their own business, but Sirius didn’t miss the extra glances thrown their way. His leg ached madly.

“I owe you another one,” he said quietly.

“No you don’t.” James gave him a firm look, which softened after a moment. “Memories catch you unawares?”

“Yeah. They do that a lot, these days.” But I don’t want to think about it, so let’s not talk about it.

James must have caught the silent plea. “What kind of wand do you think you’ll get this time?”

“I’m not sure.” He shrugged. “On one hand, I’ve changed, but on the other… I guess I’ll just have to find out.”

“Hopefully it won’t be like Harry’s trip last August,” James commented.

“Why’s that?”

“It took hours for Ollivander to find one that fit him. Finally, he uncovered a wand that had to be at least a half of a century old and had been collecting dust for ages. Lily couldn’t stop sneezing when Harry pulled it out of the package at home.”

Sirius smiled slightly. “What is it?”

“Mahogany and unicorn hair, eleven inches.” James smiled, and Sirius read in his eyes how proud his friend was of Harry. Then again, he’d always known that James would make a great dad.

“Interesting.” Sirius stopped right underneath the great sign that read: Ollivander’s: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C.

“What?”

“This place hasn’t changed a bit.” The same cushion sat in the same dusty window, with probably the same wand sitting on top of that, too. As he pulled open the door, Sirius inhaled the same dust-filled air and wondered, not for the first time, how precious woods like those in so many wands survived in such a hostile environment. He sneezed.

“I don’t think it ever will,” James replied. The same soft bell tinkered in the back of the store, and within seconds, Ollivander appeared. At eleven, Sirius had been convinced that the old wizard had
Apparated directly to the spot in front of him, but now he knew better. The store’s proprietor was simply lurking behind the endless rows of boxes, doing whatever it was that he did as he waited for new customers to arrive.

And this time, it was Ollivander’s turn to be shocked. Sirius watched with slight satisfaction as the old wizard’s silver eyes widened, then blinked once, sharply, to regain composure.

“Sirius Black,” he said abruptly. “Ebony and phoenix feather, thirteen inches, and rather elastic.”

Sirius met the gaze that he’d considered disconcerting as a child and now could hardly blink upon encountering. “Yes.”

“And James Potter, what a surprise.” The silver eyes focused briefly on his friend. “Mahogany and dragon’s heartstring, eleven inches and pliable, isn’t it?”

“It is.” James nodded. Some wizards changed wands as they grew, but Sirius wasn’t surprised to hear that he still had his first. It had always fit James well.

“To what do I owe this honor, gentlemen?” Ollivander asked, shifting his gaze between the two.

“I need a wand,” Sirius replied quietly.

Ollivander looked at him sharply. “What happened to the last?” he asked suspiciously. “Very potent wand, that—excellent for the Dark Arts…or defending against them.”

“Voldemort,” Sirius replied simply, making Ollivander jump. Something tried to well up in his soul, but he pushed it down. He’d be damned if he’d fear saying that monster’s name. I said it to his face enough times. Why be afraid of saying it to someone else?

“Ah. I see.” The old wizard turned away quickly, moving towards the nearest stack of boxes. “Well, then… perhaps…” He pulled down a pair of boxes. “Ebony and phoenix feather is an unusual combination…perhaps this one.”

Sirius took the offered wand silently, but something in him told him that this wasn’t it. He hadn’t taken quite as long as Harry to choose his first wand, but at eleven he had spent a good thirty minutes trying out wands with his disconcerted parents, and wouldn’t be surprised if it took just as long this time. If not longer.

“Ebony and unicorn hair. Eight and a half inches, springy. Go on, give it a wave.”

A flick of his wrist sent a book flying off of the single spindly chair in the store, and Ollivander snatched the wand from his hand.

“Perhaps not. Try this one—eleven and a quarter inches, willow and dragon’s heartstring. Excellent for Charms.”

Nothing happened. Ollivander offered yet another. And then another, until he turned to face them both with a curious look on his face. “I wonder…”

“Wonder what?” Sirius asked cautiously.

“Try this one. Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple.” Yet Ollivander seemed hesitant to hand it over. Finally, he did so, and Sirius gave it an experimental wave.

A slight glow appeared at the wand’s tip, but it disappeared so quickly that he almost thought that
he’d imagined it. A tingle ran its way up his arm, and he sensed something that he’d never felt from a wand before—a sense of waiting. There was power there, and possibility, but it was as if this wand was meant for something that had never been, and might yet never be. Yet the wand still waited.

“Almost,” he said quietly, drawing his thoughts away from the future. “But not for me.”

Ollivander took the wand back. “Strange,” he mused, turning back to the rows of boxes. “If anyone, I would have thought… But never mind! Here it is. My newest wand: ebony and phoenix feather, twelve inches, very rigid. Powerful wand, this one.”

Sirius had hardly touched the wand when a shower of black and gold sparks ignited and filled the room with eerie shadows and brighter light. Ollivander’s face split into a grin as Sirius felt power race up his arm and into his body. He felt lighter, all of a sudden, and more like himself than he had in years.

“I’ll take this one,” Sirius said quietly, his eyes still on the wand. It was beautiful: shiny, black, and unmarred by even a single scratch; something told him that he was the first person aside from Ollivander to lay a finger on this wand. And it was his. All his.

His smile had grown unconsciously, and when he looked up to meet James’ eyes, Sirius knew his own were shining. He felt alive again, perhaps more so than he had even with his best friends. Twirling the wand slightly in his hand, he tested its balance and weight. Both were perfect, of course, but he’d expected no less. Within a few days, he’d come to know that wand better than he knew himself.

“Excellent!” Ollivander exclaimed. “Would you like me to wrap—”

The world exploded.

“Do you think it will work?” Lily asked nervously.

Molly chuckled. Honestly, there were times when Lily Potter—as confident, capable, and powerful witch that she was—could be oddly self-depreciating. She laid a hand on her young colleague’s shoulder. “Of course it will work, dear.”

“Maybe,” Lily sighed. “I just hope we got the focusing spell right…”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out, isn’t there?”

“I suppose so.” Lily turned to face her, finally, with a slight smile. “Thanks, Molly. Project Guardian would still be wallowing around in the shallows if it weren’t for your help.”

“We all do what we can, Lily,” Molly responded quietly. And after all, it wasn’t as if Lily and her Unicorn Group hadn’t put in months of work on this project long before Molly had ever even joined the Order of the Phoenix. Although she knew that she’d done almost half the spell work on Project Guardian, it still felt odd to be given so much credit by Lily, who although many years her junior, had been the head of the Unicorn Group ever since its conception over a decade before. Lily was, after all, one of Dumbledore’s chosen few, and although Molly didn’t know enough to understand the inner workings of the Order, she knew enough to respect the brilliant witch beside her.

“Well,” her friend took a deep breath. “Let’s try it, then.”
Together, they spoke the final spell. It was only a key word, really, which activated the layers upon layers of enchantments worked under the guise of Project Guardian. Slowly, lines began to spread all over the tabletop sized piece of parchment stretched out before them, and as they multiplied, the lines began to take shape. They were light and fuzzy in many places, but a room full of paper wouldn’t have accurately mapped the entire city of London (plus Diagon Alley), so the Unicorn Group had settled for detail where it mattered, and the ability to “zoom in” on places of interest. All it took was the touch of a wand at a trouble spot, and then that area would come in with as much detail one could ever wish. In the meantime, however, the giant map was dormant, waiting, and only actively sensitive to dark magic.

The two witches exchanged triumphant grins as the lines finished filling the parchment, flickering faintly as the Guardian went to work. Although they had known it would work, they hadn’t known, and there was nothing like proof to feed their sense of accomplishment. The Order—and therefore the Ministry—had just gained a most invaluable tool. It worked.

They hadn’t expected, however, for the Guardian to immediately report results.

“Oh my God,” Lily whispered.

“Where?” Molly quickly came around the edge of the table as Lily’s wand touched down.

“Diagon Alley.”

Glass fragmented and Sirius dove, distantly aware that James had done the same thing off to his right, taking Ollivander down with him. Red light flashed, and he rolled behind the row of boxes closest to the window, hearing shattered glass crunch underneath him as he went. Out of the corner of his eye, Sirius watched James’ shoes disappear behind the counter, and the startled umph! accompanying the motion told him that Ollivander was alive as well. Still, to be careful, he called:

“James?”

“I’m fine! Are you?”

“Yeah.”

Sirius heard a scuffle, and assumed that the Auror had shoved Ollivander as far out of range as possible and was looking for a position himself. In the meantime, Sirius cautiously eased his head up to look over the boxes and out what remained of the window. The first thing he noticed was that the street was remarkably clear.

The second was two shadowy forms, one peeking out from the shadowy doorway of the junk shop across the street, and the other hiding behind a conveniently overturned trash bin. They were clearly hoping that either he or James would be stupid enough to come running outside to find out what had happened, even though that wasn’t exactly likely. Sirius inched his head up slowly, hoping to identify one of the pair, but a sudden movement from the one in the junk shop’s window warned him in time—

Light flashed, and several boxes of wands exploded over his head. Wood fragments, cardboard, and stray glass rained down as Sirius desperately shielded his face with his arms, biting back a curse at the same time. Yet there was something cool and hard in his hand, something cylindrical and firm.
Ebony and phoenix feather, twelve inches.

“Sirius?” James called worriedly.

He responded instinctively. “Intact!”

“Do you still have it?”

They both knew James wasn’t talking about his new wand. *Do you still have it, Sirius?* he asked himself. Ten years it had been since he’d been an Auror. A lifetime spent in darkness and pain separated him from the skills of his past. He’d studied spell books like mad ever since the incident at breakfast the day before, but that wasn’t exactly the same. One breath. Two. Concentration and focus. Adrenaline sped up his heartbeat, yet his breathing slowed. Calmed. The world was narrowing down to that one moment, and all other concerns fled. Nothing else mattered.

Lying on his back amid broken glass and debris, Sirius Black responded calmly. “I’m good.”

“Door or window?” James asked immediately.

“Window.” They had been partners for a year, and friends for even longer. Had Sirius ever been asked who he’d prefer to go into battle beside, the answer would always be James Potter. “There are two of them. One in the junk shop, the other in the street.”

“Right. I’m coming to you. Give me a distraction, will you?”

“Ready.” Sirius inched his head up more carefully this time. “On three.” Very slowly, he worked his wand up over the bottom ledge of the window, taking aim at the trash bin. “Three! *Reducto!*”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw James vault over the desk, but the trash bin’s spectacular explosion captured his attention. The Death Eater who had previously been using it as shelter fled to Sirius’ left and out of sight, limping slightly. *I hope that hurt,* Sirius thought nastily. But neither of his opponents would be so careless a second time, so he quickly brought his head back down and made himself less of a visible target.

*Thud.* James landed beside him before the other bad guy could react.

“Nice,” he breathed. “Trash bin?”

“Previously.”

James chuckled slightly, shifting position until they were almost back to back. Sirius didn’t have to look at his old friend to know what he would do; although they had never been in a situation quite like this, the pair had shared enough trouble to know where the other would be. The decision had already been made, and there were only two exits, anyway—“Mr. Ollivander?”

“Yes?” the old man’s head started to come up.

“Stay down!”

“*Protego!*” At his back, James’ Shield Spell blocked the incoming curse. Ollivander disappeared once more, and Sirius cursed under his breath.

“You don’t happen to have a back door in this place, do you?”

“Already asked,” James replied before Ollivander could answer. His tone was all the response Sirius needed.
“Lovely.”

“Indeed.”

“Well, shall we?” Sirius snuck a look out the shattered window. “The first is still in the junk shop. The second is to my left, sneaking up along the side of the shops.”

“Ready?” Neither thought of Apparating. Doing so would have left Ollivander and the other denizens of Diagon Alley to deal with at least two Death Eaters on their own, which neither of them could do. Long ago, both had vowed to protect people like this, and neither Sirius Black nor James Potter countenanced failure.

“Ready.”

Sirius waited a heartbeat, and then two. One wrong move and they’d both be dead—or worse—but he and James were slipping into the old roles, trusting one another implicitly. They’d been here before, and his training was coming back as if someone had cast a rust-removing charm on his brain. Alastor Moody’s old words came back to him. *Act, don’t react. Spend time trying to outthink your opponent and you’re dead. Just act.* He felt James tense beside him. Another heartbeat.

“Now!” James cried.

Sirius threw himself upwards and rolled out the window as James spun to the left and out the door. He tumbled, letting momentum carry him past where his initial opponent would aim for, and came up in his old dueling crouch, finding it by sheer instinct. Immediately, his right hand whipped forward, and he let training drive his mind. “*Petrificus Totalus!*”

To his left, James employed a strike spell. Both, predictably, missed.

But neither had really expected to hit. They’d only needed to escape; now, however, the fun could begin, and curses began to crisscross in the very air of Diagon Alley.

“*Imperio!*”

Sirius’ hastily constructed shield buckled and collapsed under the weight of one of the Unforgivable Curses, but by the time the weakened spell got through, he was rolling again and out of range. The Imperius Curse was notoriously hard to block or break, but fast enough action allowed a wizard to avoid it. He came upright, still in his crouch—“*Suffocoum!*”

His Choking Spell was blocked, and he received a Conjunctivitis Curse in return, which Sirius batted aside with hardly a second thought. Quickly, he shifted his aim ever so slightly.

“*Reducto!*”

The door of the junk shop exploded, pelting the tall Death Eater with wood fragments and driving him out of shelter. To his left, Sirius acknowledged James’ Freezing Spell and the Incinerator Curse that came in reply, but he knew that his friend could take care of himself. The moment the taller Death Eater (he could see them both, now), stumbled into the open, Sirius was ready. “*Resiacio!*”

A nearby bench sailed into the Death Eater, and he went down. Sirius didn’t wait for positive results; instead, he leapt to his feet and raced forward, wand still raised and aimed.

“*Vulernocorpus!*” He cast the Paralysis Spell without second thought, and it was just in time.Having shouldered the bench away, his opponent had begun to stand, only to collapse as his lower body gave out. However, instead of aiming his wand at Sirius again, the Death Eater instead turned
He Apparated with an audible *pop*.

Sirius skidded to a stop and whirled, changing his focus and trying to zero in before it was too late. Even as he spun to face James’ opponent, though, he knew it was of no use. He managed to turn just in time to see his old friend fell the shorter man with a well-placed Choking Spell, but even as a Stunning Spell touched James’ lips, his opponent had copied his partner. In the blink of an eye, both Death Eaters were gone. When James turned towards him, the frustration was plain on his features. Sirius supposed he looked much the same.

The street was eerily quiet, but heads were beginning to poke out from behind whatever shelter they’d been able to find. Curious and foolhardy souls ventured out into the street, still keeping their distance, some poking at the debris Sirius had left behind, and others just staring. Instincts alert, Sirius glanced around, but there seemed to be no other immediate threats. James started walked in his direction, and Sirius limped forward to meet him halfway. Cautiously, he put his wand away, relishing the feeling of having it in his hand, but knowing that keeping it there would only make him seem paranoid.

“Damn,” he said quietly.

“They were fast,” James agreed. “And smart.”

“Unfortunately,” he sighed. “Was that who I thought it was?”

James’ response was cut off by the arrival of Arabella Figg and an entire team of Aurors. While Sirius hadn’t seen the DMLE’s head since they were both Aurors in the Division, he recognized the pinched look on the old witch’s face as she surveyed the destruction they—Sirius, really, because James had always been neater about things like this—had wrought. She scowled in James’ direction.

“I should have known you’d find trouble,” Figg said unhappily.

“I usually do.”

“Who was it?”

“Mulciber and Flint,” James replied, but his quiet tone didn’t hide the frustration in his voice from Sirius, who frowned as Arabella Figg’s steely gray eyes zoomed in on him.

“You’ve made yourself a target, Black.”

He met her gaze, allowing himself only the slightest hint of a cocky smile. “You can blame Voldemort for that.”

“Indeed,” Figg snorted. But her eyes bored into his as if she expected him to break into pieces then and there. The lost, shattered, and strained part of his soul very much wanted to do so; it wanted to run and hide, trying to shield what remained of himself from the horrors of the outside world. But he wouldn’t let it, and that determination must have shown in his eyes, because she relented. “Well, you seemed to have managed adequately enough.”

*I’m glad I have your approval,* Sirius thought dryly, but he didn’t say it. Figg might have been old, but he respected her abilities and her judgment, even if she did look at him as if she expected him to crumble. She’d been Moody’s best friend for a reason, after all, and he’d never forget how much his mentor had respected the old witch. Instead of replying sarkily, he spoke dryly: “Thanks.”
“How did you get here so fast?” James asked as the other Aurors quickly and efficiently began combing the area for evidence. They wouldn’t find anything, of course, but it was a standard practice, and there was always the chance that someone would get careless.

A small smile creased her face, and her eyes cut briefly to Sirius. “Project Guardian is now fully functional.”

Sirius whistled softly. “Nice.”

“That is good news,” James agreed.

“Quite,” Figg grunted. Suddenly, her sharp eyes caught sight of something behind Sirius and James, and she frowned deeply. “You two had best leave quickly.”

“Why?” James asked warily.

“Skeeter.”

They didn’t have to be told twice. With hardly a glance at one another, the two old friends escaped down a path between the junk shop and its neighbor, leaving Arabella Figg to deal with the Daily Prophet’s sensationalist-seeking reporter.
Mysteries

The corridors were almost eerily quiet. Although the Misfits had done more than their share of wandering around after hours at Hogwarts, there was still something almost different about that night, a unique quality about the castle that told them that they really should choose somewhere else to create trouble. At any other time, they would have ignored the creepy feeling worming into all their minds, but that night, with one failed prank already under their wing, they were beginning to consider quitting.

Only for the night, of course.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “If you’d have listened to me in the first place, Ron, we wouldn’t even be here. I already told you that *Hogwarts, A History* says that the stairs are controlled by an old magic unique to the castle itself—”

“I know,” Ron snapped. “Will you stop reminding me already?”

“She does have a point, Ron,” Lee interceded. “If you had paid enough attention to her, then we would have come up with another prank instead of using your idea.”

Harry swallowed. He hadn’t exactly been listening to Hermione, either—after a while, one learned to listen around her long dissertations from *Hogwarts, A History*—but since their failed prank had been Ron’s idea, Ron was getting the blame. He didn’t feel that it was especially fair, but then again, all the Misfits had ragged on George when his latest experiment had proved disastrous only two days before, so he supposed it was only the way things went. However, he did feel honor-bound to interrupt. “So what are we going to do now? It seems like a real waste to have stayed up so late for nothing.”

And it was late. The Misfits had already wasted two hours desperately trying to enchant the stairs to turn into rather slippery slides (for Slytherins only, of course), and now it was well past midnight. They weren’t going to get much sleep at any rate, and the consensus was that they might as well use the time they had. None of them paid much attention to the eerie quiet; each thought it was only their imagination, and didn’t want the others to think them crazy. Hogwarts was always eerie, in general terms, anyway. The castle was old, after all, and no one knew all its secrets. Even the Misfits.

Especially them, as it turned out.

Footsteps rang loudly against the castle’s hard floors, and the six Misfits hurriedly exchanged startled glances. The Marauder’s Map, checked several minutes before, had accounted for Filch, Hagrid, and all of the professors, and none of them should have been able to reach this third floor corridor in such a short amount of time. Quickly, the six mischief-makers ducked into the closest hiding spot they could find; a small room off to the left, whose door had creaky hinges. Hermione whispered a silencing spell on it immediately, but even then, sound escaped. They held their breaths.

Harry felt his heart pounding. The last thing they needed was to get caught so close to the Easter holidays. He really didn’t want to be serving detention when all the other students were getting ready to go home—although he knew that Remus would never make students stay over the holidays if they didn’t want to, the prospect of detention instead of relaxation in the last two weeks of classes wasn’t very appealing. *And I had to leave the cloak behind tonight, didn’t I?* he berated himself. *Way to go, Harry. Great job.*

The Misfits sank deep into the small room’s shadows—a place, where, come to think of it, Harry had
never been before—and looked at one another with hopeful eyes. Of course, Lee was very predictably cursing under his breath and mumbling something about how the room had no exit other than the way they’d come in, but that might not matter in a moment. Perhaps whoever it was had’t heard them—

Then the door creaked open, and Harry’s heart crashed into his throat.

“The first rule of pranking,” a familiar voice remarked casually, “is not to get caught.”

Dim light from the corridor began to seep towards them, and the Misfits sank deeper into the shadows, hoping against all hope that they wouldn’t get spotted. Maybe he’d just go away if they pretended they weren’t there. And maybe Malfoy will grow up into a Muggle-loving house elf, Harry though sarcastically. Right. We’ve in for it. The shadowy figure of a tall wizard was now visible in the doorway.

“The second rule, of course, is that when you are caught, not to pick a hiding place with only one exit.”

Harry held his breath, and knew the others were doing the same. Perhaps he was just fishing in the dark…

“You can come out now,” Sirius Black said lightly. “All six of you.”

Lee mumbled something under his breath that his strict mother would probably wash his mouth out for, earning himself a glare from Hermione and forcing a snicker out of the twins. After a hesitation, though, Harry led the Misfits out of the shadows to face his godfather, who had stepped into the room and closed the door behind himself. Sirius’ blue eyes were focused on them; finally, a flick of his wrist and a mumbled spell brought light to the room and illuminated his slight smile.

“Sirius!” Harry exclaimed with relief. Of all the adults presently at Hogwarts, being caught by his godfather was a wonderful stroke of luck. Sirius was probably the only one who wouldn’t turn them in.

“Guilty as charged,” his godfather replied.

Harry frowned a little. “But what are you doing here?”

“Wandering.” His blue eyes twinkled, but beneath the surface, Harry sensed that there was something deeper and less cheerful. “As are you, I suspect. After hours, of course.”

“Are you going to turn us in, Mr. Black?” Hermione asked after a moment’s hesitation.

“Turn you in? Why would I want to do a thing like that?” Sirius asked cheerfully. “And don’t call me Mr. Black. It makes me feel old.” His gaze swept over the six of them, finally centering on Harry. “So, are you going to introduce me to your fellow mischief-makers, Harry, or do I have to guess?” His smile grew a little. “Let me see…the twins, obviously, Fred and George Weasley, which makes the leftover readhead Ron. Of course, Hermione Granger is the only girl, and Lee Jordan looks remarkably like his father. A rather diversified group, the Misfits.”

“You told him about us?” George demanded of Harry in a hiss. But before Harry could stammer out an answer, Sirius chuckled.

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“Of course he did. Your headmaster is the rule-following Marauder—at least these days—but I’ve never had an inclination to do so. Where else do you think he got the idea for that marvelous portrait changing prank that you pulled the other day?”
Harry grinned with relief, but his friends stared.

“That was your idea?” Fred managed, and then turned to glare at Harry. “But you told us that you got it from your dad.”

“Actually, I told you that the prank had been done before. And my dad was in on it, but he didn’t tell me about it.” Harry smiled. Five sets of young eyes swiveled to look at his godfather, who gave a mock bow in return.

“Monsieur Padfoot, at your service.”

Lee whistled. “You really are him.”

“Of course I am. Didn’t Harry tell you?”

“Well, yeah.” Lee shrugged, and Harry snickered.

The following moment of silence, however, was hard to breach. Although Harry’s fellow Misfits were delighted to meet the fourth Marauder, none of them seemed able to forget what had brought him there. Even now, behind the lighthearted smile and jovial words, there was a darkness that Sirius carried with him. It had retreated somewhat since Harry had seen him last, yet the haunted look in his gaze wasn’t gone. Sometimes, when his eyes seemed to flicker aside momentarily, Harry caught glimpses of demons lurking in his past, and knew that despite Sirius’ apparent ease, he was far from healed. Finally, Hermione asked:

“So why are you here?”

“Wandering, mostly,” Harry’s godfather repeated in an offhanded way that led Harry to believe he couldn’t sleep. “When I heard the racket you six were making, I decided to discover if Hogwarts current generation of mischief makers was up to the Marauder’s standards.”

“We’re better,” Ron replied promptly.

Sirius chuckled. “Are you now?”

“Well, we don’t get caught as much, anyway,” Harry replied. After growing up on stories of the Marauders’ feats, he wasn’t willing to make declaration quite as bold as Ron’s, but he knew they were good.

