

# **Biology**

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**Pairings:** Harry/Blaise

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**Spoilers:** PS–OotP

**Warnings:** slash, super!Harry, identity hopping

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**Summary:** It wasn't just power and ability that Tom Riddle transferred to Harry that night. He made him the son he never had, and that changes everything.

**Notes:** I realize that graduation isn't exactly a done thing in Britain, but I needed to use the concept, and did.

This also needs massive editing to correct all the mistakes. I just haven't worked myself up to it yet.

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## 1 : INHERITANCE

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Harry's seventeenth birthday was much like any of his other recent birthdays, with one important distinction; his so-called family refused to acknowledge his existence, which suited him just fine. He lounged on his bed waiting as the numbers on the clock ticked over to midnight, at which point owls flew through his window and waited patiently for him to remove their letters and packages, then helped themselves to water before flying out into the night.

What was curious, though, was one owl that refused to leave. It perched on the back of the spindly chair in front of his equally shaky desk and concentrated on looking important. Naturally, this intrigued Harry, and he hurried through the usual offerings until finally he opened that owl's package last.

Seeing the seal of Gringotts on the wrappings, he set aside any feelings of wariness and cut the strings, letting the plain paper fall away to reveal an equally plain box. Inside were two envelopes and a book. The first also displayed the seal and was placed prominently on top. Opening it was short work; inside were two sheets of parchment.

One sheet informed Harry that as he had reached his majority, his inheritance was now to do with as he saw fit, and that if he wished a full accounting of it he needed only to visit Gringotts. Slotted into cuts in the bottom corner was a gold key that Harry removed and tucked away.

The other informed Harry that the second letter and book were from James Potter, who had before his death entrusted them to Gringotts on the condition that they be sent to Harry on his seventeenth birthday. Harry thought that rather peculiar, and wondered why the items had not simply been left in the vault.

Opening the letter, however, explained the odd choice of delivery.

Dear Harry,

As you are reading this letter, it can only mean one thing; I am unable to handle this personally. I may be dead, or otherwise incapable. In any case, I've left this with Gringotts because it is a family-only matter. Absolutely no one, aside from yourself, should have access to this book.

Harry's brows raised in surprise. It was all very cloak and dagger to his thinking.

Once you are finished with the book, you will need to find a way to hide it once again. The only thing I can suggest offhand is to secure it in one of the hidden family estates.

He was freshly surprised, wondering just how extensive his inheritance actually was and what was so important about the book.

You'll understand better once you've opened the book. It's too hard to explain with mere words. Just know this; I cannot tell you how much I regret that I could not be there to do this in person.

All my love,  
James 'Dad' Potter

Harry blinked a few times, unsure as to what exactly he was feeling at the moment. He resolutely set the letter aside and picked up the book, hesitating. He glanced around the room, knowing that the Dursleys would be unlikely to bother him for any reason, but feeling unsettled by the letter from his father. Feeling a bit foolish for being so paranoid, he grabbed his wand and cast a locking charm on the door, and a silencing charm for good measure.

He set both wand and book aside long enough to write responses to the letters he'd received, plus one to the Order assuring that he was perfectly fine. Hedwig gave him an odd look at the quantity of deliveries, but nevertheless hooted softly and flew out into the darkness. Feeling as though he'd taken care of everything, Harry decided he was now set to tackle the mysterious book. The cover was devoid of any markings, but he decided that only made sense given his father's warning words.

So he opened it.

He awoke to achingly bright sunlight streaming in through his window and the rustling of feathers. His first conscious thought beyond griping at the watering of his eyes and sneezing fit which took hold of him was that Hedwig should not have been able to make her deliveries so quickly.

When his eyes finally adjusted he became aware of the fact that it felt as though he had repeatedly beat his head against the wall, or had been whacked by a stray bludger. As both of those were impossible he sat there wondering just what in hell had happened.

The book lay innocently beside him, cover closed. Hedwig was perched atop her cage gazing at him with half-lidded eyes, and on seeing that he was awake, hooted softly and promptly went to sleep.

The more Harry awoke, the more he began to process his surroundings and that his stomach was protesting most loudly at the evident lack of food. Shaking his head carefully he swung his legs off the bed and stood up, throwing the covers over the book for the time being.

Harry removed the locking charm from the door and stumbled to the loo, then downstairs after a quick wash. Seeing that he was alone, he breathed a sigh of relief and grabbed some fruit from a bowl on the counter, a glass of water, and some paracetamol. He knocked back the pills and some water and retreated to his room, shutting the door behind him and wolfed down the fruit between gulps from his glass. When finished he went to the bed and pulled back the covers to reveal the book.

It was when he touched it again that everything was made clear. Centuries of knowledge slammed into the forefront of his mind, each piece fighting for dominance before all of it sank back, leaving one bit to focus his scattered wits on. The location of the hidden family estate—an estate that literally no person had ever entered who was not of the Potter blood. Harry knew, without stopping to think about it, that it was the only place he could safely put the book, to be retrieved only if he had a child.

He was stricken with the need to immediately secure the book even knowing that he had no way to—

*“Of course you do,”* said a voice.

Harry let out an undignified yelp and whipped out his wand, staring around wildly. He had every intention of making the intruder squeal like a little girl, just as soon as he could spot the culprit.

His actions were greeted with warm laughter that echoed strangely. *“Don’t you think you’re overreacting a little?”*

*“Not hardly,”* Harry said tersely, continuing to scan the room, but seeing absolutely nothing. Disillusionment charm? An invisibility cloak?

*“Neither, I’m afraid. If you’d stop acting like there’s an assassin in the corner, we could get back to how you’re going to secure the book.”*

Harry, if possible, was even more startled. He *knew* people couldn’t read minds.

*“I quite agree. They can’t. Were you going to stand down, or continue to look like the before photo in a brochure for Fligger Zeebot’s Anxiety-Reducing Potions?”*

*“I think I’ve gone mental,”* Harry said through gritted teeth.

An amused snicker was followed by, *“If you have, then so have I, Harry.”*

*“Are you going to show yourself, then?”* Harry asked. *“Tell me who you are?”*

*“I’m you. Or at least, a part of you that’s aware of what we’re capable of. I can’t very well show myself though. We aren’t quite that powerful. I suppose you could look in a mirror.”*

*“I’ve definitely gone mental.”* Harry lowered his wand and slumped onto the bed, cradling his head in his free hand.

*“Oh, don’t worry. I shan’t stick around forever. I’m just here to get you started. Everyone who reads the book goes through this. Your situation is different only in that you had no idea what to expect, that’s all.”*

“Yeah, sure. All right.” Harry had a fleeting thought about a conversation he’d had with his friends back in his second year about hearing voices. All in all, he felt no compelling reason to raise his head under the circumstances.

*“Right, then! As I was saying, you need to secure the book. If you relax your mind a little you’ll realize that you’ve acquired a wealth of knowledge over the past few days. You know where the estate is and you do know how to apparate, not to mention a few other ways to travel that aren’t, strictly speaking, common in the wizarding world.”*

Harry didn’t respond; instead he tried to relax and clear his mind of the extraneous, focusing only on methods of travel. He sat up with a start when he realized the voice was right; he knew at least three ways.

*“Excellent. I suggest you do not use apparition until you’re licensed. Use an alternate until then. You can send off a letter to the Order and one to the testing department before you take the book to the estate.”*

Harry nodded and slipped his wand into the holster up his sleeve. He dashed off two letters and gave them to a sleepy Hedwig, who nipped him in annoyance at being woken, but flew out the window anyway.

After casting another locking charm on his door, Harry grabbed the book and his father’s letter, made a peculiar gesture, and disappeared. Some hours later, after having strolled around the underground estate in wonderment, Harry returned to his bedroom at the house on Privet Drive. Two letters awaited him on his desk; Hedwig was already back and fast asleep facing the wall. It was clear she did not wish to be disturbed.

The letter from the Order was nothing unusual; that it came from Remus personally made it special. The other was from the Ministry with a date for his apparition test, a week away. Deciding he may as well do something productive, he went to his desk, pulled out his assignments, and began to work. Books were unnecessary; the knowledge was all there in his head.

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He met Remus at Mrs Figg’s house. After a brief round of hugs and greetings, they floo’d to the Ministry and walked to the apparition testing center. Two bored officials and a short time later, Harry walked back to Remus fully licensed and from there they went to Diagon Alley. Fortunately, Remus was content to leave Harry inside Gringotts while he did some shopping so long as Harry promised not to leave until Remus returned.

As well he was, since Harry needed to discuss the letter he’d received privately. Perhaps he was being paranoid—the voice in his head assured him he was not—but he felt it was best to err on the side of discretion when it came to his finances. He was therefore surprised when the goblin he was escorted to could not tell him anything about the contents of the inheritance vault; instead he was told it was now his by law and that was that.

Harry took the time to go down to the vault, eyes wide at the size of it and the amount of furniture stored inside. The decided lack of money had him stumped until his internal voice told him he should take a closer look at what the hidden estate had to offer. The only thing he took with him in consequence was a box which held his parents' wands, salvaged from Godric's Hollow and given to Gringotts to store, presumably by Dumbledore himself.

He stopped in at his original vault to grab a few handfuls of galleons and went back to the lobby to meet Remus. Spotting him chatting up Tonks, he strode over and joined them, then all three went out to purchase Harry's school supplies for the year.

He could have waited for Ron and Hermione, but they had been strangely silent thus far, having only sent gifts on his birthday and some very short notes. He felt a little hurt and was at something of a loss when it came to figuring out what to do about their lack of communication. He shrugged philosophically; it would come out sooner or later. If it was thoughtlessness, it could be remedied. If it were something more sinister, he would find a way to deal with it.

Back home hours later he found himself staring at the mirror, or more accurately, the scar on his forehead. He thought, for probably the millionth time, how much it annoyed him. As if on cue, the mental voice spoke up.

*"If it upsets you that much, get rid of it."*

"Pardon?" said Harry, bewildered.

*"Get rid of it. Will it away. And while you're at it, do something about that mop you call hair."*

"Well excuse me. It's not my fault my hair is like this," Harry shot back.

*"I beg to differ. You only believe that, and you should know by now not to believe everything you're told. Go on then, change it. You have the ability."*

Harry scowled for a moment, wondering why it had to be him who had an alter-ego who deemed it necessary to find amusement at his expense. Rolling his eyes, he focused on his reflection in the mirror, imagining himself without the scar.

A moment later, it was gone.

*"See? That was easy."*

"Oh, shut up."

*"If I shut up, who would be the brains of this outfit? Speaking of which, who selects your clothes?"*

Harry's face twisted into a scowl immediately.

*“Right, anyway. Try reverting, why don't you. Did you really believe all these years that you were the spitting image of your father?”*

“What d'you mean, revert? And why shouldn't I look like my father?”

*“Just trust me. Er, you. Us. Whatever. Don't think about it, just do it.”*

“Fine.” Harry heaved a sigh and closed his eyes, trying *not* to think about what he was doing. A muffled cough had them open and him looking at his reflection again.

His appearance had definitely changed. After a bit of wild-eyed staring he realized that much was the same, but the arrangement wasn't. His hair was still black, but far longer. His eyes were still that amazing green, but now they tilted up slightly at the corners. His facial structure was more refined and the shape less round. His upper lip was thinner than the lower, but not so much as to look ridiculous, whereas before they were more or less even.

“I suppose you have an explanation for this, oh intelligent one?” he asked the voice, sarcasm and not a little anxiety colouring his words.

*“Quite so. But, I suggest we tackle that at the estate. Oh, and don't forget to bring your parents' wands with you. There's no safer place for them.”*

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The pool he'd been directed to had a sheen like mercury and disconcerting tendency to bubble at odd moments. After being transfixed by its peculiar beauty for several minutes he had the presence of mind to ask what it was.

*“It's a memory pool. Like a pensieve, but not quite. Focus on what you want to see from your memories and it'll appear. I suggest you start with the weeks after you were brought to your aunt and uncle.”*

“If you say so, but I'm not sure why.”

*“I see things a bit differently than you do. If you want answers, I suggest you get to focusing.”*

Harry sighed and gave thanks to the fact that he'd long since learned Occlumency and had little trouble clearing his mind so that he could then focus on something which, by all rights, he should not be able to remember. The surface of the pool stilled and took on a mirror-like quality, a picture forming slowly as he continued to focus. He watched as Hagrid delivered him to Privet Drive and the conversation between Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall.

But that wasn't far enough on so he tried again, finally stopping on a scene of Dumbledore appearing next to his crib and taking several strands of hair from his head. Harry didn't quite know what to make of that so he tried for the next occurrence. The scene that unfolded was illuminating.

Professor Dumbledore appeared by his crib and cast several spells, silencing and locking, before pulling a vial from his robes and placing it on a small table. He reached into baby Harry's crib and picked him up, cradling him with one arm.

The smile on Dumbledore's face was one of satisfaction and struck Harry as foreboding. Perhaps it was the way the voice had spoken, but Harry was inclined to believe he would not find this memory to be innocent.

"It's all right, young Harry. You'll see. No one will ever need know the truth of the matter, least of all you. Just one simple potion and no one will ever know just what happened that night. All they will see is James Potter's son."

Harry's sense of foreboding turned into full-blown anxiety at that, worse for the fact that he had no idea what Dumbledore was hiding.

Dumbledore picked up the vial and flipped it open with his thumb, then dribbled it into baby Harry's mouth a little at a time, making sure that it went down rather than being spat back at him. When it was gone, the vial was closed with another quick movement and placed back in his robes.

Dumbledore held baby Harry carefully as the child started to squirm, then wriggle furiously, and finally wail in pain. When at last the cries stopped and the little face had relaxed, Dumbledore smiled benevolently.

Harry realized his fists were clenched tightly at his sides and made a conscious effort to stretch out his fingers.

"You see, Harry? It's all better now. You'll grow up looking just like James, and if it starts to wear off I will simply arrange to correct the problem. After all, a secret is only a secret if only one person knows it, isn't that right?"

"You'll grow up to be just what we need, a savior twice 'round. I'll make sure of it."

Dumbledore placed baby Harry back in his crib and tucked him in, then removed the spells with a wave of his wand. A moment later, he was gone.

Harry stepped back heavily, stumbling in his anger. "What the bloody hell did he *do!*"

*"Remember when he told you his theory about the night Voldemort gave you that scar?"*

"Yes," Harry hissed.

*“Take that, and what you just saw, and your current appearance, and tell me what you think you should do to find more answers.”*

“What are you on about? He’s making it sound like I’m not the son of James Potter. Is there some kind of potion or something to give me answers?”

*“There’s no need to get shirty with me, young man. And you just answered your own question. I keep telling you. It’s all there in your head. The book gave you a wealth of knowledge.”*

Hours, a mass of ingredients, and a piece of parchment later, Harry had his answer. He wasn’t inclined to believe it in the least, but he had his answer. The damning piece of parchment told him his mother was Lily Potter, *née* Evans, which was as expected. What was horrifying was that the father’s name kept flashing between James Potter and Tom Riddle.

The words of the headmaster came back to him.

“Unless I’m much mistaken, he transferred some of his own powers to you the night he gave you that scar. Not something he intended to do, I’m sure. . . .”

“Some of his powers? Some? Powers? You have a wicked talent for understatement, I’m sure.” Harry started laughing, a high-pitched, cold laughter that echoed around the lab he was standing in. The voice stayed silent.

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The remainder of the summer went on as before, filled with summer class work, reading for pleasure, and occasionally wondering about the rare, short letters from his two friends. He tried not to dwell too much on what had happened at the estate, but it wouldn’t let him be. He certainly didn’t know what to do about it. He had honestly thought after the end of his fifth year that the secrets were done with.

How could he trust a man who professed such caring, yet left out some very important information that directly concerned himself? The more he thought about it, the more that conversation stuck in his mind. Dumbledore had told him he’d made the mistake of caring more about Harry’s happiness than burdening him with the truth at such a young age.

Was that the truth, or was that a diversion? It was, certainly, an admittance that Dumbledore had tried to think of Harry as more of a tool or a means to an end. He sighed, as he seemed to be doing a lot of lately.

He hadn’t even bothered to protest remaining at Privet Drive the entire holiday as it would be his last. Why expend the energy to complain when he’d never have to return in his lifetime? His thoughts circled round, getting nowhere. He finally decided not to decide yet. He’d watch Dumbledore, and see what happened.

When the time came, Harry left a day early and booked a room at the Leaky Cauldron. He visited Gringotts again to spend more time in his inheritance vault, making sure there was nothing of any real importance in it, then left and made a quick visit to the estate to drop off his vault keys.

Back in Diagon Alley he stayed in his room, grateful when Tom brought up both the noon and evening meals, and spent his time reading a muggle fantasy novel. The next morning, after a hearty breakfast, he gathered his shrunken belongings—Hedwig had left the day before to fly on ahead—and apparated to the platform early enough to find an empty compartment near the end of the train.

Not bothering to keep watch out the window for his friends, he pulled out the novel he'd started the day before and began reading. If they wanted to find him, they would.

Forty-five minutes later he'd been joined by Neville, Seamus and Dean. Ron and Hermione didn't arrive until an hour after the train had left the station (presumably at a prefect meeting) and looked slightly put out that the compartment was already so full. The others happily made room. Hermione immediately whipped out a book and started to read. Conversation flowed around her, and Harry was content to keep to his own book. He still didn't know what was wrong and it was obvious he wouldn't be finding out just yet.

When they arrived at the castle Harry ended up in a carriage with Ron, Hermione and Neville, and once again his two best friends looked slightly put out. Again, Harry gave no sign that he noticed and said nothing about it. The sorting, and dinner, was more of the same. Harry was beginning to get more than a little annoyed. When dinner ended he went straight up to his dormitory and got ready for bed.

When Ron arrived he bore a faintly puzzled look on his face. "Is everything all right, Harry? You've been awfully quiet today."

"It's been a quiet summer. Perhaps I'm having to get used to people again," he said evenly.

"Oh, right. Good night, then," Ron said and shuffled off to get changed.

Harry pulled the bed curtains closed and drifted off to sleep, pleased that he'd not been confrontational, but berating himself for trying subtlety on someone like Ron.

Schedules were handed out at breakfast and Harry was pleased to note that he continued to have a fairly open schedule due to only taking five NEWT level classes. He only had Care of Magical Creatures and Herbology today. Ron looked equally pleased. They both had two days with no classes at all.

When Hermione went to potions, Harry and Ron lounged around near Hagrid's hut, seeing no reason to waste the free period indoors when the day was warm and sunny.

“So,” Ron said while tugging at blades of grass.

“So,” replied Harry while getting his textbook out.

“You aren’t going to read that now are you?” asked Ron in disbelief.

“Whyever not? Have to read it sometime, don’t I?”

“But—” Ron broke off and appeared thoughtful for a minute. “It’s like this, Harry. I’ve . . . got a girlfriend. I just wasn’t sure how to tell you.”

Harry looked up from his book. “You finally got up the courage to ask Hermione out?”

Ron gaped for a moment, and Harry almost smiled at the sight. Ron shook his head finally saying, “Hermione? No. Lisa Turpin, Ravenclaw.”

Harry blinked a few times. “Really. How’d that happen?”

“Oh, well, you know. . . .” Ron didn’t seem to keen on discussing details.

Harry chose not to press the subject. Merlin knew he hated it when people tried prying at him. “Congratulations, mate. I hope you make each other happy.”

Ron broke into a wide grin. “Yeah, well, I’ve been kind of distant and I thought you’d want to know why. It only occurred to me just lately that I hadn’t been writing much over the summer and—”

“It’s all right, Ron. I’m glad to know it was nothing bad is all.”

When class rolled around Harry was happy to note that nothing untoward happened, despite Hagrid’s puppyish enthusiasm for dangerous creatures. He actually gave an overview of the coming year and belted out an exhortation about the NEWTs at the end of the year.

Herbology after lunch, where they met up again with Hermione, was similar, except they actually got to do some hands on work. Harry and Ron were thrilled to have the rest of the afternoon off, though Ron was less than pleased when Harry started in on the day’s assignments almost immediately.

To Harry’s way of thinking it was best to just get things out of the way, something that was obviously a little too close to Hermione’s philosophy for Ron’s tastes. Harry didn’t bother to tell Ron about the book from his father, or his lack of need for the textbooks or the library in order to do his assignments.

The next day was even better, though Harry noticed Hermione was still acting a bit strange, because they only had Transfiguration. True, it was a double class, but it meant his whole

afternoon was free. He once again started in on his assignment directly lunch was over, making Ron a tad peeved and causing a pleased and slightly smug look to cross Hermione's face.

After dinner he went to see Madam Hooch about booking the pitch for practices and was seen shortly thereafter posting a notice in the common room with the days and times. His attention to his studies paid off when he had four free days stretching before him with nothing to do but appear to read ahead, fly, play chess and exploding snap with Ron, or read for pleasure.

It was worth it, in a perverse way, to see Ron getting nervy on Sunday at not having bothered to put in any time yet and Hermione nagging at him like it would mean him failing his year-end tests.

Friday, however, had brought a note from Dumbledore at breakfast asking him to come to his office. A glance up at the head table told him nothing, so he trudged to the gargoyles with a slight sense of unease, gave the password, went up and knocked.

After hearing the muffled, "Come in," he went in and sat down.

"Good morning, professor."

"Good morning, Harry. I trust you are feeling well today."

"Yes, sir. And you? I mean, is there something wrong?"

"I'm not sure why you ask, Harry, but nothing is wrong. I simply want to assure myself you were all right and settling in this year, and to see if there was anything you wanted to discuss." Dumbledore smiled benevolently.

Harry noticed that the smile didn't quite reach Dumbledore's eyes. Given that they usually appeared to twinkle in amusement or high spirits, it was proof enough to him that something was not quite right.

"I didn't, but. . . ." he began, "I'm trying very hard to understand things, but I just don't. I thought the time of secrets was over, professor."

Dumbledore peered over the rim of his glasses at him and said, "Secrets?"

"Yes, secrets. I thought that once I'd learned to guard my mind that you'd be more open with me. It's not like I ever expected to know the day-to-day business of the Order, sir. But I did expect that you'd help me with the things you never explained. As it is I keep feeling like I'm floundering around in the dark. All I learn are the normal things any witch or wizard learns, Occlumency excepted, and nothing more really. If I'm supposed to be the one to bring Voldemort down, shouldn't I? And what's this power I have? How can I use something I don't understand and can't put a name to?"

“Ah, I see. You’re right, Harry. I would not be open to giving you the mundane details, for they would do you little good. As for extra training, I’m afraid that will have to wait until you have graduated; until then the Ministry and the Board of Governors have too much control.”

That struck Harry as being distinctly untrue, but he let it pass for the moment and listened to Dumbledore’s next words.

“As for the power you possess, it is more important that it exists and it works when you need it, than for you to understand it. The first time you made it manifest you did so without any conscious thought, but at exactly the correct time. Sometimes understanding is a hindrance just like sometimes knowledge is corruption.”

He smiled again, in a way that made Harry want to surge to his feet in protest. His hard-won control over his temper kept him seated.

“With all due respect, professor, people are dying out there at his bidding. Students in this school are being swayed to his side. And I sit here, the weight of what I supposed to do laying squarely on my shoulders, feeling useless.”

Dumbledore gave him another look over the rim of his glasses and finally replied, “There is a time and place for everything, Harry.”

“Of course, professor.”

“If you have no further questions, you may go, Harry. I’m sure you have plenty of things to keep you occupied for the moment.”

“Yes. Thank you, sir.” He stood up and headed for the door.

*“Why bother,”* said the voice. *“You’ll only ask questions he isn’t willing to answer anyway.”*

If Dumbledore thought anything of the slight pause in Harry’s progress out, he did not remark on it.

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## 2 : SLIGHT OF HAND

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*"I wonder men dare trust themselves with men." — William Shakespeare.*

It was two weeks into the term and Harry was having breakfast with his friends on a fine Saturday morning. He noted in passing that Malfoy had an insufferably smug look on his face, even more so than usual, but it was nothing compared to the selection of food waiting to be eaten. Ron had noticed as well and made a low remark, voice laced with venom, wondering who Malfoy had gotten one up on to look like that.

Twenty minutes later Harry was almost finished eating when a sharp pain in his scar caught him off guard. His hand automatically went up and his two friends looked over immediately, concern etched on their faces.

"All right, Harry?" asked Ron quietly.

Harry just nodded, grabbing his glass to finish off the last of his pumpkin juice. "Look, could one of you tell Dumbledore that it twinged? I think I need to go have a lie down."

Seeing Hermione's face he hastily added, "No, I didn't see anything and I'm not sick. I just feel a little unwell. If it gets worse I promise you can haul me off to the infirmary, all right?"

She didn't look happy, but nodded anyway. Harry quickly left the table and headed for his room, missing the exchange of glances between his friends and the head table.

Later that afternoon he felt a bit on edge but rationalized that away. He hadn't seen or heard anything, and while he expected not to due to the more or less permanent mental shield, he wished he had some idea what had prompted it.

Harry continued to go to his classes, do his homework and train the Gryffindor quidditch team, but he couldn't quite shake his uneasiness. By the time his scar lanced him again with stabbing pains two weeks later he was very much on edge.

This time he spoke with Dumbledore personally to report it, though as before he could not tell him any more than it had hurt. He had already resigned himself to getting nothing in return, so it came as no surprise when Dumbledore essentially petted him on the head for coming to see him, offered him a sherbet lemon, then shooed him on his way.

A visit to Madam Pomfrey revealed nothing out of order. She prescribed some pain potion, gave him some chocolate and a bottle of calming draught he could sip when he got to feeling too anxious, though only enough for a week. He'd used it, but when it didn't seem to have more than a cursory effect, he didn't bother to ask for more.

Ron and Hermione (not to mention much of Gryffindor tower) had taken to giving him odd looks when they thought he wasn't paying attention. He couldn't explain his jumpiness to

them any better than he had to the headmaster, and found himself having to reign in his temper at the subtle insinuations that he wasn't being completely honest with them.

Two weeks later he felt it again. He was starting to think Voldemort was having a once-a-fortnight morning get together where they had tea and crumpets with a side of muggle torture. The chuckling in the back of his head let him know the voice was still finding him amusing.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his growing edginess, he began to notice that one or both of his friends always seemed to be somewhere in the vicinity.

*"Or it could be that you find it a little odd that Ron always seems to need to use the loo when you do?"* commented the voice sarcastically.

Harry snorted and went back to his work, trying to block out the behavior of the people in the tower. He'd been doing better than ever in dueling practicals in Defense class, the hyper awareness he felt making it near impossible for anyone to hit him with a spell.

All in all, he was feeling a bit like he was back in second year when everyone was whispering about him and as skittish of him as deer with a lion.

The next time it happened, on a sunny Saturday morning, the pain was bad enough to send him to his knees had he been standing. As it was, he didn't quite know what happened, for the next moment the doors to the hall banged open and he gasped to see a contingent of Death Eaters striding in as though it were a perfectly natural action.

He was on his feet in a heartbeat, wand out and shooting curses and hexes at them. Anyone who got in his line of fire was shouted at or hexed into silence, and the rough hands trying to pull him back were shaken off. Harry was so engrossed in what he was doing he didn't notice an arrowhead of staff heading his way, wands at the ready.

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He stretched and cautiously opened his eyes. The light was subdued but not dim so he fumbled to the side in search of his glasses. Finding and putting them on allowed him to see the headmaster sitting patiently on a nearby chair.

"What happened?" Harry asked quietly.

The headmaster gave him a curious look and countered with a question of his own. "What do you remember, Harry?"

Harry furrowed his brow and thought back to breakfast. "My scar went off. Starting to think of it like a muggle car alarm, actually, except those don't make you want to keel over in pain." He managed a brief, humorless smile.

“Anyway, it started hurting so bad it was all I could do to stay sitting on the bench. Then the doors opened and I saw a group of Death Eaters waltz in. I attacked. I didn’t think, I admit. I saw them and reacted on reflex.”

“There were no Death Eaters, Harry.” He held up a hand at Harry’s expression of disbelief. “I assure you. I’m not sure how you saw what you saw, but you took down a group of students coming into breakfast yesterday morning. I would like to think that someone played an elaborate prank on you, but I do not see how that is possible.”

At that Harry became thoughtful.

