

## ***Crime and Punishment***

Wednesday, November 4, 1981

“I’m sorry—”

“No, I’m sorry—”

“No, me—”

They spoke in between kisses, desperate, hungry. Bill had been alarmed at first to realize that she’d followed him up to the observation deck on top of Astronomy Tower, but then he realized that there was really no one else to whom he could talk about how he felt. *James and Lily weren’t supposed to die*, he thought. *They were supposed to be what we all aspired to...they weren’t supposed to die....*

She had touched his arm tentatively, her hand, even through his cloak, feeling like fire in contrast to the cold breeze. She spoke softly. “I don’t feel like celebrating, either. I mean—yeah. It’s good that You-Know-Who is gone. But—everyone seems to have forgotten—”

“Yeah,” he said thickly, staring at a large bright star that looked like a teardrop, because his own eyes were full of tears. *Is it the Dog Star?* he wondered.

She sighed, leaning her head against his arm. “They always looked out for us. All of us. When I was a first year, it seemed that I was getting lost all of the time. Lily found me over and over and took me to whatever room I’d been unable to find....”

Bill nodded, putting his arm around her shoulder. He could feel the warmth of her skin through her cloak; she was shivering in the pre-dawn air. He turned and looked down at her, and without thinking, kissed her. After a moment of surprised hesitation, she responded, her lips parting gently, admitting him, and he pulled her to him, kissing her hungrily, his hand lacing into her hair, holding her face up to his.

“I’m sorry Juliet,” he said, breaking the kiss. “I’m sorry I was such a prat. I’m sorry I treated you so badly—”

She shook her head and pulled his mouth to hers again. After what seemed a very long time, he moved his mouth down along her jaw, whispering to her, “I’m sorry—”

“No,” she breathed, her voice ragged; *“I’m sorry—”*

“No, me,” he said moving his lips down her neck, making her gasp. She took his hand and led him back to the trap door going down to the classroom, with the clutter of astrolabes and telescopes, rolls of parchment with star charts and other detritus of Astronomy lessons. Windows faced outward in all directions, the sills slanting up toward the sky with small indentations that had been worn in the stone from generations of students resting their telescopes there to peer at the heavens.

“I’m so sorry,” Bill said again, pushing her cloak from her shoulders when they were standing in the classroom. She nodded, her fingers fluttering to his shirt buttons; he’d never put on pajamas the previous evening, but had just lain on his bed in his clothes, staring at the underside of his canopy with his hands behind his head, sleeplessly remembering James and Lily.

Near dawn he’d left Gryffindor Tower to come up to the Astronomy Tower, staring up at the stars and out over the grounds of Hogwarts, trying to fathom what it was all *for*. Why did they all try so hard to do what was right when succeeding meant not only that you would probably die, but be immediately forgotten? No one seemed to care that You-Know-Who’s fall had also been James and Lily’s fall, in a way. They were gone and no one could bring them back. But all anyone was talking about was their son, Harry Potter, who had survived the Killing Curse and who had mysteriously disappeared. Who cared about James and Lily?

*I care*, he had thought, staring at the sky.

He opened Juliet's blouse too roughly, making buttons fly. It didn't seem to matter to her; she shrugged it off as quickly as she could, pulling off her skirt after that. Everything seemed to take too long to Bill, but soon they were rolling on the floor on top of their clothes, he was running his tongue down the valley between her bared breasts, she was wrapping her legs around his waist, pulling him to her, they were rocking together, apologizing with both words and deeds.

Bill's head felt like it was exploding; he saw stars behind his eyelids, and he cursed himself. "*Damn, damn, damn, so sorry, so sorry*—" he repeated, crying again, kissing her on the forehead. He had tried to exercise some self-control—he'd never had this problem with her in the past—but had failed miserably. He rolled over next to her, tears still running down his face, and she put her head on his shoulder, feeling emotionally drained but unconcerned about not having achieved a release, like Bill. For all that he had, it didn't seem to make him very happy.

"Sssh, sssh. Stop saying you're sorry. It's all right. It's not like it's our only opportunity—"

"But that's just it!" he said angrily, starting to sit up. "You never know when—"

"—you're going to die? And how is that *more* true now than it was a week ago? Isn't it actually a little *less* likely now, with You-Know-Who gone? Do you think James and Lily did what they did to gain fame and glory? They did what they knew was right. Yes, we can all die any moment, any one of us. A blood vessel in the brain can burst and we can keel right over. But sometimes—" Her voice caught as she traced Bill's sharp jaw with her finger. "Sometimes you have to have some hope for the future. Some hope that—that things that aren't working out now will change. Hope that a friend who'd drifted away might come back...."