His godfather nodded. “Your father told me that he gave you the cloak. But we didn’t get caught as often in our first few years, either—your problems will come later, when all the professors start watching for you.” He smiled slightly. “But then again, with Moony as the headmaster…”

“It would be better if we didn’t have Snape hunting for us,” George replied glumly.

“No kidding,” Ron agreed. “He hates us.”

“Of course he does. Snape’s always a cog in the wheels; he was at school, and I’m certain he is now.”

“You went to school with him?” Fred asked with sudden curiosity.

“Unfortunately,” Sirius replied dryly.

Hermione frowned pointedly as the others chuckled. “You know, it is rather late…”
“Come on, Hermione,” Ron retorted. “Don’t be such a spoilsport.”

“It’s not that late,” Lee argued, making Sirius smile.

“Actually, I would suggest that you listen to your voice of reason,” he replied lightly. “As I know for a fact that Filch isn’t in this part of the castle right now…”

Harry watched George check his watch as the Misfits exchanged glances. “I suppose you’re right,” the third year replied reluctantly. The Misfits weren’t exactly a paranoid or suspicious group by nature, but like all witches and wizards, they were slightly superstitious. Right now, they were zero for two; their first attempt at a prank had failed, and then they’d been caught—which made the omens for a third try undoubtedly inauspicious. They hadn’t been such successful pranksters through being stupid and careless, after all.

Quickly, the Misfits said farewell to Sirius, promising to speak to him again sometime (the prospect of learning about many of the Marauders’ pranks had Fred and George all but drooling in anticipation). Then Lee, the quietest mover of the group, checked the corridor and signaled that everything was clear. Moving as stealthily as possible, the Misfits exited the room, but they hadn’t gone more than ten steps before Harry stopped.

“I’ll catch up with you guys later,” he said. “I want to ask Sirius something.”

Before the others could object, Harry rushed away, jogging in the opposite direction that his godfather had taken. As he approached, Sirius turned. “Something wrong, Harry?”

Harry slowed. “I just wondered if I could talk to you for a minute.”

“Sure.”

They walked in companionable silence as Harry tried to put his thoughts into words. Meanwhile, he couldn’t help but notice how his godfather still walked with a slight limp, favoring his right leg ever so slightly. The corridors were very quiet as they traveled, which added an eerie feel to Sirius’ presence. Every now and then, haunted eyes would cast flickering glances around, serving to highlight the remaining gauntness of Sirius’ features and remind Harry just how long his godfather had been gone. That, of course, only made things harder, because unlike Remus and Peter, he hadn’t known Sirius for all of his life and didn’t feel quite as comfortable asking him questions.

“What’s on your mind?” Sirius asked, jerking Harry out of his reverie.

He took a deep breath. “I was wondering what happened with Professor Quirrell two days ago. I mean, it’s obvious that he’s a Death Eater, but why did he act now? And how could he hide at Hogwarts?”

“You’re very perceptive, Harry,” Sirius said quietly, and the warmth in his voice made Harry redden slightly. There was a slight hesitation before his godfather continued. “To answer your second question first, its better the enemy you know than the enemy you don’t.”

“You mean…?” Harry cut himself off, knowing better than to say more as the truth dawned on him.

“I do. As for the rest, well,” Sirius shrugged. “I suppose that Voldemort wants me back.”

His words sent a shiver down Harry’s spine. Although he’d grown up hearing his parents use the Dark wizard’s name, somehow it was different to hear Sirius do so. Sirius had spent ten years in Voldemort’s hands and wasn’t afraid to do so, yet wizards who had never even seen He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named were terrified of speaking a simple name. Harry swallowed. Somehow, he had a
feeling that kind of courage wasn’t easily gained.

“I wanted to do something,” he said glumly, speaking almost before he’d realized the words were coming out of his mouth. “But there was so much confusion and everything happened so fast. Everyone was shouting and by the time I could get anywhere close, everything was over.” Then he brightened slightly. “You were really fast.”

Sirius snorted. “I managed, but I’m really out of practice.”

“I think you were brilliant.” He smiled, but then shrugged. “But I still wish I could have done something.”

“I’m glad you tried, but it’s probably a very good thing that you couldn’t.”

“Why?” he tried not to feel betrayed, but Sirius must have heard it in his voice, because he stopped and looked down at Harry.

“The first thing you have to understand, Harry, is that the very last thing your parents need is for Voldemort’s attention to be drawn to you,” his godfather replied seriously. “They’ve spent a very long time protecting you, and the longer we can keep him from remembering who you are, the safer you will be.”

“But you—”

“I’m a grown wizard, Harry, and I doubt Voldemort can hate me more than he already does.”

“Everyone always says I’m too young for things,” he replied with bitterness that Sirius didn’t really deserve. But the answering look was grave.

“Maybe you are,” he replied quietly.

“I’m eleven.”

“So?” his godfather asked. “I’m thirty-two, and there are lots of things I wish I was too young to know.” He coughed, and then smiled slightly, but there was something haunted behind the expression. “Live your childhood while you can, Harry—God knows, it will be over soon enough. I know you get impatient with being left in the dark, but your parents are fighting to protect you… and so your generation doesn’t have to fight the war that mine does.”

The sadness and emptiness in Sirius’ eyes gave Harry pause, as did the words he’d spoken. Somehow, when one of his parents mentioned how something was for his own protection, it didn’t mean as much as when the same words came from Sirius. He swallowed suddenly, remembering that Sirius had almost died to protect his family.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

“Don’t be; kids are supposed to be impatient,” his godfather replied lightly. “That’s part of growing up.”

Harry nodded, and then changed the subject as Sirius’ words made him wonder. “Were you in the Order, Sirius?”

“You’re not supposed to know about that, Harry.”

He grinned. Something in that tone told Harry that Sirius wasn’t surprised.
“Yes, I was.” Sirius chuckled softly. “A long time ago.”

“Will you be again?”

“I don’t know, to tell you the truth.” His eyes darkened. “There are some doubts about my… reliability.”


“No one has ever escaped Azkaban before,” Sirius replied. “And the few that have ever escaped Voldemort’s hands have never done so unscathed… Most have been corrupted and twisted into serving him.”

“But Professor Fletcher did, didn’t he?” he frowned.

Sirius shook his head. “Before the war, Mundungus Fletcher was one of the most laid back and carefree people you could ever meet. In fact, he wasn’t even an Auror when I entered the division; he spent many years on the shadier side of the law. He only became an Auror when things started getting really bad. His experiences changed him, as I’m sure you can tell.”

“Yeah.”

“He was also rescued, which reassures many. They think it means Voldemort couldn’t have let him go.”

The bitterness in Sirius’ voice was impossible to miss, but Harry didn’t know what to say to that. They resumed walking in silence as he thought about what Sirius had said. Although it was still galling to be dismissed as being too young for something, he’d rarely considered why his parents wouldn’t tell him things. All he ever thought about were the surface reasons and the fact that he was only eleven years old. Harry had always known that his parents were deep in the war with Voldemort, but they rarely brought work home and didn’t often discuss things with him. He’d always been irritated by that, but Harry knew they loved him. That, and if anything, his parents had always been too protective.

“My, my, my… What have we here?”

Both Harry and Sirius spun upon hearing the dry and sarcastic voice, and Harry noticed as his godfather bristled upon meeting the eyes of Professor Snape. The dislike certainly seemed to be mutual, though, because Snape’s eyes narrowed and he sneered.

“What a surprise,” he continued acidly. “Potter wandering around after hours, encouraged, no doubt, by his irresponsible godfather.”

“What a surprise it is to see Snivellus poking his nose in other people’s business,” Sirius retorted. Snape’s dark eyes burned. “Couldn’t sleep, Black?” he demanded, striding forward menacingly with his robes sweeping around him. Those robes, Harry suddenly noticed, were different from the ones he usually wore, but the significance was not immediately apparent to him. The potions master continued in a drawl: “Are certain demons haunting you?”

Harry frowned. How dare Snape mock Sirius’ time in Azkaban? Did the man have no feelings whatsoever, or at least respect for the hell Sirius had gone through? He was about to reply hotly, but his godfather’s hand clamped down heavily on his shoulder to stop him. Sirius, he noticed, had gone very white. Every line of his body was tense with anger, and his grip on Harry’s shoulder was so tight that it was becoming painful. However, his eyes were dark and haunted as they stared the other
wizard down. “I imagine,” Sirius said tightly, “that you have never had the same problem.”

Snape stopped. “You,” he spat venomously, “have no idea what I do.”

“No?” Sirius retorted. “You can fool a boy, but I recognize the robes you’re wearing.”

*Death Eater robes!* Harry’s eyes widened in shock as he remembered where he’d seen those before, although he never would have believed that Snape would have the gall to wear them at Hogwarts.

The deputy headmaster, however, did not appear surprised at Sirius’ recognition; however, he was still far from satisfied. His features tightened angrily. “Then you, of all people, ought to understand the necessity of doing so.”

“As if that excuses the choices you’ve made,” Sirius snorted. “But there are other things I understand, too, Snape. One of which is that you’d probably go to the Hospital Wing before you fall over.”

“Your time spent in Azkaban has clearly addled your wits,” Snape rolled his eyes as Harry peered at Sirius in confusion.

“Not enough that I don’t recognize the aftereffects of the Cruciatus Curse.” Steady blue eyes centered on Snape. “The pale features, the shaking hands, the uncertainty in your step—”

“My health is of no concern of yours!” But he’d shoved his hands inside his robes before Harry could tell if they were shaking or not. However, he *was* even paler than usual.

“And I’d just as soon not trouble myself with anything to do with you,” Sirius agreed. “But I suspect that it is of some slight importance to others, if you know what I mean.”

“I know perfectly well what you mean.”

“Then don’t be such a fool and stand here arguing with me,” Harry’s godfather replied with a nasty smile. “After all, I’m sure you have better things to do.”

“I am capable of adequately dealing with the Cruciatus Curse, Black,” Snape snapped irritably.

“And I’m not?”

The two wizards glared at one another for a long moment with matching and unmistakable hatred etched upon both faces. Finally, though, Snape’s sense of self-preservation seemed to prevail, and he started to walk away, snapped over his shoulder as he went. “Get that brat out of the corridor before I subtract fifty points from Gryff—”

He collapsed.

Late night meetings were hardly James’ favorite thing to do, but there were times when he couldn’t deny the necessity of doing so. A quick glance at Arabella’s wall clock reminded him that it was nearly ten, the time that he’d absolutely promised Lily he’d be home by, but he was almost finished. As long as nothing untold happened—like an arrival of Barty Crouch, Sr., who had recently taken an unhealthy interest in his division—James figured that he’d be able to make it back to Godric’s...
Hollow in time to avoid having to sleep on the couch.

“So that’s it, then,” ‘Bella said quietly.

James sighed. “Yeah. With all the excitement surrounding Sirius’ escape, I’d hoped there might be a chance, but…”

He shrugged, and his superior nodded. There were too many buts; too many things had gone wrong. That, and they both knew the price of false hope. “I find it difficult to believe that he’d be able to act after another week in that place,” she agreed. “Unfortunately, the fact that we have hard nothing probably means that his Portkey and wand have both been either confiscated or destroyed. Operation Icebreaker has failed.”

“We were so close,” James lamented quietly. “So damn close.”

“Indeed we were,” she agreed coldly—but her eyes glistened suspiciously with emotion, revealing the lie behind her uncaring demeanor.

Frustration welled up inside him along with worry for a man who he’d come to know as a friend. You sent him there, a nasty little voice in James’ head taunted him. Bursting with confidence in your grand plan, you sent Bill to Azkaban, where he will now die. How are you going to tell Arthur and Molly Weasley that you have lost them another of their sons? Cold pain filled his gut. “I want to know why,” James spat angrily. “What went wrong? We know he made it in, and those spells were undetectable—so how the hell did Voldemort know?”

“It’s possible that Weasley slipped…”

“Not Bill,” James interjected. “He’s better than that.”

So was Charlie, a traitorous voice inside him pointed out, but James shoved that painful thought aside. Charlie had been dead for years. It was past time for James to push that guilt aside.

“Anyone can slip in Azkaban,” his former Mentor pointed out, her voice rough with emotion. “And what other explanation is there?”

“We could have been betrayed.”

‘Bella’s office suddenly grew very cold, and he swallowed once. The Order had encountered spies and traitors before, of course, but that never lessened their devastating impact. It never changed how much was at risk, or how deeply betrayal could burn. Finally, the Minister for Magical Law Enforcement replied grimly:

“By who, James? So few knew…who do we blame? You or I? What about Dumbledore or Lily, perchance? Mundungus would sooner cut off his own wand arm, and Severus did not even know for his own safety. And I, too, hardly believe that Weasley would crack, given the circumstances. But then the list of suspects grows rather short, doesn’t it?”

“There’s something we’re not seeing,” James grumbled.

“Indeed there is,” Arabella agreed quietly. “Then again, there always is.”
The first thing he saw upon opening his eyes was Remus Lupin. Brown hair, blue eyes, and a concerned expression looked down at him as he lay, he abruptly realized, upon his own bed.

“Tell me he’s not here,” Snape hissed immediately.

“He’s not,” the headmaster replied with an almost imperceptible sigh. His eyes, however, gave his displeasure away.

“Good.” He started to sit up, only to have Remus force him back down with a shove.

“However,” he replied sternly, “you are quite lucky that it was Sirius who found you. Anyone else might not have had the sense to bring you here.”

“He was in my chambers?” Severus demanded. Images of his shattered wards and wrecked quarters came immediately to mind, and he scowled deeply. It wasn’t hard to imagine the chaos Black would wreck on the personal domain of a man he hated so much.

“Of course he was,” Remus said evenly. “As was I, once he sent Harry to retrieve me. I might also mention that Sirius was smart enough not to take on your wards, especially given that I know all of the passwords.”

“Well, that’s a surprise.” Snape rolled his eyes. He barely stopped himself from saying the next words that came to mind: I didn’t realize he was capable of intelligent thought. Unfortunately, Remus knew him rather well after so long.

“Severus…”

He recognized the warning tone but duly ignored it. Instead, he gave the headmaster his most irritated look. “Can I get up now?”

“No.” Remus looked as if he had more to say, but Severus overrode him.

“What time is it, anyway? I have classes to prepare for.”

“I’m sure you do,” the other replied in that damned mild voice of his. “But first I want to know what caused you to drop unconscious in a corridor in the middle of the night.”

Snape knew there was no arguing with that tone, but he had never claimed to be polite, even to his own friends. Especially after such a long night. “What do you think happened?” he asked bitterly.

“Perhaps I should rephrase the question to ask why Voldemort was so angry with you,” Remus responded calmly. Few were the times when Severus could goad him, and this clearly wasn’t one of them. Snape sighed.

“Black,” he spat, and watched brown eyebrows rise curiously.

“I was under the impression that you could excuse the wand as an ‘accident,’” the headmaster replied.

“I did,” he admitted, shifting slightly as pain shot through his chest. His vision was going blurry, but he’d damned if he’d admit that. It was, after all, only a common side effect of the Cruciatu Curse. He’d dealt with worse, too. Many times.

“Did he believe you?”
Snape shrugged and regretted doing so immediately. “I am alive, so I assume so.”

Remus frowned but did not argue; he, too, knew better than to bother. “Did you learn anything of use?”

“Aside from the fact the Dark Lord still wants your idiot friend very badly?” he asked dryly. He met Remus’ eyes. “I still think there is something Black isn’t telling us.”

“He says that he doesn’t remember, Severus.”

“I heard him,” Snape fought the urge to roll his eyes again. “But believe me, the Dark Lord does not ever act without a reason, and he is quite obsessed with getting Black—alive, if possible, which is not his normal method of operation, as you well know. There is something going on here, and I think that bastard knows what.”

Remus’ eyes narrowed. “He’s got no reason to lie.”

“Doesn’t he?”

“No, he doesn’t.” The headmaster’s voice grew hard and cold. “You may not like him, Severus, but Sirius has never been anything but loyal to the Order, and you know it. Also, Voldemort wouldn’t be chasing him so madly if he was a plant.”

“I never said he was a plant,” Snape objected emptily. The anger that was glinting in Remus’ eyes wasn’t something that he saw every day. Besides, he didn’t really think Black had been let go—the evidence was, after all, to the contrary—but he knew something was wrong with this entire situation. Why was he the only one who could see that none of the pieces quite fit together?

“No, but you certainly implied it.” The other wizard gave him an intense look, in response to which he could only shrug. So I don’t trust him, Snape thought irritably. I have absolutely no reason to, and ample reason not to. However, the headmaster continued again in his habitually calm and quiet voice; only because he knew him so well could Severus tell how controlled he was. “I believe him. If Sirius says that he does not remember, he doesn’t remember, and while I’m sure there is a reason why Voldemort wants him so badly, unless you can uncover it, we will simply have to wait.”

“Fine,” Snape snapped, “but if this ends badly, don’t blame me.”

“It won’t.” There was something almost serene in Remus’ voice.

“Do you know something I don’t?” he demanded. Pain and exhaustion were making him irritable and dizzy.

“Not at all,” was the casual reply. “I just know Sirius Black.”
“I was thinking,” Remus said over breakfast, “that since you have deprived me of my Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, you owe me a favor or two.”

Sirius snorted. “It wasn’t exactly my idea, you realize.”

“True, but in the absence of Voldemort, I certainly must blame someone.” His friend smiled slyly.

“I see how it is.” Despite himself, Sirius smiled in return. Doing so was getting easier, or at least most of the time. And although he’d hardly slept the night before, it was shaping up into a fine day, especially with the events they had planned for that night.

Remus chuckled. “I’m glad you do.”

“Indeed. What favor do you feel I owe you, then, o fearless headmaster?”

His cheek was rewarded by Remus almost choking on his orange juice, and Sirius smirked. It took the headmaster a moment to contain himself, but then Remus rolled his eyes. “You keep saying things like that, and I won’t offer you a job!”

“A job?” he looked at his friend oddly. Whatever had crawled up Remus’ robes this morning? A job? Surely, he’d gone crazy.

“Yes, a job,” the other replied mildly. “The Dark Arts position, to be precise, seeing as how you’ve lately proved yourself to be rather qualified for it.”

Sirius stared. He blinked, turning over the possibilities in his head. It was odd to think of himself as a teacher, especially given all the detentions he’d served—and all the ones he’d managed to get out of by sheer virtue of not getting caught. Remus had always wanted to teach, and Sirius had never had a problem imagining him being at Hogwarts, but as for himself…the thought was simply foreign. And Remus could not possibly be serious about it. He gave a lopsided smile. “I think too much time around the kiddies has mucked your brain up, mate.”

“I’m quite serious, Sirius.”

“Changed you name, did you?” he riposted immediately. “Liked mine so much that you couldn’t resist?”

Remus groaned. “You had to do that, didn’t you?”

“You left yourself wide open,” he agreed.

“Don’t change the subject.” His friend gave him was probably his patented ‘headmaster’ look, but Sirius blew right by it, unfazed.

“Did I?”

“You certainly did, you insufferable maniac!” Remus replied with exasperation. “Look, I’m being…dang it—being around again you makes me restructure all my sentences—The offer is genuine, Sirius. I’m not joking. I’m offering you a job.”

For a moment, all he could do was stare. A second passed before he could even begin to mull over the possibilities in his head, which gave Sirius a very strange feeling indeed. Trying to picture
himself as a teacher was difficult, even if Defense Against the Dark Arts (and the Dark Arts themselves, though one didn’t mention that in polite company!) had always been his best subject. The years at Hogwarts had been the best of his life, and returning to them was a sorely tempting thought; in many ways, Hogwarts was the closest thing to home that he had ever known. Coming back to stay might do a great deal towards healing the gaping wounds still resident in his soul and psyche, even if he wouldn’t be seeing James or Peter every day. Heading to Hogwarts when he’d escaped from Voldemort had been a natural decision—the castle had always been a safe haven for him.

Sirius blinked, and then peered out at the hundreds of young faces eating breakfast in the Great Hall. Were they so very different from what he and his friends had once been? They lived in a darker world, and yet he saw the same laughter, the same smiles. Like he, they would someday leave Hogwarts and face the bitterness of reality; unless Voldemort was stopped, these children would enter the same war he had been fighting, in one way or another, for fourteen years. Many would make the choices here, at Hogwarts, that would determine how they fought that war, if they lived or died, and even which side they would be on. To do so, however, they would need guidance and preparation from people like Remus Lupin, who were dedicated to their futures and well being.

Slowly, he let out the breath he’d been holding. As a student, he’d never respected his teachers enough… He looked over at Remus, and saw his friend’s deep blue eyes watching him expectantly. On the surface, the choice was hard—until he remembered what he once had been, and what he always would be. Finally, he spoke quietly.

“I’m going to have to refuse, Remus,” Sirius said gently. “As much as I admire what you do here, and how it helps our cause, I can’t do it. I can’t sit on the sidelines and teach. It’s a noble and worthwhile pursuit, but it’s not for me.”

“You’d be safest here, you know,” his friend replied softly.

“I know,” he admitted. “But I can’t let him frighten me away like this. And I’m sick of being a victim. I’ve got to fight back.”

Remus frowned. “No one could argue that you haven’t already done enough, Sirius.”

“The war isn’t exactly an equation, though, is it? You can balance out one side with the other.” He shrugged. “I don’t really know how to explain it, Remus. It’s just that I can’t. I’ve got to keep fighting. It’s one of the only ways I know how to prove to myself that I am all I once was.”

The headmaster looked at him worriedly, and Sirius tried to clarify.

“I feel a responsibility to keep fighting, now. I’d like to say I haven’t changed, but I am different from before… Something happened, and I don’t remember what, but Azkaban changed me. I become more aware of it every day.”

“Aware?” Remus asked warily. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure. It’s as if something is just outside of my consciousness, just beyond my reach,” Sirius shrugged. He opened his mouth to further describe the feeling, and was caught completely unaware by the memories.

Screaming.

Chains.

Fighting and not completely remembering why.
He’d never been so tired. Recent memories were a blur, but he had a sense that the battle of wills had been going on for some time. Somehow, he also knew that this wasn’t the first time.

A thin white hand raised a wand, pointing it directly at Sirius’ heart. He braced himself, digging deep to find resistance of any kind, and clinging to the tattered and fading memories of life before hell. After what seemed an eternity, the high and cold voice spoke very precisely.

“Mandatus Prospicio Subigum!”

Each clipped word sent pain shooting through his body. A fire started burning in his heart and spread outwards, making Sirius buckle in the chains, struggling for air and for control. Instinctively, he knew to fight it, although he didn’t quite understand why. His senses told him this was Dark magic, very dark and very ancient, yet he’d never heard of the spell he was fighting with all his heart and soul. He only knew he had to, had to ignore the pain and keep his mind his own—

“Sirius?”

Remus’ voice jerked him out of his unexpected daze, and Sirius shook his head unsteadily, blinking hard to banish the memory. Suddenly, his friend’s hand was on his shoulder, squeezing gently, and Sirius realized he was shaking.

“Are you all right?” Remus asked quietly.

He swallowed. “I’m fine.” His mouth was very, very dry for some reason. “Just a memory.”

“You went as white as a ghost, Padfoot.”

“I’ll be okay.” Sirius shook his darker thoughts away, banishing them by force. “It just caught me by surprise.”

“If you’re certain…?” Remus’ hand withdrew after a final squeeze as Sirius nodded.

“Have you ever heard of a spell with the incantation of ‘Mandatus Prospicio Subigum’?”

The headmaster frowned. “No, why?”

“Just wondering.”

“Are you sure that you don’t want to reconsider the Dark Arts job?” his friend asked quietly. “Just for a little while, even. Until you’re, well…better?”

“Like Fletcher, you mean?” he asked, jerking his head down the table in the Transfiguration professor’s direction.

“Hogwarts is a safe place to heal, Sirius.”

He sighed. “I know. But I don’t think there’s any way to beat my demons except by facing them. I can’t hide.”

“I had to try, you realize.” Remus smiled slightly.

“I know. But why don’t you offer Dung the job? He’s at least as qualified as I am,” Sirius pointed out. “Probably more so. At least he’s got more recent experience.”