“It is more likely that Voldemort found a way to push past your barriers and induce a waking vision given the amount of pain you were in.” Dumbledore adjusted his glasses and peered at Harry. “Now, as it is, Madam Pomfrey has given you a thorough round of tests and can find nothing amiss, but I am sure she plans to keep you here for the remainder of the day to make sure there are no further ill effects from whatever caused this to happen.”

Dumbledore stood and bestowed a kindly smile on Harry. “I’ll just be going then, but I will leave you with a piece of advice. If this happens again, try to curb your reflexes long enough to see how those around you are reacting before you jump into the fray.”

With that, he drifted out of the ward.

Harry was left torn between wanting to smack the smile off the old man’s face and wondering just how much of a fool he’d made of himself.

*“You put on quite a show. I dare say between your defense class and that display, quite a few people will be wary of your skill.”*

“That’s comforting,” he mumbled, afraid that Madam Pomfrey would wander in at any second and hear him talking to himself.

*“I didn’t mean it to be. I must be losing my touch.”*

The staccato click of heels warned him of the Pomfrey’s approach. A moment later she sailed around the curtain edge and descended on him with several potions for him to choke down.

“Now there, it’s just going on the noon meal so I’m sure your friends will be along directly. If you need anything, let me know.”

She bustled out again, the very picture of importance.

He hadn’t long to wait; Ron and Hermione arrived and pulled up chairs just as three trays of food appeared.

Harry gave them a long look. “This has got to be the first time I’m in here when I didn’t actually hurt myself. People must think I’ve gone off my rocker.” He glanced at his tray and breathed a sigh of relief that it wasn’t broth or gruel.

“Well, I daresay people are wondering, yes,” said Hermione. “On the other hand, I know how hard you’ve been studying this year and I wondered if it would have an effect.”

Ron was too busy eating to comment, though Harry was quite sure his eyes rolled.

“I have, but . . . I just feel so useless. I tried telling Dumbledore that, but he didn’t think it was important. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’m trying so hard to keep everything I can control under control for once that I’m getting edgy and nervy all the time.”

He ran a hand through his untidy hair and sighed. “The headmaster says he doesn’t see how it could have been someone pranking me. Pomfrey says she can’t find anything wrong either. The only theory is that Voldemort found a way to get past my defenses. A waking vision he called it.”

“You looked like you were about to pass out from the pain, but then you jumped up and. . . .” She trailed off and picked up her glass to drink, then set about daintily eating a few bites.

“When’s she letting you go?” asked Ron as he pushed his empty tray away.

“Tonight, I’m told. I don’t suppose you brought anything I can read while I wait?” He glanced at Hermione.

“Not really. I can fetch something if you like,” she offered.

“You would? I’ve got some muggle novels in my trunk, but only if you really don’t mind. One’s got a bookmark in it. I’ll be bored to tears otherwise.”

“It’s not a problem,” she assured him with a smile. “And since Ron still has assignments to finish, I’m sure I can convince him to do those while we wait since he can’t have you to play chess with.”

The heartfelt groan from Ron was only to be expected.

The next morning was grey and gloomy, a match for Harry’s mood once he realized his fellow students were even more wary of him now. He resolved to just ignore it all, even going so far as to walk away when a chance encounter with Malfoy on the way to breakfast had him clenching his fists in anger.

He’d managed a few pieces of toast when the mail was delivered. After a brief glance at the headline of *The Daily Prophet*—Boy-Who-Lived Attacks Fellow Students, by Rita Skeeter—he

got calmly to his feet, grabbed another slice of buttered toast, and left the hall to sit in the Charms classroom to wait for class to begin.

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Saturday they went to Hogsmeade and rummaged around the shops for ideas and accessories. Halloween was almost on them and the headmaster had decreed that there would be a costume party in addition to the usual feast.

Ron's costume had proven simple; he was going as a member of the Chudley Cannons. Hermione was more difficult, but was soon set to rights when she happened upon a filmy, floaty dress that would do well for her Shakespearean inclinations.

Harry had absolutely no idea what to wear and was becoming resigned to the idea of simply wearing his dress robes. Hermione suggested he go as something completely unlike himself, prompting Harry's somewhat acid comment, "What, wrap a turban around my head and go as Quirrell the sniveling coward?"

He was quite sure the smack upside the head he got from her was deserved.

In the end he threw his hands up in the air and stole Ron's idea, declaring he was going dressed as a member of Puddlemere United in honor of Oliver Wood. To that end he purchased a poster of the team so he'd have a picture to work from when transfiguring a set of his robes to match.

He grew increasingly edgy all week and was gratified to note that his friends did as well. None of them cared for Halloween; something always seemed to go wrong. Harry considered backing out of going to the feast, but firmly told himself that one stupid incident and a case of nerves was no reason to hide, never mind that Ron and Hermione would never hear of it.

It did not help in the least that an edition of *The Daily Prophet* had reported that dementors had appeared at Azkaban.

According to aurors stationed at Azkaban prison, a large contingent of dementors appeared early this morning. They were in no way threatening, as the aurors were not affected by their presence, but it was made quite clear that they were there to take back their position as guards.

When interviewed, Minister Fudge said, "This is a clear sign that You-Know-Who has failed to meet the conditions of whatever deal he made with them and they have come back to their rightful place."

He went on further to say, "This is wonderful news and I for one will sleep better at night knowing they are willing to once again guard the prison. I see no reason to attempt to turn them away from a job they perform extraordinarily well."

All aurors have been recalled from Azkaban and are being put back into their original roles within the Ministry.

In consequence, he and Ron spent all Halloween morning playing exploding snap to settle their nerves while Hermione was in class, then finishing up assignments during the afternoon under her watchful eye.

As the time for the feast rolled closer, they broke off to their respective rooms to clean up and get ready, meeting back downstairs a short time later. Hermione had once again used liberal amounts of Sleekeasy's Hair Potion to tame her bushy hair before styling it elaborately to match her dress.

They, along with a number of other Gryffindors, went down to the Great Hall. Unlike a normal feast, and far more similar to the Yule Ball several years ago, the room was full of smaller tables.

A number of students were already milling around or seated at tables with their chosen companions, though plenty of the tables were still empty. Harry made a beeline for one such table near one of the walls and yanked out a chair, seating himself so that his back was to the wall.

Hermione floated over, a slight frown on her face, and sat to one side.

"You don't want to, er . . . mingle a bit before dinner?" she asked.

"Not really. I want to make sure I'm at a table I like. I can always mingle, as you put it, after we eat."

She pursed her lips and nodded, then watched as students continued to enter the great hall and find friends, or choose their own tables to sit at. Ron eventually arrived with Lisa Turpin in tow and they took the two remaining seats at Harry's table.

Dinner began after the tapping of a fork on glass and a short speech by Dumbledore; people chose from the small cards listing the evening's menu. Conversation with Lisa present was slightly stilted, but otherwise socially acceptable. Harry just wanted the evening to be over.

It was when the food was magically cleared away and a great many people had started to drift around the room that Harry's uneasiness reached its peak, punctuated by the crippling pain that spiked through his head. His friends were already too far away to be of immediate help.

He bit his lip and made a survey of the room, seeing that none of the students seemed anxious or fearful in the least. The pain increased, like someone had targeted Crucio at his scar, and Harry began seeing black-robed figures slipping around in the crowd.

He tried to catch Hermione's attention to have her help him up to the infirmary when he saw one of the black-robed figures sweep up behind her, towering over her slender form. Yet more appeared in the crowd, almost as though some of them had been cloaked in illusion all along, waiting for an unheard (by him) signal; he couldn't be sure, his sight made hazy by the pain.

Things seemed to explode around him; screams assaulted his ears and something slammed into his side. He spun in place but no one was visible near him. He started toward Hermione when he was hit again and went crashing to his knees.

As soon as he was able he looked up, levering himself off the floor. Hermione's head whipped around; she looked back over her shoulder, and her eyes widened in surprise as a masked, black-cloaked eater pointed his wand at her chest.

After that, his reaction was a foregone conclusion.

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Cornelius Fudge stormed up to Hogwarts castle's front doors in a frenzy of self-righteousness, flanked by a unit of Aurors. One skipped ahead to open the doors to let the others in and caught up after closing them as the group marched up to Dumbledore's office.

Fudge barely bothered to knock on the office door before barging in and huffing importantly, probably in an attempt to *seem* important, but more likely to disguise the fact that he was not as fit as he could be for a man his age.

Dumbledore's response to the intrusion was quite mild. "Tea, Cornelius?" he asked.

Fudge threw himself into a squashy chair and immediately got down to business. "I must insist the boy be removed now. This is the second incident and he put at least twenty students in the infirmary by all accounts, maybe more."

He waved one of his hands to stress the significance of his words. "He is a danger to himself and every person in this castle. I tell you, the parents will not stand for this. Neither will the Board of Governors or the Ministry."

"I see. I assume then that you come about Harry."

Fudge's face reddened considerably at Dumbledore's unflappable demeanor. "The boy is obviously cracking, or has already. We're being inundated with howlers about him. Everyone will be safer once that boy is in a cell where he can't do any harm."

"Cornelius, I ask that you give me a day to investigate and sort things out. If by then nothing can be found, I may have no choice but to accede to your demands."

“Fine. You have that day. I will back on the fourth,” he snapped. Fudge stood, motioned to his guards and stormed off again in a flurry of motion and sound.

Dumbledore gave him several minutes lead time then left his office for the infirmary. On arrival he took a moment to look in on Harry, who was laying unconscious in one of the curtained-off areas near the back. He shook his head sadly before finding Madam Pomfrey.

“Your assessment?” he asked.

“I hate to say it, but the same as last time. I can find nothing wrong with him. I detect no dark spells, nor any traces of peculiar potions. The only explanations are that his mind is beginning to snap, or this is some doing of You-Know-Who, however that might be possible.”

She wrung her hands together in apparent frustration, giving the headmaster a wide-eyed look of concern.

“Unfortunate, indeed. Had he come to you at any other time with problems?”

“Only the once. For a pain potion because of his head. I also gave him a calming draught for the week, but he never asked for any more of it. Either it had no effect or he was embarrassed to ask for more.”

Dumbledore sighed. “For the time being, keep him sedated. Use nourishment potions if necessary. I will let you know when he can be awakened, Poppy.”

She blinked and said, “Is that wise? You know I can’t do it for long.”

He nodded. “I understand, but for now it will have to be done.” He gave her a pat on the shoulder and left the infirmary quietly.

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The Order convened and no one was happy about it. The topic was, of course, Harry Potter.

Dumbledore opened the meeting with the worst of it. “Fudge is demanding Harry be placed in Azkaban.”

The uproar was immediate. Snape was smirking in the shadows and Moody looked pensive.

“How can they think of putting a child in Azkaban!” shrieked Molly.

“It is claimed that with two of the incidents, not to mention his overall pattern this year of becoming increasingly edgy, that he is now a danger not only to himself but to the school as a whole. Madam Pomfrey has done extensive tests on Harry, both times, and found nothing wrong whatsoever.”

He raised a hand at the increasing noise level.

“I myself have theorized that perhaps Voldemort has found a way past the protections Harry has wrought for his mind, but I cannot prove it with any certainty. Harry has told me that he saw a group of Death Eaters burst into the great hall during breakfast the first time. He acted on reflex given that stimulus. However, no such event happened, or at least not as he perceived it.”

“Can’t he just be removed from the school for a while?” asked another.

“An idea I had thought of, but to where? If he goes to St. Mungo’s he would need to be under 24-hour guard and probably require aurors to be on hand, assuming the Ministry would be willing. If he goes back to Privet Drive, there would be no one to watch over him if whatever is happening should occur again.”

“Well what about here?”

“How many of you would be willing to live here for the duration? How many of you are willing to take the risk of sheltering an outlaw, as I have no doubt that Fudge is quite serious in his claims.”

“You make it sound like we have no choice in this!”

“I’m not sure we do. I confess I find myself at something of a loss. The Ministry is quite adamant. He is bringing to bear his own power, that of the parents, and the Board of Governors. If we hide Harry, I have no doubt the school will be lost. I ask that you discuss this amongst yourselves for an hour and we will try to come to a decision then.”

He turned and left the room as the noise level once again rose.

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By the time Fudge stormed back into Hogwarts Harry’s belongings had already been packed into his trunk and stowed in a corner of Dumbledore’s office on the upper level.

“Well?” Fudge demanded.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like a sherbet lemon, Cornelius. I find them quite soothing.”

“You know very well that I am not here to exchange pleasantries,” Fudge said stiffly.

“Are you sure this is the only solution, Cornelius? He is only a boy after all.”

“Yes, I am quite sure. So, apparently, is the majority of the wizarding world. Now where is the boy,” he demanded.

Biology

“Be it on your head, Cornelius. He is in the infirmary.”

Fudge gave a sharp nod and turned on his heel, moving swiftly from the room.

Dumbledore thought it odd that Fudge had never bothered to ask about Harry’s wand.

*The Daily Prophet* the next morning caused such an uproar that Dumbledore was required to use his forceful voice to regain order.

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### 3: HONESTY

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#### — Azkaban Year One —

*“I think the greatest rogues are they who talk most of their honesty.” — Anthony Trollope.*

Ron and Hermione walked side by side toward Dumbledore’s office in silence. The password was whispered to the gargoyle, which obliged by jumping to the side, letting them access the moving stair. At the top they continued on to the office door and Ron rapped three times.

“Come in,” was the muffled reply from within.

Ron opened the door, gesturing for Hermione to enter ahead of him, then entered himself. Closing the door, he took a seat next to her and looked to Dumbledore.

“Thank you both for coming. Tea, either of you?” Dumbledore waved a hand at the tea set on his desk.

Hermione replied, “No thank you, professor.”

Ron shook his head in negation of the offer.

Dumbledore peered over the rim of his glasses at the two of them, then sat back and steepled his fingers, arms braced against his sides. “This is a sad day. As you know from the report in *The Daily Prophet*, our attempts have been for naught. I trust, however, that the both of you tried diligently since we first spoke on this matter.”

Ron straightened up and said, “We did, professor! We tried to get him to talk to us about whatever was wrong, but—”

Hermione cut in, “But he never said much of anything besides thinking he might be working too hard. He said he’d spoken to you and that you’d brushed him off. I realized at that point that there had to be something seriously wrong to have said such a thing.”

She huffed slightly and continued. “He seemed all right for a while after that. More like himself. But then Halloween got closer, and you know how upset he gets during that time of the year. Did he . . . say anything afterward? About what happened?”

Dumbledore gave her a long look then poured himself a cup of tea, squeezing a wedge of lemon into it before stirring and taking a sip. “He did not. He was still unconscious when he was removed from the school.”

“He never woke up?!” Ron shouted.

“I’ll thank you to moderate your tone, Mr Weasley,” said Dumbledore. “He was unconscious from the time he was subdued during the incident until he was removed. He will wake up in Azkaban.”

“Why was he taken there, professor? Couldn’t some other place have been found?” asked Hermione.

“That was the very subject of an Order meeting, Miss Granger. The outcome should be apparent.”

“How is Harry is supposed to get better in that place? I mean, if he really has lost his grip on reality, Azkaban will hardly make it any better,” she pointed out logically.

“There are times when even my hands are tied, Miss Granger. I know you are aware of that after your years here at Hogwarts. If Harry is indeed insane, or if Voldemort has found a way to force his will into him, he is a danger to us all, and quite likely already lost to us.” He took another sip of his tea as the two students looked down.

“Is there nothing we can do?” asked Hermione finally.

“Not at present, and if Minister Fudge is correct, there may never be,” said Dumbledore gravely. “Do you have any idea what set him off? Did either of you two see?”

“Well,” said Hermione, “I think it was when Goyle bumped into me. I turned my head to see who it was and saw a licorice stick pointed at me. He shouted at me to stop mangling his food, even though it was his fault. The next thing I knew, Harry was throwing curses around like mad.”

“I think, given that evidence, that we can safely say that Harry has become delusional.” There was no trace of a twinkle in Dumbledore’s eyes.

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Remus sat at the far end of the table, almost hidden in the shadows. At the very end of the table sat Snape, likewise nearly hidden. Dumbledore took his pride of place at the head, bathed in a pool of pearly light. Remus thought that Albus had made sure of the quality of light, using it as a way to intensify his reputation as the leader of the Light.

Remus was not foolish enough to voice that opinion, however. He discounted a large part of what he’d read in *The Daily Prophet*. He was still trying to decide how he felt about what had happened with Harry. He felt, whether it was rational or not, that he owed it to Harry to give this his utmost attention; he had failed Sirius, he should do more for Harry than simply assume the reports were correct.

So it was that he attended the Order meeting and stayed silent unless expressly asked a question, or for his opinion. He had nothing to report, and was willing to venture no opinion when the subject of Harry arose. Snape was almost as silent as he; his contacts among the Death Eaters willing to talk to him had given him nothing to work with. The most he did when Harry was mentioned was to smirk even more broadly than normal. Still, Remus could not be sure if that was an honest reaction. It took an extremely unforgiving man to settle the sins of the father on the son. He didn't think Snape would tell him if he asked.

What concerned him more was that the members of the Order were acting like the world had ended because Harry was out of commission. Worse was the slowly prevailing attitude that Harry was definitely insane. It might be wrong of him, but Remus was placing the blame for the shift squarely on the shoulders of Albus Dumbledore.

Even if he wasn't now, after time in Azkaban he would be with the dementors back in charge.

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The pain in his scar woke him, that and the knowledge that someone was intensely happy. His first thought was that the beds in the infirmary had undergone a serious drop in quality. His second thought was that it must be night and that someone must be in with pneumonia due to the rattling breathing he was hearing from somewhere nearby.

He didn't really want to open his eyes, but the noise was starting to get on his already frayed nerves. And now that he was more or less awake, he really wanted to know if Ron and Hermione were all right. Reluctantly he cracked open one eye, noting the depressing grey light that greeted him, and opened the other so he could see more clearly. He fumbled to one side for his glasses and was rewarded with scraped knuckles.

He jerked in surprise and sat up, fumbling to the other side. His hand met only air. Without being able to see clearly, how was he supposed to tell what was going on?

*"You realize, of course, that sometimes I despair of you ever having an original thought."*

Harry groaned in annoyance while pulling at his hair.

*"I hate to say it, but that didn't make it any less messy."*

"All right. I guess it just wouldn't be a normal day anymore if you weren't having a go at me. Did you have a suggestion or something?"

*"Naturally. You can't see clearly, so fix it."*

"Fix it."

*"Yes, fix it."*

“Are you *sure* you don’t come with an instruction manual?”

No answer was forthcoming so Harry sighed and took the expedient route, concentrating on his flawed eyesight. He felt a curious tingling and opened them, only vaguely surprised to realize that he could see perfectly.

Perfectly dim, grey light. Perfectly grey granite walls and a door fashioned from sturdy iron bars. Certainly not the infirmary. “So, this is what it comes down to.”

*“I’m afraid so.”*

“I guess I did a lousy job with Dumbledore. Do you suppose he let . . . well, I assume Fudge was responsible, and Dumbledore let him do it because I refuse to be happy in ignorance.” Harry pushed himself off the cot and paced to the door, angling his head to peer down the hallway in either direction.

The rattling breathing was easily explained when he saw a dementor gliding toward him. He immediately retreated to his cot and sat down mumbling, “Bloody hell.”

It appeared moments later at his cell door, practically pressing up against the bars in anticipation of a meal sucked from the recesses of Harry’s mind. He waited for the icy sensation of its presence to manifest and for the horrific memories to flash before his eyes, but they never came.

Harry’s eyes widened in surprise, and he started to laugh like he had at the estate. Had any human been within hearing distance they would have assumed he was either mad or Voldemort himself in an ecstatic mood.

The dementor finally turned and drifted off during Harry’s hysteria. By the time he’d gotten control of himself there was a tray shoved through the bottom of the door containing a dish each of water and bread. A fitting meal for a prisoner not expected to live long.

The routine was soon set in his mind; meals were brought twice a day, always bread and water, with the exception of once each week when he received gruel as well. Why they bothered he wasn’t sure. Only one person had ever escaped Azkaban. Most inmates either killed themselves to be rid of the memories, or were driven crazy and then suicided.

He knew how Sirius had survived, but Sirius had known he was innocent. Bellatrix and her lot were another story. He reasoned that those already insane might not be affected in quite the way the Ministry would want. Even so, it did not explain how she and the others had managed to avoid being reduced to the level of squib after so many years, as it was well known that dementors were supposed to leech the magic from their victims over time.

Apparently, he need not fear any of the effects. Harry would have asked the voice, but decided that it was probably a side-effect of the book, and he would only risk another attack of sarcasm if he dared.

He considered escaping. Not knowing what his friends thought made him cautious. If he would not find shelter in their arms he was not sure it was worth the attempt. Until and unless someone came to visit him, he would stay right where he was. At least this misery was a constant, with little to no surprises.

He could simply hide away at the estate. He could transform his appearance and hide in plain sight. He had a gut feeling though that it would be worth his time to stay.

Magic wasn't supposed to be possible in Azkaban; prisoners didn't have wands. Luckily for Harry it was not an issue. He kept track of the days on the wall next to his cot. One small mark per day he stayed, safe within the walls of the infamous prison.

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Remus walked along Diagon Alley with a heavy heart. He had come to the conclusion that Harry could not possibly have been responsible for the things he'd done. It was unthinkable that after everything he'd endured, that his mind had snapped because of pain from his scar. He'd had odd dreams since his fourth year, visions of Voldemort torturing people and battled him and his minions personally on more than one occasion. Harry had learned to face all of that with stoic resignation.

A shout turned his attention outward. One of the Weasley twins was hailing him from the door of their shop. Remus changed direction and went to greet the redhead.

"Remus! I'm glad to see you," said the younger man. "Do you have time to come visit a bit? It's about Harry." His voice had dropped to the level of a whisper and he'd glanced around as though looking for eavesdroppers.

Remus hesitated. "I guess that depends," he finally ventured.

"Please, Remus. Just hear us out. We don't want people to overhear this," the redhead whispered urgently.

Remus sighed. "Fine. But if I don't like what I'm hearing, I'll be on my way."

The redhead nodded and stepped back into the shop, holding the door. Remus walked in and waited as the door was closed, then followed the younger man to one of the back rooms where his twin waited. The sales clerk they passed never batted an eyelid.

After an exchange of glances the first twin closed and locked the door, then protected the door and room with imperturbable and silencing charms. Once the two were standing side by side, they began.

“It’s like this. We think you’re one of the few people who may see things the way we do, so we’re taking a chance on talking to you about what we think.”

“Precisely, Fred. Half the family is now convinced that Harry is nuttier than a fruitcake or channeling You-Know-Who, and we don’t agree.”

Fred nodded. “There must be some other explanation.”

Remus heaved a sigh of relief and gave them a crooked smile, then sobered. “I was afraid of that. I knew that—never mind. How bad is it?”

“Bill and Charlie don’t seem to have formed an opinion, but mum and dad think he’s crackers. Percy has for ages anyway. Ron’s been convinced, but I think that’s as much due to Hermione’s logic as mum’s words,” said George.

“Even Ginny believes it. Maybe it’s her way of compensating for Harry never returning her feelings. If he’s now insane, maybe he always was, and that explains everything. Well, to her at least,” said Fred, rolling his eyes.

Remus gave both of them a long look. “For those who see Albus as nigh well infallible, I can see why opinions have shifted the way they have.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and went on. “I was thinking of going to Azkaban next visiting day to see him. Is there anything you want me to pass along for you two?”

Fred and George exchanged a glance.

“That we stand by him,” said George.

“That his share of the profits is being rolled back into development since the Ministry went after his money in Gringotts,” said Fred.

“Sorry, his share of the profits?”

The twins beamed. “Harry was our original investor. He gave us his Tri-Wizard winnings.”

Remus squeezed his eyes shut and massaged his forehead with long fingers. “Oh dear God,” he choked out, not sure if what he felt coming on was laughter or tears. “It figures,” he finally said, opening his eyes again. “I’ve never understood why you two weren’t inducted into the Order.”

Fred snorted. “Because we’re too frivolous, unfocused, and left school early, I hear.”

“Not to mention inventive, brilliantly creative and probably well-suited for a number of things which could be quite valuable to the cause,” countered Remus. “It’s no matter, I suppose. I’ll tell Harry what you’ve said, and not mention it to anyone else. It isn’t my business who you tell.”

The twins grinned and nodded as one.

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The ride to the island was creepy. No one manned any oars, nor worked lines to keep the longboat on course. It guided itself without any visible means at all, and creaked ominously as it moved through the water. One got the feeling it might collapse at any moment and send its passengers to a watery death.

Remus had waited until the gate to the dock had opened itself, signaling that visitors were allowed to cross to the island, then boarded the longboat for the trip. He was unsurprised to find he was alone in his desire to enter Azkaban.

He disembarked at the other side and strode up the rickety dock, his only companions the crashing of the waves against the bare rock of the island and the creak of rotting boards with each step. He idly wondered how often the dock was refurbished, and how many people had been dropped into the sea when parts of it collapsed.

The entrance was as imposing as it was bleak, a combination of dull grey granite and basalt that extended from the side of the fortress. After he was processed inside by one of the few human guards he was reminded between malicious chuckles not to stray too close to any of the dementors during his visit.

The guard produced a small sphere of blue light and released it, telling Remus to follow it well, or be lost, then promptly turned away. The blue light pulsed several times then zipped off down the corridor and Remus wisely hastened to follow it.

After many twisted corridors, stairs both up and down, and cells filled with a mixture of screaming or moaning prisoners, Remus was relieved to finally arrive at Harry’s cell. So far as Remus could tell, Harry was the only inmate secured in this block, which meant no one would be likely to overhear their conversation.

He skipped to the side as the blue sphere dipped and a three-legged stool appeared. After a look at the sphere, which was innocently swaying in circles and leaving behind trails of sparks, Remus pulled the stool close to the cell door and sat down.

“Harry?” he asked quietly.

Something detached itself from the shadows and approached the bars, then dropped to the floor. “Come to gloat?” asked a slightly hoarse voice.

“Harry, oh no, please. It’s Remus, Harry.”

The figure raised its head to expose a set of piercing green eyes and a blank expression. “Who sent you.” The tone was flat and expressionless.

“Harry, no one sent me. I had to come. I can’t believe they did this to you, let this happen.”

Green eyes stared at him; Remus felt as though they were boring a hole through his skull with their intensity. Then suddenly, Harry smiled. “All right, Remus?”

“Harry?”

“I can promise you I’m not mad, Moony. No more so than usual, anyway.”

Remus took a moment to study him through the bars. Even the short amount of time had had an effect; the lines on Harry’s face were far more pronounced.

“I assume Fudge was the front man behind sending me here,” Harry commented.

Remus cocked his head to one side. “Yes, you could say that.”

“And I assume that Dumbledore didn’t do a thing to stop him,” Harry continued calmly.

Remus blinked and nodded slowly. “Harry . . . what are your thoughts on Dumbledore?”

“Him? He’s a manipulative bastard. And, I’d say I need some work on my acting skills considering where I’m sitting now.”

“I don’t understand.”

Harry smirked and linked his hands behind his head. “I know things about Dumbledore that would horrify him. But, as I’m stuck in here, I don’t think he’d be too worried if he knew. After all, if I’m not mad now, everyone expects I will be now that the dementors are back as guards. Let’s just say that I wasn’t as circumspect as I should have been.”

Remus wasn’t happy with the brevity of the answer, but let it pass. It was more important right now to assure that Harry was all right.

“And will you? It’s not as though you have the advantage Snuffles did. . . .”

“Go mad? Not hardly.” Harry gave him a sly look. “Occlumency is useful against more than just dark lords and grudge-holding gits, Moony. Then again, perhaps the solitude will send me over the edge. Who can tell?”

Remus scratched his head; that hadn't sounded right for some reason. "The twins send their regards," he offered, trying to change the subject.

Harry brightened considerably. "Did they? Please let them know I'm happy to hear from them and that I hope the shop is doing well."

"From what I can see it is. They did ask me to tell you that they've been plowing your share of the profits back into development though."

"Ministry nicked my vault, eh?" Harry laughed. "Or can they not do that? I know Sirius still had his. . . . Ask them to be careful, Moony."

The sphere swooped in close and started pulsing, causing Harry to look at Remus with an indecipherable expression. "And Moony, you be careful too. Don't let them use you. Any of them."