She looked into his eyes and saw fresh anguish there, a knowledge of how much he'd hurt her. She put her finger to his lips and pre-empted him. "Hush. Not one more *I'm sorry*. I know you are."

He held her face in his hands, wondering how he could ever have let her go. "You knew I'd come around? That I'd stop behaving like a prat? How did you know, when I didn't know myself?" He wondered whether she knew about Roxanne.

She laughed and slid over on top of him, the contact with her body making his own body start to respond again. He held her hips with his large hands, gazing up at her. "Who said you'd stopped behaving like a prat?"

That made him laugh, too, and he pulled her face down to his, kissing her ravenously, reaching between them to rub his thumbs across the hard points of her breasts, making her squirm atop him in a way that took his breath away. She broke the kiss and then backed up slightly, reaching behind to grasp him and guide him home. He gasped at the sensation, looking up at her expression of deep concentration. She didn't start moving, but leaned down again to kiss him again, gently, her tongue stealing into his mouth slowly and luxuriously.

He broke the kiss and gazed into her eyes. "So, if I haven't stopped behaving like a prat, what's this, then?" She smiled impishly and began to move her hips; sweat broke out on his upper lip from the sensation and he willed himself to have better control this time....

"It's a start."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was very early in the morning, and the London street which Peter had chosen had various people moving about on it, but few cars. There was just enough activity that Peter could carry out his plan, using the spell he'd learned months earlier from the Death Eater who had recruited him (whose face he had still never seen). It was a powerful spell, and dangerous, but Peter *needed* to blow the street apart, needed the rats that lived in the bowels of London to emerge, so he could blend in with them. He would do everything in his power to otherwise minimize the damage. He hoped.

He'd thought of using the Dark Lord's wand for this; its weight against his leg, in the long side pocket of his robes, was a constant reminder of his part in felling the Dark Lord. But what if that didn't work? Spells were always most successful when done with the wizard's own wand. In school, Peter had had enough trouble with his spells. He needed to really *concentrate* on this one. He couldn't afford for it not to work.

He thought again of Lily, of the sacrifice she'd made, and remembered the last line of the little Weasley girl's Prophecy: *And love shall end the Dark Lord's reign*. Well, Sirius' love had done its part as well. He was willing to be the possible target, to let the world think he was the Secret Keeper, when he couldn't have given the information up if he'd wanted to.

*What a pity it wasn't Sirius who died, instead of Lily*, he thought, not for the first time. He looked down at his stump of a finger, shuddering; because of the spell he'd chosen and the potion he'd taken, it hadn't hurt to cut it off, and the end was now cleanly closed up. He reached into his other pocket, experiencing the very strange sensation of touching his own amputated finger with the hand on which it had former resided. He'd already planned for his clean getaway and fake

death. He also had some old robes he could drop on the street, robes with his own blood sprinkled liberally on them, charmed so that the blood would still seem fresh when found by the Ministry. (It had actually worked to his advantage that he'd bled much more than he'd expected to when he'd cut off the finger.) He *had* to go through with it—the Ministry officials would be showing up soon, and they needed to find everything just so.

And then—he saw him. He was standing in a shadowy doorway on the opposite side of the street, his hair matted and unkempt, as though he hadn't slowed down to wash for days—which he probably hadn't, Peter realized. Sirius' face was pale and drawn, dark circles under his unblinking eyes making him look slightly crazed. Peter swallowed, wondering whether he could really pull this off, whether he would be able to escape alive and trap Sirius into being arrested by the Ministry. Sirius hadn't spotted him yet, as he was hiding in an alleyway between two brick buildings, attempting to stay out-of-sight behind a large rubbish tip. A blood-red couch protruded from the tip; it was slashed to ribbons, perhaps by a cat, and its stuffing was spilling out.

*It's now or never*, Peter told himself, his heart thudding very fast. *Here I go—*

Peter straightened up suddenly and walked out into the middle of the street. There hadn't been any traffic for several minutes, and Peter was relatively confident that there wouldn't be more very soon—he had chosen this street especially because of the scarcity of cars but the presence—usually—of numerous Muggles. He needed witnesses, who would also be a reason for Sirius to feel constrained about doing magic himself. He needed a stage on which to enact his great drama, a way to be the center of attention without risking death by lorry.