“He won’t touch it. Says he doesn’t want to deal with the Dark Arts,” was the quiet reply.
“Ah.” Part of Sirius couldn’t blame Fletcher, but at the same time, he couldn’t really understand the fear. Running from things, in his experience, only made things worse in the long run. And no one could flee before Voldemort forever. “I see.”

“Yeah,” Remus agreed quietly. “It’s getting interesting, too. I’ve had a few applicants, although I’m not terribly inclined to hire any of them.”

“Oh? Like who?” he asked with interest.

“Oddsballs, mostly. Barty Crouch’s son, for one—he’s working in the Department of Mysteries right now. Gilderoy Lockhart, too, although I’m not sure that I could stand an ego that big around here. Dolores Umbridge has also applied, but that woman gives me the creeps. She’s also created all kinds of trouble down in the Department of Magical Catastrophes with Cornelius Fudge.”

“Sounds like a full roster,” Sirius commented sarcastically.

Remus rolled his eyes. “Hardly an hour of experience between them, unless you count Lockhart, and I certainly wouldn’t believe a word of what that man says.”

“Why not?” The name of Gilderoy Lockhart rang a faint bell for Sirius, but he was certain that he’d never met the man, unless they’d been at Hogwarts during any of the same years.

“Because he’s an arrogant and pompous git, that’s why,” Remus replied with disgust. “Every witch in the Magical world is drooling over him, and I hear he’s got some new book coming out, titled Magical Me, or something like that. He was four years ahead of us here, Hufflepuff—although I think they’ve disowned him by now. Be glad you haven’t met him.”

“I’ll take that under advisement,” Sirius responded. “So what are you going to do about the DADA job?”

“Interview all three of them, of course,” Remus said fairly. “Crouch Junior will be in today, Umbridge tomorrow morning, and Lockhart the day after that. Ought to be entertaining, at least.”

“I bet.”

James swallowed as Arthur and Molly both took seats at his kitchen table, trying not to look nervous, but knowing that he was failing miserably. Lunch was all ready set out for them, and looked appetizing enough to the eye, but he was anything but hungry. Right now, the mere thought of eating made James sick to his stomach.

“Where’s Lily?” Molly asked suddenly.

“Still at work. Dumbledore’s in a meeting with the Daily Prophet and she couldn’t get out.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Molly replied.

“Yeah,” James replied quietly. “Me, too.” But in some ways, Lily’s absence made this easier. He still didn’t know how to tell them, but he’d figure that out as he went. James had always had the ability to find words when he needed them, and he was counting on that ability to see him through
today. However, as he was still struggling to find the appropriate beginning for what he needed to say, Arthur abruptly took matters out of James’ hands.

“Something is bothering you, James,” the older wizard said gently. “This isn’t simply a social lunch, is it?”

The tabletop suddenly seemed very interesting, but he forced his head to come up and meet Arthur and Molly’s eyes in turn. “No,” he said slowly. “It’s not. In fact, it’s about Bill.”

Molly gasped. Arthur went white. Perhaps, James realized, he should have approached the topic in a different manner, but he was stuck now.

“He’s not dead,” he clarified quickly. “That much we know. But the Order hasn’t been entirely truthful with the two of you about what’s been happening—”

“He hasn’t been…kissed, has he?” Molly whispered.

“No.” At least not as far as we know, he added silently. But James would rather lie than tell the truth, especially since there was no way to know for certain. He took a deep breath and continued. “What you haven’t been told is why Bill was captured in the first place.”

They both gave him confused looks. Slowly, Arthur spoke. “’Bella told me there was a raid, and that he made a mistake…”

“There was no mistake.” James swallowed. He had known this would be hard, but had never imagined how much it would be. “I sent him to Azkaban.”

“What?”

“Bill’s capture was a part of Operation Icebreaker, which the Order has been working on since last September. The idea was for one wizard to infiltrate Azkaban, armed with a carefully concealed Portkey and wand. After one week, both would appear, enabling him to either break out or to bring others in. But something went wrong. The week deadline has come and gone, and we’ve been monitoring the Portkey as best we can. It hasn’t been activated.

“This, unfortunately, means Bill was discovered,” James continued quietly. “How, we do not know. But now he’s on his own.”

They took it better than he had expected, but the blow still hit the Weasleys hard. However, Arthur and Molly were both strong individuals, and it took only a few moments for Arthur to find his voice. “So now what?”

“We’re still trying to crack Azkaban,” James replied. “And we might even have a chance, now…but I can make you no promises. All I can say is that we’ll do our best to get him back.”

Molly swallowed, and the look on her face told James that lunch would go uneaten. “Well,” she said quietly. “I suppose that’s the best we can ask for, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I wish there was more I could say.” I wish I could stop sending good people to death.

“We know, dear.” Molly squeezed his arm, and he saw tears glittering in her eyes that she was too proud to shed. “And I’m sure that Bill understood the risks.”

James closed his eyes and shook his head slightly, swallowing back emotion. “Yeah. We all do.”
“How’d you get caught, kid?” the scratchy voice asked.

Bill thought it had been three weeks since he’d first discovered the ability to speak to the prisoner in the cell next to his, but this was the first opportunity they’d really had. After that first day, first Bill, and then his neighbor, had been taken by the Lestranges; following that, as there always was at night, the Dementors roamed freely around the prison. Combining their effect with torture had made Bill catatonic for awhile, which accounted for his difficulty grasping how much time had passed—as if Azkaban alone wasn’t capable of doing that.

He hesitated before answering. For a moment, Bill considered telling the truth. He had nothing to lose, after all, since Voldemort all ready knew and had foiled his mission. But a part of him was unable to tell, unwilling to crack, even after so much time. It didn’t really matter to anyone except for him, but he had to cling to something.

“A raid,” Bill finally responded. “Things started going wrong, and then I got caught…”

There was a cough from the other side of the wall that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. “If you don’t want to tell me, kid, just say so. You don’t have to lie about it.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Frank replied. “Place like this…it’s good to see that you’re still thinking, at least.”

“What about you?” Bill asked.

“Dumb. Trying to play hero…” Frank coughed. “But I got my team out, anyway, and that’s what counts.”

“Yeah,” he agreed quietly. He felt strangely free without the Dementors around; for some reason, every day around noon, they retreated for a while. Why, Bill still did not understand, but he was not about to press his luck. It was nice to own his soul for once, even if it was only for a little while.

There was a long moment of silence before Frank spoke again, during which Bill reflected upon his new friend’s identity. There was something familiar about the other prisoner, something he should have recognized. But even with the Dementors gone for the moment, Bill’s mind was too foggy to figure it out. The other wizard’s voice was still rough and pained. “So…you were outside more recently that I. Anything new and extraordinary?”

“Not really,” Bill admitted. “They’re still trying to break into here.” If Frank was in the Order, he’d understand that ‘they.’ If not, he’d probably just assume the Ministry—and either way, Voldemort knew the truth. Bill was finding it hard to care about that.

“Ah. Too bad they don’t hurry on that one, eh?”

“Yeah.”

They shared a silent moment of companionship again, saying nothing, yet both were grateful for the knowledge that they weren’t alone. Finally, though, the need for conversation—reassurance—grew
great, and again, Frank spoke. His voice was very quiet. “I heard there was a breakout.”

“A what?” Bill’s heart started thundering in his ears. Could it be possible?

“Yeah. Rodolphus Lestrange was muttering like mad about it…have you heard anything?”

“I wish,” he whispered. Maybe there was hope, after all… Pointlessly, his eyes started scanning the four dank walls of his cell, searching for any way out—but there wasn’t one, of course. There never was.

“Keep your ears open, though. Maybe, someday…”

Frank seemed unable to finish the thought, and Bill couldn’t either. Hope was almost impossible to grasp. “Yeah…someday…”

Salamander’s had been the premier fine dining establishment in the Wizarding world since its grand opening in 1842. Although there were restaurants that could claim longer and more illustrious histories, none were more luxurious or could boast of finer fare. This magnificence was accompanied by prices that could clean out a poorer family’s Gringotts vault, of course, but that was to be expected. With only one exclusive location, deep inside London and just off of Diagon Alley, Salamander’s waiting list often stretched to days long, and sometimes even weeks. But the oldest families always had a table reserved.

Even so, it wasn’t every day that the senior members of two of the Fourteen Families walked through the great ebony doors. Accordingly, the maître d’ immediately rushed past the three parties whom had been vying politely for his attention and approached the newest group of guests. At the same time, a trio of servers rushed to prepare their most exclusive table for four, already alerted, with customary Salamander’s efficiency, that one of their guests required special needs and not to put out the silver, no matter how nice it looked.

“Mr. Black, Mr. Potter,” the maître d’ bowed graciously. “Welcome to Salamander’s. Please, right this way. A table for four?”

Remus and Peter exchanged bemused glances, but James nodded graciously. “Private if you have it.”

“Of course.”

The Marauders followed their guide docilely enough, trying to ignore the curious—but circumspect—glances that drifted their way as they were led deeper into the spacious restaurant. Finally, they reached a beautiful round table made entirely of ivory. The chairs were plush with purple cushions, and the dinnerware was pure gold; over all, the effect was of something out of another and more elegant place and time. As each wizard reached his seat, he found his chair pulled back by a human server who wore a courteous smile. Salamander’s had always prided itself on the ‘human touch’; in this, the greatest of Wizarding restaurants, there would be no magical gimmicks.

After taking their drink orders, all four servers disappeared.
“Wow,” Peter said quietly. “This place is amazing.”

Remus arched a skeptical eyebrow. “I’ll reserve judgment until I taste the food.”

“Oh, come on, Moony,” James chuckled. “You can’t deny that the service is fantastic.”

“All very well for you to say, Mister Potter, but I’m not exactly used to the royal treatment.” But Remus allowed himself to chuckle softly.

James laughed. “Nor I! I haven’t been in this place since my sixteenth birthday—you know how my family eschewed the status game.”

“My parents, on the other hand, lived for it,” Sirius interjected sourly. “I’ve been in Salamander’s so often that I used to have the menu memorized.” Then a lopsided smile creased his features. “I imagine that it’s changed a bit in ten years, though.”

“Just a tad, I suspect.” James grinned, looking up at Remus. “Well, Moony, are you going to crack your menu open or sit there and starve in protest?”

Remus noticed with some embarrassment that all his friends were already engrossed in making their choices and shrugged self-effacingly. “I suppose I might take a look.” Finally, a sheepish grin wormed its way free of his control, and he turned his attention to the elegantly constructed menu.

To his left, Peter glanced up. “The prices here are astronomical, James,” he said in an undertone. “I mean, when I suggested that we go out to dinner together, I didn’t mean…”

“Don’t worry about it, Wormtail,” James replied easily. “I’ve got—”

“You’re not doing a damn thing,” Sirius cut him off. “My treat.”

“Sirius—” all three of them started, but each Marauder shut up upon seeing the familiar mulish look on their companion’s face.

“That’s right,” he said cheerfully. “Don’t even bother arguing with me. After all, I’ve got more money than I know what to do with—even more than you, Prongsie-boy—and it’s been doing nothing but collecting dust and interest these last ten years in Gringotts. So let me do this for my friends, who helped me in ways even they might not understand.”

It took a moment for Sirius’ last words to sink in, but when they did, Remus had to stop himself from staring in open-mouthed surprise. Rarely, even in their early years, had Sirius expressed himself so openly, and right now, with that still-haunted look in his eyes, it meant more than ever. Sirius smiled though, as they stared at him in silence, and this was a real smile that went a great way towards dissolving the lump in Remus’ throat. The Marauders waited quietly as the servers reappeared with their drinks and departed just as swiftly, but none of the trio took their eyes off of Sirius. They’d lost him once, and thought him gone forever; right now, it seemed each was realizing just how lucky they were to have him back.

Sirius picked up his goblet and held it high. “Allow me to propose a toast:

“To friendship,” he said quietly. “To bonds that don’t break. And to brothers, who stay together—no matter what—until the end.”

“To friendship,” they chorused, raising their glasses in salute.

In that moment, everything clicked. Ten years of separations faded into nothingness, and while each
still bore the scars of loss, choices, and mistakes, the distance that had marked their transition into adulthood was gone. Never again would one stand alone enough to be targeted by Death Eaters. Never again would one disappear without the others tearing the words and themselves into shreds to find him. And never again would any Marauder stand alone against any odds, for they had come full circle. It had taken losing, mourning, and regaining one of their own to do so, but once again they were four seventeen-year-old boys bonded and unshakable, together until the end. They would never break again.

The four glasses touched with a soft clink, brining to mind a handshake in a small secret passageway so many years ago. Remus smiled as he sipped his drink, remembering, and saw his expression mirrored on three other faces as they did the same. He lifted his glass once more.

“To the Marauders,” he said. “Long may we reign.”

Full-fledged grins broke out and glasses touched once more. “Marauders!”

“Now,” Peter interjected with a smile, “let’s eat!”

“You know, Wormtail, I have never heard a finer idea,” Sirius declared, burying his head in the menu once more. Chuckling, Remus did the same, and as he finally made his choice, a server magically appeared at his elbow, asking,

“What would you like tonight, Headmaster Lupin?”

Remus smiled slightly, somewhat surprised to find himself so well known. Of course, he shouldn’t have been amazed at all; if Dumbledore having appointed him as the Dark Arts professor at Hogwarts years ago hadn’t been enough to wake up the Wizarding world, his ascending to the headmaster’s position had. The flurry of pro-werewolf legislation (along with increased rights for centaurs, merfolk, house elves, and all other kinds of beings) that Dumbledore had pushed through the Ministry had certainly helped Remus become the most well known of his kind, too. If they hadn’t been at war, the new laws would probably have never passed, but they had, and over the ensuing years, Remus had ceased to be viewed as so much of a frightening monster. Now, he was just an abnormality of nature, grudgingly acknowledged as human at any other time than the full moon.

The fact that several of the world’s most dangerous werewolves had been caught red-handed (and red-mouthed) at the scene of one of the war’s bloodiest crimes could not hurt. Fenrir Greyback and his followers had murdered twelve children, four parents, and several innocent Muggle bystanders, and Death Eater influence had almost gotten them off. However, no one had been able to intimidate Dumbledore, and he had pushed the six of them out of Britain, and their absence had lightened the world view of werewolves considerably. Over time, they’d almost become normal. Like now.

He placed his order with a polite smile, pleased to notice that the server showed no particular unease around him. After the servers were all gone, James looked across the table at Peter. “So, why did you want to get together, anyway?”

“Not like this isn’t a brilliant idea, of course, but you did seem to have an ulterior motive,” Remus chuckled.

Peter smiled slightly. “You all know me too well.”

“You’re uneasy, Peter.” Leave it to Sirius to ignore niceties and get straight to the point. “What’s wrong?”
“Well… I guess I just wanted you three to hear it from me before you read it in the paper tomorrow morning,” Peter shrugged.

“Read what in the paper?” A lead weight had just taken up residence in Remus’ gut. The others, he noticed, looked equally wary.

“I did an interview with Eric Dummingston this morning,” their friend replied quietly. He took a deep but slightly shaky breath before continuing, “The article will be in tomorrow’s edition of the Daily Prophet. In it, I openly admitted to being a Death Eater…and I publicly renounced Voldemort.”

In all their years together, Remus had never heard his friends so quiet. Finally, though, it was James who spoke.

“You know what this is going to do to you, don’t you, Peter?”

“Make me the biggest target since Sirius escaped Azkaban, yeah, I know,” Peter smiled crookedly. “But I had to do it. I’d make a miserable spy, and I can’t just hide.” His green eyes searched their faces desperately, seeking understanding. “I want to make a difference.”

Those words echoed in Remus’ ears. How many times had he heard them before? He had heard them from himself, from Sirius, from James…but never from Peter. Peter had never overcome his own natural timidity strongly enough to feel the burning need to fight—until now. And what could one say in the face of such unexpected courage? Remus was at a loss for words, but he knew Peter needed to have his friends’ approval. He only wished that he could say what his friend needed to hear.

It was Sirius who leaned to his right and clapped Peter on the shoulder. “You will, Peter,” he said with a smile. “I have no doubt that you will.”

“Nor I,” Remus agreed, finding his voice. Suddenly, though, James snickered.

“Congratulations, mate,” he said with a grin. “You’re about to make Voldemort’s all-time want list. By tomorrow morning, I’m sure Skeeter will have laid odds on how long it will take you to die.”

At Peter’s aghast look, Remus punched James in the left arm. “Don’t worry. He’s only joking.”

“So says the only Marauder not on that list,” Sirius snorted. “You’re falling behind, Moony.”

Remus rolled his eyes. “Thanks, but I’ll forego that particular honor.”

“And there is such a list,” James interjected. “I’m currently rated number two, right behind Dumbledore, but Sirius is set to take my place soon. Thanks to you, I might even get to fall to number four!”

“That’s not very funny, James,” Peter pointed out.

James shrugged. “Laugh or it kills you. Personally, I’d rather laugh.”

“Me, too,” Sirius agreed quietly.

As their food arrived, conversation turned to lighter topics. Soon, they were reminiscing about old times, old pranks, and old friends. It was amazing to see the years lift away from them all, but even more rewarding to see the lines slowly ease off of Sirius’ face and see him truly laugh and enjoy himself. Remus hadn’t seen him this carefree since their graduation, yet looking at him across the
table, there were moments when the same light would enter Sirius’ eyes and he would seem ten years younger, unscarred by the hell Voldemort had put him through. Watching him argue good-naturedly with James—inevitably, it was about Quidditch, just like nearly every other disagreement they’d ever had—was like looking into the past.

“But you have to see Harry play,” James concluded. “He’s completely amazing. I’ve never seen a Seeker like him. Forget that Bulgarian—what is his name, anyway, Drum? Something like that. Anyway, Harry is simply unbelievable. You’ve got to see it to believe it—tell him, Remus.”

Hogwarts’ headmaster laughed. “For once, Sirius, James isn’t just bragging about his son. Harry is rather unbelievable.”

“It’s Krum, by the way,” Peter interjected. At James’ blank look, he clarified: “The Bulgarian Seeker. His name is Victor Krum, not Drum.”

“Oh. Right. Who cares about Bulgaria, anyway?” James asked, but the others laughed.

“I never thought I’d see the day when James Potter made a mistake when talking about Quidditch,” Sirius snickered. “It’s about damn time.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Good evening, gentlemen,” a voice suddenly intruded on their discussion, and all four turned to face Mr. Salamander himself. The establishment’s owner was an ageless silver-haired wizard, slightly hunched over but still seeming spry. After a moment of surprised silence, the Marauders managed to remember their manners and return the greeting.

“Has your food and service been satisfactory this evening?” Salamander asked.

“Yes, thank you,” Remus replied, finding himself the group’s spokesman yet again. “Everything has been wonderful.”

“If there is anything else you require, please let us know,” the restaurant’s owner continued with a smile. After James assured him that they would, Salamander turned to go, only to stop and offer a half-bow in Sirius’ direction. “And welcome back, Mr. Black. You have been missed.”

“Thank you,” Sirius replied quietly, and Salamander departed.

“Talk about service,” Peter remarked.

“What else can you expect with a Black and a Potter sitting at the same table?” Remus chuckled. “They’ll bend over backwards if they have to.”

Sirius snorted. “You should have seen what happened when I brought Julia to this place—”

He cut off with the most surprised look on his face, blinking twice as if he couldn’t believe what he’d just said. The most extraordinary expression crossed Sirius’ face, then, and Remus watched as a new light entered his eyes.

But Remus remained silent, noticing immediately that James and Peter were doing the same. How could they break the news to Sirius without shattering what little remained of his heart? He was finally coming back to them, finally starting to heal—but this could undo it all. Unfortunately, Sirius had noticed when his three friends’ expressions turned to stone.

“She’s a Death Eater, isn’t she?”
His voice had gone hollow, and the face that had so recently been filled with light had darkened. He was pale, now, heart struck, making Remus remember just how precarious hope could be.

“Yes,” James answered very quietly, and Remus didn’t miss it as something odd crossed his face. “She is.”

Sirius closed his eyes. His face went blank, but when he looked out at them again, his eyes were resigned. “Well,” he said slowly, “I suppose it’s not a surprise.”

“Talk to Snape,” Remus said suddenly, the words escaping his mouth before he had a chance to think it over. The need to give Sirius hope had overridden all other precautions. He clarified quickly when faced by his friend’s blank look. “He’s her friend, Sirius, and knows her best. There may be something more here than meets the eye.”

“What do you mean?” Sirius demanded.

“I don’t know, but—”

“Excuse me, Mr. Black, but Mr. Salamander thought you might like to see this immediately.” The arrival of the maître d’ had cut Remus off in mid-sentence, and Sirius accepted the offered copy of the *Daily Prophet*. Apparently, it was the evening edition, but Sirius’ face steadily grew more fixed as he read the front page. In the meantime, James thanked the maître d’, who retreated in due course, leaving the three friends to wonder and wait.

Finally, Sirius looked up from the paper, his eyes haunted and face tight. Wordlessly, he passed the *Daily Prophet* left to James, whose eyes widened angrily upon reading the headline. Remus, however, kept his gaze focused upon Sirius as his friend dropped his chin into upturned hands and sighed. Once James handed him the paper, Remus shifted left so that Peter could read with him.

**AZKABAN ESCAPEE CLOSE TO THE EDGE**

*by Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent*

Haunted eyes look out from a face that is still too thin, and Sirius Black declines the chance to talk about his experiences. The once handsome wizard is now but a shadow of his former self, grossly underweight and walking with a slight limp that he will undoubtedly have for the rest of his life. His eyes are dull now, and empty when he’s distracted; close friends speak of how he seems to be only a corpse walking around in the body of Sirius Black.

Once a famous Auror and very outgoing wizard, Black is now quiet and withdrawn, haunted by ten years in the hands of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. News of his miraculous escape has been all over the Wizarding world in recent days, and he has been feted as a sign of hope—yet experts from St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries say not to place too much faith in Black just yet.

“Black has undoubtedly suffered intensive psychological damage in during his time in Azkaban,” says Horace Funderburke, the Healer-in-Charge of St. Mungo’s Mental Ward. “At this early stage, it would be ludicrous to expect too much out of him. Right now, what Black clearly needs most is counseling and professional help.”
Many in the Magical community are skeptical about Black’s sudden escape, his new status as a hero, and most of all, his much-celebrated capabilities. Although there were many witnesses to yesterday’s incident in Diagon Alley, the truth of the matter is that James Potter, the famous Auror who had been accompanying Black, probably did most of the spell work involved in fighting off two Death Eaters.

Sources close to Black confirm these reports, saying that he is currently in no condition to enter the war against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. He is constantly disturbed by memories and nightmares, apparently having difficulties functioning on a day-to-day basis. There are also, of course, lingering questions about his sanity after spending so long in the hands of the most powerful Dark Wizard in history, not to mention the Dementors of Azkaban, to which he has been constantly exposed.

Therefore, while Black’s future role in the war is yet to be seen, it is clear that he will be doing very little at the present, and is hardly symbol of hope that others have already begun to claim he can be.

Remus looked up and met James’ unhappy gaze. The silence remained, however, until Peter had finished the article; he had always been the slowest reader of them all and needed a few extra moments. Finally, as Peter set the Prophet down, muttering an oath under his breath, they all turned to Sirius. In the few moments it had taken Remus to read the article, Sirius’ face had transformed from haunted to angry. His blue eyes were narrowed.

“Do I look insane to you?” he asked sourly.

“And ‘close friends’, my arse,” Peter snarled. “Who the hell has she been talking to, Snape?”

“Even he’s not that stupid.” James shook his head. “More likely the witch just made it all up.”

Remus peered carefully at Sirius. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” He raked his hands through his shoulder-length black hair irritably. “Aside from the being insane, incompetent, and empty part, that is.” He smiled bloodlessly and shrugged. “Well, one out of three isn’t too bad.”

“Don’t even joke about that, Sirius,” James said with alarm, and Remus watched Sirius force a smile.

“Sorry, mate. I’m being slightly bitter, that’s all.”

“You have every right to be,” Peter said quietly. “Especially after this piece of trash.”

Sirius shrugged again. “I’m just glad that James took her damn Quick Quotes Quill.”

“I wish it could have done more,” James responded, but Sirius waved him off. His face was still angry, but he was calculating quietly.

“So,” Remus wondered finally. “What are we going to do about it?”

“We?” Sirius echoed skeptically.