The sphere started to edge away down the hall, pause to pulse, then move further along. Remus swore under his breath and took one last look at Harry. "Yes, Harry. I'll be back next time I'm allowed."

Then he raced off after the sphere.

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It was three months later when Azkaban allowed for visitors next. Remus would have preferred coming monthly, but that wasn't the way things worked. Harry didn't look much different than he had the first time and he seemed as lucid as before, which reassured Remus to no end.

He'd spent quite a bit of time reading up on dementors and occlumency during the interim, and between Order business. He was sure that Harry hadn't been entirely honest with him the last time.

"Harry?"

"Hello, Moony. It's good to see you again." Harry's voice was rusty from disuse, but otherwise fine. He once again sat himself before the bars of his door and subjected Remus to that piercing gaze before smiling in welcome. "So what's the news from the outside? Voldemort fallen off a cliff yet?"

Remus gave him a sharp glance and said, "No, but several of his Death Eaters have been taken down and brought here after trial. Seems Amelia Bones is taking things quite seriously, throwing around veritaserum like it's water. The funny thing is no one can figure out who nabbed them."

“I bet that buttered Voldemort’s toast on the wrong side, didn’t it.”

“You sound as though you expected that kind of an answer, Harry.”

“Just because I’m here doesn’t mean I can’t still see things, Moony,” Harry said patiently. “I know when he’s upset. I reckoned something had to have happened to get that kind of reaction. What about the school then?”

“It’s fine. He and his haven’t gone near it that we know of. Classes go on as usual,” he supplied, wondering if Harry would want to hear about anyone specific.

He did not, however. He asked about no one except the twins. Remus took it as given that if a person, no matter who it was, didn’t believe in Harry, then he wasn’t going to ask about them.

“Moony, I’m curious. What are your thoughts on Professor Snape?” Harry tilted his head to one side and asked.

“Snape?” *Why Snape?* “Well, I don’t know. He had a textbook reaction to the news of your incarceration, but who can tell what’s going on in his head. I haven’t exactly asked him about his thoughts lately. Why do you ask?”

“As I said, I’m curious. Curious to know just which side Snape is really on, curious to know if he’s a puppet of Albus’s or if he’s in this for himself.”

“Short of slipping him veritaserum or digging around in his head, I’m not sure how I could find out, Harry.”

“If anything catches your notice, keep it in mind, okay?”

They moved on to more inconsequential topics for the remainder of their time together. When the sphere began to pulse Remus stood up with a sigh.

“I’ll be back in July, Harry,” he said before starting to follow the sphere.

“Just remember something, Moony. If you start running into trouble, let me know. I mean it.”



The day was warm and sunny, barely a cloud in the sky, making it perfect for the ceremony. As it was, Remus was sitting at the very back, fanning himself with his program and wishing they’d get this over with. He was only here to observe and see if anything peculiar happened. Voldemort had been far too quiet thus far and it worried him a great deal.

An outburst of applause captured his wandering thoughts and he looked up to see Albus Dumbledore step up to the podium and raise his hands for silence. Once the crowd had settled down he began to speak.

“It is with great pleasure that I once again stand here to congratulate and applaud another fine group of students who are poised on the brink of graduation and entry into the adult world.”

“But before I speak more on that, I must say a few words I wish I did not have to. It is well known that a very bright, capable student of Hogwarts was taken from us under bad circumstances. It is with every regret that I say that Voldemort has once again demonstrated his particular kind of power in having wrested Harry Potter from our midst.”

Dumbledore raised his hands again for silence as the crowd began murmuring darkly.

“I ask that you remember all that Mr Potter has done for us in the past, and mourn that the twisted machinations of Voldemort finally succeeded in bringing him low. I, more than any other, wish that he could be here today as a graduate of this fine institution.”

“But now, let us move on to brighter subjects. It is the end of another year here at Hogwarts. . . .”

Remus quietly stood and slipped away from his seat, unwilling to hear any more.

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The next time he visited he felt distinctly uneasy. Albus had been making some rather odd statements of late and it was starting to worry him. Remus had been unpleasantly surprised when Albus had begun speaking with him about his visits to Azkaban, pointing out that it could further damage his reputation to be doing so.

“It is not wise for one already under the onus of the werewolf curse to be known as the friend of a madman,” Albus had said. “It reflects badly on you, my old friend.”

It was all Remus could do at the time not to simply walk away. Instead he had replied, “Perhaps.”

Albus had gone on further to suggest that Remus take more care if he were determined to continue his visits as even he would not be able to stay the hand of public demand should the worst come to pass.

He related all of this to Harry once he'd arrived, paying close attention to the play of emotion on the young man's face as the somewhat bitter words tripped off his tongue.

Harry graced him with the kind of smile that seemed to promise that everything would be all right. When he spoke, though, he simply said, "I understand. If you're still having issues the next time you visit, speak on it again. I expect you'll continue to be careful. By the way, how are the twins?"

"They're doing fine. I've been thinking a bit about them and how they have the brains and talent to do more than they are, if they wanted to. The thing is, maybe it's all good how it is. They provide laughter and that's precious by itself."

"Perhaps," replied Harry thoughtfully. "If I think of any suggestions to pass on, be sure that I will do so. Has anything else interesting happened recently?"

"Another few Death Eaters were captured. Much the same thing as before. I don't know if he's recruiting a lot of low-talent people or if the person catching them is very cunning. Even so, their numbers never quite seem to decrease, so I expect he's still pulling new people in."

Harry nodded. "He's very pleased about something, or someone. I can't tell just what though. Not yet, anyway."

"The only other thing of note was the speech Albus made at the graduation ceremony. He seemed quite sorrowful about you and laid the blame for your insanity squarely on the shoulders of Voldemort. He said, and I quote,

' . . .the twisted machinations of Voldemort finally succeeded in bringing him low.'

I left shortly thereafter."

A smile formed on Harry's face, slowly at first, then became wide. The laughter followed, the kind that made Remus doubt for a split second Harry's sanity. As it trickled off into quiet chuckles, Remus could see the subtle signs of pain, and resolved not to doubt again.

Before he was made to leave, Remus let Harry know he would not be able to visit the next open day due to the full moon, but that he would arrive for the next. It would be six months before he could see Harry again.

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## 4 : DECEPTIVE SHADOWS

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### — Azkaban Year Two —

*“How are the mighty fallen!” – 2 Samuel i. 25. Old Testament.*

The moon rose in all her splendor, silver-white and glowing against the dark velvet of the night sky. Harry smiled. It was funny how a person could go one of two ways in near isolation. For some a mask of nothingness and others the inability to mask anything.

Now that the moon had risen though, he had things to do. He knew from experience that the dementors would not bother to check on him, and the few humans than manned the entrance to the fortress never ventured into the prison if they could help it. In any case, the bundle of rags on the cot should be misdirection enough for the casual onlooker.

A moment later he was standing inside his estate, breathing in air that was untainted by the foul atmosphere of Azkaban. He took the time to clean up and grab fresh clothing for himself; there was no point in betraying his presence with the unwashed stench of a prisoner.

Another moment was all it took for him to arrive at another of the hidden Potter estates. The lintel above the great main doors was a bare, smooth stretch of marble.

“Well,” he said into the silence of the night, “I’ll just fix that then, won’t I.”

He pointed his forefinger at the flawless stone and watched as a single word etched itself into the surface in bold, uncompromising letters.

#### Sanctuary

He smiled again and stepped forward, the massive doors opening of their own accord to let him enter. Inside he noticed the signs of disuse; layers of fuzzy dust were everywhere and hung from the cobwebs that stretched across doorways and arches.

He shook his head and turned his attention to the ancient wards which protected the property. Being of the blood, he communed with them, and asked them to allow entry for Remus should he come here. He could feel his request be acknowledged and accepted, sensing a change in their structure.

When the wards had finished shifting he made a second request, this time for two house-elves he had every intention of asking to ally with him. They too were accepted and the wards shifted a second time, affirming their right to be here.

Harry bowed. Had anyone been watching they no doubt would have thought him crazy, if they did not already. It was surely uncommon for a wizard to bow to his own house. Harry would

not have cared had his gesture been witnessed; he knew the score, and it was correct to be polite. Hogwarts was not the only structure with a degree of sentience.

His next stop would be a bit trickier. He couldn't very well summon the Marauder's Map; depending on where it was, it would quite likely alert someone (or multiple someones) as it went zipping along. Of course, Harry wasn't even sure it was still at Hogwarts.

There was also the matter of if it was in someone's hands when he arrived, they could quite possibly see that he was there, and all hell would break loose. Forgoing another cheap shot by the voice, Harry forbore actual questions and focused his thoughts on the problems instead and what might be of help to him from the virtual library in his mind.

Eventually the answer came to him and he exited Sanctuary mumbling under his breath. When he arrived in the kitchen of Hogwarts he perched above the door and surveyed the room's entourage of house-elves. Spotting Dobby after several minutes, he skittered up the wall and across the ceiling, trailing the little elf wherever he went.

When Dobby became engrossed in one of his tasks Harry descended from the ceiling silently and attached himself to Dobby's tunic. His patience was finally rewarded when Dobby found it necessary to carry Winky off to the Room of Requirement to sleep off yet another bout of butterbeer-induced somnolence.

Harry nimbly leapt off Dobby's tunic and quickly transformed, pausing to cast a few mumbled spells. Dobby whipped around at the noise, arms spread protectively as he stood in front of poor Winky. Several seconds later he relaxed and a toothy grin formed on his mobile face.

"Harry Potter, sir! Dobby is being so glad to see you!" cried the elf, bouncing up and down happily.

Harry fought back a smile; he should have known Dobby would never believe he'd gone bad. "Dobby, I've come to ask you a very important question. Will you listen?" he asked in quiet seriousness.

"Of course, Harry Potter, sir! What is being sir's question?"

"Dobby, were you aware that they took me away from Hogwarts and sent me to Azkaban?"

Dobby hopped up and down, shaking his little fist. "Yes, Dobby knew, Harry Potter, sir. Dobby was being very angry when Dobby heard! Harry Potter is not being bad, not being evil!"

"Dobby, do you think that you would like to come and work for me? You and Winky? I think she'd be much happier with a new master, and I trust you not to betray me or my secrets."

Dobby began shifting from foot to foot like he was standing on hot coals.

“You could remain free even if you did, Dobby, and continue to be paid. All I’d require is that you showed me the same loyalty you would a master,” he hastened to add. “But I don’t think Winky will ever be happy being free.” He spared a glance for the snoring elf with an empty butterbeer bottle still clutched in her hand.

Dobby started bouncing up and down again happily, clapping his hands together. “Dobby would be glad to work for Harry Potter, sir! Dobby and Winky is being ready to come now.”

“One thing before we go, Dobby. Do you have any idea what happened to my things?”

Dobby nodded with all the seriousness he could muster. “Dobby knows where they are. Dobby has seen them in the headmaster’s quarters, Harry Potter, sir.”

Harry’s eyes widened before he realized that made sense. “Do you think you could retrieve them before we go without getting caught?”

Dobby nodded vigorously and disappeared, leaving Harry to stare at air. Moments later Dobby was back, a trunk resting under his hand.

Harry grinned. “Excellent, Dobby. Thank you. Now, let me get Winky,” he said and reached down to pull the inebriated elf into his arms. “If you would be so kind, keep contact with the trunk and hold my free hand,” he instructed.

After he felt Dobby’s hand creep into his own, they disappeared, reappearing in the main hall of Sanctuary.

“I haven’t explored this place, Dobby. Not yet, anyway. I can only stay for so long before I have to get back to my cell.” After seeing the moistly shining eyes of the elf he added, “Don’t worry, Dobby. I’m all right. Let’s wake up Winky here and see what she says about all this, shall we?”

An hour later he had two house-elves in his service and had finished imparting his instructions to the pair. Winky was all but beside herself in happiness at having a new master, having flung the empty bottle into a nearby fireplace and declaring that she’d be the best house-elf a master could ever want.

By the time Harry was sure that both of them understood the seriousness of keeping Sanctuary a secret, they were practically bursting at the seams to go on a cleaning spree.

Harry left long enough to retrieve a sizeable stack of galleons from the hidden estate so that Dobby would be able to collect his pay and purchase anything the manor needed (and to store his trunk), then went back to his cell satisfied.

He had almost fallen asleep when he remembered his appearance, and shook himself awake long enough to return to being the grimy person who’d left earlier that evening.

It was, by his careful reckoning, the 31st of July. Given the potential importance of the date by anyone's standards but his own, Harry was opened the link his scar afforded, being careful to shelter behind a mental wall of his own making. He would be able to observe Voldemort's activities without alerting the man of his presence.

Pleasure was the first thing that filtered through to him that evening, followed by a full-blown vision of Voldemort's surroundings. Knowing he would not be sensed, Harry settled in to watch as things unfolded, only slightly hampered by using Voldemort's eyes as his own.

A door opened and from it issued a stream of black-robed, masked figures. They arrayed themselves in semi-circles in front of their lord and master, being sure to make as little noise as possible.

After all was settled, another group entered through the same door. This time the figures were unmasked and their hoods were thrown back, displaying their faces for all to see.

Recognizable were Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle and Nott. The others were nameless to Harry's memory. He wondered in passing why there were no females among them.

The newcomers arrayed themselves much like their masked companions, forming a loose semi-circle between them and Voldemort. As one they dropped to one knee and bowed their heads, waiting.

"Witness, my faithful, a new beginning for those here before us. Tonight they shall be initiated into their new lives and will join us in our pursuit to rid the world of tainted blood and lesser creatures who dare to defy us."

Voldemort made a sweeping gesture with one hand, ending it by pointing at one of the masked minions.

"Bella, step forth," he commanded.

She did so saying, "Yes, my lord," in a clear voice.

"Fetch tonight's entertainment. Take whomever you need to assist you."

"Yes, my lord," she repeated, then whirled and snapped her fingers at seven of the masked figures. They filed out of the room.

While they waited there was dead silence.

Of all the new recruits waiting, only Malfoy had a look of insufferable smugness and rock-hard assurance. Harry wondered what he had done to display such confidence openly while the others maintained blank expressions.

Her group returned minutes later, each directing a person in front of them as they moved back to their places in the arrangement of Death Eaters.

“Each of you will prove yourselves to me. Any so foolish as to fail will be dealt with, and trust me when I say you shall not enjoy it.”

He swept the recruits with such a gaze that several of them just barely prevented themselves from taking a step back.

“Let us see . . . who shall have the pleasure of going first. You, Lamont, step forth,” he commanded, and was pleased to see the boy obeyed immediately.

“Pick a victim, Lamont, and show me what you can do to make them suffer and die.” Voldemort cackled wildly for a moment, then turned the full force of his gaze on the boy.

Lamont said, “Yes, my lord,” in a low voice and turned, scanning the waiting selection before pointing at a nondescript man of middle years. His keeper prodded him forward, apparently controlling the man via Imperio.

Lamont took a moment to study the area before acting. He pulled the man over to a stretch of wall and conjured a metal collar around his neck, attaching it with a length of conjured chain to a sturdy ring in the wall.

Stepping well back he pointed his wand at the man’s feet and said clearly, “Incendio!”

Harry, safe behind his mental wall, was disgusted to note that at least half of the assembled Death Eaters leaned forward at this.

They watched with avid eyes as the chained man began screaming in pain as the fire began to consume him from the feet upward. He died of smoke inhalation and shock long before his body was rendered unrecognizable.

Lamont turned back to Voldemort and bowed low, waiting.

After a contemplative silence, Voldemort spoke. “Lamont, come before me.” When the boy was in place, Voldemort gestured for his left arm and when it was presented, touched his wand to the unmarred flesh and intoned, “Morsmordre.”

Lamont immediately stiffened and bit his lip against any sound he might make as the dark mark was burned into his skin moment by agonizing moment. When it was complete he was directed to stand to the side.

Harry continued to watch with only half his attention, sickened at the things the recruits were doing in order to prove themselves to this madman. Nott was particularly sadistic in using acid to systematically destroy his victim while hurling questions the woman could not possibly answer. He cackled as her blood and fluids mixed with the acid in puddles on the stone floor,

and watching with what could only be called delight as her bones cracked open to expose the marrow.

When he finally became tired of the screams, he directed the acid to her mouth and throat, then her chest. The woman died within moments and Nott cleaned up by vanishing the remains, leaving the floor spotless at the end.

One of the recruits (Harry hadn't caught his name) failed when his turn came, unable to bring himself to kill, never mind torture. He was summarily banished to the dungeons to await his doom after having his wand snapped in front of him.

Malfoy, the last to go, had made creative use of vines to snare his victim like a snake. Sharp thorns punctured her skin like the eyeteeth of a vampire and let loose flows of blood to stain her flesh and the floor. Still more vines pierced her body in places best left unmentioned and plowed through her eyes and up her nostrils.

When her cries tapered off after screaming her throat raw, Draco directed a vine to enter her mouth and burrow deep. Moments later she was ripped apart from within and without as the vines flailed in vegetative ecstasy. He too vanished the remains.

In the end there were seven newly-marked recruits: Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Lamont, Craston, and Montrose, with one unfortunate left until later to be dealt with. Harry released the link and came back to his body, blessing his degree of control and the lack of food, for surely he would have vomited it up in the aftermath.

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When visiting day rolled around Harry was not expecting anyone to arrive. Being the full moon, he knew that Remus would be otherwise occupied, so it was a surprise to Harry when he saw the blue light of the guide nearing his cell. He quickly adopted a blank mask and remained on his cot, waiting to see who was coming.

The visitor did not bother to sit upon the stool provided by the guide, but instead stood at the door, staring at him. Harry knew what they would see. A seemingly broken, filthy man with lifeless, dull eyes and white-streaked, matted hair sitting there staring at nothing in particular.

As it was, there were two visitors; a second figure came to stand beside the first.

“How are the mighty fallen,” quoted the female, brushing back her bushy hair. “I never thought it would come to this, Harry, not after all we've been through. But in the end, you failed us and everyone else. Why, Harry? Why didn't you listen to us, confide in us? I thought we were your friends.”

She shifted her weight and passed her gaze over the interior of his cell. “And look at you now, Harry. We only ever wanted what was best for you. I feel as though I never really knew you at all. How much of it was lies, Harry, a facade or a mask?”

“We knew something was wrong,” said Ron, “but Hermione’s right. You wouldn’t tell us anything when we asked, never once explained why you were acting so strangely. I’m not sure Dumbledore should have bothered to ask us to keep an eye on you. It certainly didn’t make a difference.”

“Well, Ron, I daresay if Harry had listened more often, things would be a lot different. Sirius would probably even be alive.”

Harry didn’t do much more than move his lips soundlessly on occasion and blink. He continued staring at nothing in particular, showing no signs of awareness to his two former friends.

They in turn continued to ramble on, such as Hermione pointing out how disappointed she was in him in as many ways as she could think of, while Ron interjected from time to time or nodded in agreement to whatever she’d just said.

Harry didn’t see the point of it. If he’d been as unaware as he pretended to be, all of this verbiage was wasted. Then again, Hermione had always liked to display her vocabulary. While it was true that her advice was almost always sound, whether Harry had followed it or not, he didn’t think he deserved what she had been spouting for the last half hour.

All he did feel was a lingering sadness. It was obvious to him that she’d used her not inconsiderable skills at logic to convince herself, and Ron, that everything said about him was true and that the fault lay with him for not letting her control his every action. But then, her emotional connection to him had never been one of the strong points of their friendship and was easily overruled by her intellect.

By the time the sphere did its pulsing dance to warn them of the end of the visit, she had come to the conclusion that their visit had been pointless, since Harry wasn’t in any shape to process what she’d been saying. They left without a backward glance.

Harry came out of the experience knowing that Dumbledore had succeeded in planting the seeds of doubt, then had sat back and watched them flourish.

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The evening was chilly, which was not unexpected for November, and the full moon cast her silvery light over the landscape, leeching the colour away normally seen by day. This was afforded an appreciative thought by the man lurking in the shadows of a particularly tall tree, but otherwise did not occupy his attention.

What was of interest was the hooded figure making its way toward the woods. The man didn't bother with any unnecessary shows of bravery or skill, nor the customary words of wit and cleverness that oft preceded a duel. He simply pointed his wand and cast, "Stupefy," followed by, "Incarcerous," and, "Silencio," for good measure.

Tucking his wand back into the forearm holster he wore, he stepped out into the moonlight and made his way to the prone, bound figure and pocketed the wand that lay beside, taking long enough to do a rough search for spares.

His next action was to pull a knife from the sheath strapped to his thigh and cut away the material shrouding the figure's left arm, exposing the dark mark burnt into the skin. The knife was returned to its sheath and the man graced his captive with a cold smile.

"You disgrace the name of Slytherin, Flint. Would that I had time to show you the depth of my displeasure, but I think the dementors of Azkaban will suit nicely, don't you? Of course, I doubt the Ministry will give much care to your handling in the interim. Come along now, time stands not still for you or I."

The man pulled the captive to his feet, letting Flint get a good look at his face before they both disappeared.

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Remus sank onto the three-legged stool heavily. After long moments of blank staring, Harry rose from his cot and moved to sit in front of the cell door, smiling up at his friend, who looked unutterably weary, probably from the full moon two days prior.

"Hello, Moony. It's good to see you again."

"Hello, Harry."

"I had some visitors. Can't say as they were much fun though. They seemed to think I was quite mad, and that all of this is my fault," Harry said calmly.

"That . . . doesn't surprise me."

"Yes, well. Enough about them. How fares the glorious revolution?" Harry had read something like that in a comic once, and had always been wanting to use it in conversation.

"Personally or generally?" asked Remus.

"Both. You know that."

"Personally, I'm gotten more flak for coming here, but it doesn't matter. I believe in you and that's that."

“Are you getting wolfsbane each month or having to transform unprotected?”

“That depends, Harry. Snape doesn’t always have time to make it, but that’s all right because I’m in a safe enough place to transform.”

“Oh?”

“The Shrieking Shack. The willow still protects it and the structure has been reinforced.” Remus seemed to be shrugging it off as unimportant, so Harry let him.

“Dumbledore is a bit mystified; two of the house-elves have left Hogwarts, along with your school trunk. He doesn’t understand why they left, or whether or not your trunk going missing is coincidence or planned.”

“Aside from a few items of personal value, I don’t see why anyone would either. The map, the cloak and the Firebolt, sure,” Harry reasoned.

“That’s just it. Your wand was also in the trunk according to Albus, and he’s more upset about that than anything.”

“Oh. Yeah. I’d have figured he’d snap that.” It was Harry’s turn to shrug. What use did a prisoner have for a wand? He felt only slightly guilty at playing games with Remus, but it would all come out in the end.

“The brother wand to Voldemort’s, are you kidding? Well, doesn’t matter now. It’s gone. Let me think . . . another Death Eater was captured under odd circumstances. He was delivered, bound and silenced, to the Ministry with his sleeve cut off to display the mark. Whoever the hunter is, they’re developing an odd sense of humor.” Remus chuckled.

“What makes you say that?”

“The word came down that the fellow in question, Flint, kept telling anyone who’d listen that it was Salazar Slytherin who did it. I think it spooked him enough that he was glad to be taken away. The Ministry pronounced him mad after questioning.”

Harry turned slightly so he could lean against the bars. “How tragic. How are the twins?” he asked with a slight smile.

“Business is still booming. They’ve decided that you’re a fully-fledged partner at this point, and asked me to tell you that if you’ve any ideas of your own to please pass them along.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Moony, but why do you think they don’t come here themselves?”

Remus looked him squarely in the eyes. “I think that while they disagree with most of their family, they also don’t want to be the cause of a huge rift. They keep their beliefs to themselves, refusing to say one way or the other when your name is raised. If they made the trip out here, people would start to raise questions.”

He paused, shook his head, and continued. “I think if it came down to it they’d openly stand firm, but for now they aren’t rocking the boat.”

“If it comes up, Moony, tell them I understand.”

“I will. You can be sure of it.”

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A spider crept across the ceiling with no real destination in mind, ambling along as though taking its daily constitutional, when noises made it freeze in place a moment before scuttling into the waiting shadows.

Shortly thereafter Remus Lupin strode into view with a resigned look on his face. His wand he placed onto a ledge well up into the fireplace. Sitting down, he waited patiently for the moon to rise.

The spider, watching him closely, cringed at the pain of the transformation, waving one of its legs in mute distress until at last a wolf sat panting. The spider continued to wait as the creature roamed the shack restlessly, only to finally circle a few times in place and lay down, muzzle on his paws, and go to sleep.

The spider waited a while longer before scuttling down the wall on an angled path until it rounded the doorframe and entered the next room, where it dropped to the floor.

It transformed to human, bearing the guise of the long dead Salazar, and pulled out a wand. Padding silently to the door, he poked his head around cautiously and saw that the wolf remained asleep.

A few spells, boosted in power to be assured that the wolf would not break free, rendered the creature harmless. The man stepped into the room and quickly retrieved the wand from the fireplace, stowing it in his pocket.

From there it was mere steps to bring him to the wolf’s side. He laid one hand on the creature’s flank and warped them both to Sanctuary. The room he had asked for had long been ready and Moony was plunked into the middle and locked in.

Outside, the man reverted back to his natural state and sat down. It was all there waiting for him. Harry pulled open the left drawer of the desk he was seated at and placed Moony’s wand carefully inside, then closed it.

From the right drawer he pulled a sheet of parchment, and taking a quill from the stand on the surface, he proceeded to draft a letter for his friend to read when he awoke.

It contained very little in the way of real information. Remus was free to make Sanctuary his home for as long as he wished and use the room for transformation without fear of interruption or other awkward issues. As a token of faith, he would find something within the house which should ease his worries of betrayal or worse. It also gave the location of his wand.

Harry pulled a stand over in front of the door to the locked room and placed the letter on it in plain sight. Remus would see it when he exited the room.

He snapped his fingers and Dobby appeared.

“Dobby, can you please get Winky as well?”

“Of course Harry Potter, sir! Right away!” Dobby popped out and back in a moment later, Winky by his side.

“Dobby, Winky, remember the room I had you prepare?”

They nodded.

“Remus is in there now. After the moon has gone down and it’s safe again, I want one of you to unlock it, all right? The same goes for any night he needs to use it to transform; lock him in before the moon rises, and unlock it when it sets.”

“Is Dobby and Winky to be caring for Mr Lupin?”

Harry nodded. “If he decides to stay, yes. But do *not* tell him that I am your master, or how you two or Hedwig came to be here, or who really owns this place, got it?”

“What is we allowed to be saying, Harry Potter, sir?” asked Dobby, shifting his weight from side to side.

“I’ve left him a note signed as Salazar Slytherin.” He ignored the almost comical looks of horror the two elves displayed and continued. “When the time is right, he’ll know everything, but for now what he doesn’t know he can’t be forced to tell. You can tell him that Hedwig is here though.”

“Yes, Harry Potter, sir! Dobby and Winky is keeping your secrets like good house-elves.”

Winky nodded her head as though it would fall off.

“Now, do you need any more money?”

The stool was kicked aside in favor of sitting on the floor, much like Harry did when Remus came to visit. A suspicious look tightened his already lined face, but Harry simply greeted him normally and was greeted in return.

“A strange thing happened to me a while back, and some strange things came to light,” Remus started, giving Harry a funny look. “You remember, I told you about the two house-elves who left Hogwarts, and the fellow who’s been capturing Death Eaters?”

Harry nodded, letting his face slide into an expression of inquisitiveness.

“I find it all rather convenient that the fellow, who’s going by the name of Salazar Slytherin of all things, is the same one who apparently has a mansion taken care of by said missing house-elves. The same fellow who kidnapped me from the shrieking shack and left me a note saying I was welcome to live in his mansion. And that’s not the best part.”

Harry raised his brows in silent inquiry. “I’m almost afraid to ask.”

Remus snorted. “The three residents of the mansion are all intimately connected to you, Harry.”

“Excuse me?” he asked, jerking his head forward slightly.

“You heard me. Dobby, Winky, and Hedwig.” Remus shot him another strange look. “Are you sure you aren’t an animagus or something, Harry?”

“Moony, when did I have time to become one? It took dad and the others years to manage it so they could be with you. I doubt I could figure it out in this hellhole, even if I had a clue where to begin.”