Peter glared at Sirius when he reached the middle of the street; Sirius, he could see, hesitated for a moment, but then strode purposefully to the center of the street and faced Peter head-on.

"Hello, Sirius."

"*Hello, Sirius!*" he sputtered, turning from white to deep red, his fury taking over. "Why did you—how could you have—" His hand looked like it was itching to pull his wand out of his robes.

Peter shook his head pityingly, trying to maintain his confident facade, when he was quaking inside. "You have no idea of what's really going on in the world, do you, Sirius?" he said quietly. "You've never been able to see the big picture. With you it was always instant—or very nearly so—gratification. *I* was the one with *vision*. I was the one who saw how we could *use* those spells to create the Marauder's Map, and I who saw what the *map* could be used for....You thought you were so clever to make me the Secret Keeper and tell the world it was you. You couldn't really *see*...."

Sirius had his hand in his pocket, but glanced around the street, seeing the many Muggles moving about. They largely ignored Peter and Sirius, although one or two people's eyes seemed to linger a little longer on them before resuming their business. "So, then, you weren't tortured into giving up James and Lily?" Sirius hissed, furious, yet feeling impotent, with so many nearby Muggles. *Peter wants witnesses* he realized. *If I try anything here....*

Peter grimaced. "Well, yes and no. I went round and round. I understand now why the Prophecy said, 'What though they flee before their fate....' I tried to flee from my fate, I did...."

"Prophecy?" Sirius said, puzzled. Peter seemed not to have heard him.

"...I thought I could protect Lily, but I couldn't. I had even decided that I wouldn't object to your being the Secret Keeper, although I *had* tried to convince you that *you* were too *obvious* a choice. Once it seemed to be decided, I was secretly relieved. But still—I could not hide from destiny. No one can. I see that now...."

"What bloody Prophecy?" Sirius demanded, his hand moving about inside his pocket.

"...And then, for once in your life, you actually *listened* to me and told James and Lily that I should be the Secret Keeper. But what you don't understand is that even after I *was* the Secret Keeper, I still thought I might be able to keep the secret *to myself*. So I hid. But my Master summoned me. I had no choice...."

"We always have choices!" Sirius snarled at him. Then, as though what Peter said had finally registered on him, he gasped, "Your *Master*? Do you mean who I *think* you mean?"

Peter looked him in the eye, trying not to shake. "Yes. You see, I spent a long time gaining James and Lily's trust. Originally it was to be near enough to Lily to protect her. But in the end—it had its advantages."

Sirius stiffened and took out his wand; Peter wondered whether he'd gone too far. "Their trust in you was sorely misplaced!" Sirius whispered fiercely. "You even took care of Harry for them! How could you have done that, and then—"

Peter tried not to faint at the thought of what Sirius might do to him. *Breathe, breathe*, he instructed himself. *Sirius would never cast a spell here*, he tried to reassure himself. Still, Sirius was a formidable wizard, and if he *did* lose control, there was no telling what he might do. Peter tried to appear confident still, tried to keep his voice from shaking.

"You don't seem to understand, Sirius. *I* was the Dark Lord's right hand," he lied. "He relied on me for many things." That much was true—he was supposed to kill the Weasley girls. He was supposed to research the Prophecy.

"How dare you stand there in cold blood and—and *say* these things? What about your friends? What about *loyalty*?" Sirius' voice rose and Peter knew he was getting dangerously close to going over the edge. It was time to act; Peter quickly glanced at his watch; the Ministry should be arriving any minute.

"*Lily and James, Sirius!*" he shouted as loudly as he could, causing more than one person to turn their heads as they walked by. "*How could you?*" Sirius' face was a mask of confusion; he saw Peter take his wand out of his pocket and point it behind his back.

"*Obliterate!*" Peter cried, concentrating as hard as he could. Sirius' eyes opened wide as he watched the crackling purple light strike the building behind Peter, which bore a dirty marble facade; the building actually cracked down the middle, the crack continuing down onto the street, which opened up in a jagged line, Peter on one side, Sirius on the other side of the uneven fissure. Large chunks of stone fell from the facade of the building, striking two women walking below. Sirius noticed with horror that a *man* who'd been walking by the front of the building had also been split down the middle, like the structure behind him, and then his heart thudding painfully in his chest, Sirius whirled and saw that people on the other side of the street had also been killed in similar ways, not one but *two* people gruesomely bisected, while even more people had had debris from the building behind Sirius falling on them, killing them instantly. That building had also split in two, tilting dangerously against the building next to it, causing a woman who'd flung up the sash of her bedroom window to lose her balance and fall three stories to the pavement, where she appeared to have died upon impact. Sirius felt like he couldn't breathe; he'd never seen so much damage done by a single spell, and his mind could barely comprehend that it was *Peter* who had wrought this havoc.