“You honestly don’t think we’ll let you take on that bat by yourself, do you?” Peter demanded.
“Not likely,” James commented.

Remus smiled. “Not possible.”
Eleven years ago, if anyone had told her that she’d be where she was now, Julia would have told them they were crazy. Nine years ago, if anyone had told her that she’d be doing what she was doing now, she would have laughed in their face. No way, she would have said, would she ever be stupid enough to spy on the Dark Lord.

Yet here she was, having had a choice laid before her by one of her oldest and best friends and having been unable to simply ignore it. Urged on by Severus Snape and now having already met in secret with Albus Dumbledore, Julia Malfoy was now a full-fledged spy in the service of the Order of the Phoenix. Two days before, she’d set both feet firmly on a road that few others had ever lived to tread; the chances of dying, she knew, were extraordinarily high. Yet she’d made the choice, not because of an attack of conscience, but because of one man. Julia closed her eyes and tried to still her racing heart. The effort at control didn’t really help. All she saw was his face.

Sirius Black had been the best thing that ever happened to her, and his death had been quite possibly the worst. She’d known of him for years, of course, before she really met him—what Slytherin didn’t know of the Gryffindor Quartet of troublemakers? She’d played Quidditch against him, too, but hadn’t ever really talked to him until she’d been responsible for nearly cracking his skull open with a well-aimed bludger. She hadn’t apologized, of course (she was a Slytherin, after all, and beaters took their chances), but had been very surprised when Black had stopped to compliment her on a well-aimed hit the next day. The fact that he had done so had struck Julia, not because he was a Gryffindor, but because he was a Black. She was so accustomed to the older Wizarding families’ prejudices against women in Quidditch that she’d never expected him to do anything but ignore her, even if she was a Malfoy.

Chance encounters took over from there, although she never would really know if pure chance guided their meetings, or if there was something more. As one thing led to another, they slowly came together. Julia had not been a stranger to relationships, but from the beginning, Sirius was different. He could make her laugh like no one else could, could tease her with a smile and never awaken the Malfoy pride. He also cared like no one else ever had, yet was still willing to trust her; Sirius had never begrudged Julia her friends, just like she’d never minded the fact that he was friends with a Potter, a dirt-poor pureblood, and the school’s biggest coward. But most importantly, with Sirius she could be herself. With him Julia could drop the Malfoy coldness and forget about the importance of purity and blood, of money and power. What she had been raised to see as the cornerstones of the world were suddenly less important because she could laugh. She could cause trouble. And she could simply be herself.

No one at Hogwarts had been too surprised that they’d come together. The fact that he was a Gryffindor and she a Slytherin didn’t even come into the equation; he was a Black, and she was a Malfoy. It was perfectly acceptable, and her parents had even been pleased.

Until Sirius had graduated and become an Auror.

His choice had forced one upon her, as well. By the time Julia graduated a year later, her parents were dead and Lucius was the head of the family. Lucius, who was rapidly rising to power at the Dark Lord’s right hand through a succession of ruthless moves and brutal intelligence. And then there was Sirius, who was the shining star of his generation in the Aurors, already marked by Death Eaters as one to watch. Leaving Hogwarts, she’d had to choose a side.

She chose Sirius.
It hadn’t been easy to turn her back on Lucius’ path, but the fact that it wasn’t her own made things simpler. Julia had never reveled in power; she had wanted to be a magical archeologist for as long as she could remember. Darkness had never interested her; she was much more fascinated by making discoveries. She studied hard because she wanted to, not because her parents thought that was the proper path for a young witch to take. She’d played Quidditch because the sport allowed her to be herself, and it was another way of proving that her life was her own. Julia had always been fiercely independent, Malfoy or no, and was certainly Slytherin enough not to sacrifice her own choices for the mere desire of her family. Lucius was willing to put up with her so long as she stayed neutral. Julia didn’t really care.

Everything had changed when Sirius was captured. She would never forget the day that Remus Lupin showed up at her door, pale featured and pained. He hadn’t had to tell her, then; she’d known. And for ten years she had thought that Sirius was dead.

Somehow along the way she’d ended up as a Death Eater. How no longer really mattered; she’d ceased to care about who won when Sirius died, and Julia had to chose a side. So, the second time around she had chosen family, because for a Malfoy, there was nowhere else to turn. Until now.

Rage had guided her hand this time. Anger at the Dark Lord for keeping Sirius in hell for ten years, anger at her brother for knowing and lying to her face, anger at herself for never realizing: all had played a part. Conscience had nothing to do with it; Julia wasn’t a conventional Death Eater, and she rarely took part in the Dark Lord’s revels. He excused her because she was of much more use elsewhere, digging through ruins and living the life of a respected magical archeologist. Voldemort was always interested in the Dark artifacts of past times, and Julia had uncovered more than a few for him. When she killed, she did so quickly, and tried very hard not to care. Right and wrong, she had long since decided, did not matter.

But part of her was always aware that she was losing more and more of herself the deeper she went. Now, though, at least her decision was her own, and the consequences were something she could face without flinching. And it was the right thing, even if the fire had died and Sirius never wanted to see her again. At the very least she would thank him, though, for opening this door.

My choice, she thought quietly, adjusting her mask. My consequences. This was the first time in years she could think that without lying to herself. Severus was right. It is refreshing to choose, even if this may be the death of me. Julia strode forward quickly, passing through the great oak doors that led to Voldemort’s throne room. A long walkway stretched before her, at the end of which sat the most feared Dark wizard in the history of her world. He was alone, which was somewhat surprising; lately, Lucius had been almost constantly by the Dark Lord’s side. If he wasn’t, Bellatrix Lestrange often was—while Lucius was Voldemort’s right hand, Bellatrix was his favorite pet—but today she was absent. A sense of dread prickled down Julia’s spine, but she pushed it away. At least she knew that she hadn’t been betrayed; if this was to be her death, she knew all the other Death Eaters would be there to witness it.

As she walked, Julia pulled the mask away. She’d been in the fold long enough to know that Voldemort liked to look at his follower’s faces, undoubtedly to better utilize his skill at Legilimency. Julia resisted the urge to take a deep breath; if there was ever a time when she would be at risk, this would be it. Being alone with the Dark Lord would certainly put her rusty skills in Occlumency to the test—yet for the first time in her life, she was profoundly grateful that Severus had convinced her to study it with him back in her fifth year when everyone else thought he was just a slimy and skinny nerd. It was a skill that she didn’t advertise having, and for that, now, she was doubly thankful.

“My Lord,” she said quietly, kneeling before him.
“Julia...” the cold voice hissed. “Rise.”

She did as beckoned, waiting patiently to learn why he had called her. She certainly had not been expecting the summons; Julia had been about to depart for South America once more, and although she’d been searching for reasons to delay her trip, she had not expected Voldemort to provide one.

“I am certain that you have heard of the escape of a certain old...acquaintance of yours?” the Dark Lord suddenly asked, catching Julia by surprise.

She clamped down on fury that threatened to rise, surprised by the anger in his voice. “Yes, My Lord.”

“Good...” Voldemort hissed quietly. In the following silence, Julia was tempted to ask why, but she knew better. Finally, he continued: “I have a mission for you.”

“How may I serve, Master?” Her heart thundered in her throat. If he wanted her to—

“You will find Sirius Black,” the Dark Lord commanded. “You will renew your relationship, pretending to have had a change of heart because of his survival. Through him, you will gain information and pass it on to me. When I deem the time right, you will deliver Black. Do you understand?”

Julia’s stomach clenched so hard that she thought that she would be sick. On one hand, she was being offered the perfect excuse to be a spy—but on the other, she would be expected to betray Sirius in the end. Her mind whirled, and she fought to empty it, struggling to keep a straight face. Does he really think I could betray someone I love? she wondered incredulously. Or was there something more? Was this some sort of trap? No, she answered her own question. He does think I’d betray Sirius, simply because he’s never known love. If there’s one thing he does not understand, it is the human heart.

“Yes, My Lord,” she answered smoothly. “I understand perfectly.”

“And there will be no conflicts of interest?” Voldemort pressed, his voice suddenly sharp.

“Oh course not, Master,” Julia replied immediately. “My heart belongs entirely to your cause.”

The Dark Lord smiled and dismissed her. As she exited the throne room, Julia had to fight the urge to smile. Severus, she decided, would be proud of the sarcasm in that last little line.

The media was in a frenzy. First, the Pettigrew article had appeared that morning, an exclusive for the Daily Prophet written by none other than Eric Dummingston, and now there was a press conference scheduled with the famed Azkaban escapee, Sirius Black. The conference was scheduled to take place in a special room at the Ministry of Magic, organized, rumor claimed, by none other than Albus Dumbledore himself. Reporters from worldwide newspapers and magazines were rushing to get seats, and the spacious room was already jam-packed beyond comfort. However, none were complaining; ever since his escape, Sirius Black had flatly refused to be interviewed, photographed, or even quoted. Now, however, that seemed to have finally changed.
In a side room, two figures spoke quietly. One was pacing nervously, and the other was sitting motionless in a decrepit-looking wooden chair.

“I still don’t like this,” James complained, stopping his pacing long enough to look at Sirius.

“What’s not to like?” Sirius wondered

“This entire idea of yours’ and Remus’,” James spat. “What is there to like about it?” Watching his friend shrug in response didn’t help James’ nerves, either. “It’s the perfect place for a Death Eater ambush.”

“In the Ministry? Give me a break, James.” Sirius rolled his eyes. “No one is going to get through, especially with Project Guardian working and with the dozen Aurors you have posted all over the place.”

James groaned. “I still don’t like it.”

“Neither do I, really,” his friend admitted, still appearing calm.

“Then why the hell are you doing this?” he exploded.

Sirius looked up at him and answered in a hard voice. “Well, first off, James, I’m rather mad at the lying bat.” There was no question who that lying bat could be; this time, Rita Skeeter had taken on the wrong wizard. “Second of all, I’m not about to live the rest of my life with every person I run into wondering if I’m sane or not. Or if I can’t handle what happened in Azkaban.”

“You’re not ready for this, Sirius,” James pleaded quietly, hating to say so but knowing that was the truth.

“I know,” Sirius replied. “But sometimes war is like that, isn’t it? We have to do things we’re not ready for. Voldemort’s not going to wait until I’m ready, either. I’ve got to fight back, and I’ve got to start now.”

James let himself slump into a nearby wall. “I know.”

“Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the Ministry of Magic,” Clifford Meadows, the Ministry’s press secretary said cheerfully. Due to a well-applied Sonorus Charm, his voice boomed loudly in the circular room, easy to hear and understand. “The Ministry would like to thank you for coming on such short notice, and without further delay, allow me to introduce Sirius Black.”

Someone could have dropped an anvil on the floor and it would have been ignored as the room fell silent. All eyes swung to face the youngish, black haired wizard as he took the podium, measuring him carefully against the description in Skeeter’s article. While he did indeed walk with a slight limp, favoring his right leg, and was clearly underweight, there was still no denying the confidence with which he moved or the alert eyes shining out from only a slightly gaunt face. His shoulder length black hair was clean and fell with a kind of haphazard elegance that could not have been planned, and his goatee was neatly trimmed. Except for the lines around the eyes and obvious lack of nutrition, Sirius Black looked very little different from the way many remembered him looking a
decade before.

“Thanks for coming.” His quiet voice carried easily, amplified although no one had seen him lift his wand. “I’m new at this press conference business, so you’ll have to excuse my abruptness. I will answer a few questions when I am finished, but I would like to make a statement first.” His chin lifted as he peered out at the assembled witches and wizards.

“Lately, certain individuals have seen fit to print lies about me and attribute others to some of my friends. I am here today to put an end to that.” Black paused, and several reporters allowed their eyes to drift in Rita Skeeter’s general direction, just to see how she would react. Typically, though, she only smiled, tapping one green manicured nail against the quill in her hand.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, you know my story. I spent ten years as a prisoner, five of which were in Azkaban. I have faced things that you would probably not believe, even were I to tell you, and I have survived. I am not insane. No insane man would have escaped Azkaban.

“Nor am I what you have been led to believe. I will admit to nightmares, something anyone who has ever been near a Dementor can understand. I will admit that I have been changed by my experiences. But I will not admit to insanity, and I will not crumble under pressure. I have been fighting this war, in one way or another, since I was seventeen years old.” His blue eyes blazed. “And make no mistake about it—I will continue to do so. No matter what happens, I will fight Voldemort until the end.”

Silence reigned, and the assembled reporters couldn’t believe that Sirius Black, prisoner of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named for ten years, would dare say the name ‘Voldemort.’ There were so many who feared to do so, yet the man who had been face to face with that horror for a decade did not.

Either he was insane, or he had a kind of courage that they weren’t accustomed to seeing.

Black let them sit in that silence for a long moment, allowing his words to sink in until they began to understand. Finally, he continued in a quieter voice. “This concludes my statement. I will now take questions.”

Another silent heartbeat passed, and then the room exploded. Reporters vied for his attention through shouting, waving their arms in the air, or, in a few cases, shooting sparks with their wands. Those foolish few who tried the latter were quickly calmed by the dozen Aurors who ringed the conference room, who discouraged further efforts by promising to expel any who made use of magic. The Aurors’ presence, though, wasn’t merely to preserve order. They were clearly on hand to protect Sirius Black, directed by none other than James Potter himself, who stood quietly at the back of the room. Out of all the Aurors, he was the closest to Black, which reminded several reporters that they were old friends.

Finally, Black pointed out a willowy looking witch, who shot him a dazzling smile before speaking. “Belinda Caldrum, The Sunday Seer,” she identified herself. “Now that you are free, what are you going to do now, Mr. Black?”

“As most of you know, I used to be an Auror,” he responded. “And I’ve talked the matter over with the head of the Division. I plan to reenter the field.”

“But wouldn’t you say that you’ve already done your part?” Caldrum asked.

“This isn’t a war where one can simply ‘do their part’,“ Black replied. “And I’m not the type to sit on the sidelines.”
“What about the rumors that the Ministry doesn’t believe you?” one wizard shouted.

“If there are such rumors, no one has dared say them to my face.” He quirked a smile, and there seemed to be a hint of something dangerous in his eyes, but it passed before any of the gathered witches and wizards could be sure. He pointed to another witch.

“Doris Macintosh, Witch Weekly,” she piped up immediately. “I’m sure there are many witches out there who are wondering if you have any current romantic interests. Is there someone special, Mr. Black?”

Black gave a lopsided smile that the photographers were quick to take advantage of. “No. Not at the moment.”

“Eric Dummingston, Daily Prophet,” another identified himself. “As an outside observer, what do you think of the Ministry’s chances in the war?”

“I think we’ll win.”

The bold statement didn’t faze Dummingston a bit. He wasn’t the most famous reporter in the Wizarding world for nothing, after all. “Why is that?”

“Because we have to,” Black said evenly. “And although I’m hardly an unbiased observer, because it’s never too late. I’m living proof that Voldemort is not invincible.”

“Mr. Black, how is that you can bear to say the name of You-Know-Who after so many years in his hands?” Albert Addams of Wizard’s Digest asked. “Are you not afraid to do so?”

Black’s face closed off. “Fear will kill you in Azkaban.”

“And how was your time in Azkaban?”

All eyes swiveled to face the speaker, and she smiled sweetly. “Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet,” she identified herself needlessly. There was an ominous moment of silence, and then she added, “And how did you escape?”

Black’s face had grown pale, although if that was from anger or emotion none could tell. Finally, he spoke through clenched teeth, having obviously made a great effort to keep his temper in control.

“I am afraid,” he said in short, clipped tones, “that I must decline to answer either one of those questions. The first because it is my business, and mine alone, and the second because as interesting as the subject is, that’s a secret I’d like to save for later use.”

However, although his response was polite enough, the acid gaze he pointed in Skeeter’s direction was enough to make her shiver and wilt. Unable to meet his eyes, the reporter turned away, attempting to smile and failing miserably. At the same time, Black stepped back from the podium.

“Good day, Ladies and Gentlemen. I thank you for your time.”

“Nicely done, Padfoot,” James said when they were alone again. Now, however, the two were deep
in the Auror Division’s headquarters in the Ministry, walking down the hall amid curious glances.  “Too bad Remus had to be at Hogwarts this morning.  He’d have liked to see that.  Might have said something about you finally having matured, too.”

“And too bad Peter would be mobbed if he set foot anywhere near the press,” Sirius agreed quietly, ignoring the joke.  His head was still reeling from the effort of appearing so calm and controlled before so many strangers, but it had been easier than he’d expected it to be.  The conference had been necessary, of course—he wouldn’t have ever done it otherwise—but it had been hard.  Only the knowledge of his friends’ undying support let him pull that one off.

“How are you doing?”

“All right, I guess,” he admitted.  “It could have been worse.”

“Yeah,” James agreed.  “I thought Skeeter had you there.”

“I was ready for her,” Sirius replied sourly.  “This time.”

It was strange walking through the Division again.  Once, he’d spent nearly eighteen hours a day in this place, working desperately to arrest Voldemort’s ascension to power.  He’d been working solo sometimes, or partnered with his old Mentor, Alastor Moody.  After that, he’d been partnered with James, and boy had the two of them wreaked havoc together… The memories, although trying at times, were good.  Now, though, complete strangers sat at familiar desks.  Sirius swallowed, feeling out of place.

“So, how soon do you want to start?” James suddenly asked.

“Beg pardon?”

“Re-orientation training,” his friend clarified.  “Unless you’ve changed your mind since our conversation this morning.”

“No.  I haven’t,” Sirius responded quickly.  He shrugged an apology.  “My mind was elsewhere.”

“I can tell.”

“Then whenever you’re ready for me,” he answered.  A part of him almost regretted not taking Remus’ offer, then, but that idea faded quickly enough.  He needed to fight, needed to be a part of this.  He’d been away too long.

“This way.”

James led him to a mid-sized cubicle in which a slim, black-haired witch sat reading her way through a pile of reports.  She was rosy cheeked, yet her bland features were somewhat severe with concentration, until James cleared his throat and she looked up.  The witch rose immediately.

“This is Hestia Jones.  She’ll be conducting your re-orientation training,” James said.  “Hestia, this is Sirius Black.”

Sirius held out a hand.  “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Her grip was firm, but he read doubt in her eyes.  Inwardly, Sirius sighed.  He supposed that he would get that a lot, but that didn’t make it any less irritating.  Clearly, she thought he was going to be a lot of work.
He smiled slightly. Obviously, he’d have to prove her wrong.

There was a knock, and Arabella Figg looked up from the gargantuan pile of paperwork on her
desk. Anything was worth the relief. “Come in!”

Surprisingly enough, it was Alice Longbottom, a senior Auror who, although one of ‘Bella’s good
friends, rarely came to visit due to both their heavy schedules. “Sorry to bother you, ‘Bella.”

“It’s no bother,” Figg assured her. “I was hoping for a break, anyway. Sit down, please.”

Alice sat, extending a manila folder as she did so. “James thought you should see this right away.”

Arabella accepted the file immediately, glancing at the name engraved on its edge. Much to her
surprise, it read Bartemius Crouch, Junior. The Head of the DMLE looked up in surprise. “What’s
this about?”

“A few weeks ago, we received an anonymous tip about the young Mr. Crouch. At first, it seemed
only to be a prank, but James assigned a junior Auror to poke around anyway, and things started to
pan out. So I took the case and have had a team tailing Junior for twenty-one days. The evidence is
solid, ‘Bella. He’s a Death Eater.”

“A what?” Arabella felt her own jaw drop. “Crouch’s son?”

“It surprised me, too. He’s always seemed like a nice boy,” Alice replied. “But I’ve back checked
everything, and one of my men managed to follow him to a Death Eater revel. He’s one of them.”

Arabella blinked slowly, flipping through the file as the facts lined up in her head. “This is going to
be a godawful mess,” she remarked quietly.

“The Deputy Minister’s son, I know,” her friend replied. “If it’s any consolation, we don’t think
Crouch Senior knows.”

“Oh, great,” she sighed. This was going to create a media heyday on the Ministry, Arabella knew;
the last thing they needed was for a senior Ministry member’s son to turn out to be a Death Eater.
Still, she believed Alice. Alice Longbottom had always been one of the best, right from the
beginning. And she had been especially dedicated to the job ever since Frank had been captured.
“I’m going to have to look at this for awhile. Just to make sure.”

“I understand.” Alice shrugged tolerantly. “James said to tell you that he’ll be around later to talk
about it.”

“Thanks.”
“As you know, Auror Training has seven basic sections,” Hestia Jones began in a dry voice. “Before the war, these sections, combined with Basic Auror Training and the Mentorship Phase took three years to complete. Now, the entire process is squeezed into a one-year period because we lose Aurors faster than we can train their replacements. With you, the process will be even shorter.

“Most Aurors that leave the field never come back. Most aren’t even alive to do so,” she continued. “So, you are somewhat of a unique case, especially given that you have been gone for so long. Also, I expect your basic spell work to have suffered a great deal while you were a prisoner, so we’re going to really have to go back to the beginning.”

Sirius shifted slightly in his chair, but remained silent, biting back an impatient reply. Jones, of course, droned on as if she hadn’t seen a thing.

“Accordingly, we’ll spend a couple weeks working on simple spells, slowly working our way up to more advanced magic. After that, I’ve organized a weeklong crash course for each of the seven sections, starting with Concealment and Disguise and ending with Combat Curses. Then you’ll be tested in each of the sections to ensure that you’re up to Auror Standards. Assuming that works out,” (and nothing in her voice made Sirius think she was willing to believe that it would) “you will be partnered with an experienced Auror for six months.”

“So let me get this straight,” Sirius said slowly. “I’ll be spending almost three months retraining, and then undergo a second Mentorship for another six?”

He tried to keep the irritation out of his voice, but he wasn’t sure if Jones would have noticed it anyway. Her answer was simple: “Precisely.”

“I don’t have nine months.”

Only then did she seem to notice that he wasn’t happy about this. “I beg your pardon?”

“I said that I don’t have nine months to waste,” Sirius replied with icy precision. “And neither does the Division.”

“Forgive me for believing that your contribution is not going to make the difference between life and death for the entire Auror Division,” she remarked sarcastically.

Sirius bit back his temper; right now, it was the absolute last thing he needed. “I never said it would,” he retorted. “But there are a few things I can tell you for certain. One: Voldemort wants me, and he’s willing to tear apart all kinds of things to do it. Two: my basic spell work does not need refreshing. I’ve fought two separate duels in the last three days, and come out on top both times. Three: I’m not insane or inept, and there’s nothing wrong with my memory. I might have spent the last ten years as a prisoner, but I do remember how to fight.”

“Are you finished yet?” Jones demanded coldly.

“Should I be?” Sirius shot back, not willing to give an inch, and was rewarded by anger flashing in her eyes.

“Quite frankly, I don’t care what you know or don’t know,” Jones snapped. “My job is to retrain you, and that means we do it my way, or not at all. If you don’t like that, you can leave now.”
“Sirius stood up and left the cubicle without a word.”

“So what do we have here, Perkins?” Arthur asked curiously, having just Apparated onto the scene.

“Interesting one, actually,” his colleague replied. “Seems that old Martook had an enchanted Muggle yacht in addition to all his other gadgets and tricks.”

“Yes, but what do we do with it?” Arthur asked worriedly, scratching his head. “It’s not simply as if we can fly this back to the Ministry. Where will we put it?”

Arthur and Perkins were currently investigating the estate of the late Dennis Martook, and the process was taking days. Of course, ever since Arthur’s promotion, he hadn’t really been required to go into the field for investigative work, but he found it simply fascinating. Martook’s estate had certainly been no exception, either; in fact, it was turning into the most outrageous raid Arthur had ever even heard of. First it had been exploding telephones and random channel-changing televisions. Then the pair had started finding biting ceiling fans and ejecting trash bins; things had only gotten worse when Perkins had tripped over the self-digging shovel. After that Arthur had stumbled into a door that had kicked him clean out of the house, at which point his attention had been drawn to Perkins, who was shouting down by the waterfront.

Martook had lived in Aberdeen before his death, right on the beach. It wasn’t a very popular area amongst magical folk, which probably explained how he could get away with enchanting nearly every Muggle item in his entire house. That, and any wizard would have known that boat—What did Perkins call it, a yetch? Arthur wondered—wasn’t exactly normal.