Remus started to speak, then closed his mouth, obviously thinking. After a moment he looked back up. “There’s something very strange about you, Harry.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” he said, smiling slightly.

“You don’t seem to be affected by the dementors—and don’t give me that song and dance about Occlumency again—you obviously aren’t insane, and someone . . . someone seems bent on gathering up pieces of your life and bringing them to the same place. Wouldn’t you be a little unnerved if you were me?”

“I expect so, but I’m not sure what you think this Salazar fellow has to do with me specifically. I can’t very well have asked him to do these things.” Seeing the look on Moony’s face he said, “You know as well as I do that no one leaves Azkaban without trickery or help, and no one has visited me except you and, well, those two.”

Remus grunted and inspected his fingernails.

“Remus,” Harry said hesitantly, “do you trust me?”

The werewolf looked up. “Yes, Harry, I do.”

Harry felt the truth of the simple statement and heaved a quiet sigh of relief. He summoned up a smile and told the other man, “Then don’t worry about it for now. Whatever’s happening, I’m sure that Dobby has enough sense to stay away from danger and treachery. And he knows you’re my friend; he’ll probably protect you as well as he could me, even if he is known to be a bit enthusiastic at times.”

“Speaking of whatever’s happening, another Death Eater was brought in, also claiming to have been apprehended by Salazar Slytherin. This one said he’d been told he shamed the name and house of Slytherin.” Remus gave Harry a sideways glance.

“Must be a kick in the pants for Voldemort if he’s heard about that detail,” commented Harry. “Quite infuriating, I’d say.”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“That reminds me. I didn’t think to tell you the last time you were here. I guess I had other things on my mind.”

“Tell me what?” Remus asked.

“Voldemort held an initiation ceremony on my birthday last year. Seven of the eight were marked. I don’t suppose Snape said anything?” Harry was truly interested to know if the potions master had gotten word through his own sources.

Remus cocked his head to one side. “No, he didn’t. Or if he did, it wasn’t brought up as it should have been in a meeting.”

“How curious,” he said vaguely.

“Do you know who was inducted?”

“Yes, but I don’t think—well, maybe it could work. How’s this? That is to say, if you intend to pass the names on, I have an idea as to how.” Seeing Remus nod, he continued. “Let’s say that the last time you were here you kept hearing me mumble a series of names. At the time you assumed that’s all it was—the ramblings of the insane—but this time I kept at it, plus added more.”

“Go on,” prompted Remus.

“A few more were initiated just recently, which is probably why I remembered this time. Anyway, the list is Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Oakley, Shipton, Lamont, Craston, Montrose and Bole.”

Remus pulled a spare bit of parchment from his robes and scribbled down the names with a muggle pencil, then looked up. “I suppose then, with you being insane and all, that you’ve no control over shielding your mind, and therefore see everything, right?”

Harry gave him a vacuous smile and nodded his head foolishly, then smirked. “Something like that. Of course, after you wrote those names down, I stopped babbling abruptly.”

“Of course you did. I wonder why Snape wasn’t informed of these, or if it’s just me who’s out of the loop.” Remus shoved the list and pencil back into his robes and frowned. “How come your two visitors didn’t hear this?”

“How often have you heard me say anything meaningful the times you’ve been here, Moony?” Harry asked with a pointed look.

“Touché.”

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The remaining two visits by Remus that year were somewhat similar. In June he was told that Travers had been dropped off at the Ministry. As he was one of those who had been broken out after imprisonment for participation in the battle at the Department of Mysteries, the Ministry was reportedly thrilled to have him back in custody. The same was true for Dolohov.

Remus had dutifully reported what he’d heard Harry mumbling in his cell, though he’d given no opinion as to what it meant, saying only that it had stopped abruptly after he’d written the names down. As he relayed to Harry, Snape had looked briefly surprised before his habitual dour expression had fallen into place again.

Albus, for his part, had nodded sagely and requested that Remus keep his ears open for anything more that Harry might say, regardless of how peculiar it may sound, and ceased his gentle chiding about the visits Remus insisted on making.

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## 5: MIGHTY HUNTER

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### — Azkaban Year Three —

*“A mighty hunter, and his prey was man.” — Alexander Pope.*

Remus sat in the lesser library of the mansion, a newspaper wide open on his lap. Blaise was somewhere else in the building, though his book of logic puzzles was on the chair he favored along with a pencil.

Blaise had been living at Sanctuary for the past six months, ever since the owner had dropped him off, scaring the wits out of Remus in the midst of eating dinner.

All he'd said was, “This is Blaise. He's welcome to make this his home too,” then disappeared from view.

Blaise had crept around in the shadows for several months before he'd finally opened up to Remus about why he'd been brought to the estate. His story was somewhat predictable; as a Slytherin and a pure-blood he'd been targeted by Voldemort as a potential recruit.

It had been getting more and more difficult for him to evade the increasingly persistent invitations and fleeing the country had started to look very attractive. That is, until the day the man calling himself Salazar had essentially kidnapped him. His belongings had shown up shortly thereafter, and Blaise simply hadn't left the grounds.

As he had put it, “Better to stay here than to step outside and be forced to take the mark.”

Remus shook his head slightly and glanced back at the paper in his lap, frowning as he read over the story again.

#### **Fudge Establishes New Division**

It was revealed in a press conference today that Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge has established a new division within the Ministry, dedicated to the sole purpose of tracking down and bringing to justice those with strong ties to the dark and those actively working toward the destabilization of the Ministry itself.

Appointed as head of the new division is Arnold Peasegood, formerly an Obliviator for the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad. Peasegood was unavailable for comment.

Fudge justified this development in his opening speech.

“It is with regret that I must decry the efforts of late of aurors, who are far too overworked and much too ineffective to be of any real use in the ongoing fight against the forces of evil.”

“As Minister it is my duty to do all within my power to serve and protect the good citizens of the wizarding world, and it is by this authority that I have created a new division, the Office of Wizardland Security.”

When asked how this will affect the aurors he said, “Aurors will go back to their original purpose, and only called in when the need for them as backup is unavoidable.”

Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, was also unavailable for comment.

Fudge concluded his speech by calling the new division a “spearhead” and a “bright arrow of justice”.

A member of the crowd was overheard to say, “But I thought the whole point of aurors was for them to hunt down and subdue dark wizards. What are they supposed to do now, hand out splinching citations and make Knockturn Alley their new pet project?”

Only time will tell how this new development pans out.

Remus snorted in disgust. The crowd member had the right of it. How Fudge thought anyone wouldn’t see through this charade was beyond him.

“Is something wrong, Remus?” Blaise asked from the doorway, interrupting his thoughts.

“What? Oh . . . sorry, Blaise. I was just reading the article on the new division again.”

“Ah, that.” Blaise looked down for a moment, then moved to stand near Remus. Remus could see him lean over out of the corner of his eye, presumably to look at the article.

“Are you going to tell Harry?” Blaise asked after a pause.

Remus blinked a few times and furrowed his brow slightly, then turned his head, giving Blaise a wide-eyed look. “Pardon?”

“I know you must visit him.”

Remus shrugged. “What point is there in telling? I will though. I always try to get through to him.” Remus reflected for a moment that lies really were better when they were mostly truth.

Blaise tilted his head to the side consideringly. “Is he that bad off then?”

Remus hesitated before answering. Guarded truth would have to suffice again. “He’s not himself,” he said quietly.

“Who isn’t himself?” came a third voice from behind.

The two men both looked sharply over their shoulders to see Salazar leaning over the paper shared between them. Remus did not need a wolf's senses to see the blood rush to Blaise's face as the younger wizard found himself just inches from Salazar's confident gaze. For a moment, Blaise stopped breathing, then quickly pulled himself together and straightened up, looking slightly away.

"What, no hello? I'm hurt," said Salazar with a smirk, clutching one hand to his heart and standing upright in fluid movements. "So, who isn't himself?" he repeated.

"Harry," Remus said flatly.

"Oh, him. Yes, well. He wouldn't be, now would he."

As if suddenly remembering that he and Salazar were still so close that he could feel the other's breath on his neck, Blaise moved nervously away and settled into his chair silently, tacitly allowing the others to continue their conversation. That Salazar followed Blaise's movements with his eyes did not escape Remus's attention.

Salazar, however, snapped his fingers and Dobby appeared. "Is there any tea, Dobby? Perhaps some biscuits?"

Dobby squeaked and nodded his head, disappearing only to reappear with a tray in his hands. He placed it carefully on a table and poured out for Salazar, then glanced inquiringly at Remus and Blaise, who both shook their heads.

"Thank you, Dobby. Is there anything I need to take care of?" Salazar asked, arching his brow in a way eerily reminiscent of Snape.

"Master is to enjoy himself," said Dobby immediately. "Master will come see Dobby before he goes?"

"Of course."

Dobby bounced and disappeared. Salazar took a sip from his cup, then moved directly behind Remus's chair and leaned over, reaching out with a finger to trace it down the text of the story as he read.

Remus, aside from stiffening slightly, did nothing but sit there, letting his senses take stock of the situation. When Salazar moved to the couch and sat, he was afforded an opaque look.

"Sad, that," Salazar commented, investigating the biscuit selection and picking up a ladyfinger. He raised his head and looked at each man in turn, then nipped off the end of his cake.

"Fudge?" offered Blaise.

“Cornelius, yes. Someday he’ll make a decision that comes back to bite him on the arse. I just hope I’m there to see it.” Salazar smirked again and finished his cake. “Unfortunately, I can’t stay. Things to do, places to go, naughty people to put in jail. You know how it is,” he said deprecatingly.

Salazar bounced to his feet, grabbed another cake, and headed into the hallway. Remus was right behind him, tapping him on the shoulder once they were out of sight of the library.

“Hmm?” asked Salazar, looking back over his shoulder.

“You don’t smell right,” came the bald reply. “Not human.”

Salazar’s face relaxed into a knowing smile and he nodded. “Don’t imagine I do, dear fellow. But, you didn’t think I’d be so foolish as to open my home to a werewolf and not use some form of dissimulative arts? What you do not know, you cannot be forced to reveal.”

Salazar smiled again, then turned his head away and walked onward to the kitchen, leaving Remus standing there with only his thoughts. And, not knowing quite what to think, Remus went back to say goodnight to Blaise, then headed up to bed.

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Remus and Blaise were just sitting down to have their evening meal when Salazar strode into the room and pulled out a chair. “Evening, gentlemen. Always a pleasure to see you!” he said breezily, sitting down and scooting the chair forward.

He whipped the napkin off the table from his place setting and shook it out, then draped it over his lap.

“Good evening, Salazar,” Remus and Blaise murmured, slightly taken aback by the sudden appearance.

“Both of you look quite well,” Salazar said, then was momentarily distracted by food appearing on his plate. “Plenty of things here good enough to eat,” he went on to comment enigmatically.

By whatever design the conversation touched on Arnold Peasegood. Other than his rather mundane record as an Obliviator, none of them knew much about the man, and Blaise the least of all. From what he could see, it looked to Remus that the lack of information disturbed Salazar, but he could pick up nothing from his enhanced senses; it was more of a slight tensing of the skin around the man’s eyes and the heightened rigidity of his frame that made him think so.

It was the scent of arousal during dessert that caught Remus’s attention, causing him to cast a discreet glance at Blaise, and then at Salazar, who was getting far too much enjoyment from a

bowl of sliced peaches. Every time he stopped to lick the juices from his fingers Blaise twitched almost imperceptibly.

Remus was inclined to agree with his reaction; though Salazar was not doing anything untoward (aside from not using utensils), the mere sight of the succulent fruit slipping past the man's lips was enough to shift his perception like the view in a child's kaleidoscope.

If anything, Salazar didn't seem to be aware of the reaction his display was provoking. When the peaches were gone he looked quite desolate, then wiped his hands on his napkin and leaned back.

"Right," he said, looking up from the table. "More places to go, things to do, and naughty people to chastise." He pushed back his chair, dropped the napkin on the table and gave a quick half bow, flashed a smile, then sauntered out of the room.

The next morning was peaceful; Salazar had pulled another of his disappearing acts after leaving the table. *The Daily Prophet* was already waiting, laying next to his plate.

Remus sat down and unfolded the paper, absently wishing Blaise as good morning as he stumbled in for breakfast, and fixed his eyes on the day's headlines.

### **Mystery Man Strikes Again**

Late last night two more marked men were dropped off at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement by the vigilante, who once again did not stick around to comment on his actions.

Sources within the Ministry say that those brought in are known Death Eater Geoffrey Goyle and his son Gregory Goyle, and were found after the alarm wards had gone off, magically bound to chairs in one of the interrogation rooms.

"They both told us during questioning that Salazar Slytherin apprehended them, or at least someone who looked exactly like the known portraits of him," said one insider who refused to be named.

The source went on to say that each had a letter, found during a routine search for dangerous items, that gave suggestions as to what questions exactly should be asked of them during interrogation.

It is rumored that both Goyles have already been given trials based on their testimony under veritaserum and been taken to Azkaban for life sentences on charges of torture, murder, and use of the Unforgivables.

Minister Fudge has issued a statement declaring the vigilante a wanted man and has given standing orders to the Office of Wizardland Security to capture him dead or alive.

People are encouraged to report him if seen, but to otherwise not attempt to interfere in any way.

Remus was torn between snorting and chuckling. “Busy man,” he said in response to the questioning look he was getting from Blaise, then tossed the paper at him in favor of the breakfast now waiting on his plate.

If *The Daily Prophet* might have been cause for a smile, the next morning’s edition was not. Remus and Blaise sat side-by-side at the table with the paper before them, reading a sidebar article which had caught their attention.

### **OWS Announces First Arrests**

Late last evening the Office of Wizardland Security announced their first arrests in their efforts to maintain order in the British wizarding community.

The two men in question, Artair Ainslie and Blair Barclay, were held overnight for questioning as to their seditious activities, and sentenced to twenty years imprisonment in Azkaban early this morning.

Members of the community are reminded to report any suspicious activities, but to otherwise not interfere.

Blaise spluttered and slapped the hard wood of the table. “Both of those families are well known to be neutral! I’ve never even heard a hint of them being connected with Death Eaters, or active in anything underhanded.”

“I don’t understand either, Blaise. This doesn’t even say what they supposedly did. It’s just a vague statement of guilt.” Remus leaned back and exhaled noisily. “I take it this is why Salazar was so interested in Peasegood. Still, if no one’s dug up any dirt on him so far. . . .”

“Time will tell, eh?”

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Remus ignored the stool that appeared and sank down to the floor. “Harry?” he called softly, a smile breaking over his face as he saw a dark figure detach itself from the shadows of the cell’s interior.

“Hello, Moony.” Harry sank down in a mirror position and sighed.

“Harry?”

“I’m bored. Silly, huh? Day in and day out, nothing to do but sit here. And the food is awful! If this were a muggle prison at least there’d be books and activities. Something.”

Remus forced himself not to smile. Harry sounded like a whiny child, not that he didn’t have reason. Still, it sounded so commonplace and mundane. It would be unwise to spout useless platitudes though.

“Want to hear what’s been going on outside?” he offered.

Harry nodded and fiddled with a greasy hank of his long hair.

“Well, a number of things have happened. That Salazar fellow dropped off Blaise Zabini one day to live at the estate. We’re getting along fine. Apparently he was being hounded by Voldemort’s Death Eaters, trying to get him to join up. Salazar found out somehow and kidnapped him.”

He paused and chuckled. “Rather like he did me, I suppose. He also dropped off both Goyles to the Ministry. He’s a strange fellow. I can’t sense anything about him, and he doesn’t smell human. I’ll be damned if I can figure out who or what he is though.”

Harry glanced up for a moment, displaying raised brows.

“Anyway, he drops by from time to time. Dobby seems to like him, so I guess I can’t say much.”

Harry smiled. “Dobby is a strange house-elf, but I think his judgment isn’t far off the mark.”

Remus gave a vague nod. “Fudge created a new division, the Office of Wizardland Security. They’ve already arrested two men. Blaise says they’re neutral pure-bloods, and the paper didn’t go into detail as to their supposed crimes. It worries me, and makes me wonder just who’s going to be hauled in next and shipped off.”

Harry’s face twisted in rarely shown bitterness. “We are talking about Fudge here, Moony. There’s not a lot I wouldn’t put past him. He’s made enough mistakes so far that I’d not be surprised if he’s having people who’d rather see him out of office brought in for questioning.”

“Yes, well, it seems this new office bypasses Amelia Bones’s authority, so there’s no telling. You may well be right, Harry.”

“Speaking of which, isn’t she in charge of the aurors? What are they doing now, policing Hogsmeade picnics to make sure nobody litters?” Harry asked with more than a little sarcasm.

Remus chuckled and shook his head. “I’m not sure, to be honest. I very much doubt she’s happy about this though. By the way, have you had any more visions?”

“No.” Harry pushed his matted hair away from his face and grimaced. “But I have the sneaking suspicion that Voldemort will use my birthday as another day for initiations. But that’s a ways off, isn’t it? I try and keep track of time, but. . . .”

“It’s the third of April, so yes.”

An odd look flashed across Harry’s face, so quickly that Remus couldn’t decipher it.

“Ask again next time you come. Each time.” Harry frowned. “I don’t always remember,” he whispered, giving Remus a worried look.

“I will, Harry.”

“Are you okay, Moony? Is Dumbledore still giving you trouble?”

“After I passed on those names he stopped.” Remus made a cutting motion with one hand. “I haven’t gotten much out of Snape though. He’s been acting particularly vicious lately, biting people’s heads off.”

Harry shrugged, his expression back to a curious blankness. “Sounds like he’s hiding something.”

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Spring was making herself heard across the country with a vengeance. Obviously so was Salazar. Remus and Blaise were treated to another evening visit from him; this time he stayed with them in the library until dinner, ate with them, then pulled another disappearing act.

Naturally, it made them wonder what was up, or rather, what he was up to. It also gave both of them a chance to discreetly eye Salazar as he moved about with all the grace of a panther on the hunt, and ate his dinner with single-minded focus.

Remus was amused to note that Blaise once again had trouble restraining himself when the pudding was served, but declined to comment openly. It hadn’t helped in his opinion that Salazar kept bestowing winsome smiles on Blaise and touching his hand when making points to him specifically during conversation.

The next morning’s paper relieved them both of their curiosity and their ignorance. After seeing the headline, Remus motioned Blaise over so they could both read simultaneously.

### **Slytherin Strikes Again**

Ministry sources reveal that Carey Crabbe and his son Vincent were brought in late last night to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in the same circumstances as the Goyles.

As before, both men allowed that it was Salazar Slytherin who apprehended them shortly after they had retired for the evening. Despite their initial protestations of innocence of any wrongdoing, interrogation under the influence of veritaserum revealed a number of heinous crimes they had willingly participated in, most of which were centered around the torture, maiming, and execution of muggles and muggle-borns.

One Ministry official (who refused to be named) said, “I find it quite curious that while these Death Eaters will go after muggles or those connected, and even after aurors, that

they are conspicuous in not targeting members of the OWS. It raises grave doubts in my mind as to the integrity of the office.”

Albus Dumbledore was overheard to say, “It is clear to me that the man known as Salazar Slytherin is at least as dangerous as the one he’s named for. People should use great caution and do nothing to provoke his ire, as it remains unclear what his true intentions are, or on which side of the battle he stands.”

Minister Fudge was not available for comment.

“How very interesting,” commented Remus. “I can’t tell if Albus is implying that Salazar is setting himself up to be the next Dark Lord or not.”

Blaise gave him a penetrating look.

“Either way,” he continued, “it seems to me that Albus is unhappy that there’s a loose cannon out there. Salazar might be on the side of good, but he’s not under Albus’ control, and that makes him dangerous.”

Blaise smirked. “I don’t expect we’ll be seeing Salazar kowtowing to Dumbledore anytime soon. Don’t mistake me—there are reasons enough to be at least slightly doubtful. Voldemort was known to be a very charismatic man back in the day, and Salazar is no slouch himself. He’s obviously powerful as well. It would be foolish to automatically assume that because he’s bringing in Death Eaters that he’s part of the home guard. But still . . . he’s one of the few people I trust these days.”

Remus nodded and said, “Mmm. I doubt Salazar trusts Albus anymore than I do.”

“Or me.”

Remus shot him a look, raising his brows slightly.

“Ah, I never told you, did I. Remember when I explained how I came to be here? Well, what I didn’t say was that I’d gone to Dumbledore for help, before Salazar came, and his learned advice was for me to just go along with it so I could become a spy for him.”

Remus blinked several times then scowled fiercely.

“It’s water under the bridge now, Remus. I thought his advice was ludicrous, and I’m safe now anyway. In any case,” he said, indicating the paper, “there’s other things to be concerned about in the present.”

### **OWS Announces More Arrests**

Early this morning the Office of Wizardland Security announced more arrests in their efforts to maintain order in the British wizarding community.

The two men in question, Melfus Morgan and Timistan Taylor, were held for questioning as to their seditious activities, and sentenced to twenty years imprisonment in Azkaban.

Members of the community are reminded to report any suspicious activities, but to otherwise not interfere.

“I have to wonder. . . .” said Blaise.

“Yes?” prompted Remus.

“I have to wonder if this is some sort of twisted response. Salazar brings in genuine Death Eaters, so the OWS has to respond in kind and bring in supposed subversives to show they’re just as active as the vigilante.”

“Yes, well. I suppose you noticed that it’s almost word-for-word the same article as before?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes, I suppose it is now that you mention it. But again, these are people from pure-blood, neutral families, Remus. And these two weren’t named as Death Eaters either. . . .”

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The beginning of May brought another interesting article to the attention of Remus and Blaise via *The Daily Prophet*.

### **OWS Arrests Contested**

Families of all four men arrested earlier this year have come forward en masse to protest their incarcerations. The families claim that no evidence has been provided to back up the guilty charges of seditious activity and no transcripts of the interrogations have been made available.

It is worth noting that the families in question are at risk of losing fortune and property if the OWS is successful in proving that any was gained through ill means.

While casting doubt on the validity of their claims, it also serves as motive (aside from the supposed innocence of the men involved) for them to push this issue into a public forum and demand satisfaction.

As one matriarch of the Barclay family said, “This is preposterous! It is bad enough that Blair was hauled off like a common thief in the night by the OWS, but as it stands we have absolutely no proof whatsoever that he was questioned with veritaserum, never mind that we have no idea what the actual charges are. And now we find out we could lose everything else as well? Is this valid government or a dictatorship?”

The Barclay family alone stands to lose approximately five million galleons in combined currency, inventory and real estate holdings. Figures were unavailable at press time for the other families under investigation.

When shown the assertions of the families in question, Fudge had the following to say. “The Ministry is under no obligation to reveal sensitive information we hold in trust. While it is indeed tragic that these men have been found in violation of our laws, we will not submit to challenges to our attempts to maintain order.”

Shortly before press time, an anonymous letter arrived in the offices of the Daily Prophet, which we reprint here for readers in its entirety.

“The public would do well to question the motives of Mr Peasegood. Given that his office has been arresting men of good name and neutral stance, one must wonder if the OWS is actually under the control of [You-Know-Who] and Fudge is being played for the fool he is.”

When asked to comment Fudge replied, “I have the utmost confidence in the fidelity of Mr Peasegood. His reputation is as dear to me as my own, and I say quite plainly that he is as much the pawn of You-Know-Who as I am!”

The Daily Prophet will continue to keep the public informed on this rather sensitive and provoking story.

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His visit to see Harry was more or less commonplace by now. The trip across to the island no longer bothered him; he shut out the ominous sounds and instead concentrated on seeing Harry smile.

When he arrived, Harry was already waiting for him, sitting in front of the cell door. He was greeted with a familiar, “Hello, Moony,” and a smile.

“It’s good to see you again, Harry.”

“Voldemort is pleased about something,” he offered blandly. “I don’t know what though.”

Remus smiled. “I see you remembered. Just to let you know, it’s the third of July now.”

Harry nodded and pushed back his matted hair from his face. Remus was displeased to see him looking so bad, spying more than a few streaks of dirty white in Harry’s hair, but maintained a pleasant expression.

“So amuse me, Moony. What’s happening in the world?”

“Oh, the usual. Salazar continues to bring in more Death Eaters. The OWS has made more suspicious arrests, and the families are up in arms. In fact, when someone wrote *The Daily*

*Prophet* questioning the ulterior motives of Peasegood, Fudge was quick to defend him. Par, basically. Sounds a lot like Malfoy if you ask me.”

“I don’t know about you, but I think I like this Salazar guy, despite the name. Maybe he’ll find something on Peasegood. Fudge defending him is enough to make me leery of the fellow.” Harry flashed Remus a brief smile.

“Hopefully Fudge’s statement will come back to bite him on the arse,” commented Remus thoughtfully.

“Have you been able to find anything out about Snape?”

Remus shook his head. “He’s been very . . . skittish. If I didn’t know any better I’d say that Albus isn’t particularly pleased with him right now.”

“Because you provided names he couldn’t?” asked Harry.

“I don’t know.” Remus shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe, but I could be very wrong in my impression. Let’s face it—Snape has to work through others and it was one thing before Voldemort regained his body, but it must be ten times more difficult to get people to talk now. Still. . . .”

“Still?” Harry angled his head, then brushed away the hanks of hair that threatened to obscure his vision.

“Well, think about all the times he’s been there watching your back. You’re in here now.”

“His value has been cut in half, you mean. In consequence, if he can’t get information like he used to, he may as well go into hiding now and pray Voldemort goes down.”

“Exactly.”

“Let’s say he’s useless now. Why is he being so skittish? Maybe he’s worried Dumbledore will let him hang in the wind and let the Ministry do as they wish? Rescind his testimonial, so to speak?”

“No idea. I’ll try again to corner him and find out what I can. My past attempts have been less than successful—he always manages to slip off when I start asking questions—but I’ll try again.”

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Blaise sat on the couch, the same couch that Salazar favored, though at the other end. Remus carefully hid a smile when he realized that Blaise had been doing so for some time now,

having forsaken his usual chair. As though the thought had become reality, Salazar bounced through the door into the lesser library and claimed his usual spot.

“Evening,” Salazar said cheerfully, flashing a smile at Remus even as he absently patted Blaise on the leg briefly in tactile greeting. “Dinner almost ready?”

Remus was reminded of Ron for a moment. It was almost inevitable that Salazar showed up for the evening meal, or at the very least for some tea and biscuits. He smiled back and dipped his head quickly. “You’re awfully chipper. I guess we should expect to be amused by the morning paper, no?”

Salazar flashed him another smile, this one unrepentantly devious. “Maybe. But then, *The Daily Prophet* is always full of thrilling news these days isn’t it.”

He looked as though he meant to say more, but at that moment Dobby popped in, squeaked when he saw Salazar, and announced dinner.

The next morning Remus was proved right; a small piece titled ***Slytherin’s Revenge Continues*** provided the names Craston and Lamont as the latest Death Eaters brought in to the Law Enforcement department of the Ministry.

However, that news wasn’t nearly as interesting as the subtle flirting which had taken place over the table the night before between Salazar and Blaise. Blaise had maintained the air of a person who was conflicted between the pleasure the exchanges were affording him and the knowledge that neither he nor Remus had any real idea of who this man was.

Salazar had progressed from smiles and seemingly absentminded touches to gentle verbal thrusts and exploratory topics. He had a singular way of twisting innocent speech to carry a wealth of double meaning and innuendo, and appeared to have every idea of how his actions and words were affecting his target. Perhaps it was that Salazar had finally cottoned to the fact that Blaise was of a like-minded persuasion. It could have been that Salazar had come to a decision based on Blaise’s steadfast choice to remain under the protection of Sanctuary.

Remus wasn’t going to ask; he was going to sit back and continue to enjoy the show.

He had, however, commented on it one afternoon with a knowing smile, hoping to provoke a response from Blaise instead.

“It isn’t as though him saving me means I’m going to fall all over him, you know,” Blaise said.

“You don’t think that’s why he brought you here, do you?”

“No, I don’t. Besides, he’s been flirting with you too a bit in case you hadn’t noticed. It may just be his nature,” Blaise countered with the faintest suggestion of a sly smile. “I’d point out that he’s handsome but I know that isn’t his real face, never mind his real name.”

“True. He looks like he stepped out of a portrait from Hogwarts, and a young one at that. As H . . . he said to me once, it must be a kick in the pants to Voldemort, having Salazar Slytherin capturing his Death Eaters and telling them they shame the name. Anyway, he may be a bit of a flirt regardless, but he’s been focusing on you, and you don’t seem to be minding so much.”