The fissure in the middle of the street had widened to a crater. A geyser of water was gushing into the air from a ruptured pipe somewhere under the street, and a stink of raw sewage filled the air. In his horror, Sirius realized that Peter was no longer standing on the other side of the crater; numerous rats had emerged from the sewer and were running down the street, making the people who hadn't been killed scream at this new horror. Sirius looked around helplessly at the smoking ruins of the street, at the crying, bleeding people lying on the pavement, or weeping over someone else who'd been killed by Peter's spell.

And then he saw it: the finger. It was lying on the far side of the crater, where Peter had been, along with some blood-stained robes. *What is going on?* he thought frantically. His vision seemed to be clouded and he could no longer control his breathing; he thought he might faint....

Instead, hysterical laughter bubbled up from inside of him. *You win, Wormtail!* he thought, starting to realize what Peter had done. His laughter grew even more out of control. He knew that if he stopped laughing, he would start hysterically crying, instead. *Yes, Peter. You got the better of all of us. You sodding bastard.*

He couldn't stop, he just couldn't, even though he realized that the surviving Muggles were looking at him with very queer expressions. He was still holding his wand, his useless, useless wand. What did it matter, really? He might as well kill himself. He raised the wand; if only he could concentrate and stop the hysterics, the laughter that had taken him over....

A moment later, several loud *pops!* erupted on the street. There was a cloud of dust hovering over the debris that had fallen and was still falling from the buildings, which looked like they'd come through an earthquake; that and the geyser of water helped to hide the advent of the Aurors. A very stern man with a painstakingly neat mustache and what appeared to be *starched* navy robes strode to Sirius and confronted him, his wand out.

"Sirius Black! I arrest you in the name of the Ministry of Magic!"

Sirius stared at him, silent for just seconds, but he felt tears stealing into his eyes and had to stop that, so he burst out laughing again, right into the man's face. The wizard backed up, looking truly alarmed. Then he saw the finger, and robes.

"Who was that?" he demanded.

"Pe-Pete-Peter Pettigrew," Sirius managed through his hysterics. The stiff man looked horrified, both at what had happened to Peter and at Sirius' laughter.

Evidently, he had a low tolerance for people who had just been framed for murder laughing hysterically. He pulled out his wand and pointed it at Sirius, crying, "*Stupefy!*"

Sirius stopped laughing and fell to the ground, just barely missing falling into the crater. Barty Crouch looked down at him with contempt as Alastor Moody appeared at his side.

"Take him back to the Ministry. Don't revive him until I come. I'll be a little while here—it looks

like we have to do quite a lot of damage control, and I'll need to get statements from the surviving Muggles before the Obliviators wipe their memories. Remember, *don't* revive him until I get there."

Moody nodded, looking down at Sirius' body grimly, his lip curling in a snarl.

"He'll be lucky if I don't—"

"Moody! Just get him back to the Ministry! That's an order!"

Moody looked discontentedly at Crouch, but nodded.

"Yes, sir," he ground out. Crouch turned from him and surveyed the damage the street had taken. It looked as though it should be in the middle of a war zone, not London, England. *Maybe we can make the Muggles think it was a terrorist bombing*, he thought briefly, before rejecting this idea. That would be interfering with Muggle affairs; every time one of those really occurred, on either side of an unbreachable divide (no matter which divide it was) the other side tended to retaliate. He didn't want to be responsible for that. It was too dangerous.

*Ah, well*, he thought. *We can say it was a gas line. An accident. No one to blame. No retaliation.*

He glanced back at Moody, levitating Sirius Black's body, moving away, a smile slowly pulling across his face. He fought the urge to laugh, but remembering Sirius Black's laughter was a very effective deterrent. *You're going to make my career, Sirius Black*, he thought with satisfaction. *When word comes out about what you've done here, and that I arrested you—I'll be the next bloody Minister of Magic.*

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Peter glanced at the house from behind one of the trees in the orchard. He was trying to hide behind a gnarled old apple tree, but its twisted shape made it a less-than-ideal hiding place. He liked the orchard; when he was living with the Weasleys, as a rat, he'd often been able to find fallen fruit that the birds hadn't yet taken. The largely leafless trees waved their branches in a brisk autumn breeze, the cidery smell of old, rotting apples that were probably lying under the fallen leaves perfuming the air with a combination of sweetness and rottenness. It was the smell of death.