“I dunno. We could leave it here, maybe,” Perkins answered with a shrug, but inspiration suddenly struck Arthur, and he wasn’t listening.

“Does it have a motor, do you think?” he wondered breathlessly.

Perkins laughed (he was Muggleborn and understood these things better than Arthur could ever hope to). “Of course it’s got a motor. Does this luxury boat look like its got sails?”

Arthur ignored the sarcasm and jumped aboard. This was going to be interesting!

“James, we have a problem.”

Sirius had walked straight into his friend’s office without bothering to knock and closed the door behind himself. He sat down in the chair before the rather nice looking wood desk—Sirius hadn’t been in James’ office since it belonged to Moody, and couldn’t help but notice the austerity the room now sported—and looked his old friend in the eye. For his part, James looked at Sirius as if he’d
grown a second head.

“What?”

“Jones,” Sirius spat.

James took a deep breath before peering closely at him. “What happened, Sirius?”

“She happened!” With an effort, he reined in his irritation. “Hestia Jones and her nine month long ‘retraining’ program.”

“She—what? Nine months? What in the name of Merlin are you talking about?”

“Yeah,” he responded bitterly. He was so sick of people treating him as if he was made of glass. “Apparently, I’m inept as well as off my rocker.”

“I know Hestia would never say that,” his friend pointed out.

“All right, so she didn’t say that. But she sure as hell implied it.”

“Is it at all possible that you misunderstood?”

Sirius sighed. “Look, I know you said she’s a good Auror and all, and I don’t doubt that. In fact, I bet she’s even a nice lady, too”—Cold as a fish, but I’ll give her the benefit of the doubt—“but she wants me to do a three month crash course followed by a six month Mentorship. For God’s sake, James, I was about to start Mentoring people myself before I became your Secret Keeper!”

“I know, Sirius, I know,” James reassured him, holding up his hands in surrender. “Don’t bite my head off here.”

“Sorry.” He reined his temper in again with an effort. Doing so was getting harder with every minute, and Sirius didn’t know what he’d do if James started doubting him, too.

His friend waved off the apology. “All right. What exactly did Hestia say?”

“In a nutshell, I think she believes everything that Skeeter said.” Sirius shook his head and resisted the urge to employ very foul language. Whether it would be aimed at the irritating Auror or the nosy reporter he didn’t quite know; however, nor did he care. “She started talking about going back to the basics and reviewing every little bit of Auror Training—a broom load of junk I don’t need to do. I’ve been studying on my own, and I know my weaknesses. My reflexes are shot to hell, and I’m short on complicated spells. I’ve also simply got to work on combat reactions and simply find out how I react under pressure. I don’t need to read Miranda Goshawk’s Standard Book of Spells.”

James chuckled. “Did you ever read that, mate?”

“Sure, when I was about six.” Sirius finally cracked a smile. People like Jones simply drove him crazy; he couldn’t stand not to be believed anymore. He hadn’t escaped from Azkaban to be called a liar, and it was really beginning to get on his nerves.

They grinned, both remembering days spent under one singular tree, some of which were stupider than others, but all of which were memorable. But the shared nostalgia of the moment couldn’t last forever; there was a war on, now, and neither of them were children anymore. Unfortunately, reality always intervened. Finally, James replied,

“I’ll talk to her, Sirius. You’re right in saying that she’s giving you an awfully hard time about this,
“Nice to know Figg believes in me so much,” Sirius growled, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice. James, however, was having none of that.

“She’s got reason to doubt you, you realize. ‘Bella doesn’t know you as well as I do, and this does seem like a miracle. So do the tests as fast as you can, and maybe then we can start working on Azkaban.”

This was the very first time that either of them had ever referred to the prison in such a context, and Sirius saw James’ eyes center on him worriedly. It was clear that his friend hadn’t meant to mention it so soon, but Sirius nodded with conviction. “Definitely.”

Relief blossomed on his friend’s face, but a shadow of doubt corrupted it. “I don’t want to push you,” James said quietly.

“You’re worried that I would want anything to remind me of the place, aren’t you? That I’d want to stay away from it at all costs?” Sirius asked.

“It’s happened before,” the Auror pointed out.

“I’m not Dung Fletcher, James,” he replied, taking a steadying breath he hoped his friend didn’t see. “While I understand his choices, I think they’re the wrong ones. I’ll never heal if I hide. And I can’t hide forever, at any rate.”

Not with the way Voldemort wants me, he didn’t say, but the point was made all the same. And maybe James did see the breath and pause he’d had to take to reassure himself. It didn’t really matter. Friends, Sirius had long ago learned, didn’t look down on you because of what you had to be. On roads that needed taking, they were willing to walk by your side—not matter how long or how dark the path might be. He smiled slightly, and was surprised to feel that it wasn’t really forced.

“I had to be sure,” James said.

“I understand.”

Arabella Figg came storming into the Minister of Magic’s office, her robes swirling around her like a hurricane. Her abrupt arrival startled even Lily and made Fawkes screech irritably when she crashed into Dumbledore’s inner sanctum, slamming the door shut behind herself. Had it been possible, she was certain that steam would have been blowing out of her ears.

“He’s gone,” she seethed. Fury made her words short and clipped, and definitely grabbed Dumbledore’s attention. The venerable wizard peered carefully up at her over the rims of his glasses.

“Sit down, Arabella,” he said quietly. “Who is gone?”
She remained standing with a shake of her head and resisted the urge to break something. “Crouch. Junior,” she spat. “My people brought him into custody today and now he is gone. Vanished. Disappeared straight out of a maximum security cell.”

“Oh, dear.”

“Is that all you can say?” she demanded, glaring at her superior. “A Death Eater is gone and you say ‘oh dear’?”

Albus looked at her with suddenly alert blue eyes. “Sit down, Arabella,” he repeated quietly, but now his voice was harder and booked no argument. She did so, and his eyes focused on her. “I have much more to say, my friend, as you well know,” he replied. “However, I prefer not to jump to conclusions. Tell me what happened.”

She took a deep breath and organized her angry thoughts. Of all people, Arabella Figg knew that losing her temper wasn’t a good way to operate anything; unfortunately, that didn’t change the fact that it was often hard to control it. As a child, she’d had an explosive temper, especially back in the days when her parents had been convinced that she was a Squib. A chance accident had helped her to avoid that fate, however, and years fighting against Dark wizards had taught her not to lose control of her anger. At moments like this, though, flying into a rage would have felt very good.

“Crouch was brought in early this morning by a team of very experienced Aurors, led by Alice Longbottom. He was incarcerated shortly after the Black press conference”—Arabella didn’t have to say what she felt about that one—“and placed in our highest security cell. Shortly after noon, his father showed up, demanding to see the evidence against him.”

Dumbledore’s face darkened. “And what happened then?”

“He was allowed to see the same evidence I showed you last night,” she replied immediately. “As you know, the facts are overwhelming. Crouch Senior was not happy, but he couldn’t argue. Unfortunately, the then demanded the right to visit his son, which the Aurors on duty granted”—she grimaced—“and left shortly afterwards.”

“And then the son escaped,” the Minister finished gravely for her.

“Yes. Two hours to the minute after his father left.” She bit her lip to contain the sarcastic comment that the coincidence warranted. “Which was about fifteen minutes ago.”

“I see.”

“Yeah, so do I,” ‘Bella commented darkly. “I don’t believe in coincidences, Albus.”

Dumbledore frowned deeply, and she knew what he was about to say. Barty Crouch was the Deputy Minister of Magic and a wizard of no insignificant power in his own right. That power was not simply magical, either; much of it could be derived from the influence and political authority he wielded. It would not do Dumbledore any good to go chasing after his deputy with false charges; rather, that would only give Crouch the excuse he wanted to remove the Minister from power and take his place, which they both knew would spell disaster for the Wizarding world. However, there were also some things that could not be allowed to continue. Finally, Dumbledore sighed.

“Investigate quietly, ‘Bella,” he said. “Use the Order’s resources where you can. I’d prefer to avoid a scandal.”

“Consider it done.”
Dumbledore nodded, suddenly seeming much older than he had in years. His voice was quiet and heavy. “Thank you.”

Late that afternoon, a bone-tired Sirius Black headed for the Ministry’s outbound fireplaces. He’d been working exercises all day in the Auror Division’s carefully designed Testing Rooms, pushing his memory and reflexes to the limits. He was very thankful for those practice chambers, each of which contained a network of carefully worked spells that could be activated at a number of different levels of difficulty, allowing an Auror (or candidate) to concentrate on spell work, dueling reflexes, and combat technique. In the absence of Hestia Jones, whom he strongly suspected was very unhappy with him, he’d worked hard. Too hard, probably.

But it felt good, in an odd sort of way. Even though Sirius had to now dedicate ninety percent of his concentration to not heavily favoring his right leg, a sense of accomplishment filled him. Pain, he knew, wouldn’t last forever, and sweat in training equaled less blood in combat. Therefore, Sirius could deal with a lot of sweat.

He smiled slightly, remembering the many times Alastor Moody had pounded those words into his skull. Of course, Sirius had an uncommonly thick skull, but Moody had gotten the point across with his customary efficiency. He’d simply drilled Sirius over and over again, pushing and pushing until the importance of training was something his student could understand even in his sleep. His influence hadn’t waned, either; Sirius was still pushing himself as far as he could go, knowing that he needed to know his limits now, and that finding them out in combat would be disastrous. Even dead and gone, Alastor, “Mad-Eye” Moody’s influence lingered

He was too preoccupied with reminiscences to notice the approaching witch until it was too late. “Doris Macintosh, *Witch Weekly*,” she introduced herself, bustling forward. He recognized her curly blonde hair and blue eyes from the press conference that morning, of course, but was at a loss to figure out how or why she was approaching him now. But Macintosh immediately held out a hand, which Sirius took against his better judgment.

Instincts honed in Azkaban told him that this was a time to flee, but he resisted the urge. He was in the real world, now, and couldn’t run away from reporters—although he’d rather face a Death Eater any day. At least he knew exactly where they stood. *And no one will yell at me if I hex them, either.*

“Miss Macintosh,” he replied warily, drawing his hand from her grip as soon as politely possible. Not for the first time, Sirius wished strangers still didn’t make him so uneasy.

“I’m so glad I caught you, Mr. Black,” she gushed, turning a dazzling smile on him. Her teeth were rather too white, Sirius thought; they blazed. “I spoke to my editors following the press conference this morning, and we have decided to award you *Witch Weekly*’s Most Charming Smile Award.”

“I beg your pardon?” Sirius stared at her, certain he’d heard wrong.

Macintosh shoved a picture towards him. It had been taken earlier that morning, captured in the one moment when he’d smiled lopsidedly in response to a question about if he was currently in a romantic relationship of any sort. “The Most Charming Smile Award,” she replied. “Surely you’ve heard of it.”
“I have been gone for ten years,” he reminded her dryly. “And before that, I did not exactly spend my time reading witch’s magazines.”

“I’m so sorr—”

“No matter.” Sirius waved the apology off. He was getting so sick of hearing it. She smiled gratefully, not knowing that another one of those blistering grins would make him sick.

“Well, anyway, I just wanted to let you know that you will be featured on the cover of tomorrow’s issue of *Witch Weekly*,” Macintosh continued brightly.

*Can I refuse?* Sirius wondered, trying not to laugh at the absurdity of it all. *I escape from Azkaban, and the award I get is for the ‘Most Charming Smile’? The world really has gone mad.* Instead, though, he replied as politely as he was able. “Thanks.”

To his ears, the response didn’t sound very nice at all, but evidently it was good enough for her. With another brilliant smile (making Sirius want to throw up the undigested remains of his lunch), Doris Macintosh rushed away, oblivious to the rest of the world’s concerns and quite satisfied with herself. Sirius watched her go with a bemused expression on his face, finally shrugging his shoulders and continuing on his way. In a few minutes, he’d be back at Hogwarts and able to pretend this was all just another bad dream.

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“Do you still wonder about the world outside?” Frank asked quietly.

Bill blinked at the unexpected query. “Yeah. Why do you ask?”

“Just wondering,” his companion replied. “It’s a way to make sure that you’re still sane…the mad ones don’t think about home much.”

Images of his family flashed through his mind. One by one, Bill saw his parents’ faces, then Percy and the twins, then Ron and Ginny—and finally Charlie’s. *Charlie.* Sadness welled up inside him, but Bill pushed it away. Oftentimes the Dementors centered on that horrible memory of the day Arabella Figg had come to tell the Weasleys that their son had been slain… Sometimes he had wondered why James hadn’t come himself, but now Bill understood. Having come to know the senior Auror quite well during the long days leading up to Operation Icebreaker, he had come to know a lot more about James Potter than was simply presented in his public image. He knew that having been Charlie’s Mentor, James had been heartbroken by his loss.

Sometimes he wondered if Charlie could see him now. If so, Bill hoped he could make him proud.

“Forgetting must be hell,” he finally breathed.

“The longer you’re here, the harder it gets to remember,” Frank remarked. His scratchy voice was bitter, now.

“What do you think about?” Bill asked on impulse.

A long pause followed his question, and for a moment he began to wish he hadn’t asked. Frank, he
knew, had been in Azkaban much longer than he; perhaps he was speaking from experience and had a hard time remembering better times or the world outside. Maybe Frank was so quiet because he feared that he was going insane—

“I think about my family,” the other replied softly. “I wonder how my son is doing...”

Midnight, in the Wizarding world, was usually considered an ominous hour. Ever since the beginning of the war, the deep hours of darkness had spelled evil, and good witches and wizards had feared the night. Accordingly, most stayed inside at such sinister hours, asleep if possible. Bad things happened at midnight, and few wanted to be a part of that. Midnight, they said, was when the Death Eaters came out to play.

Midnight was definitely not the ideal time for spring cleaning.

“KREACHER!”

Remus’ patience had finally snapped, and his wand was out, pointed at the degenerate house elf in an unwavering threat. “If you even think about letting that boggart out, I swear by all that’s holy I will hex you into the next century!”

Far to the left and busy wrestling with an umbrella rack, Sirius laughed. “Unbelievable, isn’t he?”

“I thought you were joking,” Remus snarled, still pointing his wand at Kreacher, who was mumbling furiously under his breath.

“The werewolf is talking to Kreacher as if Kreacher cares what such a beast has to say—”

“Kreacher, if you say another word, I will give you clothes!” Sirius bellowed, cutting the house elf off. Big and watery eyes focused on him, then, but he glared, striding towards the Black family servant. He left the umbrella rack to deal with itself. “Just try me.”

“Master must do as Master wishes.” Kreacher bowed miserably low and then started mumbling. “Oh, Kreacher’s poor mistress would hate to see this. Traitors and freaks and monsters defiling her house...”

“Oh, I’ve had it with this,” Remus spat all of a sudden, more impatient than Sirius had ever seen him. “I’ll be right back.”

Crack. Remus Apparated away, leaving Sirius to stare and Kreacher to mumble. Finally, Sirius turned to the house elf. “You sure do have a way with people, don’t you?”

Kreacher glared at him in sullen silence.

“Where’d Remus go?” James asked, walking in with Peter. Both of them were covered in dust and muck, having been waging war on Number 12, Grimmauld Place for the past four hours and having made as little progress as Sirius and Remus had in the Drawing Room.

“Good question,” Sirius replied as Kreacher snuck out the door his friends had entered through. “The little monster must have peeved him something mighty, though. He said he’d be right back.”
“Remus, angry?” Peter chuckled. “Too bad I missed it.”

“I think Kreacher offends his sense of order,” James replied with a smile. “Merlin knows, I couldn’t abide a house elf like that.”

“I told you my mum was a bit off, mate.”

“Yeah, so we gathered from that screeching portrait in the hallway,” Peter commented. “Lily is still doing war with it.”

“Lily versus my mum?” Sirius grinned. “I almost feel sorry for the old bat. Almost.”

“I don’t,” James responded darkly. “I’d have blasted that damn portrait into smithereens if Lily hadn’t stopped me. You should have heard what she was calling Lily…” A baffled look crossed James’ face. “But Lily was laughing at her. No offense, Sirius, but you mother was a nutter.”

But Sirius only snorted. “I did warn you, but this was your idea, I do recall.”

“You agreed, Padfoot.”

“With reservations.”

“Reservations, hell!” Peter snickered. “This will be a great house as soon as it’s cleaned up a bit.”

“A bit?” James snorted.

Sirius rolled his eyes and responded to Peter. His voice was grim. “You didn’t have to live here growing up, Wormtail. It was different then.”

Everything was different then. Sirius still remembered running away from home at sixteen and vowing to never return. He’d hated this place, then, as beautiful, ancient, and splendid as the house was. For Sirius, Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, represented a family history that he had been struggling all of his life to overcome: one of prejudice, arrogance, and darkness. He hadn’t really wanted to come back, even when he’d learned of his mother’s death and the fact that he inherited the house. Only James and Remus’ insistence had brought him back, and when the five of them had visited for the first time early that evening, Sirius had been almost ready to give up. Not only was the place a mess, but it also reminded him of things best left forgotten.

He took a deep breath and glanced over at the tapestry on the far wall. The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. He couldn’t deny that there were good people there, too, and good memories mixed in with the bad—but both were far outnumbered by darkness and evil. Sirius sighed. Maybe he’d leave the tapestry there. Maybe he’d leave it up as a reminder of the past he’d chosen to overcome, and the history that made him what he was. Forces had shaped and changed him throughout his life, and not all of them were good. Perhaps his family’s history was a good lesson to remember.

At any rate, his family’s was a good tradition to break.

Pop. Remus suddenly appeared in front of them; the Anti-Apparition wards around the house were so old that Sirius had taken them down entirely. He’d fix them whenever he moved in, along with all the other decaying defenses that the house sported. However, even he couldn’t argue with the advantages of having an Unplottable home, especially when Voldemort was hunting him so madly. And he did appreciate the irony of returning to here as the last Black, especially after his mother swore he’d never amount to anything.

“Welcome back,” Sirius said with amusement. “Where did you go?”
“Recruiting.”

_Crack._

The other three looked at Remus strangely.

_Crack._

Sirius frowned, trying to figure out what was going on. In the background, he heard his mother’s portrait screeching at Lily, who was obviously still winning.

_Crack. Crack. Crack. Crack._

A veritable army of house elves had appeared around their friend, who was grinning like a madman. “I suddenly had an epiphany,” Remus explained gravely. “And I realized that we have been expending quite a lot of unnecessary effort.”

“You went to Hogwarts.” Realization dawned on James’ face.

“That I did.” Remus grinned. “By this time Wednesday, this house will be fit for human habitation.”

“Remus, you’re a bloody genius,” Sirius declared with feeling.

Hogwarts’ headmaster chuckled. “I am, aren’t I?”

“Oh, great. Now he’s going to get all egotistical about this,” Peter grumbled. But he was smiling, too. Anything that promised to free them from several weeks’ worth of work on that dammed house was worth cheering over.

“So.” Sirius cracked his knuckles. “Why don’t we go attack my mum, now? After all, I don’t think even _her_ portrait can stand up to the Marauders.”
“Welcome back to Hogwarts, Albus.” Remus smiled, holding out a hand, which his predecessor took warmly. “How are you?”

“Good, thank you.” Mischievous blue eyes twinkled. “And how are you, Headmaster? I hear you interviewed Dolores Umbridge this morning.”

Remus chuckled ruefully. “That was an interesting experience, I’ll admit,” he replied. “Dolores has many…ideas.”

“Indeed she does,” the Minister replied gruffly. “Between her and Fudge, one would think I am inept, senile, and completely incapable of running a sweets shop, let alone the Ministry and a war.”

“Rubbish.”

“True. But I am getting up there in age, you know.” Dumbledore smiled gently, but Remus peered at him curiously. Seeing that, the former headmaster waved a hand in the air to signify that his comment was of no importance. “Don’t mind me,” he said cheerfully. “These are simply the ramblings of an old man.”

“I doubt that,” Remus contradicted him quietly. “You always have an ulterior motive.”

“And so I do,” Dumbledore agreed. “Will you take a walk with me, Remus? I have a sudden urge to explore the castle.”

“Of course.” They had been standing just inside Hogwarts’ great front entranceway, but they moved off together, with Remus allowing Dumbledore to set the direction and the pace of their travels. Although his predecessor was well known for being eccentric and even slightly odd, Remus knew him too well. He knew that Dumbledore hardly ever did anything without a purpose. Finally, as they walked down an empty staircase, Remus continued quietly. “I suppose the meeting about Ministry teaching guidelines was merely an excuse?”

“Perceptive as always, I see, Professor.”

He shrugged. “I thought that seemed a little fishy.”

Dumbledore smiled and merely led him deeper into the castle. As they walked, portraits cried out greetings to both current headmaster and old, and suits of armor snapped to attention, saluting as the two wizards strolled past. For Remus, the journey was like a scene out of memory; he remembered taking one just like this the day that Dumbledore had asked him to take his place at Hogwarts. There was no one, he remembered Albus saying, that he would rather trust with his school and his students. Those were words that Remus would never forget, especially coming from the first man who had trusted him for who he was, and had given him a chance regardless of the beast that lived inside.

As they walked, Remus noticed the ease of their travel. Although the castle was always more accommodating for its head, Hogwarts was still an old place with a great deal of personality. Staircases had a tendency to move without notice simply because they wanted to, depositing travelers—even headmasters—in places they did not want to be. However, this time the staircases were lining themselves up perfectly, often moving to fit in the line of Dumbledore’s chosen path as if commanded to do so.
“What are you doing? he asked quietly. This was something Remus had never seen before, and as well as he knew the castle, had not thought possible.

“You shall see.”

Remus arched an eyebrow, fighting the urge to tell Dumbledore that he wasn’t a child anymore. However, he resisted; he was old enough to know that the old man only did things for a reason, and he could wait. Smiling, he corrected himself.

“Perhaps the question I ought to ask is where we are going.”

“You always did as the smart questions,” the former headmaster remarked. “Tell me, Remus, have you ever heard of the Founders’ Door?”

He nodded immediately. “We found it during second year. There’s nothing there.”

Dumbledore’s silver eyebrows rose in silent query.

“But,” Remus corrected himself slowly, “nothing that we could see.”

“Right again, Remus.”

They traveled in comfortable silence down two more flights of stairs and into the very bowels of the school. This had been the place of many meetings and practical jokes in Remus’ youth. In the days before the Marauder’s Map and their discovery of all the secret passageways, the basement levels had been the best, and darkest, places that the Marauders could hide. But their interest had waned, eventually, as the four boys turned on to bigger and better game; even the discovery of the Founders’ Door had not whetted their appetites.

The Founders’ Door was one of Hogwarts’ more minor legends. Long ago, it was said, the Founders—together, before difference and time split them apart—built a door deep in the castle to protect their greatest treasure. This door was said to be unbreachable by any except the Founders’ chosen few, protected by the strongest concealment spells and wards that witches and wizards could create. Legend never told what was beyond the great door, of course, but rumors abounded. Some said riches, others power, and still more said knowledge. Once, it had even been rumored that the Philosopher’s Stone lay behind the Founders’ Door.

There was only one problem.

Remus stopped and studied the ancient door. It appeared little different from how it had two decades previously; the wood was rotted away in most places, leaving only half the original door in place. The bottommost hinge was gone, and the brass fittings that had once adorned the wood were rusted and discolored beyond recognition. The Founders’ Door could no longer close, let alone lock; whatever treasure lay beyond it had been long since carted away. Barely viewable in faded letters above the arched doorway were the words “Leve fit, quod bene fertur, onus.” They made Remus smile at the mystery, just as they always had.

“Shall we?” Albus asked, and Remus nodded mutely, following his old headmaster through the Founders’ Door.

“Welcome to the heart of Hogwarts,” Dumbledore said quietly once they were inside. The chamber was full of discarded and decrepit furniture that had been seemingly rotting away for centuries, some pieces of which Remus could not even begin to identify. It, too, hadn’t changed since Remus and his fellow Marauders had wandered this way; the room was just another basement chamber, full of
rubbish and dirt and dust.

“The heart of Hogwarts?” he echoed.

“Indeed.” Dumbledore turned to face him. “Legends tell, I know, of the Founders’ Door and how it was built to protect the four founders’ greatest treasures. Over the past one thousand years, this has brought many to Hogwarts, seeking riches, enlightenment, or power. However, they have each encountered the same thing you see today: nothing. What they never understood was that the founders’ greatest treasure was their students, nothing more.”