“Yes, and what happens when Voldemort is finally gone—does Salazar fade into the woodwork never to be seen again, or do we finally get to find out who he is? I think I’d have to be a fool to do more than harmless flirting until then.”

“Of course. But we’re not always given that choice.”

Blaise gave him a startled look. “Say what you mean, Remus.”

“I’m sorry. Flirting is one thing, but your heart is another. We don’t always get to choose what we feel, that’s all.”

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Remus had had enough. He kept a close tail this time on Severus when the meeting broke up, abandoning his questions for the moment and instead shadowing him along the dimly lit halls and down into the dungeons. Before Snape had a chance to slip entirely through the door to his rooms, Remus was centered in the frame and clearing his throat.

Snape whipped around with lightning speed, obviously startled that anyone had been able to sneak up on him, a scowl firmly entrenched on his pale, drawn face.

“What do you want?” he demanded harshly.

Remus got right to the point. “Why is Albus so unhappy with you, Severus? Maybe the rest don’t see it, but I do.”

If possible, Snape’s scowl deepened. “I hardly think this is a conversation for a hallway.”

“I agree, which is why I’m sure you won’t mind inviting me in,” Remus replied with a half smile. “I assure you, I’ll keep at this. You may as well talk to me now and get it over with. It’s obvious something is wrong, and I doubt very much that Albus would be pleased to find you hexed me into the infirmary in a fit of pique.”

Snape snarled and turned abruptly, stepping into his quarters and letting Remus follow him in. He crossed immediately to a series of bottles on one of the many shelves that lined the walls and poured himself a drink.

After a gulp he rounded on Remus and said, “I really don’t see what business of yours it is how Albus regards me. In point of fact, I can’t see why you’d be interested in the first place.”

“Let’s just say I’m not the only one who’s curious. I ask again, what’s going on, Severus? Why do I get the feeling that Albus doesn’t find you nearly so useful these days? That he’s disappointed in what you’re able to contribute to the Order of late? Shall I go on?” Remus persisted as Severus became increasingly agitated. It served as a marked contrast to his usual cool mask of indifference.

He tilted his head to the side and stared unblinkingly at Snape. “Or is it that you’re worried Albus thinks that you’re deliberately unsuccessful. That you really are on the other side and your failure to bring in vital information is a sign of where your loyalties really lay.”

Severus threw his glass at the fireplace and wrenched up his sleeve, displaying the dark mark burned into his skin. “Blast it, Lupin! Do you have any idea what a mark like this means? You just can’t let it go, can you. Always badgering me, always in my face like some common urchin begging for crusts.”

He pulled his sleeve back down roughly and went on. “While it may not directly compel my obedience to his whims and aims, it does mean that if the Dark Lord dies, I die.”

“I’m going to assume this somehow ties in with Albus,” Remus stated.

“Of course it does, you fool. If Albus dies, I die—he made sure of it. So I’m sure even someone as used to looking the other way as you are can see that I’m damned either way.”

Remus blinked in surprise. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t pretend your enhanced ears didn’t hear me clearly. Try phrasing a question of actual substance if you insist on doing so.” He turned and poured a new drink, then remained facing slightly away, his expression partly hidden by the shadows inhabiting the room.

“All right. Why in Merlin’s name would you die if Albus did?”

“I should think that would be obvious, Lupin. It was a condition of him standing up for me at my trial. Oh, he knew my siding against the Dark Lord was genuine, but that wasn’t good enough for him. Apparently he prefers to hedge his bets. Look at Potter—something went wrong there and look where he ended up.”

“But you still haven’t explained. Are you saying Albus marked you as well?”

“Well aren’t you the bright fellow,” Snape said sarcastically. “Ten points to Gryffindor. Well done.”

Snape took another gulp of his drink and said, “The dark isn’t the only side with tricky little spells, Lupin. At least if the Dark Lord goes first, I’d die knowing we won.”

Remus didn't have anything to say to that, so he changed the subject. "So tell me, what is the problem anyway? Are your sources being uncooperative? Though I'd be the last person to try and take any part of your operation, I know I brought it more names than you did, even if only purely by accident."

Snape gave him the kind of glare he normally reserved only for Neville Longbottom and took another healthy swig of his drink.

"They are bringing me next to no information. And you're right. What you managed was nothing more than a fluke," he snarled. "Now if you don't mind, I have better things to deal with than to have you stinking up my quarters."

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**6: WICKED INTENTIONS**

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**— Azkaban Year Three —**

*“Adders who with cloven tongues do hiss into madness.” — William Shakespeare.*

September brought about an interesting series of events. The night was crisp, and smelled of the delicious scents of encroaching fall. At the moment Salazar was rather bored, clinging to the robes of a certain Mr Peasegood in spider form. It seemed to be the easiest method of shadowing the man, trying to find direct evidence of any wrongdoing.

He'd already lost the man several times over the past week because of apparitions, but that evening he was walking along quiet back streets in London. After a not unpleasant stroll they arrived at an unremarkable door situated in an alley indistinguishable from many others in the city, except perhaps by the degree of dirt and debris present.

After a quick glance around and a barely voiced spell, Peasegood slipped through the now open door and closed and re-locked it behind him. Inside was a marked contrast to the area in which the building was located, being fairly well decorated and maintained.

But, Salazar wasn't there to critique the decor. He continued to cling as Peasegood moved deeper inside and into what looked like a small sitting room. Already seated there were Theodore Nott and his father, both looking slightly impatient.

“It's about time you got here,” complained Alexander. “We've been waiting over an hour.”

Peasegood flapped his hand and sat down. “Problems at the office. Nothing important, but nothing I could just walk out on either. I'm here now, so let's get to it. What do you know about the Monihans?”

Theodore examined his nails as his father answered, looking for all the world as though he'd rather be at a young Death Eaters' cotillion hanging out for a pure-blood bride. “They're no different than the others. Rich and opinionated. They think Fudge is a fool.”

“And?” he countered irritably. “Habits? Defenses?”

Salazar slowly crept down to the floor and scuttled to the wall, then began to make his careful way to the open door that led into the hall from which they'd entered.

“No more difficult than the others. You could set your clock by the father's routine, and for all the spell work and warding that's been done on the family mansion, it would be simple to get in.”

He paused and sent a knowing look at Peasegood. “Fudge getting impatient again?”

“You know damned well he is. Don’t you ever read what I send you? I keep him happy by arresting his opponents and he looks the other way on a number of things.”

Salazar had by now made it through the door frame and far enough into the hall that he could regain his human form. By now he was quite pleased and thinking, “Self, I think Mr Peasegood has been a very naughty fellow.”

*“Self, I think you are quite correct.”*

The unexpected response, for he had not heard his inner voice in some time, nearly made him chuckle. Working with excruciating care Salazar spelled the door frame, then changed back to spider form and skittered up the wall diagonally to rest above his trap. From his vantage he could hear them talking quite clearly.

“So in what . . . two weeks?” came Alexander’s voice.

“Yes. That should give me time to get everything into place so my team can bring them in, and you to plant the evidence we need for this set. People are getting much too vocal about the arrests. I want back up this time.”

Salazar could hear the sounds of movement; he assumed they were standing in preparation of departure.

“Fine. I’ll owl you when things are ready.”

One by one the three men walked through the door, and one by one the three men keeled over inelegantly as the sleep spell took effect ten seconds later.

Salazar scuttled part way across the ceiling then slid down a line to the floor, changing back into human form with a smug smile. After preparing each one his normal way, he removed the spell from the door frame.

A note was placed with each body and from there it was a moment’s work to float all three through a warp gate to the Ministry. After setting off the alarm, Salazar warped to Sanctuary.

As luck would have it, he arrived just in time for dinner. He breezed into the dining room with a charming smile and seated himself across from Blaise.

“You’ve been up to something,” observed Remus with a wry smile.

“Who me? I have no idea what you’re talking about, dear fellow.” He shook out his napkin and laid it across his lap. “I just think it’s a lovely night to be alive, don’t you?”

“Mmmhmm. Any other words of wisdom?” Remus asked.

“Adders who with cloven tongues do hiss into madness.” Salazar paused, smiled faintly, then said, “I think perhaps the morning paper will be interesting. There are altogether too many naughty people roaming the countryside.”

“Surely you aren’t planning to capture all of them,” objected Blaise as dinner appeared on the table.

“Only as many as I need to,” Salazar replied with a salacious wink. “I captured you, didn’t I?” He thought the rosy colour that flushed Blaise’s cheeks suddenly was quite endearing.

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Remus arrived right on schedule according to Harry’s makeshift calendar and was practically bursting to fill him in on everything that had been happening since his last visit. Though Harry already knew about the Notts and Peasegood, he affected to look both surprised and pleased at the redundant information. However, when Remus started in on what he didn’t yet know, his expressions were genuine indeed.

“Harry!”

“Hello, Moony. You’re awfully excited,” he replied with a smile.

“A lot has happened in the past few months. For the boring part, Alexander and Theodore Nott were sentenced to Azkaban. However, it was who was brought in with them that caused quite the ruckus.”

“Who?” he asked simply.

“Arnold Peasegood, head of the OWS,” Remus said triumphantly.

“Peasegood’s a Death Eater?” he asked incredulously. “Then . . . what about Fudge?” Harry’s lips curved into an unmistakably malicious smile.

“Read this first. They allowed me to bring in a copy because they didn’t see any harm in it.” Remus thrust a page at Harry, ripped from *The Daily Prophet*.

### **Salazar Traps Triad**

Three Death Eaters were dropped off last night by the canny Salazar. Brought in were Alexander Nott, his son Theodore Nott, and the most surprising of all, Arnold Peasegood.

Peasegood, head of the Office of Wizardland Security and appointed by none other than the Minister himself, was sporting a note which read, “As much the pawn of [You-Know-Who] as Fudge is? How about that reputation now?”

Ministry sources say that both Notts have already been interrogated under veritaserum and sentenced to Azkaban for life. Peasegood was apparently questioned for several hours on his connection to You-Know-Who as well as his actions while head of the OWS.

Madam Bones released the following statement to the press early this morning:

“Mr Peasegood indeed bears the dark mark and has been verified as a Death Eater along with the two men brought in with him. Due to the gravity of the situation and the gross misconduct accomplished while in office, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has every intention of pulling the files on each of the men the OWS has incarcerated. Each man will be re-interrogated as necessary so that their innocence or guilt may be ascertained once and for all.”

She went on to say that “Mr Peasegood’s division members are also being brought in for questioning to alleviate any question as to their primary loyalty and whether or not they should be charged with any crimes.”

Minister Fudge was unavailable for comment.

A small sidebar story reiterated Fudge’s earlier comments when he defended his choice of Peasegood as the head of the new division. It went on to then question his suitability as Minister of Magic given his glaringly bad choices of late, and perhaps even in the past decade.

Harry grinned and asked, “So how’d it fall out?”

“Apparently Salazar’s note caused quite a commotion. The Ministry started getting a massive amount of howlers, and not a few letters straight to Madam Bones about Fudge. Later reports showed that Fudge has been a pawn for years, working on his pride and greed to keep him in line. I guess Peasegood was pretty well informed and had been a sleeper in the Ministry for years just waiting for a good time to be of use.”

“And?” he prompted.

“They called for his impeachment, and it stuck. Amelia is now the interim Minister and she started things off with a bang. Fudge himself was questioned under veritaserum and it was quite clear what his motivations were. He’s been chucked out. Every last Ministry employee has been interrogated in fact. Anyone found with ties to Voldemort has been either fired or imprisoned, depending on what they’ve done.”

“What about the people the OWS arrested?”

“Released. Nobody could find any files on them. They were arrested because they spoke out against Fudge and thrown into Azkaban. Reparations were made to all four families as well.”

“That’s amazing news. Anything else happen because of all this?”

Remus's face lit up with mischief. "Two things, though only one you might expect. There's a new dessert at the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade called Fudge Peachmint. It's fudge-swirled mint ice cream topped with peaches. They keep selling out of the stuff, and I've noticed more than one person giggling madly while they eat."

"Would the other have anything to do with the twins?" asked Harry shrewdly.

"Absolutely. Can you imagine them *not* finding a way to make money of this? They've been selling a new trick sweet. Ordinary looking enough, as you'd expect. Fudge-dipped peaches. They place chocolate shackles on the victim when eaten. Last I heard they were arguing over whether to call them Fudge Fetters or Peach Pinions and handing out free samples in the meantime."

Harry laughed in delight, thinking it was too bad they'd never be able to get a picture of Fudge himself in a set for advertising purposes. Then again, maybe they had.

"That reminds me. Snape. I finally managed to pin him down."

"Oh?" Harry's brows rose.

"He never really did answer my original questions about Albus or his usefulness, but I did find out something interesting. Horrifying actually."

Harry tilted his head to the side and waited.

"You know he's got the dark mark, Harry. But what you don't know is that Albus marked him as well. He's going to die either way, just as soon as one of those two does, and I don't see any way of saving him." Remus sighed and shook his head sadly. "I know he's a cruel bastard, but no one deserves that."

"I . . . I'm not sure what to say to that."

"He hasn't been getting information. It's not that he's telling Albus privately, he just isn't getting much of anything from his sources. So it doesn't matter. He's a dead man walking and he knows it. Probably the only thing keeping him from cutting his own throat is his honor and belief in what's necessary."

"Well, we'll just have to hope for the best. Miracles can happen. I'm still alive, aren't I?"

Remus favored him with an odd look but stayed silent.

Harry pushed his hair back, grimacing at the feel of the greasy, matted mass. "Oh, three more people were initiated. . . ."

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Certain sensations made themselves known to Harry one fine evening. At least he assumed it was fine, not having had the chance to look through the stone walls of his cell lately. Given the strength of the sensations, Harry thought it wise to peek in on Voldemort's doings.

And so it was that he was treated to a quite pleased not-entirely-human wizard who was discussing his plans with his inner circle.

"The time is now," Voldemort said. "Our highest pawn has been nullified and can no longer be manipulated by his own greed and pride into working for me. We will move now before the Ministry is able to completely recoup from this disruption."

He pointed a spindly finger at Bellatrix and went on to say, "You and the others will coordinate teams with which to assault Azkaban and free your imprisoned comrades, after which we will find our dear friend Harry Potter. I am quite sure that by now he is either willing to join us because of the betrayal of his own side, or is mad enough to no longer be a threat to my plans."

Harry thought it was rather funny all told. Muggle scientists said humans only use about ten percent of their brains. Maybe magical folk used more, but will and intent are also a funny thing. Aside from being able to erect a mental wall to hide behind so as to keep Voldemort unaware of his intrusions, Harry had spent quite a bit of time working on a way to present a false perception of himself to ward off any Legilimens.

So it was that when he heard noises echoing off the walls from the distance, he was ready to meet what was coming. It was, appropriately enough, Halloween. By the time footsteps resounded near his cell, he was curled up on his bed softly singing nursery rhymes as though he hadn't a care, or a brain, to his name.

A spindly finger pointed at the cell door, causing one of the masked Death Eaters to immediately force it open. Striding into the cell the minion hauled Harry off his bed and dragged him over to be dumped in a heap at Voldemort's feet.

Harry continued to sing to himself regardless, acting as though nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

He stopped suddenly to ask, "Have you come to play?" in a childish voice as he stared ingenuously at the masked and black-robed gathering, then went back to his songs.

The nearest Death Eater pulled back a leg to kick Harry, but stopped when Voldemort motioned sharply.

"Dear, dear, Harry," Voldemort said with mock sadness, "it pains me to see you in this condition. You're hardly a worthy opponent now, are you? I had this grand speech to give you, an offer of a binding choice. But now. . . ."

He made a sweeping gesture with one hand, then shrugged. "Pitiful child. Well, I shall give you a choice anyway, as I can afford this one time to be magnanimous. You will either join me or you will die, Harry. It's up to you."

Harry looked at him with wide, serious eyes for a moment then started speaking in a high-pitched, singsong voice. "They kept telling me love would save me, did save me. They did. He holds my life in his hands. So I must love him. Right?"

He was rewarded by seeing Voldemort's eyes narrow in what could have been anger, and giggled like a love struck young girl.

An offended Death Eater cursed and nudged Harry in the back with his foot roughly. "Kiss the robes of your new master, Potter!" he commanded in a harsh voice.

Harry rocked with the impact, affecting to appear much more frail than he was, then looked up at Voldemort with an injured expression before swiveling his head to look over his shoulder.

"Robes?" he asked in that same odd voice. "Loves don't kiss robes on robes. Loves kiss robes on the mouth. A proper kiss." He turned back to Voldemort and said, "A proper kiss, right?"

Voldemort stared at him with those curious red eyes, and Harry could feel the pressure on his mind. He did nothing to stop the intrusion, trusting in his mental preparations. Voldemort stared until at last his changed face twisted slightly, his reptilian nostrils flared, and he began to laugh the way Harry had often heard in his visions.

After a full minute of this, Harry screeched with childish indignation. "Harry not good enough for a proper kiss!?" he demanded, then punched Voldemort in the leg with a fist and screamed.

*"You can only use it once,"* said the voice, *"so you better make it count."*

*"I know,"* he thought.

Voldemort stopped laughing immediately. He crouched down and placed his hands under Harry's arms and rose until they both were standing. Harry smiled vacuously at him in response.

"You'll make a fine trophy once you're cleaned up, Harry, even if you are completely mad. A kiss then to seal the bargain of your fate," said Voldemort, just before he inclined his head and covered Harry's lips with his own.

Harry could hear the stifled gasps of the Death Eaters present, but ignored them. He accepted Voldemort's probing tongue by parting his lips, letting the snake get the barest of tastes before invoking his own special twist in the bargain.

It was then that he had to act just as much as he had been, sliding his mouth away from Voldemort's and along his cheek to his neck, planting lingering kisses as Voldemort's head tilted forward as though to rest on Harry's shoulder. Harry let out another childish giggle and turned his head slightly toward the Death Eaters. "See? A proper kiss. Harry's kiss," he said sweetly.

The assembled Death Eaters, wary at the lack of movement from their leader, began to shift their weight and brandish wands at Harry menacingly, making him wonder if Voldemort had ever before shown any interest in other men.

Harry licked his lips and started to turn back when he paused and widened his eyes considerably. After a moment he giggled once more and pointed at something behind the threatening group, then turned back to Voldemort's neck and placed another tender kiss.

Watching out of the corner of his eye he could see several of them whip around. When they cursed the rest turned and got ready to defend their lord from the aurors who were even now pounding down the corridor at them.

Seeing that their attention was rightly elsewhere, Harry took the opportunity to duck off around the corner, pulling Voldemort with him. As soon as they were out of sight of the impending conflict, he warped them both out of Azkaban.

Knowing that he was safe for the time being, Harry let Voldemort's body slip to the floor, making no attempt to cushion the fall. For himself, he sank down to rest a moment before searching his victim thoroughly. Aside from the brother wand, he found nothing of interest.

He had an overwhelming urge to bathe, to brush his teeth, and repeat the actions until he might conceivably feel clean again. As it was there were other things he needed to accomplish before he released Voldemort to the authorities, so he tucked the wand behind his ear and placed a hand on each of the snake's temples.

Voldemort's eyes were still open, though he blinked occasionally. Harry stared deeply into his eyes and reached, pressing forward into the other's mind and taking control.

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What seemed like an hour later had Harry collapsed on the floor and staring at the ceiling. When he'd finally had enough of counting the myriad cracks he rose unsteadily and shuffled off to the bathroom for a long, hot soak in the tub. Now was not the time to use a spell in his opinion. When his skin became wrinkly and pruned he finally hauled himself out and dried off, using a spell to remove the snarls and tangles from his hair, and then padded off to the bedroom for a few hours of sleep before his next task.

After he woke, a quick check showed Voldemort to be exactly where he'd left him, so Harry morphed into the guise of Salazar and dressed himself with a spare set of clothing he'd left

there for this exact purpose. It never hurt to be prepared, and he could have recovered them had his plan been unsuccessful.

Then he waited. When the hands on the grandfather clock swung round to 8.30 am, he stood and latched on to a floating Voldemort's arm. He warped them to the usual spot in the Ministry, set off the alarms, then settled on the ceiling.

He waited through the arrival of the aurors, through their frenzied calls for backup, and until Dumbledore finally appeared, having been called in to witness the events. The only thing they found on Voldemort's body was a note. When they finally cleared the room, he warped back to the hidden estate.

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## 7 : THE TRUTH WILL OUT

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*“Truth does not consist in never lying but in knowing when to lie and when not to do so.” — Samuel Butler.*

Albus arrived at the head table for breakfast in the great hall as he had done for many years gone by. He sat in his usual seat, gave his usual greetings, and only then noticed that Severus was not there. He frowned slightly at this omission. All the professors knew quite well his views on mealtime behavior, and Snape was certainly not an exception despite his eccentricities. He would have to deal with it later on.

Students filing in were chattering sleepily and rubbing their eyes, likely still tired from the festivities of the evening before. It was a wonder in his opinion that any of them were able to eat the morning after Halloween, given their tendency toward an excess of sweets. With a purely mental shrug he filled his own plate and began to eat.

When the morning post arrived his copy of *The Daily Prophet* came with it. His own operatives had been on the look out for suspicious activities and Kingsley had sent him a brief note regarding a break-in at Azkaban, but had been unable to provide detailed information as his presence was needed at the Ministry.

So it was that he settled in to read the front page news.

### **Azkaban Assaulted**

Late last night a contingent of Death Eaters, and reportedly You-Know-Who himself, broke into the fortress prison. From evidence gathered from those captured in the attack, their target was both to free their fellow Death Eaters and to remove Harry Potter.

Readers are reminded that Potter was placed in Azkaban on 4 November 1997 under suspicious circumstances. Officials at the Ministry were notoriously tight-lipped at the time of his incarceration.

Captured in the attack were five Death Eaters, two of which were previously incarcerated. Thomas Avery, the brothers Rabastan and Rudolphus Lestrangle, Michael Shipton, and Horton Oakley were all questioned and immediately sentenced to life imprisonment.

Killed in the attack were escaped Death Eaters Bellatrix Lestrangle and Lucius Malfoy, along with Niall Montrose. You-Know-Who escaped the conflict, along with Mr Potter. Their whereabouts are currently unknown.

Aurors are on full alert for the escapees and urge citizens to not attempt to apprehend anyone personally. Report any and all suspicious activity to the Ministry immediately.

Albus forgot himself enough to scowl. He folded the paper abruptly and placed it on the table next to his plate, not bothering to read what he expected to be a sappy side story on the much

maligned Harry Potter. Truly there were days when he thought reporters like Rita Skeeter should be tossed into Azkaban as well.

The fact remained that Harry was missing; the question was, was he insane, or out for revenge? Albus considered that updating the school's wards against Harry might not be such a bad idea, assuming he could get the castle to cooperate. One of the teachers could certainly teach the front doors to recognize the boy—well, young man—and sound the alarm. That would not, however, cover the other entrances to the castle, and especially the secret passages.

Moments later a slight noise off to the left made Albus turn his head in time to see Severus slipping into his seat at the end of the table. He was in the process of casting a stern look at Snape when the spreading silence in the room distracted him. He turned back to the hall only to see an auror racing up between the tables toward him, an anxious look on his reddening face.

The auror skidded to a stop in front of him, gasping for breath, and thrust out a note before turning and heading back out at a dead run.

Albus raised his brows in surprise as he took and opened the note, taking in a request for his presence at the Ministry on an extremely urgent matter. He tucked it into his robes and turned to Minerva.

“I must go, though for what I do not yet know. I will be at the Ministry.”

He stood and left through the side door, not waiting for a response. When he was clear of the apparition wards, he apparated to the Ministry and was immediately met by a nameless auror, who led him straight to the interrogation rooms.

He was not prepared for what he saw, the body of Voldemort laid out on a table as though it were a bier.

Hours later when he returned to Hogwarts, he called all of the professors to his office to inform them of the morning's events. They each took the news in different ways. Some openly cried, while others, like Severus, maintained a blank face, perhaps too much in shock to process what they were hearing.

When he was finished with his recital, he dismissed them with the exception of the potions master.

“So, Severus. The time has come at last,” he began placidly. “Given that Voldemort is indeed dealt with, I feel it is only right that I release you from your vow. It, after all, no longer applies.”

Snape nodded, appearing unwilling to speak.

It didn't really matter in his opinion. Even though he was about to remove his mark, Severus would still die. By all accounts, Voldemort had somehow been kissed by a dementor. Everyone knew that those kissed never lasted all that long; lack of water alone would kill faster than a lack of food. So, either way, one of his liabilities would be handled in the course of time; Snape's dark mark would make sure of it.

He and all the others so marked would die a probably excruciating death when the time came. There had long been conjecture that the dark mark would transfer the life energy of those marked to their master if he needed it, killing them in the process in order to keep Voldemort alive that much longer. Albus did not want some unexpected backlash to hit him through his own mark when Voldemort breathed his last and Severus died of it.

The ritual was tiring more than difficult; Albus felt his age most keenly by the time he was done. Severus looked to not be in much better shape despite his much younger years, hunched over on the floor and breathing heavily. Once they had both recovered to a degree, he packed Severus off and rested further. When the time came, he went on down to the great hall for dinner. He forgot entirely his earlier plans to ward the castle against Harry.

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Severus had woken the night before from a dream of nightmarish proportions, the pain enough to shock him awake. The surprise came when he realized that the pain was real, and not his twisted subconscious punishing him for his life as it had done so often in the past. His arm felt afire; it was every moment of his marking times ten, or a level of *crucio* much favored by the Dark Lord. He soon passed into blessed unconsciousness.

When he had woken, still clutching his arm, he could not for a moment remember what had happened. But as his sleepy brain caught up to wakefulness, he released his grip and looked feverishly at his arm. His now unmarked arm.

For a split second he was suffused with transcendent rapture.

His intellect set in, and the questions began to flow like water in his mind. How was it possible that his mark was gone? The Dark Lord did not willingly release his servants; any fool knew that.

He glanced around the room, noting that aside from the fact that his bed looked like a war zone, nothing was out of place. As his eyes came to rest on his clock though, he cursed under his breath and struggled out of his coverings. He thrust himself into the first clothes that came to hand, fumbling with buttons and ties, until finally casting a quick cleansing charm over himself.

He left his rooms at a dead run, slowing only when he stood before the door leading to the head table's dais in the great hall. Mere minutes later he watched in unexpressed confusion as an auror raced up to the head table, thrust a note at Albus, then ran off again like a rabbit.

He used the experience of years of spying to hold steady his expression against Albus's remarks later in his office, and then through the pain of a second removal. Albus, for all his conniving and manipulations, had laid a gentler yoke upon his shoulders it seemed.

Why he had not mentioned that his dark mark was already gone was a purely Slytherin matter. It was, he thought, a foolish thing to do to admit that he was free but for the headmaster's fetters. He could well imagine Albus refusing to release him, forcing him to follow in death, should he know beforehand that the dark mark was already removed. A last line of defense, if you will.

He was not surprised when a special edition of *The Daily Prophet* was sent out that evening, arriving during dinner.

### **Dark Lord Defeated**

Interim Minister of Magic Amelia Bones held a press conference earlier today stating unequivocally that You-Know-Who is no longer a threat.

The body of You-Know-Who was delivered early this morning to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement by none other than the same man who has been capturing Death Eaters for the past several years, Salazar Slytherin.

"After close examination the Ministry is able to report that [You-Know-Who] has suffered what appears to be the dementor's kiss. How this happened we have no idea," said Madam Bones in part of her speech to the press.

"The Ministry will continue to investigate the body and inform the public of any developments as they happen. While we will not disclose the current whereabouts of his body, we can assure the public that he is no longer a threat of any kind to the wizarding community."

No doubt the Ministry is concerned that the remaining Death Eaters at large might try to recover their master.

An insider at the Ministry told the Daily Prophet that Salazar left another of his infamous notes, this time with the words, "Thus is the name and house of Slytherin redeemed."

Slytherin's whereabouts are unknown at this time. Readers are reminded that not all dark forces have been captured and to please report any suspicious activity to the Ministry immediately.

By the time Severus was through reading the bare-bones article, the hall had erupted in cheering and crying, prompting the headmaster to call for silence long enough to announce that classes were canceled for the remainder of the week in celebration.