Peter could see lights on in the Burrow, movement behind the kitchen window. He sighed, thinking of the warm and cozy house. Smoke curled out of the leaning stone chimney and the chickens clucking and pecking about the yard completed the welcoming picture. Finally, he once again said a silent farewell to living as a man and changed back to his rat form. *This is who I am now*, he thought, climbing over the uneven tree roots and starting to scavenge amongst the leaves for the old apples he could smell. When he'd had a quarter of an apple that was still a little crunchy, he made his way toward the house; he was startled when the door opened suddenly and Molly Weasley emerged, going to the pumpkin patch and fetching a large specimen to take inside. He had frozen and she didn't notice him, dun-colored against the bare earth that characterized the rest of the vegetable patch. Everything else had already been harvested.

When he reached the door, he found that she hadn't closed it quite all the way. He pushed inside and finally managed to get all of himself in. After the chilly garden, the house's warmth was a huge relief. The thought of spending the winter in the Weasleys' garden was very depressing; he needed to find a place to hide in the house, a place where Molly Weasley wouldn't notice him.

He heard a heavy human step and dashed under the skirt on an armchair's slipcover, shaking violently. Lowering his head to the floor so that he could see under the skirt, he saw heavy brown brogans treading the threadbare hall carpet leading to the kitchen. "Molly! Are you making your scrumptious pumpkin bread?" There was the sound of a smile in Arthur Weasley's voice.

"Yes, Arthur, and I'm making two loaves, so there'll be enough for both the family and the party. Lucy Lovegood said she'd bring her chocolate-pumpkin cookies. I just love those, don't you? She has the same problem with her husband I have with mine though—can't keep him from eating up the lot before someone else has a chance at them." There was a laugh in her voice; Molly Weasley also sounded like she was in good spirits. Peter dared to poke his nose under the chair skirt and looked through the living room and kitchen doorways into the warm kitchen, where he could see little Ginny Weasley in a highchair, merrily slapping the tray with the palms of her hands, making a terrific racket. She laughed with glee. Her brother, Ron, was also in a highchair, but he seemed to be doing his best to struggle out of it, sinking down and discovering that the strap around his waist kept this from happening. He frowned spectacularly.

"When are the Lovegoods getting here?"

"Shouldn't be long now. Lucy said she'd help me get ready. I don't know when I've thrown a party on such short notice! Thank goodness the twins are still asleep. I shouldn't be able to get anything done if I had them to worry about as well..."

"And thank goodness for our Percy," Arthur added; Peter saw him pour himself a cup of tea.

*Percy?* Peter thought. *Where is Percy?*

He turned his head and immediately saw; Percy was lying on his stomach on the hearth rug, nose deep in a book. Sometime since the last time Peter had seen him, Percy had been fitted for glasses, which reflected the firelight and made it difficult to see his eyes. Peter glanced into the kitchen again, where Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were busy discussing the party they were going to be having shortly. It seemed rather out-of-character for them to host a party, but with a jolt, Peter realized the likely purpose of it.

*They were celebrating the Dark Lord's fall.*

The others seemed to be adequately occupied, so he ventured out from under the chair and across the room to the silent, reading five-year-old, waiting patiently. When Percy looked up from his book and saw Peter, to his relief, Percy recognized him and grinned broadly. This revealed the missing gaps in Percy's smile, where he'd recently lost teeth. Combined with his new glasses, the missing teeth made him seem more than a bit awkward.

"Twitchers! You're back! I thought you'd gone for good!" He paused, then touched Peter's front paw with his finger, very lightly, where Peter was also missing a finger in his rat form. "You've been hurt! What happened?" He looked grim for a five-year-old now, and rather thoughtful. "Well, it looks like it's already healed over. You've got a scab. That should be your name now!" he said, looking excited as this revelation came to him. "You should be Scabbers! That's better than Twitchers, isn't it? Scabbers," he said again, trying it out. "Definitely better. I'm reading a story that has rats in it, Scabbers. Want me to read to you?"