Realization dawned on Remus. “The door was built to protect those outside from what was within, not the other way around.”

“Very good. In my Hogwarts days, this chamber was considered something of a great cosmic joke. Secret meetings and duels took place down here far more often than anywhere else, and like so many others, I came to disbelieve all of the legends. Such was my mistake.”

Slowly, Dumbledore walked to the very center of the room, raising his wand. When he reached a perfectly round and remarkably intact table, he stopped. A sudden flick of his wand banished the table, though, and left a gapping circular hole in its place. There was a grate over the opening.

“This grate and the wards were not here when I was a child,” he said. “All the evidence that I have been able to discover leads me to believe that my teachers shared our skepticism over the legends, and never thought to check this room. But this is a Font of Power.”

“I didn’t know such things still existed,” Remus said in amazement, and his heart flipped over in his chest as he contemplated what that meant for his school.

“To my knowledge, this is the only one remaining in the world,” Dumbledore replied. “Hogwarts was built upon it, as this is an ancient site of magic, and the founders built their door to shield the students from its powers—and the dangers inherent in any such power. For a student to fall into the font would be…disastrous.

“As I found out in my first year at Hogwarts.”

Remus gaped. “You?”

“Yes.” Dumbledore smiled slightly. “A group of us were practicing hexes and charms down here—meaning no harm, but simply being reckless children. There was an illusion over the Font, then, but only to keep us away from it. The enchantment was very old by then, and not too effective. When I failed to block a Hurling Hex, I was thrown into the Font. I still live with the effects to this day.”

“You survived falling into a Font of Power?” Remus asked incredulously.

“I did,” the legendary wizard replied quietly. “As must you.”
“Death Eaters firing spells at me.”

“It is an entirely possible situation.”

“Then I’ll just run,” Sirius countered, crossing his arms.

“You can’t always run,” Jones retorted levelly.

“And you can’t dodge forever, either.” He resisted the urge to roll his eyes, and struggled to remind himself that Hestia Jones was eight years younger than he was. When he’d started Auror training, she’d only been in her first year at Hogwarts; Jones simply hadn’t seen the things he had. She’d been in the field, of course, and was good, too—her talent showed through even in moments like this—but she hadn’t encountered the same darkness Sirius had. She didn’t know, and he doubted that she’d ever stared failure in the face and known she was caught.

Hell, she’d probably never even been on a failed mission, judging from her attitude.

“And you can’t allow pain to distract you, no matter what,” Jones replied.

Sirius growled under his breath and hauled himself forward to face her closely, trying not to favor his game leg too much, even though it throbbed like mad. They’d been working a basic Auror exercise: avoiding spells when wandless—however, Jones had insisted that he keep going well beyond the normal time limit, and while Sirius had been doing very well, he’d rolled wrong once and landed hard on his right leg, which had thrown his timing off enough to get hit on the next pass.

“Look,” he snarled. “I would say that I know a great deal more about not allowing pain to be a distraction than you do, seeing where I came from and what I did to get to where I am. However, I also know that it’s not good to push the body beyond a certain limit unless you absolutely have to do so. I know all about working through pain, Jones. I’ve been doing it for ten years.”

Her dark eyes regarded him narrowly. “Are you telling me that you don’t feel the need to train as you would act in combat?”

“No.” Sirius met her glare inch for inch. “I’m telling you that there’s a line between training and stupidity.”

“And I suppose you know just where that line is, do you?”

“Obviously, I’m more acquainted with it than you are, since I’m damn good at being stupid,” Sirius snapped. He knew that he shouldn’t lose his temper, but Jones made it very hard, especially when she couldn’t control her own. He reined in his boiling anger with an effort. “I’m taking a walk.”

“We’re not finished yet,” she objected as he limped toward the door.

“I am.” Sirius glanced over his shoulder at her one last time. “Or else I’ll do something we’ll both regret.” Without waiting for a response, he strode out the door, heading out of the Ministry and towards sunlight.

“What?” Remus sputtered, staring at Dumbledore. But the old man only smiled sadly.
“When I fell into the Font, I found myself changed, Remus. Not only did the waters increase my
natural magical abilities, but they also linked me irrevocably to the castle itself. As a first year
student, I understood more about this castle, its secrets, corridors, and even passageways than any of
my professors, because Hogwarts itself seemed to speak to me. When there was trouble, I would
know before anyone else could because the castle would tell me—not with words, but I would
know.

“When I came back, first to teach and then as headmaster, I kept these abilities a secret. You are the
first person aside from Minerva McGonagall with whom I have ever shared this secret.”

“Why me?”

“Because you are in need of this link now, Remus,” Dumbledore responded. “I am certain you see
the importance of it. When Lord Voldemort attacked the school in 1984, it was my connection to the
castle that made him fail. The fact that he and I faced one another was completely accidental; neither
of us intended to do so. He wanted to shatter the castle’s defenses; I sought to preserve them. But
without my connection to the castle, through this Font, Hogwarts would have fallen.”

“But why now?” Remus asked. “Why not before?”

“Because there are other consequences to the font as well, ones I have been trying to understand for
my entire life. The visions I have, Remus, the bits and pieces and wavering glimpses of the future,
are not something I would wish upon anyone. They sometimes do more harm than good. Often, I
have wished that I could view the world through normal eyes, if simply to gain perspective that I no
longer have.” Dumbledore paused. “I think, however, that I have found a way for you to avoid the
most adverse affects of the Font.”

Remus’ mind was reeling with the new information it was trying to assimilate. He didn’t really
know much about Fonts of Power; only a few books ever even mentioned them because they were
considered to be more legend than fact. But from what he remembered, a Font was deadly if not
channeled correctly. Finally, he asked, “How?”

“I was submerged in the Font for almost twenty minutes,” Albus replied. “A much shorter time,
however, will be enough to link you permanently with the castle while hopefully not burdening you
with the visions as well.”

“Why were you in for so long?” he wondered.

“I was a boy, and my companions were as well. It took some time for them to remove me from the
well.”

“The well?”

“The opening to the Font. I know not what lies beneath it, for the Font is very deep, but you will
only enter the well, should you choose to do so at all,” Dumbledore replied.

Remus chewed cautiously on his lower lip, staring at the well. It was such an innocent looking hole
in the floor, if one did not count the grate, which seemed solid and sinister looking. That grate
represented a boundary. On this side was the life he’d always lived, simple and fairly
straightforward—and on the other lay a future unknown, containing powers that Remus did not even
understand. But was it even a choice? Upon inheriting Hogwarts from Dumbledore, he’d sworn to
protect the students at any and all costs, sacrificing heart and soul to do so if necessary, and Albus
wouldn’t have brought him here if he didn’t think this was necessary.
“Do you think it will affect my condition?” he finally asked, hating the tremor in his voice.

“No,” the other replied slowly. “If anything, I believe that the Font may give you more control over the wolf…but I am only guessing.”

Remus’ heart pounded in his throat, but he forced it down back to where it belonged in his chest. *That's only a guess*, he reminded himself firmly. *And this is dangerous enough without introducing false hope into the equation.* He took a deep breath and prepared to accept. Dumbledore, however, spoke first.

“You can refuse this if you wish, Remus. I will understand.”

“I know you would.” He smiled slightly. “But I also know why you brought me here…and this is worth the risks. You know that I’ll do anything to protect Hogwarts.”

“Very well then,” Dumbledore replied. The left side of his mouth curled up in a lopsided smile. “I suggest you leave your clothes behind, then, else you’ll emerge wearing nothing at all.”

Remus chuckled and began to disrobe. “I’ll take that under advisement, then.”

A flick of Dumbledore’s’s wand made the grate slide aside. “Only those who have been in the Font can move this grate,” he explained. “Someday, you may choose to do as I have done, and pass the powers to another. Choose carefully, though, and remember that if you die before you move this grate, there will never be another.”

“I understand.” The finality in Dumbledore’s voice sent a shiver running down his spine, but he looked at his predecessor. “Should I take my wand?”

“If you did, it would also be destroyed. After one minute, I will raise you from the Font.”

Remus handed over his wand, which he had no intention of losing—ever. Stepping forward, he looked down into the well, noticing that the substance that had at first looked like water was full of subtle colors, dancing in the shadows. Light flickered every few moments, and now, standing so close to it, Remus could sense the power thrumming from the Font itself. He shivered, and glanced over at Dumbledore.

“Do not be surprised if one minute feels like a lifetime,” the old wizard cautioned him. “An eternity will pass in your mind before you are released.”

“All right.” He swallowed. This was probably one of the singularly most stupid things he had ever done in his life, but at least it had a purpose. And he trusted Dumbledore.

“Whenever you are ready,” Dumbledore said softly.

Remus stepped forward and fell into nothingness.

Sirius was looking in the front window of Quality Quidditch Supplies when an owl landed on his shoulder. He’d spent the last hour walking in Diagon Alley, and although he’d originally not intended to return to Auror Headquarters at all that afternoon (it was nearing lunchtime), he was
beginning to think the better of that decision as his temper cooled down. Sure, he was still more than slightly peeved at Jones, but the job he’d set out to do seemed to be more important than indulging a minor grudge. Time, he knew, would prove him right, yet he didn’t have time to argue with her. Voldemort wasn’t about to give him that long.

Turning his head, he faced a giant brown barn owl that a corner of his mind knew he’d seen before. It was staring at him with large and bright eyes, and hooted impatiently when Sirius failed to notice the letter sealed in its claws. Blinking, he took the letter and was surprised to see the owl take flight before he could even figure out if it required a reply or not. Sirius frowned and unsealed the letter.

Sirius,

I am at Fortescue’s, if you’re willing to talk.

J.M.

It was suddenly very hard to breathe. Sirius blinked, trying to refocus on the letter before him, trying to make sure that this wasn’t some kind of rude hallucination. After a moment, though, the words didn’t disappear. They stayed, and more importantly, he recognized the handwriting. He hadn’t seen a letter scrawled in that hand for years, but he would know the bold strokes anywhere. They were Julia’s.

The mere thought of her reawakened a lot of things he’d thought dead. James’ revelation in Salamander’s had been extremely difficult to bear, but he’d coped by not thinking about Julia at all. Why hope for what he could not have? But here was hope, staring him bluntly in the face. He’d meant to ask Snape, per Remus’ suggestion, but had never gotten around to doing so. Or maybe he just hadn’t wanted to talk to the slime ball. Either way, Sirius knew no more than what James had said the other night: She’s a Death Eater. That meant, of course, that this letter could very well be a trap. The words haunted him now, running over and over again through his head. She’s a Death Eater.

But that doesn’t mean she isn’t still Julia. His life would have been so much less complicated if he hadn’t fallen in love fifteen years ago or if he were simply able to banish those feelings now. But he had, and he couldn’t. Julia. Unfortunately, Sirius knew himself. Trap or not, he’d go to Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlor and find her. If you’re willing to talk… Sirius snorted to himself as he set off. If. What a stupid, stupid, question.

His long strides easily ate up the ground between Quality Quidditch Supplies and Fortescue’s. In no time at all he had reached the ice cream shop, and his anxious eyes scanned the crowded tables outside. Even though he knew nothing about what could happen, his heart was pounding, and Sirius almost hated himself for that. It was foolish to hope, he knew, but there was no convincing his heart of that.

Finally, his eyes found her. Julia was looking in the other direction, so for a moment he could admire her in profile, looking at the face he hadn’t seen in so long. Her blond hair was shorter now than he last remembered it, cut to just below her shoulders, probably, although he had a hard time telling with it pulled up in a utilitarian ponytail. Her features were still cut from the same classic Malfoy mold, finely boned and yet hinting at hidden strength. The fingers of her right hand drummed lightly against the tabletop, while the left toyed with the spoon she held; both, of course, did not possess the manicured nails of a society witch. Julia’s nails were ragged and short, cut to stay...
out of the way, regardless of appearance.

With an effort, Sirius stopped staring and moved towards her table. Oblivious, Julia looked down at her ice cream, stirring it absent-mindedly and unaware of his approach. Finally, though, he had come close enough to stand over her. It took a long moment to find his voice.

“Is this seat taken?”

Julia’s head snapped up like a spooked Hippogriff’s. She stared at him speechlessly, with gray eyes that were as wide as saucers, and Sirius swore that he could hear her heart pounding in time with his. For a long moment, neither could do more than stare at the other dumbly; there were no words to speak in a reunion that had waited so long in coming. Eventually, she managed to shake her head.

“No,” Julia said quietly. “It’s not.”

Sirius sat with her letter still grasped tightly in his left hand. He didn’t want to let go of it because he was afraid that if he did, both she and the letter would disappear, proving all his hopes to be lies.

“Hello,” he finally said hoarsely. It sounded stupid, but that was all he could manage.

“Hi,” she replied weakly. Then there was a long silence, and it was uncomfortable to the core. How could he find nothing to say when faced with someone who he had once known so well? How could mere years do this to them? They started to speak at exactly the same moment.

“Julia—”

“Sirius—”

She laughed. It was an uneasy and uncertain laugh, but it was still the most beautiful sound Sirius had heard in a long time. He tried to smile a little, and was somewhat surprised when the effort didn’t fail entirely. “You first.”

“I thought you were dead,” she whispered suddenly. “I didn’t know.”

Sirius looked at her in astonishment. “I never thought you did.”

If he had, the thought would have broken his heart. Julia seemed to see that as she blinked, replying, “You didn’t?”

“I didn’t even know that you were a…” He couldn’t bring himself to say the words, and had to take a deep breath. “…until two days ago.”

“Oh.” Something flashed in Julia’s gray eyes too quickly for him to follow. Once, Sirius would have been able to read that emotion like a book, but they had been apart too long. She whispered, “I’m sorry.”

He closed his eyes, bringing his hands up to press against the bridge of his nose as he tried to clear his head. “But you still are, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then why this?” Sirius asked bitterly. His eyes snapped open, and as much as he tried to hide the pain, he knew that it showed through. “Why do you even want to see me? You know what I am, Julia, what side I’m on. That won’t change, especially now. Not after where I’ve been.”

“I know.” Suddenly, her left hand shot out to grasp his right and Julia spoke in an undertone.
“We’re being watched.”

Instinct and old training reawakened instantly, and Sirius felt a rush of adrenaline whip through his body. The response was instinctive. “Yours or mine?”

“Both, I think,” Julia answered. “I recognize the wizard to my right, but not the witch to my left. I think she’s an Auror.”

“Brilliant.” His arm was tingling where Julia’s hand rested upon it, and although common sense screamed that he ought to pull away, his heart would not let him. Her touch reawakened more than just memory.

Her fingers tightened around his. “Will you trust me, Sirius?” Julia asked quietly. “Just one more time, if I swear to you this isn’t a trap? I know I have everything to explain, but I promise you there is a reason—”

“I trust you,” Sirius cut her off. It was a risk, he knew, but he’d taken chances before. He’d always been reckless, but he still had to swallow back pain. “But I need answers,” he whispered.

“Tell me where to go and you’ll get them.”

He almost asked, rather stupidly, if she meant that instant, but Sirius knew Julia. She wasn’t one to procrastinate, especially when things were important. So his mind began whirling, considering and rejecting possibilities as fast as possible. “Do you remember that Muggle hotel we went to once, just outside of London?”

“I remember.” A smile touched her eyes, and Sirius knew she was recalling the same things he was. But there was no time for reminiscing.

“Then let’s go.”

Colors swirled around Remus, whipping him into a spiral from which there was no escape. He was submerged in the Font, now, and had never felt such pure power. It was all around him, ancient and implacable; Remus could almost feel the Font speaking to him. But the words were like distant whispers that took place just outside his range of hearing, quiet and mysterious. Try as he did, he could not make out their meaning. Finally, the words faded into the background, leaving Remus alone with the spiraling sea of color.

It seemed like forever passed within the variations of dark and light. Warmth encased him, and Remus felt his bones tingling as power worked its way through his body unchecked. Magical phenomenons were unpredictable, uncontrollable—yet here he was, deep in the center of one and allowing the Font to permeate his very being. The color changes increased in frequency, suddenly, flashing on and off as he spun like a child’s top. Remus’ mind was working at an incredibly slow pace, and while he knew that, there was still no stopping it. Panic tried to rise within him, but he pushed it down. Surely he hadn’t been in the well for as long as it felt. Dumbledore had said that time would pass with unnatural slowness.

He could feel the power at work. While he had no idea what the Font was doing to him, Remus
could feel it happening, and could feel his body responding. Something was changing; a chill ran
down his spine despite the apparent warmth in the well. His limbs were shaking now, in a very
slight and gentle way, but they still trembled with the effort of trying to adapt to…what?

Power, he knew. Power and awareness—suddenly, he could feel the castle, knew every corner and
mystery of Hogwarts—but that awareness faded quickly, replaced by something older and greater.
Images flashed before his eyes, containing faces of friends, allies, and enemies alike. Three faces
figured predominately in the vision though, and those were of his closest friends. First James, then
Sirius, and then Peter’s features flashed through his mind’s eye, and then Remus saw the four of
them, standing side by side against a windswept background of a stormy sky…

Suddenly he was free and cold.

Remus lay on his back on hard stone, sputtering for air and staring up at Albus Dumbledore as soon
as his eyes would function. He blinked once, struggling to focus on the blue eyes that looked down
kindly at him, offering Remus his robes as soon as he was able to sit up. Belatedly, he realized he
was shivering.

“What happened?” the headmaster managed to ask.

“The Font would not release you as quickly as I had hoped,” Dumbledore replied quietly. “Five
minutes passed before I was able to free you.”

“Is that all?” Remus whispered incredulously.

Dumbledore reached down and helped him to his feet; Remus was still very shaky. “That is all.”
Rubbing his arms seemed to bring some of the circulation back. “I feel cold.”

“It will take you a moment to readjust,” the other said in response.

“Oh.”

A long moment passed in silence as Remus finished dressing himself. Finally, though, he was able
to look at Dumbledore once more. “So what does this mean?” he asked. “You said the Font would
not release me. Why not?”

“I wish I had the answers to your questions, Remus, but I do not,” the old wizard replied quietly.
“The only experience I have with the Font is my own. I suspect, simply, that the Font was not
ready.”

“Not ready?” Remus asked with a frown. “Why?”

“That, I do not know,” Dumbledore said quietly. “And I suspect that the only one who ever will is
you.”

Remus nodded quietly, finally tearing his eyes away from Dumbledore and looking around the
room. At first, the room beyond the Founders’ Door seemed no different to him; clutter and
decaying furniture still filled the chamber, strewn about haphazardly and without meaning. Slowly,
though, his eyes began to pick up colors flickering in and out of focus, dancing in the walls and the
doorway. When Remus finally turned to look back at the well, it was surrounded by rainbow of
color that was virtually identical to the spiral he’d encountered within the Font. Those were the same
colors drifted in and out of the walls and doorway, too, and he began to understand.

“Unbelievable,” Remus whispered.
There was a whisper of power in his head, too, and Remus began to be aware for the first time in his life. Blinking, he realized that he could feel the structural integrity of the castle, could sense the wards protecting his students both inside and out. He could feel the walls, the rooms, the doors—the power was intoxicating, unbelievable. The grounds became an extension of his senses, and he could feel the darkness of the Forbidden Forest at their edge, alternately protecting and threatening Hogwarts. He could feel the presence of power in bright instances, centered on certain individuals who could outshine others—Dumbledore’s hand gripped his arm.

“Breathe, Remus.”

The unexpected contact snapped his connection with the castle, and Remus suddenly found himself light headed. He blinked rapidly, struggling for air and realizing that he’d been so caught up in his newfound abilities that he had concentrated on nothing else. The awareness, however, did not flee. It remained in the back of his consciousness, waiting and ever available.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Dumbledore chuckled without humor. “Come,” he said softly. “Let’s go to your office.”

Still in a daze, Remus allowed Dumbledore to lead him from the room. He watched with amazement as the old man sealed the Font once more, instinctively understanding the entire process. His eyes widened as they walked; with each step, Remus saw or felt something new in the castle. He could now see the union of stone and magic all around him, could sense the lines binding the two together and making Hogwarts ageless and strong. He could feel power shifting all around him, could feel the aliveness of the castle. As he and the former headmaster walked together, staircases and hidden pathways suddenly made themselves available; the entire castle was signaling, subtly, that it was at his disposal.

But even as he reveled in the newfound power and understanding, Remus recognized the danger of it.

“How do you live like this?” he asked.

“You become accustomed to the awareness after some time,” Dumbledore replied. “It is not difficult to control, once you have adjusted, and the feelings become somewhat muted. They are always there, only in the background, waiting.”

Remus blinked. “It must be hard for you to live away from Hogwarts.”

“It is,” the old man admitted. “But we all do what we must, Remus—just as I had to bring you to the Font. You will need this power, in times to come.”

“A vision?” Even as he spoke the words, a feeling of foreboding snuck into Remus’ gut.

Dumbledore nodded without replying aloud. The expression on his face was suddenly sad, and Remus had never seen him so withdrawn. However, he had a feeling that the former headmaster was not about to share whatever affected him so much, so Remus changed the subject.

“How much of this awareness will remain with me outside the castle?” he wondered.

“Some,” Dumbledore replied after a moment. “You will find your natural powers augmented—but in what ways I cannot tell you. I expect that it is different for everyone. And you will sense more, if you learn to listen.” He paused. “Few will understand your newfound abilities, Remus. You must be careful when you use them.”
“You mean that some will fear them, especially from a werewolf.” Coldness seeped into his gut with his words.

“Yes. Oh, not your closest friends,” Dumbledore smiled. “Peter is too trusting to doubt you, and James and Sirius are both heirs to very powerful lines themselves. Sirius, moreover, has been changed—I will venture to guess that he will understand this better than any other. But strangers will not understand, and you will frighten them if you are not careful.”

“So, in other words, I ought to be careful what I do where others can see me,” Remus replied.

“Quite. I have rarely shown power, save when directly confronted—I have always found that wisdom serves as a better guide than power, and that I can do more good through others than on my own.” The other smiled. “But you must find your own path.”

Remus’ eyes were still adjusting to his new sight. Even the corridors seemed different now; they were richer in color and larger in scope. He could feel their connections, too, to the rest of the castle, and suddenly understood how every little piece fit together to make the whole. “I will,” he said quietly.

“That,” Dumbledore said with a smile as they reached his office, “I do not doubt.”

Sirius stared out the window in silence. The sun was just beginning to fade behind gathering storm clouds, now; they had been talking for over an hour and trying to explain, trying to understand. Or rather, Sirius had been trying to understand.

His back was to Julia. It had to be as he tried to think about what she had to say without letting emotions get involved. If he looked at her, Sirius knew, his resolve would crack completely. How could something that felt so right be so wrong? How could one simple choice of his change everything? But it had been the right choice, he knew. Even with the consequences that becoming James and Lily’s Secret Keeper had entailed, he had done the right thing. And like he had told James not too long before, he would do it again.

Still, though, that choice was making it very hard to go on with his life. It was already apparent that he couldn’t simply pick up where he left off—too much had changed. Not only, though, had the world been transformed in the years he’d been absent—Sirius had, too, and he knew it. The only question was how much.

“So let me get this straight,” he said quietly, still staring sightlessly out the window. The storm was coming on fast. “Voldemort sent you to spy on me and then hand me over when the time is right.”

“Yes.” He couldn’t see her face—didn’t want to see her face—but Julia’s voice was tight.

Sirius took a deep breath. “But you’re also spying for the Order.”

“I am.”

_And only because I’m alive_, Sirius thought painfully. He didn’t know if he should be pleased or not by that fact; Julia had always been a fence sitter, with too much to risk choosing either side, but now
she had. First, because of his supposed death, and now because he lived. Did he have a right to influence such a strong woman in that way? Julia had always been ferociously independent; who was he to turn her world upside down? But he could not deny that it had been her choice to make.

Just as this choice was his. She’d placed it firmly in his hands and promised to abide by the outcome. She would walk away if he wanted her to…or stay if Sirius asked. But there was no choice, really, and he knew it. On one hand he could risk everything—yet on the other, he would hate himself forever. And Sirius couldn’t deny one of the very things that made kept him alive in Azkaban.

In the end, his heart always won, even against his better judgment.