Severus, no longer enslaved by two masters, left for his quarters when dinner was done with a light heart for the first time in decades.

Harry strode confidently down Diagon Alley, pausing occasionally to examine the contents of shop windows and shake his head over the latest models of racing brooms, wondering what prices they went for. No one paid him the least bit of attention, which was hardly surprising considering his mousy brown hair, hazel eyes, and overall nondescript appearance.

When he had had his fill of the bustle around him, he stopped long enough to secure a copy of *The Daily Prophet*, then found himself a seat in the Leaky Cauldron and ordered a cup of tea and a sandwich. The main story carried little in the way of real news, just a rather fluffy piece on people's reactions to Voldemort's defeat, taken from people who happened to be in Diagon Alley at the time. Harry was skimming the article when several names caught his attention, causing him to backtrack and read more carefully.

"We'd had such a bad let down before because of Harry Potter. We'd thought for a while there that all our hopes had been dashed. But when you look at it realistically, no one ever should have expected a single boy to be strong enough, or powerful enough, to have handled this. He'd only survived in the past because of luck, or our help." Miss Granger shrugged at this point and went on to say, "Salazar, on the other hand, is quite a different story."

Harry smirked at her assessment, then skipped down to read what Ron had been quoted saying.

"Oi, yeah. I can't tell you how relieved I am that this is all over. Wish I could shake the guy's hand. He's bloody brilliant."

Harry had to restrain himself from laughing outright. There were a few minor comments quoted here and there from people he'd once considered his friends, but they and others focused more on the fact that Voldemort was no longer a threat. It did not surprise him in the least to read that Albus Dumbledore still urged caution when it came to any dealings with Salazar.

"How very interesting," he murmured to himself, then folded the paper, set it aside, and finished his meal. A few minutes later he was back at the hidden estate.

Much later on found Harry sitting in the garden, gazing up at the sky with the faint suggestion of a smile gracing his lips. He knew that while he had finally taken down Voldemort, through guile more than a straightforward thrust, that it was not quite enough.

Snape would be fine, that much he assumed to be truth, though perhaps it would not be so bad of an idea as to check. For himself, however, he would have to try just a little bit harder. He could live out the remainder of his life at Sanctuary; he knew that. None of the residents would betray his trust, but that wasn't good enough. Even he was curious as to how he'd been put in such a state as to be shunted off to Azkaban at the first opportunity.

He could postulate for days, but it would likely get him nowhere fast. After much contemplation he pulled himself to his feet and headed to the memory pool to review the early days of his seventh year at Hogwarts. It didn't help . . . much. But he was left with a lingering sense of something familiar. Of all the students he'd known even passing well, there was only one who went out of his way to aggravate Harry.

He left the memory pool and went to the bedroom he'd claimed as his own, changing into his Salazar persona's guise and a fresh set of clothing. From there he warped directly to the dungeons of Hogwarts, right outside Snape's office, fading into invisibility as quickly as he arrived.

It was early yet, but hopefully he would be lucky enough to catch the man alone, rather than with some student in detention. He listened at the door but heard nothing, and so walked on silent feet to the potions classroom to listen again. Still nothing. Taking a chance, he warped himself into Snape's office, landing just inside the door.

Snape was seated at his desk, hair falling around his face as he graded papers. Salazar cleared his throat softly, watching as Snape's head snapped up violently and the man reached for his wand.

"You won't be needing that, I assure you," he said as he walked forward, fading back into view with each step. He could detect the faint widening of the professor's eyes at his appearance. "I just had the odd question or two for you. That's all."

Either Snape didn't consider him a threat, or his reputation had gained enough in stature that Snape didn't expect to win if it came to a duel. The professor slowly lowered his wand and raised his brow quizzically.

"First let me ask if you are suffering any ill effects from the removal of your dark mark."

Snape's face slackened slightly as he straightened in his chair, his posture more than making up for the lack of rigidity in his expression. "I am well."

"Excellent, my dear fellow. I would hate to think I had caused you any lingering pain for my efforts. Don't worry, I shan't keep you long. I have only one other question for you."

Snape nodded in acquiescence.

"Any idea where a fellow might find a certain Draco Malfoy?" Salazar was quite curious to see the reaction to that question, never having really known just how Snape felt about the boy. "I'm just perishing to have a chat with him."

Snape's only sign of surprise was to blink. "Who are you anyway?" he asked in a sidestep maneuver.

“Does it really matter? Someone once said, ‘Truth does not consist in never lying but in knowing when to lie and when not to do so.’ I simply wish to solve the final mystery on my list of good deeds. Of course if our young Mr Malfoy is a Death Eater as I suspect, I would have to turn him over once he’d enlightened me.”

“And what mystery would that be, pray tell.”

“I doubt very much it would interest you. You never liked the person I wish to help from all accounts,” he countered.

Snape’s face creased slightly in the barest of frowns.

“If you haven’t any idea simply say so and I’ll be on my way. I’m sure you have more pressing matters to attend to,” he said calmly.

“You said your efforts. What did you mean?”

“My dear fellow, I should think that would be obvious. It was certainly not Riddle’s idea to remove your mark. For that matter, did our dear headmaster remove his?”

Snape frowned again. “He did. Why did you assure my release?”

He was quite a stubborn fellow in Salazar’s opinion. Maybe it was true that a Slytherin never gave something for nothing. “I thought you deserved it. I am well aware of the situation you were in and did what I could to assist you. Perhaps now, if you are not so far gone from your years in servitude as to be empty, you can live something akin to a normal life. But really, we must stop with all these pesky tangents. About Mr Malfoy. . . ?”

“There are a number of places he could be. I would suggest you start with Malfoy Manor and if that doesn’t work then. . . .” Snape rambled off a list of possible locations, mercifully short.

“Splendid,” he said brightly. “You have my gratitude.” The last thing he did before fading from view was to smile and accord Snape a half bow. Then he warped away.

His timing was impeccable; the evening meal was always served fashionably late at Sanctuary. Seeing that no one was in the lesser library Salazar headed directly to the dining room and was happy to see Remus and Blaise just seating themselves.

He breezed in with a smile and sat down. “Evening, gentlemen. I trust you are both well.”

Blaise gave him a pointed look and said, “So tell me, Salazar, how did you do it?”

“Pardon?” He dealt with his napkin in the usual fashion then looked up with innocently wide eyes.

“Don’t be coy,” said Remus. “*The Daily Prophet* pegs you as the one to deliver Voldemort and they say he was given the dementor’s kiss.”

“Did they really? Sounds like that trip to Azkaban didn’t turn out quite like he expected. A terrible, yet fitting tragedy, don’t you think?”

“Salazar,” said Blaise warningly as Remus rolled his eyes in exasperation.

“It was just one of those things,” he said deprecatingly. “Imagine my delight when I found him, drooling like a baby.”

“You found him,” said Remus flatly.

Salazar nodded and then brightened when food appeared on the table, immediately reaching out to fill his plate.

“If you found him, I don’t suppose you also found Harry?”

“I have a very good idea of where Harry is, now that you mention it. Would you like me to make sure?” Salazar carefully sliced into his steak and munched on some potato before popping it into his mouth.

“If you would be so kind, yes. I’m worried about him even more now that he’s gone missing.” That much was clear from the undercurrents in Remus’s voice.

Salazar glanced over at Blaise and hesitated, getting a quirked brow in response.

“Don’t suppose you know much about a Mr Draco Malfoy do you?”

“You mean aside from his pure-blood mania?” said Blaise in a terse voice.

“Not fond of him?”

“Hardly. I do know that he became Voldemort’s potions master.”

“Splendid. Just the kind of thing I like to hear. Wouldn’t want you getting upset with me over a little thing like a friend going to prison.”

He noticed Remus smirk and toss a look of satisfaction toward Blaise, who stoically ignored him.

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That Draco was at Malfoy Manor he found somewhat bewildering. He wasn’t sure if it was stupidity or arrogance. Narcissa was nowhere to be found, so Salazar proceeded with his

plans. He had Draco disarmed and strapped to a chair when he let three drops of veritaserum fall on his tongue. After it had taken effect, Salazar began his series of questions.

“What is your full name?”

“Draco Lucius Malfoy,” came the monotone response.

“Are you a Death Eater?”

“Yes.” *So far, so good.*

“Were you involved with Harry Potter’s seeming descent into madness?”

“Yes.” *Bingo. Case solved?*

“In what way were you involved?”

“I created an experimental potion and used it on him.”

“How did you dose him, and how often?”

“Every six days I arranged for the potion to be slipped into his food.”

“What was the purpose of the potion?”

“It was intended to induce hallucinations and to increase the victim’s sense of paranoia to the point that they acted rashly and without thought.” *I see.*

“How come no traces were ever found in Harry’s body on examination?”

“The formula I finally used dissipates rapidly after it’s been ingested. By the time the victim is subjected to a medical scan, nothing is left to be detected.” *How thrilling.*

“Where is Peter Pettigrew, also known as Wormtail?”

“At Riddle Manor.”

Salazar smiled and dashed off a note at the nearby desk. He folded it neatly and turned back to Malfoy, tucking the paper into the pocket of the young man’s shirt. After placing a hand on Malfoy’s shoulder he warped them to the Ministry, set off the alarm, then warped alone to Riddle Manor to capture the rat.

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He was lazing about the hidden estate's garden when Hedwig arrived with a letter for him. Knowing that it had to have come from either Remus or Blaise, Harry had no trepidation in opening it. Inside was a short note and the front page of *The Daily Prophet*. The headline told him all he needed to know about his recent antics. Both he and Sirius had been declared innocent. He skimmed it quickly, pausing to snort at the part where reparations were promised.

He tossed the paper aside and turned his attention to the note.

Harry,

I can only pray that Hedwig, of all owls, can find you wherever you are. Salazar has told us that he thinks he knows where you are, but has not been back to tell us anything yet.

Has he contacted you? Tell me where I can meet you so I can bring you home with me.

Love,  
Remus

He looked up to see Hedwig getting a drink from a birdbath and smiled. "I need to write a reply, girl. You rest while I go take care of this."

She hooted at him agreeably and ruffled her wings, so he turned and went inside.

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Remus was scowling, and with good reason. Albus had declared in the latest of Order meetings (one that he'd called on horribly short notice) that he could not completely endorse an attempt to locate Harry Potter. It was possible, he had said, that the time spent in Azkaban could have seriously unbalanced him, making him into what he had heretofore been accused of.

Snape had been atypically quiet during Albus's comments, which fired Remus's curiosity, but it was not enough to overcome his disgust at the headmaster's continued malignment of Harry. Luckily it had lasted only through the lunch hour, and Remus was able to escape before his temper got the better of him.

He had almost reached the front doors when a whispery voice stopped him in his tracks. Turning slowly, he came face to face with a very transparent, very much afloat, ghost of Sirius.

"S-Sirius?" he stammered.

"In the fle—yeah, Moony."

"Can you follow me anywhere? Even if you have no idea where I am?" he asked uncertainly, but knowing he didn't want to speak further in a place like Hogwarts.

“Sure can.”

Back at Sanctuary he spent what felt like hours explaining everything that had happened since the beginning of Harry’s seventh year, finally concluding that Harry (and he) had been found innocent of the trumped up charges Fudge had used. He was about to explain how it had come about when Hedwig flew into the room and landed on the table. She stuck out one leg and hooted at him importantly.

“Hang on . . . let me see what this is.”

Dear Remus,

Please don’t worry. I have seen Salazar and he’s going to bring me to Sanctuary very soon. I’ll see you before you know it.

Love,  
Harry

“Well, that’s a relief. Harry should be here soon. Now let me tell you about the past few days. . . .”

At least with Sirius as a ghost Remus didn’t need to worry about the results of the man’s notorious temper. As it was, the best he could manage was shouting, cursing, and railing about the unfairness of it all.

“But, Padfoot, he’s okay. For whatever reason—and I never *did* get him to explain that—the dementors didn’t affect him. He was fine the last time I saw him, I swear. Ragged and badly in need of a bath, but fine.”

“That’s beside the point,” Sirius growled. “And who is this Salazar guy anyway.”

“You mean little old me?” asked a third voice, causing both man and ghost to whip around. “Always a pleasure, Remus,” Salazar went on, casting a plainly curious glance at Sirius. “Who’s your new friend? Never occurred to me to ward against ghosts.”

“Salazar!” exclaimed Remus.

Salazar accorded him a mocking little half bow. “At your service, dear fellow.”

“Look here, no offense, but where the hell is Harry!?”

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Salazar was at a bit of a crossroads, and he honestly wasn’t sure what to do. He knew that Harry needed to appear here soon, but at what cost? He’d been declared innocent, and the game of half-truths and outright lies could end. Still, he had no idea how Remus, Blaise, and

Sirius would react. Would they in turn feel betrayed by his choices, or brush aside the deception as having been expedient? Further still, how would Blaise react to finding out that the man who'd saved him and had been flirting with him all this time was in fact the Boy Who Lived?

For that matter, how the hell had Sirius come back as a ghost? Sir Nicholas had seemed quite certain all those years ago that it was simply not possible. He decided to sidestep the issue for the moment. "Harry? He's safe, collecting his thoughts, trying to come to terms with being vindicated."

Remus swore and threw his hands up in the air while Sirius crossed his ghostly arms and glared.

"Where's Blaise, by the way?" he asked.

"The garden. Why?" asked Remus.

"There are some things I need to talk to him about," he said vaguely, then shrugged slightly and turned, tossing a wave over his shoulder as he left the room.

He found Blaise sitting outside, tackling yet another puzzle in yet another book. Seeing it always made him feel a little bit better, that Blaise was not above such muggle things. He'd obviously heard Salazar's approach, having looked up with a warm smile.

"Hello, Salazar," Blaise said, tucking his pencil into the book and closing it.

He dropped to the grass in front of Blaise and returned the smile. "I was wondering. . . ."

"Yes?"

He sighed, causing a concerned expression to cross Blaise's face. "I was wondering about a few things, you see. For instance, how do you feel about people? Our kind, their kind, rich people, poor people, heritage. . . ."

Blaise crinkled his brow and looked at him oddly. "This is about who you are, isn't it?"

He rolled a shoulder in a kind of half shrug.

"I don't think it matters," said Blaise firmly.

"Care to elaborate?"

"Okay. You know I'm a pure-blood. You know I was in Slytherin. But it doesn't really matter. It's just a part of who I am, and not something I had any control over it. I've met a lot of people and it seems to me that the ones who generally come off the worst are pure-bloods."

“How so?”

“Because people are a product of their upbringing. There’s far too many people out there who think that purity of blood somehow puts them a head above everyone else. On the other hand, I’ll admit that I don’t quite know what to think about muggle-borns and half-bloods. I mean, if I knew that it was hurting the wizarding world, then maybe I’d be against them too. But I don’t know that, so I sit the fence, just like I tried to with the whole Voldemort thing.”

“I see. As in people who believe that the infusion of muggle blood only weakens our magic?”

Blaise nodded. “Yes, but that doesn’t mean those people they rant about are bad people. I get the feeling that you’re trying to tell me you aren’t a purist’s view of a pure-blood, at the very least.”

“Mmm. All right. Harry is coming here soon.”

“Oh?” said Blaise with a smile. “I never did have a chance to talk with him, you know, before.”

He arched a brow and said, “Sounds like you regret that.”

Blaise laughed. “It’s hardly the done thing for a Slytherin to walk right up and say hello. My housemates would have crucified me, or at least most of them.”

“What will you do when he gets here?” he asked.

“Hope he’s able to see past houses.” Blaise smiled briefly before sobering. “Are you . . . going to disappear on us?”

“Would you miss me?” he asked and aimed what he hoped was a flirtatious smile at Blaise.

“I think you know I would.”

“Even if it turns out you can’t handle who I am?”

“It’s true I don’t know much about you, but what I do has all been good.”

“That doesn’t really answer the question,” he pointed out.

“No, but that’s something we won’t know until the time comes,” Blaise said quite reasonably.

“And if you react so badly that I have to obliviate you?”

“Then I guess you go back to whatever life you led before you came into ours, and I’m left wondering. I think I trust you enough to believe you’d do the right thing, Salazar.”

He smiled and rose from the grass. I hope so, he thought. "I may as well. If you react badly, at least I'll know not to tell Remus. One moment while I check something." He communed with the wards of the estate long enough to determine that Moony and Padfoot were still in the lesser library and that he would be warned if they moved, then opened his eyes and stared at Blaise. "Here goes nothing."

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8 : DECEPTIONS REVEALED

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*“While all deception requires secrecy, all secrecy is not meant to deceive.” — Sissela Bok.*

Forgoing any of the theatrics so fondly used by Tonks, he initiated a transformation. Salazar could feel his body tingling with the changes that were taking place. Throughout it all he kept his gaze directly on Blaise, whose face became more wide-eyed by the second. When the tingling at last stopped, Harry summoned a faint smile and braced himself for the coming reaction.

Blaise, thankfully, was too polished to gape. Finally he said, “How—but—and you. . . .”

Harry snapped his fingers and changed back into Salazar, just in case they should be interrupted. “Yes?”

“Right. Okay. I can handle this. You’re still the same person,” Blaise muttered, more to himself than Salazar. “I’m sorry, this is a lot to take in.”

He nodded and shifted his weight. “Are you okay?”

Blaise looked down for a moment in thought and said, “Yes, I think I am. This is crazy, but I really think I am.” He looked back up with a tentative smile curving his lips. “I’m willing to try if you are.”

Salazar extended his hand, smiling when Blaise took it and allowed himself to be drawn to his feet.

“But—wait a minute.” Blaise crinkled his brow again and looked at Salazar quizzically. “Everyone always assumed it would be Harry Potter who defeated Voldemort. But Salazar was the one to deliver him. Why?”

He chuckled and replied with a shrug, “That’s easy, Blaise. Since the day I stepped into the Leaky Cauldron for the first time I’ve been a celebrity. People loved me for something that happened when I was a baby, and hated me when it seemed convenient. I’m not sure I want Harry Potter to take the credit. Right now, Salazar will.”

He let his thumb caress the back of Blaise’s hand for a moment, then grinned. “So, care to come protect me when I break the news to Remus and he tries to kill me for worrying him half to death?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“One warning, though, we have a new guest. My godfather, Sirius Black.” At Blaise’s look of surprise he added, “He’s a ghost. Don’t ask—I’m still wondering myself.”

He reluctantly released Blaise's hand and stepped around the bench, then walked toward the house. He cast one look over his shoulder to make sure Blaise was following before continuing on to the lesser library. There he found Remus and Sirius embroiled in what was probably a continuation of their earlier discussion, and seated himself on the couch. Blaise sat beside him and gave him a tentative pat on the leg.

Both sets of elder eyes turned toward them.

"Well?" asked Remus. "When do we get to see Harry?"

Salazar sighed and rolled his eyes, glancing at Blaise to see an amused smirk, then back to the expectant faces of the Marauders. "Fine. But don't get your knickers in a twist, eh?"

Sirius managed to say, "What the hell is that suppo—" before abruptly shutting his mouth when Salazar shifted into Harry's form.

A full minute passed, in which Harry could see a combination of relief and anger build up on Remus's face, until he finally rushed over and yanked him off the couch into a crushing hug. "I'm not going to yell, Harry, but I don't understand. If you could leave Azkaban at any time, why did you stay there? Why didn't you just live here?"

"I was safe in Azkaban, Moony. In Azkaban, no one could possibly believe that I and Salazar were the same person. I just had to stay there and wait. I knew that Voldemort would come eventually, and he did."

"But you could have died," Remus mumbled into his neck before loosing his grip and stepping back a little.

"That was always the case, Moony. You know that. And it's done, it's over with."

"It sounds to me like my godson pulled off the biggest prank in history, and got away with it," inserted Sirius, a strange silver gleam in his eyes.

"Yes, and fooled even me, despite all my suspicions," Remus said before glancing over at Blaise. "You don't exactly look shocked by this. I expect that was what the garden was about?"

Blaise grinned up at him.

Harry pulled away from Remus slightly and looked over at his godfather's ghost. "I don't know how or why, but I'm more happy than I can express at seeing you again."

"I couldn't very let you bumble around by yourself, though I think I got here a little late," Sirius said, scratching his head.

"Speaking of which," interjected Remus, "why did it take so long?"

“I’ll tell you, but only if Harry promises to enlighten everyone on what we *don’t* know.” Sirius crossed his arms defiantly and tapped his translucent foot an inch above the floor.

“Fine,” Harry replied. “But I’m hungry—no offense, Sirius—so why don’t we talk and eat at the same time?”

After much squeaking, bouncing, and hugging after seeing Harry as Harry, Dobby saw fit to provide a huge meal in the dining room for them. Harry felt a little uncomfortable being back in his own skin outside of Azkaban, having grown somewhat used to interacting with people (aside from Remus) as the much more confident Salazar. He was inclined to think that perhaps the idea of Harry Potter rarely, or never, being seen in public again wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

As it turned out, Sirius’s time through the veil had been a difficult one. It had not killed him immediately, as most people in the know had suspected. He had died the slow and tedious way, his body finding surcease due to lack of water long before the effects of starvation had had a chance to kill him. However, through it all he had not stopped thinking of his godson and the trust he held. And so it was that when he did die, he was able to escape the limbo of his existence as a ghost.

“I ended up in the Department of Mysteries. I guess it’s not so surprising . . . right outside the veil. At the time I wasn’t really sure where I was, never mind when, so I wandered around for a bit. Scared one poor guy half to death, but I don’t think he got a very good look at me. It was Arthur, I know that now, but I couldn’t remember at the time.”

Harry and the others did their level best not to spit out the food they were industriously eating at the thought, and to refrain from choking.

“Anyway . . . I found out what year it was from a calendar on one of the desks, and that didn’t seem right. The time gap was huge! Then again, I doubt anyone really understands the veil, so I finally got it into my head to go to Hogwarts. I mean, where else? So I drifted off there hoping my head would straighten itself out, or I’d at least see someone I knew.”

Remus smiled briefly at that point.

“I’d been there for a while, lurking around trying not to be noticed by strangers when I noticed a very pissy looking Moony storming toward the front doors. We came here and he brought me up to date on what’s happened since I disappeared. And now, Harry James Potter, I believe you have some explaining to do.”

“Who me, my dear Padfoot?” he said with a slight smirk.

“Yes, you. Now get to it or I’ll haunt you for the rest of your life.”

Harry sighed gustily. “Before I get to that, I have to ask you a question.”

A silvery brow quirked upward, so Harry continued. “Did you ever . . . suspect anything? I mean, about Dumbledore?”

Sirius blinked at him, then seemed to notice that none of their faces were anything but serious. “Well, no. But . . . I get the feeling you’re trying to tell me something.”

Harry grimaced. “One more question, and this goes for all of you. And, please don’t start shouting when I say it, okay? I want you to hear me out, and think about it.”

They nodded uncertainly and waited.

“Knowing what I know, I sort of think that Snape has as much right to hear some of this as you all do. He has as much reason to hate Dumbledore as I do, but for different reasons. And you two have your own reasons for not trusting the man. So, do you think it would be a mistake to include him when I explain everything? If you honestly do then I’ll just send him a thank you present for everything he’s done for me and leave it at that.”

“A present!?” shouted Sirius. “What the hell for?”

Harry glared at Sirius for a moment, then relented. “He saved my life a number of times, and he is the one who told me—well, Salazar—where to look for Malfoy so I could get my name cleared. I think at the least he deserves some token of appreciation.”

He sighed again and ran a hand through his hair. “Look, you guys talk it over. I’m going to talk to a few snakes about some venom and I’ll be back later, okay? I promise I’m not trying to get out of explaining. I’m just delaying it a little bit.”

He stood up and shifted back into Salazar, preparing to warp out.

Blaise stopped him with a hasty, “Wait!” then followed up quickly with, “I don’t care if Snape comes. But I would like to go on your trip with you. I haven’t been out of here in ages.”

Salazar glanced quickly at Remus and Sirius, then nodded to Blaise. “Go grab a cloak and meet me in the garden. I have to go get some supplies.” Then he warped to the hidden estate and collected a number of unbreakable phials and a case to put them in, along with several other small items. After collecting Blaise from Sanctuary, he warped them to a jungle.

“Uh, this isn’t the UK anymore is it?”

Salazar shook his head. “I didn’t want to be anywhere near those two when they started a shouting match over Snape. Besides, there’s only one poisonous snake native to Britain, and I had more in mind than a single kind of venom. Anyway, it’s the wrong time of the year at home.”

Several hours later and a full collection of phials, Salazar warped them back to Sanctuary, well pleased with himself. It had taken a while for Blaise to get used to him hissing in Parseltongue, but once he'd settled down he'd found the trip quite entertaining.

He shifted back into what they knew as Harry and stored his collection of potion ingredients in a room upstairs, then went back down to see his friends.

Sirius was looking rather mutinous and Remus aggrieved, but neither was arguing with the other.

"I see the house is still standing," said Harry in a chipper voice as he sat beside Blaise. "Have we come to any kind of a decision?"

Sirius huffed as Remus said, "Yes, we have. If you really think he should be here, then we won't object."

"Well, then I suppose I should write a note to go with that stuff and have Salazar drop it off with Snape, along with an invitation. If he ends up saying no, that's his business." Harry jumped up again after squeezing Blaise's knee and said, "I'll be back before dinner. This shouldn't take long." Then he hurried upstairs.

Seating himself at the desk in the room he'd chosen for himself, he uncapped the inkwell and began to write.

Professor Snape,

Please find enclosed a token of my appreciation for the many times you have been there to watch my back during my years at Hogwarts.

I know it isn't much, but I think you'll be pleased with the contents of the phials. I had a hard time convincing the donors to agree with my request in some cases, but it all worked out in the end.

If you'd ever like refills, I'd be happy to gather additional quantities.

There's something more, but I think I'll let Salazar broach that subject.

Sincerely,  
Harry

He blew gently across the parchment until the ink dried, then folded the note and slipped it into an envelope and attached it to the case. Glancing at the clock he saw that Snape should have already finished dinner, so he shifted back to Salazar and grabbed the case, went invisible, then warped to the man's office.

His luck held; Snape was sitting at his desk grading papers and no one else was present. As before he cleared his throat softly to alert the other man, then stepped forward and into view.

“I didn’t expect to see you again,” said Snape evenly.

“One never can be too careful, my dear fellow,” he replied. “Not with Dumbledore wanting my head on a pike anyway.”

“May I ask why you’ve come?”

“Of course you may. I have something for you from an old acquaintance by way of thanks.” He stepped forward slowly and placed the case on the desk, then backed up a few paces.

Snape gave him a piercing look as he reached for the attached envelope, then looked down to open it and read the enclosed note. He looked momentarily puzzled, then opened the case gingerly, reaching in to remove one of the phials and read the label.

“Merlin,” he breathed, replacing the phial and investigating the others. “How did he manage to get all of this?” Snape glanced up at Salazar.

“Oh, you might say I helped him a little with the logistics, but aside from that, it was all his idea and doing. I believe he thought you would appreciate this over what might be construed as empty words.”

“I see. He seems awfully lucid for having been in Azkaban for almost three years. And what is this other thing he alludes to?” Snape asked with a hint of curiosity.

Salazar carefully suppressed a smile, thinking that it was rather nice to see Snape acting almost human for once. “You are cordially invited to a discussion about events of the past, specifically pertaining to information held both separately and in common about, oh . . . a number of things you’d quite probably find fascinating.”

“Such as,” came the guarded response.

“Some history, some dastardly deeds by a certain well-known personage of the light, and the stories of several people who have had their lives interfered with by same said personage, to varying degrees. Not to mention what’s likely to become a planning session on how best to deal with said personage to see that he gets what’s coming to him.”

“And this group would consist of?”

“I’m afraid that might be the sticking point. But they’re well aware you might not agree to come. In light of that, I should point out that Harry’s gift to you is not a bribe. Anyway, my dear fellow, *they* would be Mr Potter, Mr Lupin, Mr Zabini, and the ghost of Mr Black.”

“Not you?”

“My time is almost up, dear fellow. I can’t be hanging around forever you know. Dumbledore isn’t the only one who’s ready to curse me on sight and ask questions later. But if you do decide to go, I will be the one transporting you. Finding your way back is as easy as apparating.”