He changed his position, sitting with his legs folded under him now, lifting Peter onto his lap. "It's a poem actually, and in it, there are people trying to get rid of rats, but you'll see what happens to *them*," Percy said with a slight lisp, probably due to the missing teeth, Peter reckoned. Otherwise, Percy seemed remarkably advanced for a child of his age. "Mummy said we're not going to have lessons today, because of the party, but I want to go on reading anyway. It's a good story. I think you'll like it," he said companionably to the rat, who was nestling down on the boy's worn corduroy trousers quite comfortably.

The fire crackled and sent a delicious warmth into Peter as he listened to the comforting cadence of the small boy's voice, trying to forget about what he'd done to Sirius, to James and to Lily. *It's all to the good*, he told himself, looking around the shabby but nonetheless inviting room. *The Weasleys are happy about it*, he thought. *They're having a party. And other people are happy about it, too.*

He tried to dwell on how happy people were now, the parties they were planning, the Death Eater attacks that would cease, as he listened to the small boy tell him about the Pied Piper of Hamelin leading the villagers' children away from the town in retribution for their not having paid him to remove the rats....

*"Willy, let me and you be wipers  
Of scores out with all men—especially pipers!  
And, whether they pipe us free from rats or from mice,  
If we've promised them aught, let us keep our promise!"*

\* \* \* \* \*

Vernon Dursley's hand slipped and he cut himself with his straight-razor. It wasn't an uncommon occurrence for him to cut himself while shaving (he already had three cuts this morning alone) but this was more along the lines of a gash, thanks to the blood-curdling scream that had emanated from below.

He couldn't imagine what might have happened. Suppose there was something wrong with Dudley and he had to be rushed to Dr. Forbes, in the village? Or worse—to the hospital in Guilford! Vernon hastily wiped the rest of the shaving cream from his face and lumbered down the stairs, crying out, "Coming, my dumpling! Coming!"

The front door was open, the last thing he'd expected, and his wife had dropped the empty milk bottles she'd been planning to put out, causing them to shatter on the hard brick step. Vernon's heart was in his throat; he couldn't imagine what had happened. As far as he could see, unless the street had blown up, or one of the other houses on it, there was no reason for her to be standing in the doorway like this.

But when he arrived next to her, he saw the reason—a small blanket-wrapped bundle was sitting on the step, a tuft of black hair peeking out from amidst the blankets. A small hand clutched what looked like a large, creamy envelope with curling script on the front:

*Mrs. Petunia Dursley  
4 Privet Drive  
Little Whinging, Surrey*

His wife was shivering, and he didn't think it was just because she was still in her dressing gown. He bent and gingerly picked up the envelope, wondering why this seemed to terrify his wife even more than the fact that someone had evidently deposited a *baby* on their doorstep. He turned the envelope over and saw a crest on the back which had been pressed into a purple wax seal. He couldn't make out the images on the seal, as the baby's hand had been clutching it and his body heat had caused the wax to soften.

Vernon heard a hiccupping noise and looked down; the baby had awoken, and was glancing around with large green eyes that looked disturbingly familiar....

Almost immediately, another noise met their ears: the sound of the milkman driving onto the street, his milk bottles rattling along behind him. Petunia gave a cry and bent down to scoop up the baby before the milkman came to a stop in front of number four. *Normal* people did *not* have babies on their front steps! *Normal* people's babies were in their houses, asleep in their cots.

She slammed the door quickly, leaning against it, holding the baby at arm's length as though she was afraid of it. The baby didn't like this a bit and started yowling at the top of its lungs. Vernon noticed that there was a jagged scar on the baby's forehead; it was probably not very bright, he thought. Probably banged into things all of the time. And it obviously didn't come from responsible parents. Who left a baby on a stranger's doorstep when they could no longer cope? Wastrels and criminals, *that's* who. To quiet the yowling, Petunia Dursley held the baby closer, although she made a face at having to do so; his nappy obviously hadn't been changed in some time. So she changed her mind; instead, she thrust the baby at him and snatched the letter from her husband's hands.

"His nappy wants changing. Use one of Dudley's," she said shortly, looking at the envelope with trepidation. *She* knew that seal. This could mean nothing good.

Vernon Dursley was horrified at the prospect of changing the strange child's nappy; now he was the one holding it at arm's length. "But-Petunia! I don't even change Dudley's nappies!"