Still, though, he closed his eyes and whispered, almost against his will, “I wish things were simpler.”

“Me, too,” Julia responded quietly. “I wish I could make things easier for you, Sirius, but I can’t walk away without knowing. I just can’t.”

“I know.” Sirius opened his eyes and turned to face her, ignoring the storm at his back. “Neither can I.”

Her gray eyes searched his face silently, looking for answers that Sirius didn’t even know himself. Finally, Julia asked, “What now?”

“I don’t know,” he whispered. “I’m sure of so very few things… Maybe time has changed us both too much, but then again…” He took a deep breath. “The only thing I’m certain of right now is that I still love you.”

He held out his hands and she took them. Their gazes locked, and for Sirius, it was like going back a decade into the past, when the world had been simpler and everything had made so much more sense. Everything, it seemed, spiraled down into that one moment, and nothing else mattered.

Thunder crashed at his back as they kissed.
Early morning found Sirius ensconced in the Hogwarts library, with two enormous texts spread open before him and a third serving as a paperweight. Although he’d never been much of a studier during his Hogwarts years (there were pitfalls to having a natural talent for magic, and one of them was definitely laziness), his time in the Aurors had actually taught him the value of bookwork. At the height of his career, Sirius had hardly needed to look spells up—he’d intensely familiar with ever one of the Aurors’ standard texts, thanks to both his own natural curiosity and Alastor Moody’s relentless hounding. Now, though, he was playing ten years worth of catch up, and he wasn’t about to let Hestia Jones find him wanting in any category.

He was so engrossed that he didn’t even hear Remus Lupin approach.

“A fine Auror you’ll make,” his friend commented quietly, “if you don’t even hear me walk up.”

Sirius shrugged and didn’t even bother to look up. “I hardly expect to be attacked in Hogwarts’ library.”

“I bet you didn’t expect to be attacked in the Great Hall, either,” Remus countered mildly.

“Oops.” Sirius grinned and leaned back in his chair, throwing his feet up on the desk before him. “Well, if you’re the worst thing that’s going to attack me, I feel fairly comfortable. Unless you’d like me to be properly frightened, of course.”

Remus finally chuckled and dropped into a chair. “Maybe tomorrow. So what are you doing, anyway?”

“Studying.” He yawned. “Thought I’d get in here before the children do.”

“Oh?”

Sirius nodded and pulled his feet down. “That, and I thought I’d make use of the library before I leave today.”

“You can stay longer if you need to, you know,” Remus responded immediately, but Sirius smiled slightly.

“I know, and thanks. But I can’t really hide any more, and you need space to adjust.”

Remus looked at him strangely. “Adjust?”

“To whatever it is you did yesterday while I was gone,” he replied. “D’you think me blind, Moony? You’re different, though I can’t quite put my finger on how.”

“I never could fool you, could I?” his friend asked, seemingly not very upset at all.

“Nope,” Sirius responded cheerfully. “You going to tell me why?”

He watched Remus take a precautionary look around the library to make sure they were alone, but Madam Pince wasn’t even in sight. Finally, the headmaster replied, “I fell into a Font of Power.”

“A—you’re kidding me.” Sirius stared at him, but Remus wasn’t laughing. “Right?”

“Not at all. Hogwarts is built on one, you know.”
“No, I didn’t know,” he said, blinking in surprise and trying to remember everything he’d ever learned about Fonts of Power. Unfortunately, that wasn’t much. “At least tell me that you did it on purpose.”

“Quite,” Remus replied dryly.

“You're crazy, mate.”

“Probably.” His friend smiled slightly, but at least now Sirius understood the difference that his subconscious had detected. Whatever reason Remus had for jumping down a Font of Power had to be good, he knew—and the experience must have changed him, since it obviously hadn’t killed him, anyway. But Remus was clearly still trying to figure it out himself, so Sirius made a mental vow to ask later as his friend changed the subject. “What are you reading, anyway?”

Sirius held up the book. “Dark Magic and Ancient Curses,” he replied, “which, by the way, I was kind of surprised to find here. What’s a book like this doing in a children’s library?”

“You see the sign labeled ‘Restricted Section’?” Remus asked lightly.

“You think that ever stopped kids like us?” he retorted.

“Well, no, but if they’re going to read it, Sirius, they’ll find it somewhere,” the headmaster replied reasonably. “My question, however, is why you are reading it.”


“What did you say it was again?” Remus suddenly asked.

“Mandatus Prospicio Subigum.” He shivered and tried mightily to hide his reaction. Even the words brought back memories, and Sirius had to make an effort to push them away.

Remus frowned. “Mandatus Prospicio Subigum…” he mused. “Roughly translated, it would mean something about commanding to see at a distance…with a conquering or compelling thrown in for good measure.”

“I figured that much,” Sirius replied quietly. If he closed his eyes, he could remember, but he didn’t want to. He didn’t want to see it, didn’t want to be reminded… He shook his head. “But knowing what it means still doesn’t tell me what it does.”

“Yeah. Good point.” Remus bit his lower lip in concentration. “I’ve got a few books you can check later if you want.”

Sirius slammed Dark Magic and Ancient Curses shut with a decisive snap. “Sure. It’s worth the try.”

They stood together, and Remus trailed a few steps behind as Sirius replaced all three volumes on their proper shelves. “So, how did yesterday go?” the headmaster suddenly asked. “Any news on how long you’ll have to wait before going back into the field?”

“Forever, if Jones gets her way.” Sirius rolled his eyes.

“Beg pardon?” He knew that Remus didn’t exactly like the idea of him going back into the Aurors, but all the same, Sirius also knew that his friend supported his choice. They also both knew how
“Hestia Jones can bite me,” he replied acidly.

Remus looked at him strangely. “Surely you don’t mean that.”

Sirius sighed. “You’re right. I’d much rather let Padfoot take a chunk out of her.”

“Sirius…”

He just shook his head at his friend’s warning tone. Remus had always been the least reckless of them all…comparatively speaking, of course. “I had to take a walk to avoid losing my temper with her when she talked about how I lacked concentration and didn’t know how to work through pain.”

“Oh,” was all Remus could say as they walked out of the library, heading for the headmaster’s office.

“Yeah, oh,” Sirius rolled his eyes again. “So I wandered through Diagon Alley and ran into someone else. I didn’t go back.”

“Tell me you didn’t run into another Death Eater, Sirius. You’re getting enough press as it is,” Remus remarked dryly.

“Well, technically speaking, I suppose she is.” He grinned and saw his friend’s eyes widen with understanding. “But this one is on our side.”

“How in the world did you manage that?”

“I didn’t.” Sirius felt his stupid grin widen, but he could hardly care. Even the darkness seemed lighter now. “There’s no one in the world who could make Julia Malfoy do a thing she doesn’t want to, me included. But she made her choice.”

Remus smiled. “I hope it works out for you, my friend,” he said sincerely.

“Me, too.” He smiled wryly. “In fact—”

“Ah! Professor Lupin!” a deep voice cut Sirius off mid sentence. “Just the person I was looking for.”

Both turned to face the wizard who was striding towards them; he was dressed in shining robes of lavender with a hint of gold—a completely nauseating combination in Sirius’ estimation, although he had to admit that the color scheme definitely outshone his own utilitarian robes of dark blue. He had golden blond hair and a dazzling smile; Sirius resisted the urge to wince away from the artificial glare set off by too perfect teeth. He’s got to be using a spell for that was Sirius’ first thought. What a fop was the second. Remus, however, was busy putting on a smile that only Sirius recognized as false.

“Gilderoy Lockhart. I’m glad you were able to show up…a half an hour early.” The sarcasm was impossible to miss, but somehow Lockhart smiled cheerfully.

“Well, you know how it is,” he responded with a smile. “The early Seeker catches the Snitch, as I always like to say.”

He laughed at his own joke as Remus held out a hand; some of the smile faded, however, and Lockhart hesitated before taking it. Mustn’t contaminate yourself, Sirius thought acidly, already deciding that he didn’t like this applicant for the Defense Against the Dark Arts job. Bigot. Only
Remus could keep his voice level and pleasant in such a situation. Sirius drifted back, away from the conversation, trying not to snarl as he did. *Moony, you're a saint.*

“Welcome to Hogwarts.”

“Oh, yes, of course.” Lockhart smiled again. “A charming place, really. Even if the castle is a bit too antique if you know what I mean.” He paused, shrugging theatrically. “But then again, I doubt you get too many expert decorators amongst your staff, do you?”

“I tend to put emphasis on teaching as opposed to decorating abilities, yes,” Remus replied mildly.

“Too true!” Lockhart declared. “And let me tell you, I have a great deal of experience that I’m simply aching to pass on to the next generation of witches and wizards…as evidenced by my published works, of course.”

“Of course.” Again, only Remus could have said that without seeming sarcastic. Sirius doubted if even Dumbledore could do better.

“And I’ll admit that I have been ready to get out of the field for some time,” Lockhart continued obliviously. “It will be quite a relief to get away from all the glory and the fame…after all, what nobler pursuit can there be than educating young witches and wizards? There are times when my reputation can be very burdensome, although I will never hesitate to use it in every way I can to serve Hogwarts’ aims.”

Remus arched an eyebrow, and Sirius could tell it was getting hard for even him not to laugh. “Really?”

“Oh, definitely. Hogwarts *is* my alma mater, after all.” Another patented and glorious smile. “Although I have to admit a bit of concern over some of the other applicants. There are rumors flying that you offered the position to Sirius Black…”

Sirius stopped drifting backwards. Remus kept an admirably straight face. “Indeed?”

“My concern is solely as a Hogwarts alum,” Lockhart said earnestly. “I’ve been speaking to certain contacts of mine in the publishing business, and it seems that, despite appearances, he is not entirely stable…”

“Is that so?” Remus asked coldly. Despite the formerly mild look, the headmaster’s gaze had suddenly sharpened; very few wizards would have been foolish enough to interpret those frigid words as encouragement. Lockhart, however, was.

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t want someone with such a troubled past teaching my children if I were a Hogwarts parent. Personally, I would prefer someone more like”—Lockhart shrugged self-depreciatingly—“myself.”

“That’s funny.” If there was anything Remus couldn’t abide, Sirius knew, it was people whose egos out massed their brains. There were few ways to try his patience, but that was certainly one of them, and always had been. He continued, “Seeing as how Sirius has been a friend of mine since we were eleven years old.” Remus’ smile grew rather wolfish. “In fact, he’s standing right behind me. Gilderoy Lockhart, meet Sirius Black.”

Lockhart spun, wearing the most priceless expression of shock on his face, and Sirius smiled.
“I won’t offer to shake your hand, lest my *instability* contaminate you,” he remarked sarcastically. “But I am absolutely delighted to make your acquaintance.”

The pompous wizard blinked, and then glanced at Remus. “If this is some sort of comparison,” he said archly, “I feel that I should have been properly notified ahead of time, as he clearly was.”

“Comparison?” the headmaster repeated blankly; Sirius could tell he was trying hard not to laugh. “No, not at all.”

“Then why are is he here?” Lockhart demanded, gesturing angrily at Sirius.

“May I answer that, Remus?” he cut in. “Seeing as how I am the subject of that…polite inquiry?”

“By all means,” his friend responded gravely, and Sirius knew Lockhart was done. He turned to face the would-be Dark Arts Professor.

“I assure you, Mr. Lockhart, that I am not here to sabotage your chances at the Defense Against the Dark Arts position here at Hogwarts,” Sirius said coldly. “A position, I might add, that I have already refused.

*However*, as a ‘concerned Hogwarts alum’ myself, I would like to point out that you are hardly the type I would wish to have teaching at this school. If I had children of my own, your reputation would do little to reassure me. And as a wizard whose godson is currently attending Hogwarts, I am quite glad to see that you have thoroughly sabotaged your own chances.” He smiled nastily. “Unless, of course, I have sorely misjudged my friend.”

“Which,” Remus picked up immediately, “he has most definitely not.”

“I beg your pardon?” Lockhart glanced rapidly between them both, seemingly unsure which to stare at in disbelief.

Remus’ blue eyes flashed. “You are no longer welcome at my school, Mr. Lockhart. I thank you kindly for the interview, but I have seen all that I need to see. Ego and self-promotion have no place at Hogwarts. Therefore, neither do you.

“Good day, Mr. Lockhart.”

Peter sat cross-legged on the floor at Godric’s Hollow, with a Siberian Husky puppy climbing all over him. Lily smiled, watching him laugh; ever since the night of that fateful revelation, Peter hadn’t laughed nearly enough. Throughout their school years, Lily hadn’t known him very well—until she and James had started dating in their seventh year, the Gryffindor girls and boys had existed in separate universes that only entered the same orbit in class or at meals. Now, though, she counted all of James’ friends as her own and cared for them deeply. This wasn’t to say, of course, that Lily had forgotten all of her own school friends, but of all of them aside from Severus, she’d only ever been very close to Alice Longbottom. The others had only been friends, although they still sometimes kept in touch. Alice, however, had been like a sister, and even with both their busy lives, the two still found moments to get together.
At the moment, though, Peter was sitting in a completely undignified manner on her living room floor, and Lily was laughing with him as Joe finally succeeded in toppling the wizard over to his back and licking his upturned face. She had never seen a puppy with so much energy, and Lily thought it was good for Peter, who had been for the past year a rather lonely man. A second failed engagement still troubled his relationships, and Lily thought it was good for him to have someone to come home to. Even if it was just a dog—but heavens knew that Joe had more personality than a lot of people Lily had met.

Finally, though, Peter extracted himself from the puppy’s control and sat up, still rubbing under Joe’s ears, which seemed to satisfy the rapidly growing Siberian. “Sorry about bringing him along,” Peter said with a smile. “I just didn’t want to leave him alone in my flat. He’d probably destroy the place.”

“You know I always love to see Joe,” Lily replied playfully. “Especially since he’s not making messes on my carpet anymore.”

“I keep telling you how sorry I am about that, Lily—”

“I’m joking, Peter,” she cut him off. “Don’t worry about it.”

He smiled crookedly. “All right.”

“So what brought you here, anyway? I mean, I always love to see you, but you usually drop by when James is around.”

Peter shrugged. “Actually, he’s the reason why I’m here,” he said quietly. “James told me that the Unicorn Group has been working on a way to get rid of the Dark Mark.”

“Oh.” Lily fought down the need to slap herself. She should have thought of that a lot sooner, should have realized that Peter would need to talk to her. I should have sought him out, Lily reprimanded herself. I shouldn’t have made him come to me.

Peter reddened slightly, misinterpreting her silence. “I mean, I didn’t want to bother you, but I was hoping that…you know…”

“It’s no bother at all, Peter,” Lily replied quickly. “I just wish I had better news for you.”

“Oh.” His hopeful face fell, and Lily reached out to put a hand on his arm, noticing that Peter’s right hand was unconsciously rubbing the Mark hidden under his left sleeve.

“The Unicorn Group has been working on this for a while, but just because we haven’t made any progress yet isn’t a reason to lose hope,” she said quietly. “So far, we haven’t really been able to talk to anyone who knows enough about the Mark to help us. I can’t make any promises, but if you could work with us…?”

Peter’s green eyes met her own. “Do you really think it’s possible?” he whispered. “I’d give anything to be free of this.”

“I do.” Lily smiled slightly. But her expression didn’t seem to do much to hearten Peter.

“It burns, you know,” he said quietly. “I don’t know how to describe it, really… I know that it’s really just a Mark on my arm, but it feels like a stain on my soul.” He winced. “I just wish…”

Lily squeezed his shoulder. “I know, Peter. I know.”
“Well?” Sirius asked impatiently.

This was his final check-up, so to speak. When Pomfrey had worked on him the first time, she had told Sirius (repeatedly) that his leg would require some time to heal, perhaps even months. It had proved to be quite a pain that way, too, both figuratively and literally speaking. Somehow, his injured leg seemed to worm its way into influencing everything he did, and Sirius was ready to be done with that. Also, after spending two weeks at Hogwarts, he was ready to leave. It was time to step into the real world again.

“Mr. Black, if you don’t ever learn patience, you’re not going to get anywhere in this world,” Pomfrey replied automatically. After a second, the matron seemed to realize what she’d said and blushed.

He snickered. “Sounds different when you say that to an adult, doesn’t it?”

“The thought behind it is the same,” the nurse told him sternly. “You could do with a bit of patience.”

“Probably,” Sirius admitted. He waited a heartbeat, and then smiled, knowing he had her. “Well?”

They both laughed. “How the four of you have managed to live so long is beyond me,” Pomfrey remarked, still chuckling. “Despite that, I am pleased to say that your leg is finally healed. Just don’t fall off a broom in the next few days and you should be fine.”

“Seriously?”

“Quite,” she replied evenly, not about to fall into that particular trap. “The spells I laid today should be final—providing, of course, that you don’t do anything foolish.”

“I won’t,” Sirius replied immediately, earning himself a doubtful look from the longtime Hogwarts nurse. “What? I promise!”

“I’ve heard that before,” Pomfrey remarked with an indulgent smile. “Always about an hour before you went out and played Quidditch, hurting yourself again.”

“How ‘bout this?” he asked playfully. “I promise not to play Quidditch in the next week.”

“A great deal of good that does me,” she snorted. “I’m certain that the new and improved, grown up Sirius Black can think of much more inventive ways to hurt himself.”

“True.” Sirius smiled, jumping off the bed. “But I can promise that I won’t do it on purpose.”

Pomfrey sighed, but he saw the hints of a smile. “I suppose that will have to do.”

“Thanks, Poppy.”

She smiled in return. “You’re welcome, Sirius. Be careful.”
“Are you insinuating that I had something to do with my son’s escape?” Crouch demanded.

Arabella leaned back slightly in her chair, keeping her face expressionless and resisting the urge to fidget. That was always something that she liked to do during long meetings, but doing so would be disastrous in this case. She replied evenly, “I’m just searching for answers.”

Crouch snorted.

“You visited your son at twelve thirty in the afternoon two days ago, correct? While he was in DMLE custody,” she added, just to see if he’d bite.

He didn’t. “Yes.”

“Are you aware of the fact that he escaped at exactly two thirty?”

“Obviously, judging from the fact that you’re questioning me now,” Crouch replied dryly.

“I see. Do you have any idea how he might have escaped, Minister?” she asked politely. “You were the last to speak with him.”

“I have no clue.” Crouch rolled his eyes. “Maybe he used some Dark Magic that he learned from You-Know-Who.”

Doubtful, ‘Bella thought, but she kept that feeling to herself. The wards on the DMLE’s cells weren’t something that could be broken in a day, and wandless to boot. “Did you know he was a Death Eater?”

“Of course not,” he snapped immediately. “Do you think I’d put up with that from someone in my family?”

“Not at all,” she replied. Most parents would have defended their children to the death, but not Barty Crouch. “But I have to ask, as I’m sure you understand.”

“Right.” He wasn’t being very cooperative, but Crouch wasn’t as angry and antagonistic as she’d expected, either. They’d never gotten along terribly well, going back all the way to when she’d been the number two Auror under Alastor Moody and Crouch had been their boss. Still, she knew he could be a lot more difficult, and Arabella supposed that she ought to be grateful that he wasn’t acting like the ass she had seen Crouch be so many times. Despite that, she was really beginning to get the feeling that this conversation was going nowhere.

“Looking back, can you think of any hints of what drove your son to become a Death Eater?”

Crouch hesitated, thinking. Finally, he responded, “He was never a very happy boy. His mother spoiled him too much, and her death hit him hard.” Crouch’s voice grew dark. “Maybe the loneliness did it.”

It was like a door had closed before her, and Arabella knew she would get no more answers. So she stood, offering her hand politely to the man who was technically her senior in the Ministry. “Thank you, Minister,” she said politely. “We’ll be in touch.”

“Right.” He shook her hand very briefly and turned to go. “I’m sure.”
“Everbero!”

She cast the first spell when Sirius’ back was still turned, and power crashed into him from behind. He flew, rather like a very ungraceful bird, crashing into the shielded dueling area’s far wall. Sirius bounced off, rolling, and heard Jones yell:

“If that were an Unforgivable, you would be dead right now!” she yelled. “Stay awake! Constant vigilance!”

A red streak of light hit the ground where he’d just left, and Sirius came up into his customary crouch only a few feet away, furious that she’d dare thrown Alastor Moody’s words at him. Moody had been Sirius’ Mentor, but Jones had barely known him. *He was also my friend, you heinous bitch.* Snarling aloud, he batted her Conjunctivitis Curse aside with ease.

“Impedimenta!”

“Is that the best you can do?” Jones’ shield ate his curse up easily. *Suffocoum!*

Sirius rolled, not bothering to block the Choking Charm. An old and familiar calm was creeping over him, and he found himself grinning. Another blast of red light intercepted the path he’d just left, but he was rolling into the crouch again. Sirius’ wand whipped forward.

“Conteriaco!”

His spell burst straight through her shields and sent Jones flying high into the air. Moments later, when she crashed back down to the ground, he was ready. *Demergos!*

The padded ground around his evaluator turned into quicksand, and she started sinking rapidly. Unfortunately, Jones was nothing if not talented, and she did have years of training to fall back on. The Auror didn’t even bother to try and counter the spell. Instead she cast one of her own.

“Incendio!”

The Fire-lighting Curse would have been a good idea if Sirius didn’t have the same type of training to fall back upon. His shield forced it aside without even wavering. *Pulverulentus!* he cried quickly, and was gratified to see a cloud of dust immediately settle over his opponent, blocking her field of view. Taking great advantage of the fact that she couldn’t see him, Sirius moved right, sprinting now and out of his crouch. However, Jones was pretty quick, and the cloud began to dissipate in seconds. Before it could, he shouted, *“Roteventilo!”*

Again, Jones shot up into the air, spinning like a child’s top. Caught by surprise, she howled in fury, but still had the presence of mind to bring herself down quickly.

“Petrificus Totalus!” Sirius barely dodged in time, twisting to his left and presenting his back for one crucial and foolhardy second. He knew it was stupid even before he heard her cry: “*Offenvox!*”

Sirius felt like he’d been zapped by a bolt of lightning, and he barely managed to keep a hold of his wand as he fell. Unfortunately for Jones, he was rather well acquainted with pain, and instinct took
over as he rolled to the right, coming up into his crouch with hardly a thought.

“*Glacialium!*”

Jones dodged the Freezing Spell with irritating ease. “*Crucio!*”

The curse hit Sirius full in the chest and sent him flying backwards. Hitting the ground hard, he felt the familiar feeling of agony racing through his body, and for a moment he was caught up in memories of other times, of darker places—*No!* Gathering himself, Sirius drew all his concentration away from the pain and into his wand.

“*Everbero!*”

His strike spell sent her flying, and he was suddenly free of pain. Quickly, Sirius leapt to his feet, ignoring the residual effects of the Cruciatus Curse—after all, this was Auror training and almost anything was legal. Besides, he knew that he could take the antidote later and have little else to worry about. For a moment, he was tempted to toss the torture curse back in Jones’ direction, just to see how *she* dealt with it, but Sirius resisted the urge. Doing so wouldn’t prove a damn thing.

“*Tarantallegra!*”

“*Imperio!*”

Their spells crossed in mid-air; his moment of hesitation had cost him the advantage. Sirius never had time to tell if his spell struck or not; suddenly, he was encased in a warm feeling that he knew all too well. The rest of the world faded, and he was comfortable, drifting peacefully. On the edge of his consciousness, a voice began to whisper sweetly, telling him to drop his wand. It was of no importance, and the voice was so sensible... *Drop your wand.* Everything was warm and peaceful. It seemed so simple—

Awareness reasserted itself. Sirius broke free of the curse and brought his wand forward in the same instant.

“*Expelliarmus!*”

Jones’ wand sailed into his hand as she stumbled backwards into the opposite wall. Sirius shook his head to clear his mind, concentrating on judging the affects of the curses he’d been hit with. After a mental check, he decided that there would be no lasting damage—but Jones was staring at him strangely.

“How did you do that?” she demanded.

“Do what?” Sirius asked in confusion.

“Break the curse so quickly,” the Auror replied, walking towards him. “I’ve never seen anyone come through the Imperius Curse like that. It only took you a few seconds.”

*It did?* Sirius wondered to himself inwardly. *It felt like eternity.* However, he only shrugged and responded dryly. “Practice.”
“The list of applicants is shrinking rather rapidly, isn’t it?”