“I see. I’ll have to think about this. When would they like to meet?”

“Sunday, as that would be a free day for you, and give you until then to decide. I’ll be waiting behind the Three Broomsticks from 9 to 10 in the morning. If you do not appear during that hour, I’ll assume you don’t wish to come.”

Snape nodded. “I will see you then, or not.”

Salazar sketched him a half bow and disappeared, then warped back to Sanctuary. As it was going on dinner time, he went directly to the dining room, joining the others as they filed into the room. After sitting down he said, “He’s thinking about it.”

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When Sunday morning arrived, Harry was relieved. He’d been dodging questions since he’d arrived, refusing to explain anything until he knew whether or not Snape would be joining them. He really didn’t want to have to explain things twice, and he wanted to hear Snape’s thoughts on Dumbledore if possible.

Shortly before 9 o’clock he slipped away from the others to his room. The wards were reset to accommodate Snape (should he come) and Harry shifted back to Salazar. The only part he wasn’t looking forward to was if and when it came out that Harry was Salazar to Snape. The man had been an unyielding bastard for so many years that Harry wasn’t sure that knowledge would sit well, no matter how much he’d appeared to like the gift.

He warped to behind the Three Broomsticks and settled in to wait. Snape rounded the corner approximately half an hour later.

“A pleasure to see you, my dear fellow. Ready to go?” There was no sense in having second thoughts at this point.

Snape nodded so Salazar waved his hand, causing a warp portal to appear. “After you.”

After another curious look, Snape stepped through, and Salazar was right behind him, landing in the garden. Salazar led him into the house and to the lesser library, gesturing for him to take a seat.

“Would you care for anything? Tea?”

“Tea would be fine, thank you.”

Salazar snapped his fingers and Dobby appeared, causing Snape to start with surprise. Yet another interesting reaction in Salazar’s opinion.

“Dobby, could you inform the others that Professor Snape has arrived, and then bring some tea and biscuits?”

Dobby glanced over at Snape before answering, “Of course, Master. Right away, Master!” He popped out immediately and was back with a huge tray before the others arrived. He poured out for Snape and Salazar then disappeared.

A moment later Blaise and Remus arrived with Sirius floating behind them. Salazar immediately pulled Remus off to the side for a quick consultation.

“Um, do you think I should just come out and tell him I’m Harry, or disappear and have Harry come in?” he whispered.

“You may as well be honest with him.”

Salazar nodded, grimaced slightly, then cleared his expression and turned around. He took his usual spot on the couch, picked up his tea, and had a sip. He could always obliviate the man if necessary.

As Blaise and Remus poured for themselves, Snape finally brought up the obvious. “I thought you said you would not be here, Salazar. And where is Mr Potter?”

Salazar set down his cup, glanced at Blaise, who smiled, then turned his attention to Snape. “It’s like this. Harry is here already. I’m him.” And to forestall any biting sarcasm about his vision, he shifted back to Harry.

Surprisingly Snape didn’t so much as bat an eye, but rather said, “I see you have some interesting talents, Mr Potter. Why, exactly, am I here? You were quite vague the other day when I asked.”

“Because I think you have as much right to know what I’m going to explain as this lot. I think you may have as much reason to distrust and possibly despise Albus Dumbledore as I do. Given that, I felt you had the right to know who Salazar was, especially after you helped the other evening when I asked about Malfoy.”

“And you told me you had everything to do with the removal of my dark mark,” countered Snape.

“True, but I didn’t need to tell you that. It simply would have taken me more time to track down Malfoy without your help.”

“Yet you did.”

“Harry, this wrangling is delightful, but could you please stop torturing us and start filling us in?” said Sirius stiffly.

He rolled his eyes at his godfather and stood up. “Okay, okay. I need to go get a pensieve first. I’ll be right back.”

He warped to the hidden estate and got a pensieve and the piece of paper he’d used to confirm his parentage, then warped back to the group and sat down again, placing the pensieve on the low table. He fetched out his wand and used it a number of times to place memories into the device.

“It’s easier this way,” he explained during the process. “Some of it is difficult to explain.”

When he was finished he started at the beginning, back during the summer between his sixth and seventh years. Avoiding the letter from his father and the book entirely, he explained that he’d been having disturbing dreams for the first part of the summer, dreams that called into question a number of things about himself. He told that during that time he also discovered that he was a metamorphmagus.

“It was the dreams that started me believing that Dumbledore was a lot different than he appeared to be, and what finally made me do some checking on the questions that were raised. But before I get to that bit of evidence, I want you to view the first set of memories so you can see what I mean.”

He tapped the pensieve with his wand, making it display the memory of Dumbledore coming to his crib and removing several of the hairs from his head. From there he moved on to displaying the much longer memory of when Dumbledore had returned to feed baby Harry a potion.

“As you can see, that’s enough to make anyone a bit nervy. So I went with the logical course of action. I made a potion to determine my parents without question.” He paused when Snape snorted, flashed him a cheeky smile, and went on. “The results were illuminating, to say the least.”

He pulled the parchment from his pocket and handed it to Blaise, who read it and gasped, then handed it off to Snape, and from there it went to Remus, with Sirius hovering over Moony’s shoulder.

“So. Dumbledore told me a long time ago that he thought Voldemort transferred some of his powers to me the night he gave me this scar. To say that he understated the case would be redundant. He obviously knew what I’d only just found out, and taken pains to make sure it never got discovered.”

“So this is where you began to seriously distrust Albus,” said Remus.

“Yeah. When I went to see him after I got to school, I asked him why, if I was supposed to be the one that defeated Voldemort, I wasn’t getting any kind of special training aside from the Occlumency lessons, and he brushed me off. I asked him about the special power I was supposed to have, and he sidestepped. You know how he is. But I never said a word about that parchment. I guess I shouldn’t have confronted him though, seeing as how I ended up in Azkaban shortly thereafter, and he didn’t do a thing to stop it I bet.”

Both Remus and Snape shook their heads, but it was Snape who spoke. “No, he did not. Though he called a meeting of the Order to discuss the situation after your second episode, it was quite clear to me that he had no intention of spiriting you away to safety.”

“At the end of fifth year, when I destroyed his office, he told me of a prophecy that Trelawney had supposedly made about me. I suspect it was faked, or at least altered.” He shrugged. “Doesn’t really matter, since I fulfilled it anyway.”

“What did it say?” asked Blaise.

Harry tapped the pensieve again. An image of Trelawney appeared, rotating above the device as she spoke the words that had so burdened Harry after the death of his godfather.

“I mean, every year it was just one more thing, another set of evasions, and always my life in danger. I started wondering if he’d been conditioning me from the start by sending Hagrid with his stories about evil Slytherins. But anyway . . . so, Malfoy was drugging me, and Dumbledore let me hang. So there I am in Azkaban with nothing better to do except sit and stare at the walls. Luckily, I’d already figured out I could fix my vision, so I wasn’t half blind.”

“I’d wondered about that, but I never got around to asking,” said Remus.

“I think I got a bit hysterical when the dementors first came. I was waiting to see my parents die over and over again, but it didn’t happen. Nothing happened. They got bored or something and stopped bothering me after a while. They only ever showed up to deliver food.”

“And why do you suppose that might be?” inquired Snape silkily.

“I honestly don’t know.” He shot an apologetic look at Remus before saying, “I know, I said it was because of Occlumency, but it was convenient at the time. When Remus first came to visit I didn’t know what to think, but that turned out okay. As I recall, neither one of us was too happy with Dumbledore.”

Snape had snorted again, but Harry ignored it.

“It was a little after Moony visited the first time that I realized I could leave Akzaban whenever I damned well pleased.” He glanced over at Snape. “You noticed I didn’t exactly apparate, though I’m licensed. Whatever it is, apparition wards can’t stop it.”

He realized his tea had gone cold and paused to heat it back up and take a sip, then grimaced at the resulting taste.

“I didn’t think it was such a good idea to just escape. People knew Moony had visited me, and I didn’t want anyone asking him awkward questions, and certainly not that I was perfectly fine even if the accommodations weren’t great. So I came up with a different idea. I started tracking down Death Eaters and bringing them in. I just wasn’t running around as Salazar yet. It was also around then that I started getting real curious about you, Professor Snape.”

At Snape’s pointed look he said, “I just was. I wanted to know what your part in all this was. You’d always been there watching my back whether I realized it or not, and I started wondering if you were just as much of a pawn as I’d been, that’s all.”

“Moony was starting to catch a lot of flak from Dumbledore so I decided to do something about it. I came here and fiddled the wards, slapped a name over the front door, then warped to Hogwarts to track down Dobby and Winky, and hopefully my stuff. I convinced them to come work for me and brought them here, letting them get the place back into shape. Then I went back to Azkaban. On my birthday I peeked in on Voldemort and watched him initiate seven new people, one of which was Malfoy.”

He grimaced at the memory. “If you want to see it, you can. Up to you, but I wouldn’t recommend it.”

Nobody jumped at the suggestion so Harry moved on.

“My next visit was from Weasley and Granger. Remus couldn’t come because of the full moon. They’d fallen for Dumbledore’s explanation of things and spent the whole time ranting at me. Not long after that I brought in Flint. It was the first time I went as Salazar. Maybe it sounds silly but. . . .”

He paused and took a deep breath. “It’s like this—and the only person I *ever* told this was Dumbledore—when I was sorted, the hat badly wanted to place me in Slytherin house, but I refused.” He had the satisfaction of seeing Snape start slightly out of the corner of his eye.

“I figured, when I decided to be more visible, that I might as well *be* Slytherin, you know? Like I told Moony one visit, it had to be a kick in the pants to Voldemort when the news of what I was doing and said filtered in, what with him being the Heir and all. Anyway. . . .”

He tapped the pensieve and replayed the memory for them, getting a good number of chuckles at his actions of that evening.

“After Moony’s next visit, and I found out where he was transforming, I kidnapped him on the full moon and brought him here. Told the house-elves to look after him.” He shot a look at Remus. “You started getting really suspicious at that point. I told you about the initiate names, you passed them on, and Dumbledore stopped giving you grief.”

He frowned in thought. “Let me see . . . I nabbed Travers and Dolohov, then I kidnapped Blaise and brought him here next.”

“And thank Merlin for that!” said Blaise with a laugh.

“Why is that, Mr Zabini?” asked Snape.

“Well, like I told Remus, the Death Eaters were giving me a really hard time trying to recruit me and I was starting to think I’d have to leave the country. I have no idea how Harry found out, but he did, and got me to safety. I haven’t stepped foot off this estate until the other day when we went snake wrangling.”

“Some of the Death Eaters are notorious gossips when they don’t realize someone is listening in,” offered Harry. “Uh, let’s see. Around the time the OWS was formed I made my first normal visit here as Salazar, upset Remus a bit, then left. Started having dinner here before I’d go pick up and deliver more Death Eaters to the Ministry. I liked the company, not to mention the food.”

He grinned at no one in particular and continued. “I needed to get real evidence for my suspicions about Peasegood, so I followed him around several times until I got lucky and he met up with the Notts. I hauled all three of them in. Then I heard a bit from Moony about you, professor, and had that to mull over. Anyway, I started getting the feeling Voldemort was up to something, so I checked in and caught him planning the assault on Azkaban, so I made preparations.”

“I cannot wait to hear this,” said Snape with a tinge of sarcasm.

“Occlumency was the first part. Everybody besides Moony thought I was mad as a hatter, so I had to make sure that if Voldemort used Legilimency on me, he’d believe it too. So I built a wall, but placed what I wanted him to see in front of it. And I was right, he did check, and he never looked beyond the façade.”

“What exactly happened that night? You told us as Salazar that you *found* Voldemort already kissed.”

“Heh. Um. . .” Harry tapped the pensieve again, and sat back as they watched his performance that night. He knew they’d be wondering about that kiss, but he had the perfect answer ready for them even if it was a blatant lie. Extensive potions research had to count for something after all.

Remus looked a little traumatized when the memory ended (just as Harry had dragged Voldemort out of sight) and Blaise didn't look much better. Snape merely looked thoughtful, and Sirius was swaying from side to side in agitation.

He turned to Blaise and said quite seriously, "I hope this doesn't change anything."

Blaise was saved from having to respond for the moment by Remus cutting in. "I think we'd all like to know *why* the kiss was necessary."

"Sure, Moony. Like I said before, I knew he'd come eventually. I mean, I had to be a fat target sitting in there, right? So I did a lot of research, and when the time came I was ready. I found myself a nifty little potion that works on contact, was fast, but that I could protect myself against. When he kissed me, it knocked him out. The second I saw the opportunity, I dragged him around the corner and hauled him off to the dementors. They didn't affect me, but he was fair game."

Harry shrugged. "They took care of the problem of his soul coming back, and then I warped us out of there, took control of his body, and broke the bond between him and Snape." He glanced over at the professor and said, "I didn't think you deserved to die. I did the same with the bond between me and Voldemort, though that was a bit more complex. I didn't want to take any chances."

He felt a hand on his leg and looked at Blaise once more. "You did what you had to, and it worked."

Harry smiled winsomely and covered Blaise's hand with his own. "I'm glad to hear you say that."

"Then what?" interrupted Sirius rudely.

"Oh," he said, not taking his eyes off Blaise. "After that, I spent several hours in the bath to wash off Azkaban, and Voldemort. I felt . . . filthy." He didn't think anyone would mistake his meaning. "The next morning I warped the body to the Ministry and watched as all hell broke loose. Later that night I visited Professor Snape, came here for dinner, went and got Malfoy, then Pettigrew. And that's it."

"I can't believe such a simple plan worked," commented Remus. "I think everyone's always expected some huge blow-out of a battle with hundreds of people getting . . . well, you know."

"Yes, but I didn't want that. It was safer if it was just me and them. Right now, though, I really think something needs to be done about Dumbledore. We've all been screwed over by him in one way or another."

Snape cast an inquiring gaze at his former Slytherin.

“I went to Dumbledore when they were trying to recruit me. I wanted his help, or his protection. He suggested I go along with it so I could spy for him. That was when I started thinking of leaving the country. I freely admit that I’m not so brave as to agree to something like that. I didn’t want to mess up and die and I knew if I didn’t leave soon I wouldn’t have a choice.”

“Perhaps we should adjourn for now and each think on the matter. Arrange to meet on another day to discuss Albus specifically,” suggested Snape reasonably.

Harry looked around and sensed no dissent. “I don’t see why not. The wards accept you, so you can apparate here any time you like, professor. Owl post is blocked except for Hedwig so. . . .”

“I will return as soon as it is convenient, and would give Albus no cause for suspicion,” he replied smoothly and stood. After bowing his head slightly in parting, he apparated away.

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## 9: WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?

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*“Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.” — Winston Churchill.*

He landed in back of the Three Broomsticks. After a moment of reflection he decided that heading back to the school immediately was not something he was particularly interested in, so he rounded the building and went inside. As it was not a Hogsmeade weekend he had little competition for a table, and chose a booth where he could sit facing the door.

Rosmerta wandered by shortly thereafter and took his order with her customary cheer, and came back almost immediately with his drink. When his food came he ate mechanically, thinking over all that Potter had said that morning.

He had certainly been wary of Salazar early on, especially once it became obvious he was specifically targeting Death Eaters. It was no huge secret that he had been one, and he'd wondered more than once if he was next on the list.

The captures reported early on had nothing about them to arouse any particular suspicion; it had seemed at the time more as though the ones arrested were monumentally foolish as to be caught as they had been. He understood now that Potter had been working very hard to assure that no one was alerted to his presence. But as time went on he'd developed it into a kind of deadly fun game, using the name of Slytherin to strike back directly at the Dark Lord.

He shook himself mentally; he no longer had any reason to use the term Dark Lord even in his thoughts.

He wanted to laugh at Potter's reasoning for using Slytherin's guise, but what genuinely disturbed him about the entire recitation was his admission that he had very nearly been placed in his own house. He must truly be a stubborn, blind fool to have ever thought the boy was all that he appeared to be on the surface. Not that it could change the past, of course, or even possibly the future.

He didn't much care to think about how those years would have gone had Potter been a Slytherin. His own life would have been immeasurably more in danger. Still, the boy *had* given him much thought over the course of the past few years, and had wondered if his own situation paralleled to any degree, even in the face of such blatant hatred and disregard. Not a quality that he himself found appealing in the norm.

Potter could have indeed been a Slytherin with his sly machinations and covert dealings.

Snape sighed audibly and picked at the remains of his meal. In a roundabout sense he owed Potter a life debt. Two in his lifetime was more than any sane man should be asked to bear.

He took a last drink from his glass and stood, dropping coins on the table to cover the cost, then left to start the walk back up to the school. Albus was much on his mind as he

approached the main doors, but he resolutely pushed aside those thoughts, resolving to wait until he was ensconced in his quarters to dwell on them.

He stepped inside, carefully closing the door against the chill of autumn, and turned to notice a number of people milling about the entrance hall. Aurors and ministry officials judging by their attire and carriage. Two were headed through the doors to the Great Hall, a body floating between them, while the rest appeared to be waiting on something, or someone.

One auror spotted him and started to make his way over in haste when Snape's attention was diverted by the sound of heavy footfalls on the stairs. He looked over to see Albus racing down the main staircase, one hand raised up in a quelling position and a shout on his lips of, "Stop!"

Puzzled, Snape followed the line of Albus's gaze to see again the two aurors entering the Great Hall. Seconds after they and the body had passed the threshold an explosion rocked the castle. Thin streams of blood splattered out through the doors to smear across the stone floor.

Snape's gaze whipped back to Albus to see his ashen face; he'd stopped dead at the eruption, heaving for breath and clutching his chest with one hand. What had he done that he had tried so hard to prevent happening?

Everyone was still. When the detonations finally ceased, one brave (or sadly curious) soul loped through the doors and let out an anguished yell, then slowly backed out into the entrance hall, shaking his head mutely. Snape, no stranger to many sights best left unseen, bolted for the Great Hall, prompting the others present to do likewise.

Inside was chaos. The men had only gotten a few steps inside; that much was evident. Blood and wetly gleaming chunks of flesh were oozing down the walls and splattered across the floor and what was left of the furnishings. Tables and benches were little more than splinters and kindling, dyed a dull crimson in the places where blood was already sinking in.

There was no sign of anyone left living.

A faint rustling sound made him look up, along with many of those around him, to see a singed piece of parchment wafting through the air like a feather. He followed it with his gaze until it came to a rest on the floor next to a piece of shattered bone.

He snorted and looked deeper into the hall, seeing additional evidence of death partway down what had been the Gryffindor table. Mixed in among the bits of wood were blood and bone and bile, like a grotesque sludge of shredded humanity.

The air was scented with a gut-wrenching mixture of the contents of burst internal organs and partially digested food, all of which was overlain with a faint hint of the metallic.

Nothing had escaped the destruction. Even the banners that hung overhead were little more than blackened rags and the enchantments on the ceiling were gone. As one of the aurors

rushed from the scene and noisily threw up in the entrance hall, Snape could not help but feel a twinge of dismay that Trelawney had not been here at the wrong moment in time.

He looked back over his shoulder to see Albus propped against the doorframe still clutching his chest, and another auror skidding past him. Snape slowly turned and returned to the entrance hall to wait.

As a matter of course, all those who had been present when the explosion happened were kept in the entrance hall as fresh ministry personnel went over the destruction. A multitude of pictures were taken, and each witness was provided with parchment, ink and quill so that they might write down their perceptions of the event. Albus had been removed to the hospital wing on suspicion of heart troubles and shock.

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They sat in the infirmary, chairs arrayed in a loose, incomplete circle around the bed that currently held the headmaster. His face had not regained any of its natural colour in the interim and his breathing sounded labored. Poppy hovered nearby, having been unable to prevent this meeting, but close enough to be on hand immediately should Albus have difficulties.

Madam Bones was currently holding court, though it was one of her aurors who was reciting a list of findings resulting in the examination of the Great Hall. When he finished, she turned to Albus.

“I must ask what you know of this. The witness accounts clearly state that you were running toward the scene shouting stop just before the explosion. Please tell us why.”

“It was a final defense measure,” he said with difficulty.

“Please explain,” Madam Bones prompted evenly.

“If Voldemort ever got that far into Hogwarts, then all hope for the school was lost.”

“Possibly. But why did the hall explode?”

“Final strike. If he got that far, it had to be because I was already dead, that I’d failed. And if I died, surely no one other wizard would be capable of killing him. If the explosion did not kill him, it would buy time for additional forces to finish him off while he was gravely wounded.”

“I see,” she said primly, glancing around at the other attendants before turning her gaze back toward the headmaster. “And the potential danger to the students?”

“If he got that far, better for them to die quickly than to be tortured, controlled, or killed slowly,” he gasped out.

“You did not consider the possibility that you may have been called away? That a ruse might be employed so that he could have stormed the school in your absence?”

“I do not think that very likely.”

Snape barely controlled his expression as he held back a snort. He could certainly recall that Dumbledore had been tricked exactly so during Potter’s first year, resulting in the boy and his friends going after the stone personally.

“All right,” she responded. “When it was clear that Voldemort had been, er . . . taken care of . . . why did you not remove the enchantments?”

“What would be the point? Why would anyone think to bring him here? He was as good as dead!” Albus’s voice was growing increasingly shrill. “Why did you bring him here? Why!?”

Poppy rushed to his bedside and forced a potion down his throat even as he tried to keep speaking. She stared at Madam Bones with burning eyes, ignoring the headmaster’s increasingly weaker questions of why.

Madam Bones cleared her throat and stood. “I think we should continue this in the headmaster’s office.” She vanished her chair and calmly walked away.

The meeting was short and to the point, consisting of the heads of houses and several aurors, with Madam Bones taking charge once again as interim minister.

“In light of the current situation I would like you, Professor McGonagall, to take over as the Headmistress of Hogwarts for the time being.” When Minerva nodded sharply, her lips compressed into a thin line, she continued. “You may appoint anyone you please as deputy with the same understanding. All of this will be reviewed at a later date.”

She paused, straightened her robes, then said, “I expect that letters will be going out to the families of the six students who were killed today. Please contact the ministry immediately if you have any questions or if any further problems arise, such as any other hidden enchantments the headmaster has not revealed as of yet.”

“Good day, everyone.” She nodded at each of the professors in turn, then left with her aurors in tow.

“Why *did* they bring him here?” Snape finally asked, but no one answered.

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Harry was enjoying breakfast with his friends Monday morning, with Sirius floating nearby, when Blaise suddenly looked up and pinned Harry with a deeply thoughtful gaze.

“Harry? Remember how you showed us the parchment from the familius potion you used?” asked Blaise.

“Yes, what about it?”

“Do you . . . really look like that? I mean, it doesn’t matter. I’m just curious. With everything else yesterday, it never occurred to me to ask.”

“Oh, er . . . no, actually, I don’t. Then again, I can look like anything I want.” He tilted his head and shrugged. “I take it you want to see?”

Blaise nodded. Harry didn’t really expect Remus or Sirius to be fond of the idea, but they didn’t object, so he cleared his mind to prevent conscious direction and let himself shift. When he opened his eyes Blaise was giving him a curious look.

“Good? Bad? Oh, Merlin, someone let a troll loose in the house?”

Blaise laughed and shook his head. “It’s fine. I don’t know if you’d be recognized.”

Harry shrugged again and shifted back. “I don’t much care. But it’ll be handy for public places when I don’t wish to be mobbed.”

He might have expounded but Dobby popped in with *The Daily Prophet* and handed it to Harry, who murmured a thank you and shook it out, then muttered, “Bloody hell.”

### **Great Hall Explodes at Hogwarts**

According to ministry sources, aurors had brought the body of You-Know-Who to Hogwarts yesterday in an attempt to secure the assistance of some of the more skilled staff in double-checking the body’s condition.

Specifically, that of Professor Severus Snape in his capacity as Potions Master and as a former Death Eater-turned-spy, in the hopes that his connection with the aforementioned could shed some light on the matter.

However, as the body was floated into the hall just after lunch, the Great Hall was rocked with a cataclysmic series of explosions. Both aurors were killed and the body was destroyed.

After detailed investigation of the aftermath, it was determined that six students from Gryffindor house were also killed in the blast, who had unfortunately remained in the hall.

Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of the school, is reported to be in hospital wing as a result of the tragedy, though he was not caught in the actual explosions.

It is rumored that a last-ditch defense mechanism was at fault, set to go off in the unlikely event that You-Know-Who ever gained the Great Hall, but was not removed after reports of You-Know-Who's defeat.

It has been suggested that this defense mechanism was never removed due to someone high up at Hogwarts never expecting the body to be brought to the school, which has long been considered one of the safest bastions of light in the British wizarding community.

In the interim, Professor Minerva McGonagall will be taking on the mantle of headmistress with a new deputy to be announced at a later time.

Harry cursed again and shoved the paper at Remus, a scowl etched firmly on his face.

"Harry, what is it?" asked Blaise anxiously, getting up so he could stand behind Remus's chair and read over his shoulder.

Harry continued to mutter to himself, occasionally using his fork to stab his toast viciously. It beat punching or kicking the wall, and saved on personal pain.

"Do we wait for Snape to come back, or shall I go see him?" asked Remus in a dull tone as Blaise sat back down in his chair heavily.

Harry looked up from the mutilated remains of his breakfast and sighed. "I don't know. Do you think Dumbledore will be imprisoned for this?"

"That's a hard question, Harry, considering who he is. But even in the muggle world manslaughter is grounds for a prison sentence."

"I wonder if Snape would be able to tell us what, if anything, Dumbledore had to say on this," he mused.

"Perhaps. I can go. See if there's anything I can find out. I doubt he'd be able to leave the school again so soon, even if classes are suspended in light of the current situation. And I don't think he'd appreciate Dobby or Salazar slipping into his rooms."

Harry nodded. "Yeah. If he was there to hear anything, see if you can get a memory? Salazar could always leak it to *The Daily Prophet*. . . ."

Remus stood up and left.

When he returned several hours later he bore a slight smile on his face and held a small pensieve in his hand. He placed the device on a table and fished in his pocket for a moment, then handed a note to Harry.

Salazar,

Do as you deem best with the contents of the pensieve. I am quite certain that a sly person such as yourself can think of any number of things to do with it.

You might be interested to know that your suspicions were correct. Reports have been filing in from all over regarding the Death Eaters still on the loose. All of them are dead, and their bodies look as though they were sucked dry when it happened.

Logic suggests that those in Azkaban were similarly affected.

Regards,  
Severus Snape

“I think he prefers Salazar,” Harry commented ruefully, handing the note to Remus to look over.

“I think it’s more that I told him what you said about Salazar and *The Daily Prophet*, in a roundabout way,” offered Remus with a tight grin. “So it sort of makes sense to address it to the right person.” He skimmed the note and nodded to himself, then sat down, looking at Harry expectantly.

Harry snapped his fingers and Dobby appeared. “Dobby, can you find Blaise and ask him to come here?”

Dobby bounced happily and nodded his head, disappearing in the next second.

Harry eyed the pensieve for a moment before saying, “Did he give you any trouble? The note sounds almost . . . humorous.”

“No. He just looked disgusted. Classes have been canceled for an additional week because of what happened. I couldn’t tell if he was like that because he couldn’t torture students, or if it has to do with what we’re going to see.”

“We probably won’t like this, then,” Harry said, wrinkling his brow.

“Like what?” asked Blaise as he stepped into the room, smiled at Remus, then moved to sit next to Harry. “Oh,” he said, noticing the pensieve.

“Let’s have a look, shall we?”

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After replaying the memory enough times to have a transcript of the conversation, Harry banished the pensieve up to his room. Remus was keeping Sirius occupied as Harry and Blaise discussed a plan regarding *The Daily Prophet*. After some wrangling back and forth, they’d

decided that Salazar should make it appear that he'd been present for the meeting between Albus and the others, and that it was Albus's comments that should be the focus of what they were going to do. Since no word of them had graced the paper yet, it was about time.

Remus and Sirius had been called in, and the plan explained. Remus had looked doubtful until Harry pointed out that no one could get to them here, and Sirius had started laughing at what he considered to be the second big prank of his godson's life. Together they drafted out a letter meant for publication.

As I have become aware, many of the wizarding community have to come to regard me with a curious mixture of awe and fear. To this I say there is no need. The only people that ever need fear me are those who well know the depths of their own duplicity as it regards those around them, and the community at large.