"Well, it's time to start!" she snapped, breaking the seal with shaking hands and taking the heavy parchment out of the envelope, her heart in her throat.

Vernon drew himself up; his wife was behaving very strangely. "This isn't our problem," he said authoritatively, while thinking, *What did we ever do to deserve this? What?* "We'll just call the police and they'll come to collect the brat, put it into some care facility with the other brats abandoned by their drug-addicted parents...."

His wife gasped and sat on the stairs suddenly. He wasn't sure why, though. She'd heard quite a lot on the news about the drain on society, on decent, *normal* people, represented by drug addicts and criminals. She knew all about these things, and shouldn't be shocked by his talking this way. But after a moment, he realized that she was gasping because of the letter, not his comment about drug addicts. She raised large frightened eyes to her husband and spoke in a small, quivering voice.

*"We have to keep him."*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Thursday, 5 November, 1981*

Severus Snape paced the length of his cell and back again, seething. He shouldn't have gone to Hogwarts first, he saw that now. It hadn't been his first instinct, either. His first had been to try to find Sirius Black. The problem was, he'd thought Dumbledore would be at Hogwarts, that that was why he had sent Hagrid to Godric's Hollow. They could go after Black together. Black would surely have other Death Eaters with him, and Severus wasn't a stupid man; he knew what his fellow Death Eaters could do. He didn't want to take chances. He hadn't reckoned on McGonagall not trusting him, nor Dumbledore being gone. He hadn't expected her to call the most paranoid Auror at the Ministry to keep watch over him.

All he'd been doing was opening the window to let some air into McGonagall's stuffy office, and the next thing he knew Moody was storming the room with his wand drawn, stunning Severus before he could say a word. When he awoke he was in a cell, presumably at the Ministry of Magic, and he hadn't seen a soul since arriving. Some food had been magicked into the cell, but that was all. He patted his robe pockets for the millionth time; they'd taken his wand, and he felt sick without it. *I want my bloody wand back. Give me my wand back!* he thought. Sometimes he broke out in a sweat, thinking about not having it.

Suddenly, he heard the bolt slide back and the door swung open slowly. He felt the cold in his chest first, then the coldness of mind and the voices of all of the people he'd seen Barty Crouch kill were howling in his head, along with Barty's voice, crying the fatal curses, and flash after flash of speeding green death....

He could dimly see that Alastor Moody was standing in the doorway, flanked by two dementors. He turned to them, looking no more disturbed than if they'd been little old ladies, and dismissed them with a wave of his hand. They glided away, and, little by little, Severus started to feel close to normal again. Normal for him. He'd found that he had few happy thoughts left, so the dementors didn't spend much time lurking outside his cell, trying to feed off them. He couldn't give them what they wanted, so they left him alone, for the most part.

He stared at Moody, who limped into the room, one of his legs making a loud clumping sound. He had moved surprisingly fast when he'd entered McGonagall's office, all things considered. Severus knew of Moody's reputation. He knew not to say anything to him. Moody sat on the pallet, the noisy leg stretched out straight before him, now revealed to be a wooden one with an elaborately carved foot, as though it were a piece of furniture. (Maybe it was *from* a piece of furniture, Severus thought.)

"Hello there, Snape," Moody growled out suddenly. Severus noticed that he didn't have his wand drawn. Was that meant to lull him into a false sense of security?

"Rather a nasty shock, I imagine, waking up here instead of Minerva McGonagall's office at Hogwarts," he said in a gravelly voice.

Severus wasn't sure what he was up to, and surveyed him through narrowed eyes.

"You would imagine correctly," he said stiffly.

Moody gave off a laugh that sounded a bit like a sick dog. "Minerva tells me that you're a Death Eater. You've got your nerve, haven't you? Walking into Hogwarts and announcing that...."

"Dumbledore knows all about that!" he said impatiently. "I was looking for him! I've been spying for him, I *told* McGonagall...."

"Yes, yes. So she said," he replied in a low voice, clearly not believing this. "Or rather, so she said *you* said."

*So McGonagall doesn't believe me either. That explains why she called Moody.* "Listen, just talk to Dumbledore and you'll find out the truth....I was trying to get his help running down Sirius Black. He's a Death Eater and betrayed Lily and James Potter. It's his fault they're dead...."

Moody grunted, as though reluctantly admitting that Snape seemed to know what he was talking about. "You don't need to worry about finding Black. He's in custody. Since yesterday morning."