“Quite,” Severus responded dryly.

Remus chuckled, but his deputy headmaster looked at him as if he’d gone insane.

“I fail to see what is so amusing about the entire situation,” Snape commented. “We have been without a Dark Arts professor for over a month now. That translates into a great deal of cancelled classes, even with the rest of us substituting, and O.W.L.s are less than three months away. So, unless you want to cap your fourth year as headmaster with dismal failures all around…”

“Severus…”

“Yes?” Snape asked pointedly, but Remus could only sigh. “So who will it be, then, Remus: the Death Eater, the fop, or the politician? Of the group, Crouch is probably the best qualified, but I certainly wouldn’t recommend him.”

There was nothing to do but snort. “I had truly hoped Dung would take the job,” he said quietly. “Or Sirius.”

Snape choked.

“Oh, don’t carry on like that,” Remus replied crossly. “You know as well as I do that Sirius is far more qualified that Quirell ever was, and quite possibly more qualified than you, especially when he gets back in stride.”

“I—”

“No, Severus. Before you even say it, you know I can’t give you the job. First of all, potions experts are extremely hard to come by—harder than even Dark Arts Professors—and second of all, the entire Wizarding World knows you’re a Death Eater.”

Black eyes glinted angrily. “It’s never been proven.”

“Of course it hasn’t. Arabella and James are remarkably talented at losing evidence,” Remus retorted. Snape glared. “If I give you the job, parents will revolt.”

Severus growled under his breath but remained silent, for which Remus was glad. He didn’t really have time to deal with his deputy headmaster’s feelings on the matter; he had a host of problems on his hands and very few ways to solve them. That, of course, didn’t even take into account the fact that Remus was still struggling to adjust to his newfound powers, which had kept him from sleeping in over twenty-four hours. He was tired, irritated, and didn’t any patience left. So if Severus was a tiny bit annoyed, so be it. At the moment, Remus could hardly care.

“Now,” he said with pronounced control. “I recognize the fact that we have a problem. Do you have a solution?”

“No,” his deputy grumbled.

“Nor do I,” Remus admitted. “So I suppose I’ll have to teach the class for the remainder of the year.”

“What?”

Remus chuckled at the confusion on Severus’ face. “I have taught it before, you realize.”
“I know that,” Snape snapped. “I was going to point out, however, that you are the headmaster. Your job is not to teach.”

“So I’ve noticed,” he replied dryly. “But unless you have any better ideas…”

Snape glared, and he knew the answer.
Origins and Answers

The first good sign was the fact that the door didn’t screech loudly in protest when Peter opened it. The second was the absence of the marvelous smell of decay that had characterized Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place the last time they had visited.

“Seems to have improved,” Peter remarked as a long line of packages drifted into the house before them. Sirius had recently indulged in a much-needed shopping spree, buying everything from new robes to household items, and under his direction, the packages deposited themselves just inside the door. He’d deal with them later.

Sirius grunted in response to Peter’s question. “We’ll see.”

Stepping into the front hall was like walking into the past. The gloomy and smelly corridor had been transformed. Once moldy walls were covered in new paint and wallpaper, and the old threadbare carpet had been either replaced with an identical copy or repaired so well that it looked brand new. The pure silver chandelier was free of both cobwebs and grime now, and the gas lamps had been refurbished so that they didn’t smell or hiss anymore. Most importantly, though, almost all of the old portraits were gone. In two days, the Hogwarts house elves had done miracles.

Grinning, Sirius cast a triumphant glance at where his mother’s old portrait had once hung behind absent moldy curtains; she, of course, was gone, thanks to a great deal of work done by the Marauders. The Permanent Sticking Charm had been almost impossible to defeat, but Lily, the Curse-breaker extraordinaire, had finally done so, which meant the obnoxious and bigoted painting was no more. It was a hell of a relief to not have to walk into the hallway accompanied by her screeching.

“Quiet,” Peter commented.

“Refreshing,” Sirius corrected him with a grin. “I could almost like this place, now. It doesn’t feel nearly as dark.”

“No kidding.”

“There is one thing that the house elves overlooked, though…” Sirius mused, reaching out to tapping his wand against the hanging chandelier. Suddenly, the serpent shape wavered, and after a moment, transformed into a lion’s head. He grinned.

“Oh, my parents would hate me now.”

Peter laughed. “Shall we transfigure the rest of the snakes now, or do you want to examine the rest of the house first?”

“Let’s explore.”

Their journey throughout the rest of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place revealed the rest of the house to be equally transformed. Once dilapidated and dark, the work of the Hogwarts house elves had returned the Black house to the childhood home that Sirius remembered in some of his happier memories. When he was being honest with himself, too, he could recall happier times before Voldemort’s rise—times when differences hadn’t irrevocably separated him from his parents and his brother. As a child, he remembered, he had once been happy here.

They were busy exploring the main bedroom when Peter turned to face him.
“Can I ask you something, Sirius?”

“Sure.” He poked curiously at the bed, wondering if it would bite, but then he noticed the silence as his friend tried to put thoughts into words. Realizing that this had to be important, Sirius turned to face Peter. It took a long moment before the shorter man spoke.

“I was wondering…” Peter took a deep breath. “You don’t have to answer this if you don’t want to—but I was wondering why you forgave me so quickly. When you learned that I was a Death Eater, that is. You have the most reason to hate me.”

Sirius blinked. Although only just over two weeks had passed since his arrival at Hogwarts, it seemed as if a lifetime had gone by. His life seemed to have split into two sections: before and after Voldemort. The second seemed to have taken over with a vengeance, now, and he rather preferred it that way. In truth, he hadn’t put much thought into Peter’s choice since that moment in the Hospital Ward—or not, at least, a conscious decision about hatred or forgiveness. Not since then. He sighed and sank onto the bed, suddenly feeling very tired.

“I didn’t, really,” Sirius said quietly. “Not right away, anyway.” As Peter stared at him in confusion, he continued. “Remus told me why you changed sides, but I still wasn’t sure what to believe…but seeing you there, with James and Remus—” he took a deep breath “—I just couldn’t not forgive you. I knew you meant it, and God, Peter, with your reasons…any of us would be dumb enough to do it for those. For each other. And seeing you there, seeing us all together for the first time in ten years…who was I to break that?

“And I needed it, too,” Sirius concluded quietly, “our friendship. After all, three Marauders aren’t worth much without the fourth.”

“Thanks,” Peter said very quietly.

Sirius shrugged and tried to smile. “Hell, Wormtail, you deserved the chance. Everyone makes bad choices.”

“Some make worse ones than others, Sirius,” his friend replied seriously.

“Yeah, but you’re forgetting that I know how persuasive Voldemort can be.”

“But you didn’t break,” Peter objected.

“I’m too stupid to break,” Sirius replied lightly. “Too damn stubborn for my own good.”

“You’re not stupid.”

“Stupid, brave, same difference in case like that.” He shrugged again.

But Peter didn’t laugh. Instead, he sat down heavily on the bed next to Sirius. “I wish I could have done what you did,” he admitted quietly. “I wish I had the courage to say no, to resist just because it was the right thing to do.”

“Peter, do you think I resisted so long out of principle?” Sirius asked, looking at his friend, who met his eyes timidly. He reached out and squeezed Peter’s shoulder. “Hardly. I did it for my friends, because that’s what we are. We’re brothers and loyal no matter what. I did it for friends who I knew would do the same for me. Just like you did—you made the wrong choice, true, but you did it for the right reasons. There’s nothing for me to hate in that.”

“But—”
“But what? You can’t say you don’t have courage. Not after what you did the other day, publicly defying him.”

“I did it because I was scared to stay a Death Eater,” Peter said in a small voice.

Sirius snorted. “So? And I ran from Azkaban because I didn’t want to die. People keep telling me that was a courageous thing to do, but I don’t really think so.”

“It is,” his friend objected.

“There can be no courage unless you’re scared,” he said quietly. “Some Muggle said that, once, and it’s very true.”

“But you don’t fear him. V-Voldemort, I mean.”

“He scared the hell out of me, Peter,” Sirius admitted quietly, shivering and glancing away. “More for what he has done than for what he is. I have nightmares every night, too.”

“You never seem afraid.”

“Because he can’t do any worse to me than he’s already done, and I lived through that,” he replied, hating the way his voice turned sharp. Vicious, even. “Voldemort wants to break me, and I don’t know why. He’s obsessive over it…and has been for years. That means if I let myself fear him now, I’ll be paralyzed and unable to act when I have to. Sooner or later, I know I’m going to have to face him.”

“Why do you think that?” Peter asked quietly.

“I don’t know. Just a feeling I have.”

“He’s got no control.”

“No?” James asked, feeling his eyebrows—and his heckles—rise. He shoved both down by force, reminding himself that now was a time to be professional and not simply one to defend his friend.

“None whatsoever,” Hestia Jones confirmed with a grimace. “I don’t deny he’s got power, but he doesn’t have any control. He does things and doesn’t know why. He’s no better than a first year Hogwarts student in that respect.”

“He did just get out of prison, Hestia,” the senior Auror pointed out mildly, partially surprised at his own control. “You have to remember that Sirius hasn’t used magic in ten years. He’s bound to make mistakes.”

“I understand that completely,” she replied. “And that is why I recommended a gradual re-orientation program, designed to allow Black to get his bearings at a natural rate…”

“Which I overruled,” James put in, saying it before she had to.

Hestia shrugged unhappily. “You’re the boss.”
“I am, but I didn’t do that because he’s my friend.” Although he doubted she believed that, and in her place, James probably wouldn’t have either. Hestia was a good Auror—otherwise he wouldn’t have assigned her to Sirius—but sometimes she lacked imagination. “You might not agree with me, but I know Sirius Black. You were still at Hogwarts when he entered the Aurors, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I was playing Quidditch for Puddlemere United at the time, but even I saw the waves he made in the division. Alastor Moody called Sirius the best he’d ever taught, and if you had known Moody, you’d realize that he didn’t hand out compliments lightly.” James looked her in the eye. “By the time I entered the Aurors in 1979, he was already considered one of the best.”

“With all due respect, sir, I wasn’t arguing about his talents then,” she replied stiffly. “I’m simply worried about his control now.”

“One of our professors at Hogwarts used to say that Sirius had no brakes. Are you sure that isn’t what you’re seeing? And don’t call me sir, Hestia. We’ve gone through this before.”

“Fine. James, he’s a danger to himself and to others.”

“Describe how.”

“He’s easily distracted,” Hestia responded immediately. “When practice dueling, I caught him completely unaware at least twice, and managed to hit him with both the Imperius Curse and the Cruciatius Curse.”

“How did he deal with those?” James cut in.

“Well enough,” she replied grudgingly. “But in standard spell work he tends to do the unexpected, coming up with complicated solutions to simple problems—”

James had tried not to laugh, but a little snort broke through his control.

“What?” Hestia demanded.

“That’s just Sirius,” he replied, still struggling to contain the urge to giggle. The problem, James was rapidly realizing, was more of a personality conflict than anything else. “He’s been doing that since we were kids. It means he’s bored.”

“Bored or not, he doesn’t have the patience to be an Auror,” she replied darkly. “Half of what we do is routine and straightforward.”

“But he’s got the power and he’s got the skill,” James pointed out conclusively. “Two out of three isn’t bad, especially when it’s those two.” He stood up. “Keep working with him, though, and see what comes up. I know you two don’t exactly get along, but you might just learn something from him.”

“I doubt it,” she replied sourly.

James smiled serenely. “We’ll see.”
That evening, Sirius and Julia wandered Diagon Alley side by side. The beauty of their situation was completely ironical: few knew Julia was a Death Eater, and those who did thought she was simply luring Sirius into a trap. Therefore, it became not only safe, but also essential, for them to be seen together. It was an awkward arrangement, but also a necessary one.

As the hours passed, they became more and more comfortable together; oftentimes, the years apart seemed to melt away. There were uneasy moments, of course, due to both of them having grown and changed, but those were few, and well worth the trouble.

“You really ought to come to South America with me sometime,” Julia was saying with a smile. “When this is all over, I mean. You’d find the Aztecs’ temples fascinating, I think.”

“Why’s that?”

“Plenty of places to explore and get yourself in trouble,” she replied, making Sirius chuckle.

“You’re probably right, then. But only if you’ll play hide and seek.”

“I’ll have an advantage, you know,” she laughed. Her blond ponytail whipped around as she shook her head.

“I don’t care,” Sirius replied with a grin. “I’ll find you eventually.”

“You think so, do you?”

He just kept smiling. “Yep.”

“And why is that?” Julia demanded lightly.

“Because I know you. You’ll get sick of hiding and come look for me.”

She started to object and then stopped with the strangest look on her face. “You know,” Julia said quietly, “you’re probably right.”

Sirius looked at her strangely. “That’s the first time I’ve ever known you to give in without a fight,” he commented.

“I just don’t want to lose you again.” Her eyes met his, and they were level, but Sirius saw the pain behind the control. He wrapped an arm around her as they walked.

“You won’t,” he said quietly. “I promise.”

Julia laughed humorlessly. “For once, I wish I was one of those silly little girls who believe every word you say,” she replied. “But you and I both know there are no promises in this war.”

“I know,” he admitted. “But I’m not dying.”

“Sirius…”

“Hush.” He turned his head to kiss her on the forehead; as short as Julia was, she was of a perfect height for that. “I’m not, so don’t argue with me.”

“How can you be sure?” she whispered.
“Because I’ve come close enough, and I’m not going back,” Sirius replied grimly. “Not until I’m old and toothless and ready to go.” He smiled playfully, looking in her eyes. “And by then, I’ll be so ugly that you don’t want anything to do with me.”

“Not likely.” She smiled in return.

“What, me growing old and ugly, or you not wanting to stick around?”

Her eyes sparkled. “Both.”

He Apparated almost on top of Julia in her room at the Leaky Cauldron just as she was getting ready to turn in for the night. She jumped, startled, then tripped and collapsed onto the bed. Angrily, she snapped, “Well, hello!”

“I’m glad to see you’re alone,” Severus Snape snarled.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Julia demanded.

“It means that the entire world knows you’re cavorting around with Sirius Black!” her best friend retorted. He looked at her crossly. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“The sitting on the bed part or the Sirius part?” Julia met his eyes with an equally furious glare. Of all people, Severus should have known better than not to knock. He knew how much that ticked her off.

“The goddamn Black part!”

“Oh, that part,” she replied sweetly, enjoying watching his face go red in frustration. “Is it so complicated for you to understand that I have gotten back together with the man I love after ten years apart? I know this is a difficult subject for you, Severus, but even you should have seen it coming.”

“I’m not talking about that,” he snapped.

“Then what are you talking about?” Julia stood, wishing she was taller so that she could look him in the eye without having to crane her neck upwards.

“I’m simply wondering if you have gone insane,” Severus growled.

“And why is that?”

He reached out and grabbed her arm so roughly that it hurt, and didn’t let her pull away when she tried. “Do you think the Dark Lord will allow you to publicly slap him in the face this way? Do you think he will allow you to wander at will by the side of a man who has become a symbol of resistance? For Merlin’s sake, Julia, you couldn’t have done worse if you’d chosen Dumbledore or Potter to fall in love with!”

Julia stared for a moment, startled by his outburst—it was so unlike Severus to shout—and then she began to laugh.
“What?” he demanded hotly. “Will you please tell me what’s so damn funny about all of this?”

“Severus…” She laid her free hand on his shoulder and gained control of her relief-filled laughter. “I am touched by your concern, but do you think I’m stupid?”

His dark eyes searched her face suspiciously. “At the moment, either stupid or insane, yes.”

“I hate to disappoint you, but I am in full possession of my wits at this moment,” Julia responded dryly. “And actually, I do believe that the Dark Lord will indeed allow me to do exactly as I please.”

“What are you playing at, Julia?” Severus asked worriedly.

“Nothing at all,” she answered truthfully. “I’m a Slytherin, remember? No unnecessary risks. But actually, I have been given the task of renewing my relationship with Sirius.” She finally grimaced, not wanting to say the distasteful part.

Realization dawned on her old friend’s face. “He wants you to deliver Black.”

“Yes. Which I won’t, of course, but I’ll deal with that when it comes.”

“Does he know this?” Severus suddenly asked, finally releasing her arm from the death grip he’d had it in.

“Sirius? Yes.” Julia smiled slightly. “He’s got more courage than you give him credit for, Severus. He understands the risks.”

Snape rolled his eyes. “Foolish Gryffindor. He’s enough of a target as it is, without adding you to the list.”

“You’ve never been in love,” she replied quietly.

“And I hope I never am, judging from what it does to you,” he retorted, but she heard the catch in his voice.

“Sure you do,” Julia said tolerantly, not pressing the point. “You can fool your students, but I know you’re an old softie at heart.”

Severus snorted.

Remus sat quietly under the beech tree by the lake, letting his mind wander. It was night, now, and the moon was very nearly full, but not quite—he had three weeks still before he would transform. For many years after he’d received the bite, Remus had been uneasy under any moon, but now he’d come to appreciate its beauty, and the peace he could find alone in the darkness. Few would expect to find Hogwarts’ headmaster out alone this late in the evening, staring up at the moon, but that was his reason for coming. In the bustle of the castle, it was hard for even Remus to find solitude, and right now he needed it very much.

His feet were bare, and every so often he wiggled his toes, enjoying the feel of the damp grass between them. He sat with his back against the old beech’s trunk, uncaring if he stained his robes or
not. Gone were the days when he counted every penny and conserved his money carefully; back when he’d first graduated from Hogwarts, Remus had never been sure how long the time between jobs would stretch. But now, after having been teaching for eight years, he was secure in his position—both financially and materially. He’d never be a rich man, but Hogwarts paid well enough. He was comfortable.

Out of habit, his eyes drifted over the castle, carefully examining each line and curve, looking for problems or dangers. He didn’t expect to find any because the enchantments around his school were too strong for that, but he always looked, knowing that the children inside were his to protect. Even unknowingly, they depended upon his strength to shield them from the monster that lurked just outside the gates.

Sooner or later, Voldemort would come.

He’d gathered that much from talking to Dumbledore three days before. Because of that, there were reasons other than the need for solitude that brought Remus outside tonight. He was still adjusting to his newfound powers, but he had already learned how to see the castle in a different light. Now, he didn’t just judge Hogwarts through physical eyes; he saw deeper, delved into the old and ancient power that kept the wards strong and the castle whole. He could see strengths and weakness without even concentrating, and could direct the castle itself on how to heal its wounds. But there weren’t any, of course. Dumbledore had taken care of Hogwarts too well for that to happen.

Still, though, Voldemort would come. At the very least, he would have to test Remus again, because the attack by the giants (which seemed to have been a lifetime ago) had been very minor in the grand scope of the war. The Dark Lord needed to know if Remus could stand against him in the same way Dumbledore had, if he could seal the school against all comers and still fight on.

A shiver snuck its way down Remus’ spine. He didn’t relish the idea of standing against Lord Voldemort, but he’d do so if he had to. He had a responsibility to his students and to his teachers. He had to keep them safe, no matter what the cost. In some ways, that duty hardly seemed fair; Remus had always considered himself only slightly above average for a wizard. He certainly had never possessed James or Sirius’ casual power or undeniable brilliance. Intelligence, yes, he had, and he’d learned his lessons well throughout life, but he wasn’t Dumbledore, either. He’d never have that kind of earth-shattering power. But he’d known what the risks were when he’d taken the job. Although it had seemed unlikely that Voldemort would try for Hogwarts at the time, Remus had always known that the possibility existed.

Now, though, it was more a probability than anything else.

“Nice mess you’ve gotten yourself in here, Moony,” he whispered to himself, smiling slightly.

But he wasn’t afraid. Not for himself, anyway. He only feared failure. He feared failure, and what it represented.

The face of every student he passed in the halls reminded him of how high the cost could be.

He would not fail them.

He could not.
The clock on the wall to his right read, “Go to Bed,” and it probably had the right idea.

Instead, Sirius sighed and opened another book. A Muggle clock would have simply told him that it was past two o’clock in the morning, but he could hardly care. He’d woken from a nightmare that had been all to clear for his tastes, shaken and needing to get out. Surprisingly enough, his walk had led him straight to the Ministry, even though he hadn’t meant to go there. But Sirius wasn’t one to discount coincidences, and his nightmare had given him another clue in the mystery he was struggling to solve. Accordingly, he made his way down to the division’s library and started pulling out books he’d never find at Hogwarts.

He swiped a hand at his tired eyes and kept skimming through the index of *Dark Magic in Ancient Times*. As tired as he was, Sirius’ fingers flew over the pages, searching for the one incantation that would answer all his questions. Almost a dozen different volumes had failed to yield up answers, but he was certain that it had to exist somewhere. He wasn’t hallucinating, and he wasn’t insane. The damn thing had to be somewhere. With exasperation, he flipped the page past the D’s, but turned back quickly as something caught his eye. Maybe, he thought, looking carefully at the entry. Page 269.

Quickly, Sirius turned to the correct page. Halfway down the right hand side of the page, he read:

**Distance Seeing Enchantment, the** (incantation: *Mandatus Prospicio Subigum*): A very complicated spell which creates the ability for the caster to see through the eyes of another. Ancient Dark Magic, with first recorded use in the Roman province of Hispania in 117 AD. [Root form: “Mandatum,” to command; “Prospicio,” to see from a distance; “Subigo,” to conquer or compel.] Counter Curse: None.

A chill ran down his spine, and Sirius had to let out the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. His first thought was relief—I’m not imagining things. The second, though, was fear. What if it worked? Immediately, he racked his mind for answers, actively searching his memories for the first time, but he found nothing. As far as Sirius remembered, Voldemort had never succeeded. He remembered passing out more than once from the pain, but didn’t recall giving in.

He closed his eyes, thinking, remembering—

*Dementors holding him down.*

*Shooting pain in his head. Was that blood dripping into his eyes?*

*The words he’d heard too many times, knew far too well—“Mandatus Prospicio Subigum!”*

*Agony.*

*They were trying to grind his resistance down, attempting in every way they knew to break him. Sirius struggled against the horrors rising in his own mind, desperately trying to differentiate between the past and the present and fight against the cold magic tearing through his body. He was screaming and his mind was a mess of memories and pain, unable to tell what was then and what was now.*
But he had to fight. That was the one constant he both knew and understood. Fight, or betray his friends. Sirius didn’t know how he knew that was true; he just did.

A sudden scream tore out of him more violently than the last, and his muscles disintegrated into wild spasms.

Someone had cast the Cruciatus Curse, still trying to grind him down. He was screaming so loudly that his throat burned. Sirius gave up on trying to cling to consciousness. He simply fought for control of his heart and mind. They were all that mattered. He couldn’t afford to care what happened to his body. He was in a war for his soul.

Pain.

Coldness.

Dark.

Sirius snapped out of the memory with a start. Breathing hard, he forced himself to blink rapidly and focus on the room he was in. Not Azkaban, he told himself sternly. Not Casa Serpente. After a long moment, he was able to bring his racing heart under control and think. He had to analyze what he remembered, had to understand what it meant. Had he broken? Could Voldemort use him?

No. And it wasn’t stubbornness or denial speaking. Sirius knew it was true. If he had cracked, Voldemort would never be searching for him in this way… So he hadn’t broken. But then why did Voldemort want him so?

Every instinct he had told Sirius that the answer lay within that failed spell. He looked at the book again, but there was nothing else. No Counter Curse. No consequences. No other information. He frowned. Maybe his instincts were wrong, but Sirius had learned to listen to them a long time ago. In the Aurors, his instincts had kept him alive more than once, and they had helped him escape from Azkaban, too. But if the reason had something to do with the spell, what was it? Did Voldemort need him because the spell had failed?

He yawned and glanced at the clock again. It was now emitting a faint snoring sound, and read, “Far Too Late to be Looking at a Clock.” Sirius groaned aloud. It was probably right.

Armed with answers (and still more questions), Sirius rose and headed home.

End Notes

So, this is an old story that I've been asked to bring over here. If there's interest, I'll continue posting it, as the story has been done for a long time. That said, there are some significant differences between this version and the version over on FFN, including a lot of updates for Book 7 and fixing all the errors I could find.

Works inspired by this one: Even Dawn Falls by QiEclipse

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!