As such, I would not be me were I to deprive the public of an exceptionally interesting conversation, one that brings to light a side of a man who until now has been regarded as one of the foremost people in the fight to protect and save lives in the name of light.

On the day the Great Hall of Hogwarts exploded, a certain Headmaster Dumbledore was seen running toward the aurors escorting the body of Voldemort, trying desperately to stop them from entering.

One might ask why such a measure was necessary? In the aftermath of the destruction, Dumbledore was questioned on his actions and knowledge of the event, and I provide here a transcript of the questions and his answers.

When asked why he tried to prevent the aurors from entering the hall: "It was a final defense measure. If Voldemort ever got that far into Hogwarts, then all hope for the school was lost."

When asked why the hall exploded: "Final strike. If he got that far, it had to be because I was already dead, that I'd failed. And if I died, surely no one other wizard would be capable of killing him. If the explosion did not kill him, it would buy time for additional forces to finish him off while he was gravely wounded."

When asked about the potential danger to the students: "If he got that far, better for them to die quickly than to be tortured, controlled, or killed slowly."

When asked about the possibility of him having been called away as a ruse to allow Voldemort to gain the school in his absence: "I do not think that very likely."

When asked why the enchantments were not removed from the hall once it was known that Voldemort was defeated: "What would be the point? Why would anyone think to bring him here? He was as good as dead! Why did you bring him here? Why!?"

It was at this point that Dumbledore had to be sedated. So I ask you of the wizarding community to ponder these words and decide for yourselves whether the cost was worth it.

My own opinion here is irrelevant, for I am but one voice in a community of thousands.

And . . . one last thought before I put away my quill and come among you no longer, for my time here is done, and the tasks I set myself completed.

The world is what you make of it, and those that cower in fear of the events around them do a grave disservice to the world they live in. People who pin their hopes on one person alone are bound in the end to be victims of their own shortsightedness.

With no regrets,  
Salazar Slytherin, a.k.a. Harry James Potter

Now the only thing to do was to deliver it. Harry made a copy of the letter to leave at Sanctuary before heading upstairs to change into one of the outfits so favored by Salazar and shifting his appearance. Downstairs he blew a kiss to his friends and warped to the offices of *The Daily Prophet*.

His arrival set several people off to shrieking, but a wave of his hand brought on a shock of silence.

“Where, pray tell, is the head editor?” he asked, taking a moment to scan the room. His eye was caught by one of the braver employees, who was pointing toward a heavily embellished door on the far side. Salazar nodded and set off across the room, opening the door and entering without bothering to knock.

The sound of spluttering began as he carefully closed it behind him, and then he turned to face a rather weedy man with a florid complexion.

“How thrilling to see you, dear fellow. You and I need to have a little talk.” Seeing that the man wasn’t going to recover immediately, Salazar seated himself in a squashy chair and propped his feet up on the corner of the desk between him and the man.

“I need you to publish something, dear fellow. A little letter from me to the wizarding community. I think a special evening edition would be just the thing, don’t you?”

The editor snapped his mouth shut and straightened. This was apparently common enough that he slipped back into his customary role despite who was sitting with him. “A letter, you say?” he finally asked.

“Quite so, dear fellow.” Salazar pulled out the letter and handed it over, saying, “You might be interested to know that I kept a copy. It would be tragic indeed if this were published with . . . changes. I would be quite annoyed.”

The spindly man flushed and took the letter, spending the next minute or so reading it. As he reached the end he stood up stared at Salazar, a nervous tic making one of his eyes twitch

uncontrollably. “I don’t know what kind of a joke this is, but you can’t well expect me to publish nonsense!” he exclaimed.

“Really,” Salazar said in a deadly voice. “What nonsense might that be, dear fellow? Do enlighten me.”

The man backed up against his chair and stabbed at the parchment with a thin finger. “This! Right here! You don’t honestly expect me or anyone to believe that you’re the Potter boy. It’s preposterous!”

“My, you are a brave fellow, aren’t you,” he responded, swinging his feet back to the floor and standing as well. “I think you will publish it, because you aren’t a stupid man,” he said as he shifted his form back to that of Harry and loomed over the desk. “I think that you have better sense than to piss off the man who assured that Voldemort is no more!” he roared.

The editor flopped into his chair as though the force of Harry’s words had blown him back, clearly intimidated by the display.

“Now, I expect you to get all your people on this immediately. And if when I get a copy of this and see that you have changed a single word of the letter, and that includes replacing the name Voldemort with one of those cowardly euphemisms, I will personally make you regret you ever met me. Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

The editor nodded his head dumbly and clutched the letter.

“Splendid,” Harry said as he shifted back to Salazar. “I’ll just be off, then. Pray you give no cause to see me again.” He warped away, but not far. He stayed there in hiding as *The Daily Prophet* exploded into activity, and waited through until the special evening copies were made. When the delivery owls began flying off to the regular customers he liberated several copies, stowed them, and warped to the infirmary of Hogwarts.

Dumbledore was alone, dozing restlessly. Salazar quickly placed silencing and aversion charms around the private room the headmaster was in, then went to stand by the bed. Perhaps it was the intensity of his gaze that woke the old man, but within minutes his eyes had slowly opened.

Salazar conjured himself a stool and sat down waiting.

“Why are you here?” Dumbledore finally asked.

“Curiosity mostly,” he replied honestly. “The seeds you’ve sown bore fruit, old man. One hopes you can live with the results.”

“I don’t understand.”

“How surprising to hear that coming from a master of misdirection, one who has made vagueness into an art form.”

“Why are you here?” repeated Dumbledore.

“I have questions, of course. For example, did you think that Harry Potter would remain forever ignorant of your meddling, old man? Was it when you thought you’d lost control that you let Fudge do as he pleased and lock the boy away?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you don’t. How silly of me!” Salazar threw his hands in the air in mock chagrin. “Then I guess you wouldn’t know anything about the truth of what happened the night Voldemort attacked the Potters, would you.”

He glared at Dumbledore with a pointed look and said, “And it was obviously your twin who snuck into Privet Drive not once, but twice, and fed the poor babe a potion to assure that no one would ever ask questions about his . . . parentage.”

Dumbledore’s already pale face became ashen.

“And it couldn’t possibly have been you who lied to the boy repeatedly over the years and withheld information that could have helped him, not to mention do nothing to make sure his support system was not undermined. Poor Sirius Black, dead because you could not bear to part with the cards you held so close. And poor Harry Potter, devastated by guilt over his part in the death of his godfather.”

Dumbledore closed his eyes and said tiredly, “You’re here to avenge them.”

Salazar laughed merrily, causing the headmaster’s eyes to open again. “You’ll know soon enough.” He stood up and vanished the stool. “I didn’t do much of anything, old man, but you did.”

Removing the charms on the room with a wave of his hand, he then smirked and tossed a copy of the special edition on the bed. “Here,” he said nastily. “Your public awaits, I’m sure.” With one last glance he warped back to Sanctuary.

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## 10 : CAVALCADE OF SIN

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*“Regard the cavalcade of sin,  
Remorse for foolish action done,  
That pass like ghosts regardless, in  
A human image made....”*

– Philip Larkin

He flopped into a chair with no attempt at grace; his mind was focused on only one thing. When the evening meal appeared he pounced on it like a starving man and filled his plate quickly. Only then did he bother to look up and smile at his companions.

However, he was quickly diverted by the delicious scents of the food. Shaking out his napkin and placing it across his lap, he proceeded to wield his knife and fork with calm assurance, attacking his dinner with relish. When at last he was full, he let the silverware clatter onto the plate and sat back.

“So, that was interesting,” he commented.

“Do tell,” requested Blaise cheerfully.

“Yes, do. I want to hear about this latest prank,” said Sirius, who was floating up near the chandelier.

“Well, I had to use a bit of persuasion on the editor at *The Daily Prophet* to print the letter, but eventually he decided it was better to do so than to make me angry. I stuck around long enough to make sure of it, then went off to visit dear old Dumbledore.”

“You’re obviously fine, so I won’t ask if that was a prudent course of action. Why’d you go?” asked Remus.

He shrugged and said, “Felt like it. I guess I wanted the old coot to know that someone was aware of his machinations and see how he’d react. Well, that and to hand deliver a copy of the paper.” He reached into the pocket of his cloak and pulled out two copies, handing one each to Remus and Blaise.

The editor of *The Daily Prophet*, in all his wisdom, had added an introduction to the letter assuring readers that he himself had seen all the proof he needed to be sure of the identity of the writer. Harry didn’t care; some people would refuse to believe that Salazar was him regardless.

When Harry finally trudged up the stairs to bed he realized that Blaise was right behind him. When he opened the door to his room, Blaise followed him in and shut it quietly.

“Blaise?” asked Harry uncertainly.

“I want to stay with you tonight, Harry,” Blaise said softly. “I’m not asking for much, just to wake up in the morning beside you.”

Despite all his poise and flirtatious prowess as Salazar, Harry could feel heat rising in his cheeks. He tried to hide his nervousness by quipping, “But we haven’t even kissed yet.”

Blaise chuckled and stepped closer. “No, but I’m sure we will when you get around to it. May I stay?”

Harry ducked his head briefly, wishing with almost painful intensity that he was not quite so inexperienced. He didn’t answer in words, just nodded and began stripping off his clothes. When he was clad in nothing but a pair of nondescript black boxers he slid under the covers on the bed.

A glance at Blaise showed the other man to be shedding clothes quickly, and it was only moments before he too slipped into bed. The lights went out a moment later, plunging the room into darkness.

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Breakfast was a cheerful affair; Harry had brought out his pensieve again and shown everyone his trip to *The Daily Prophet* offices and to Hogwarts. They talked of it as they ate, stopping only when Dobby appeared with a copy of the morning’s paper. A quick glance showed Harry that it contained several stories deemed newsworthy enough for the front page.

### **Public Calls for Immediate Action**

Letters and howlers have been pouring into the ministry since yesterday’s expose on the words of Albus Dumbledore regarding the incident in the Great Hall.

Public opinion seems to be divided on the matter, with some calling for Dumbledore to be sentenced to Azkaban for the deaths of two aurors and six students, while others simply want his immediate resignation. A small portion of the community supports his actions, despite the cost in lives.

The board of governors refused to comment at this time other than to state that a snap judgment would be in the interests of no one.

Also on the front page was a short article about the fallen Death Eaters.

## **Death Eaters a Terror No More**

Ministry officials have revealed that with the death of the body of Voldemort all his followers have also perished. Both those imprisoned at Azkaban and those still on the loose have been discovered dead, in a condition that closely resembles mummification.

One official was overheard questioning the survival of Professor Severus Snape at Hogwarts, who was brought to trial at the time of Voldemort's first defeat as a Death Eater, but was released on the word of Albus Dumbledore that he was a spy for the side of light wizards and witches.

Professor Snape declined to comment other than to roll up his sleeves and display clearly unmarked arms.

Harry was pleased to note that the editor had taken his words more literally than he'd meant, and had stopped his people from hiding behind euphemisms. The man was dead after all, and saying his name would no more bring him back to life than it had summoned him when spoken.

## **New Minister of Magic Elected**

Madam Amelia Bones, interim Minister of Magic, has been voted into office. She will hold the post until the next scheduled election, though that will extend her term past the normal ten years by several months.

Taking over her place as head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement will be Kingsley Shacklebolt, promoted from his position as auror.

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"You know what? Let's go to Diagon Alley today. Have lunch, window shop, whatever. I'm safe now and you can wear whatever face you want." Blaise gave Harry a meltingly hopeful look.

Harry pondered a moment, glanced at Remus, then back at Blaise. "I don't see why not. I'll use my real appearance. Should anyone ask my name is, er, John. But now that you bring it up. . . . Remus, would you care to come along at least for a little while? I really should talk to the twins, and it'd be simpler if you eased the way."

"Sure," replied Remus. "I haven't seen the twins in a while anyway."

"Let's go get changed and meet in a half hour," suggested Blaise as he jumped up from his seat, then dashed off.

They apparated to a quiet alley near the Leaky Cauldron and trooped in together, bypassing the knots of people that cluttered the establishment and out the back door. Once through the archway they headed straight for 93 Diagon Alley and into the shop of the twins.

Fred and George were both in the front of the store, chatting idly behind the counter. They looked up when the bell above the door jingled, wide smiles crossing their faces as they spotted Remus.

“Moony!” exclaimed one of them in delight. “It’s about time you stopped by.”

“Mmm, yes. You two willing to take a short break? We have some catching up to do.” Remus scanned the shop for any customers or clerks, then gave the twins a pointed look.

“Of course,” said one as he slipped out from behind the counter and went to flip the lock and sign on the front door.

“Let’s just go in back, shall we?” said the other, leading the way.

After the door was closed the twins perched on one of the counters lining the walls of the small room and looked expectantly at Remus.

“I thought you might like to know that Harry is doing quite well,” said Remus with an odd smile.

“You’ve seen him?”

“He’s all right?”

“Where is he?”

“When can we see him?”

Remus waved his hands in front of his face, laughing. “I’d like to introduce you to Blaise and John,” he said, pointing them out respectively. “Guys, these are Fred and George Weasley, not that you can usually tell them apart. I’m sure you remember them from Hogwarts.”

Before anyone had a chance to exchange greetings Harry cut in with, “Is this room secure?”

The twins exchanged a look. “It’s warded against nosy people, if that’s what you mean.”

Harry grinned. “As I’d expect from you two.”

The twins exchanged another look, then stared at Harry intently.

“You look familiar for some reason.”

“I expect I’ll be getting that a lot, but I’ll let you two in on a little secret.”

The twins perked up and leaned forward, then edged back slightly as Harry returned to his “Harry” form. “Harry?”

“Who else?” he said with a smile, a second before he was engulfed in a round of hearty back slaps and hugs. When they managed to settle a bit, he said, “I know you’ve always supported me, thanks to Moony, so when Blaise suggested we come visit Diagon Alley, you two came to mind. But, guys . . . I don’t want this getting out.”

“Merlin, no!”

“We can keep a secret!”

“Besides, I had a little proposition for you, if you’re interested. . . .”

A half hour later, when the plans were loosely set, he had another suggestion for them. “Perhaps I’m a little bitter, but I had another idea. You did such a lovely job on the trick sweets over Fudge that I thought of something else you might like making.”

Both twins leaned in with mischievous smiles.

“Bumblebees.”

“Bumblebees?” The twins exchanged a glance then looked back at Harry.

“Bumblebees. Little bee shaped sweets that make the eater into a bumbling idiot for a while. You know, in honor of a certain someone. . . .”

The twins grinned at each other and said in unison, “We’ll get right on that, Harry!”

“The only thing. . . . Well, I expect you two have an owl, at least for personal use?” Harry asked.

“Of course,” they said.

“Where we are, the wards are quite strict. If your owl is here, could I see it? I can’t key it in without at least having held it.”

One of them shot off immediately through another door and came back with a tawny owl, murmuring to it before handing it over to Harry, who stroked its feathers for a minute before smiling.

“Right. No problem, then.” Harry set the owl on a bare spot on the counter and looked at Blaise. “Don’t suppose you’d care to become the proud new owner of an owl would you? Hedwig is much too visible for me to use all the time. I wouldn’t want to send her off with mail constantly and have people recognize her. Someone might try to intercept or hurt her.”

Blaise took on a thoughtful aspect, then said, "All right. We can make that our last stop before we head home."

Harry shifted back to his true form and said to the twins, "I think we should get going. But you'll be able to owl us by tomorrow certainly."

The twins nodded as Remus cut in with, "I'll think I'll stay here a bit longer and discuss that other idea. You and Blaise go enjoy yourselves. Er . . . do you want me to fill them in on everything, or shall it wait until they can visit?"

"Wait, I think. It'd be safer back at the house. Figure out a day that's good."

They left in high good humor, promising to get together soon. After a relaxed lunch at a cozy restaurant partway down the alley, Harry and Blaise continued on, popping into various shops and buying the odd thing or two.

As they were leaving Flourish & Blotts they were approached by two people, one male, one female, and among the last people Harry wished to see at present, if ever. However, they ignored him and stopped in front of Blaise. Harry was surprised given that Blaise had been in Slytherin house.

"Zabini," said Hermione evenly, casting a curious look at Harry.

"Granger, Weasley," replied Blaise calmly.

"We didn't expect to see you. You've been missing for quite a while."

Blaise shrugged. "Better to disappear for a while than to be dragged into something I had no interest in."

"Yes, of course. Considering that you're alive I expect that's true. Who's your friend, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

Blaise shrugged again. "No one you'd know."

"Name's Chandler," said Harry absently, doing his best to look disinterested.

"You remind me of someone," she said, then glanced at Ron, who was standing with his arms crossed.

Harry didn't bother answering, instead shifting the bags he was carrying from one hand to the other.

"A *lot* like someone," she persisted, ignoring a nudge from Ron.

“Was there something in particular you wanted?” asked Blaise with a hint of impatience.

“We thought it was quite curious that you should suddenly reappear,” she replied, still giving Harry a speculative look.

Blaise started to open his mouth to speak when he was roughly pushed to the side and into Harry, who blinked and immediately became alert, scanning the area around them. A crowd had formed as they’d been speaking, a crowd that looked none too happy.

Harry grabbed Blaise’s sleeve and pulled him back as the crowd started to push in closer.

“You!” shrieked a plump witch dressed in a shockingly yellow robe appliquéd with daisies and sunflowers.

“You!” shouted a beefy wizard, bearing an expression that reminded Harry keenly of his Uncle Vernon.

Hermione clutched at Ron nervously and looked around with wide eyes. “W-what?”

“It’s because of people like *you*—”

“You drove him off, you sick—”

“What’ll we do if another wizard like You-Know-Who arises?!”

“Who’ll save us then after people like you drove off our savior!?”

“What kind of friends do you think you are, anyway!”

“He may never return now, and we blame you two!”

“How dare you show your faces here among decent people!?”

“How can you possibly believe that letter?” Hermione said firmly. “It’s ridiculous! Salazar couldn’t possibly be Potter!” she yelled, again ignoring a nudge from Ron.

“How dare you disbelieve *The Daily Prophet*? They had proof you wretched girl!”

Harry looked at Blaise and jerked his head back. “Let’s get out of here,” he whispered. “They look pretty angry, and I think I’ve seen enough.”

Blaise nodded and turned, pushing through the crowd. When they reached the outskirts of the angry mob Harry looked over his shoulder, wincing at a particularly nasty epithet, then resolutely walked away. Luckily for them, the owl shop was clear of any trouble, and they slipped inside its cool interior. A half hour later they emerged with a caged owl and headed

toward the Leaky Cauldron, ignoring the crowd still blocking a good part of the street further down.

Resetting the wards to allow for two new owls along with Fred and George was little trouble, and Blaise apparated in shortly after with a devious smile on his face. The two of them dashed upstairs to unload their bags, then went off to find Remus.

Harry could tell Remus was suspicious as soon as he laid eyes on them, but that might have been their expressions.

“What have you done now?” Remus asked with a long-suffering attitude.

“We ran into some, er . . . old acquaintances . . . in Diagon Alley,” said Blaise cheerfully as he flopped onto the ground.

“Uh huh,” said Remus as Sirius floated in from another section of the garden.

“Granger and Weasley felt the need to approach us,” supplied Harry.

“Did they now?” asked Sirius, now floating slightly above the bench Remus was seated on.

“What happened?”

“Granger seemed a little too curious about Harry here, but the crowd that formed around us and started hurling insults at her and Weasley more than made up for it.”

Blaise went on to explain the encounter as Harry tried hard not to laugh in the aftermath. He shouldn't be so pleased, he knew, but at the same time it felt good to know that those two weren't getting away with their reversal of loyalty in the eyes of the public, hypocrisy aside.

“Fred and George can visit anytime, by the way,” said Remus once Blaise was finished and everyone had settled down. “The clerks can take care of the store so long as the twins are there to open or close the place.”

“Brilliant,” said Harry.

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Several days later the twins arrived, having been escorted by Harry (as John), so that they'd be able to apparate there in the future. According to them, Ron and Hermione had escaped the crowd and taken refuge at their shop, causing the twins to close up again for the second time that day.

They found cold comfort, though, as the twins were quite unsympathetic to their plight, and had pointed out that they never once believed that Harry had gone mad or was a danger to himself and those around him.

As George had said to them, “You can stay here until it dies down, but don’t expect us to coddle you. This isn’t a place to hide from your own actions.”

Ron had tried to start a fight over the concept of family sticking together, but had gone silent when Fred pointed out that Harry was family, and it didn’t stop the majority of the clan from turning their backs on him. The two of them had apparently gone off in a huff the second the crowd had dissipated, casting scornful glances over their shoulders.

“Frankly, Harry, we were glad to see them go,” said Fred, identified as such by the pale orange jumper he was wearing. “Ron is family, but he needs to wake up. Nobody is infallible, and in another world we might have been wrong to choose as we did, but in this one we didn’t. He let Hermione talk him into believing, after she was talked into it by Dumbledore. Somewhere along the line he needs to learn to think for himself.”

“Anyway,” said George as he pulled two envelopes from his pocket, “when we visited the Burrow the other day I noticed these sitting around. They’d tried to owl you but the letters just came back. We brought them, but obviously it’s your choice to read them or burn them. They’ve no idea what we did.”

Harry hesitated for a moment, then stuck out his hand to receive them. “I’ll read them a bit later,” he said, taking the envelopes and stuffing them into his pocket.

The remainder of their visit was taken up with Harry giving them a condensed re-telling of the past few years from his point of view. After a hearty lunch had been served up and eaten, the twins left, promising to keep in touch.

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Harry,

I’m sure you’ve heard many things in the past few years. But I think you should know that I’m a firm believer in things happening for a reason. I also believed in Albus Dumbledore. After all, if you couldn’t trust him, who could you trust?

You going to Azkaban fell under both those. You went, and I listened, and in the end I believed it was for the best. I know now that you probably heard and understood every word I said the day we visited, but I think that you should not hold those words against me, for they were spoken in ignorance of the truth.

I hope that you can find it in your heart to put the past where it belongs. Everything turned out all right in the end.

Hermione

Harry could feel his mouth twisting with every word he read. After staring at her letter for some countless minutes, he reached for a fresh sheet of lined paper and a ballpoint pen.

I can plainly see that some things have not changed over the course of time. You speak to me of trust and belief, of discarding the words you spoke on that day, and of putting the past where it belongs.

I say to you that in all that you've said in this letter, you did not once speak of apologies, or of being wrong, or remorse. You never did like admitting you could be wrong.

Just a week ago you maligned me once again, before you knew my name was cleared. I find it quite amusing that almost in the same breath you praised Salazar. As a friend remarked to me, my actions as Salazar were the biggest prank of my life, and my letter to the Daily Prophet my second. I laughed. Did you?

The Hermione I knew and trusted is a ghost of the past. The boy you knew is much the same. He is dead, and I stand in his place. Maybe someday I'll be able to look at you and not hear you telling me the things you did, but right now you ask far too much for so little in return.

Harry Potter

He folded the letter, shoved it into an envelope, then sealed it and addressed it. He didn't want to open Ron's letter any more than he had Hermione's, but forced himself to regardless.

Harry,

Mate, are you okay? I can't believe I let myself fall for all this rot! I still don't understand what happened. I swore to myself back in fourth year that I wouldn't be so stupid again, and look what I do.

I was so happy when Salazar took care of things, but I couldn't help thinking it should have been you. And then against all odds, it was. Bloody brilliant!

A few days ago in Diagon Alley Hermione and I ran into Blaise Zabini—you remember he was a Slytherin in our year?—and some friend of his. Hermione was being her usual self, trying to dig up information and pushing for answers. I tried to shut her up, but she kept right on.

And then out of nowhere there's this crowd surrounding us, yelling and shouting about how it was our fault that you might never come back. Hermione didn't want to believe you were Salazar (she even called you Potter), and that really riled them up. I tried to get her attention again, but it didn't work.

We got away from them thankfully, but Fred and George weren't too happy to see us. It all got me to thinking, though—maybe I'd got so used to Hermione always being right about stuff that I stopped thinking for myself sometimes.

It doesn't matter, though, because I can't change the things I've already done. I let you down in the worst way possible, and I'm sorry for it. Maybe we'll never be friends again like we were, but hopefully someday we can talk, even if it's only about quidditch.

And I want you to know, Neville never believed you were crazy. Neither did Bill or Charlie. I'm pretty sure Remus never believed it either, seeing as how he visited you so much. The twins—no one ever could get them to voice an opinion.

Ron

Harry had to give him credit. Ron was at least trying, and Ron at least apologized and tried to come up with a reason for his actions. Funny though how he'd almost echoed his brother's words. He grabbed another sheet of paper and started writing.

Ron,

You're right that you let me down, but to some extent I place blame on Dumbledore. In some ways it's like when Sirius died. For a long time I placed the blame squarely on my shoulders, but once I stopped grieving constantly and starting thinking more clearly, I realized that there were a multitude of decisions and choices from several people which led to that end.

I was not alone in my culpability, and I don't think you are either. I don't know if we'll ever be friends again, but I can't predict the future either. I won't know exactly how I feel about a lot of things for a while.

Thank you for telling me about Neville and the others. When I am up to getting further correspondence, I'll let you know how to contact me.

Harry

After getting the reply into an envelope and addressed, Harry picked up it and the other and found Hedwig.

"Hey, girl. I have two letters for you. Are you up for a journey?"

She hooted agreeably and stuck out her leg.

As Harry attached them he said, "I want you to be careful, Hedwig. And don't stick around for replies, okay?"

She nipped at his fingers, hooted again, and flew off.

A short time later he cornered Blaise in the above stairs hallway, then dragged him off into his bedroom. After closing the door he turned to Blaise and said teasingly, "I captured you again. Can I keep you?"

Blaise didn't bother to answer in words, but who ever said a man had to speak to use his mouth?

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## 11 : EPILOGUE

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*"See how the world its veterans rewards!" – Alexander Pope.*

**Minerva McGonagall** was offered the position of Headmistress at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and accepted. She is currently on the look out for whomever liberated the school's portrait of Salazar Slytherin out from under her nose during the Christmas holidays.

**Severus Snape** was offered the position as Deputy Headmaster, and accepted. However, he turned down the chance to become the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, shocking many who thought he'd truly been after it for the past twenty odd years, and remains happily in his dungeons teaching Potions and intimidating the younger years.

**Hermione Granger** remained at her job in the Ministry's Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, Office for House-Elf Relocation, and continues to advocate House-Elf rights in her spare time, which is far more frequent of late for some reason. Rumor has it that she's been seen in the company of Percy Weasley, who seems to share her opinions and work ethic.

**Ron Weasley** downgraded his friendship with Hermione Granger to passing acquaintance, and is rarely seen in her company due to their differences over Harry, but was finally invited to Sanctuary after months of correspondence with Harry.

**Fred & George Weasley** continue to run their shop at 93 Diagon Alley and invent new trick items, as well as work on a secret project funded almost entirely by Harry Potter, which they refuse to talk about.

**Remus Lupin** continues to live at Sanctuary while spending a great deal of time with the Weasley twins, and is currently pondering the offer from the new Headmistress of Hogwarts to become the new Transfiguration teacher and Gryffindor's new Head of House.

**Sirius Black** moved on to the afterlife after seeing that his godson was finally out of danger and one of his worst persecutors was appropriately dealt with, and now presumably enjoys pranking other spirits and spying on enemies and loved ones alike from on high.

**Albus Dumbledore** was moved to the Janus Thickey Ward on the fourth floor of St. Mungo's not long after he was visited by Salazar Slytherin, and now discusses the virtues of joined-up writing with Gilderoy Lockhart when he's not begging the nursing staff for lemon drops. Unsurprisingly, several attempts have already been made on his life.

**Blaise Zabini** continues to live at Sanctuary with Harry, and is very pleased to have moved past their first kiss to more interesting expressions of affection.

Fawkes, bright bird that he is, renounced his former master and appeared at Sanctuary, causing Harry to spend several days examining the wards trying to figure out how he got in, and bonded to Harry when the young man wasn't paying attention.

Harry Potter, after slapping Rita Skeeter with a lawsuit over a trashy, unauthorized biography of himself, was last seen at his desk with rolls of parchment and a dictoquill, preparing to write his own version of events. It began. . . .

The very first, and only memory I have of my parents, is seeing them die at the hand of Voldemort.