"Yester-Why didn't anyone tell me?" he demanded angrily, approaching Moody, but stopping when he saw Moody's hand move toward his pocket.

"You're a relatively low priority at the moment, Snape. We've been keeping you fed. You'll wait. Everything's in a bit of an uproar at the moment...."

"How'd they catch him?" he said anxiously.

Moody shook his head. "Not clear. Apparently his friend, Petty, Pettigrew--"

"Pettigrew," Snape offered, remembering.

"Right. Pettigrew. Evidently he tracked Black down and confronted him about betraying their friends. Terrible--he was a little bloke, I hear."

Snape nodded, blinking back his confusion. "Right. Not large," he said slowly, resuming his pacing, having a very hard time imagining Peter Pettigrew confronting Sirius Black. "Why was it terrible?" he finally dared to ask.

Moody sighed. "Street blasted apart. About a dozen Muggles killed, some in ways I won't tell you unless you want to stop sleeping for a few years. And it was all with one spell. Black has clearly been learning his Dark Arts from the master. Blew Pettigrew to bits, too. All that we found of *him* was a finger and some bloody robes. His poor mum was in a right state."

Snape stared in disbelief. *Black did that!* He drew his lips into an angry line. "Nothing you could tell me about Sirius Black would surprise me in the least," he said in a low voice. Moody looked at him in surprise.

"Oh, I see how it is. No love lost there, eh? What's the matter--he got into daddy's good graces and you didn't? Is that why you turned *spy*?" Although he said this, he still sounded skeptical about the 'spy' part.

Severus swallowed; he couldn't say too much. Barty Crouch, Jr. had the run of the Ministry because of his father and could get into his cell in a heartbeat. If he thought Severus was going to turn him in, he would, too. He already knew that Severus had warned Lily. He might have thought that was just because of having been her boyfriend, though. Severus was starting to rue

the moment he'd told McGonagall that he was a spy for Dumbledore. If Barty found out he was in custody, his life might not be worth a Knut.

"Please—I need to see Dumbledore. He'll vouch for me. But—could you not tell anyone else about my being a spy? Please?" he whispered.

Moody looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Why?" he growled, clearly suspicious. Severus decided that the closest thing to the truth would be the best idea.

"I can implicate someone in the Ministry." That wasn't strictly true, but Barty had as much access as someone working for the Ministry. "Someone who's a Death Eater, who told me that the Potters' Secret Keeper was also a Death Eater. I'm afraid that if he finds out I'm here, I'll be dead. I don't want to say anything more right now."

He reached over with his right hand and kneaded the skin of his left inner forearm with his hand, a convulsive movement he'd repeated many times since being taken into custody; Moody noticed and stared at the arm carefully.

"Had the Mark, did you?" he said suddenly. Severus was jolted.

"You know?"

Moody nodded. "I'm one of the few who do. It's faded now, isn't it?"

Severus nodded. The old man rose and clunked his way to the cell door and pounded on it twice with his fist. "I'll see if Dumbledore is free yet. He's being questioned about Black. Be patient," he added gleefully, with a twisted smile, as though knowing that this was most likely to agitate Severus. *Patient!* He'd been nothing *but* patient! Rotting in a Ministry cell, waiting for someone to remember that he'd been charged with nothing, he hadn't even been questioned....

The dementors came to open the door again; Severus could feel the cold before they opened it this time. He surveyed the unflustered Moody.

"How—how do you keep from being affected by them?" he choked, his vision starting to blur.

Moody gave him a crooked smile, which was missing more than a few teeth. "Strength of mind. Practice. And—I'm not what you'd call an exceptionally happy person. I don't give them much to work with," he growled.

Severus nodded. That last part was also true of him, to an extent. But he still felt the icy coldness in his chest, his mind and vision clouding when they drew too near, voices that came not from without but from within.

Moody left with the dementors and Severus Snape went on pacing, waiting for Dumbledore.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So you are saying that to the best of your knowledge, Sirius Black was the Secret Keeper for James and Lily Potter."

Albus Dumbledore nodded reluctantly. "Yes. I suggested that they use him, in fact. He is—was—James Potter's best friend. They were like brothers," he said quietly.

Barty Crouch snorted, the hairs on his precisely-trimmed mustache quivering only slightly. "If we're talking about Cain and Abel, yes."

"This is no time for jokes!" Dumbledore said sharply. "Do you think that a dear friend betraying another friend is *funny*?" His voice suddenly seemed very loud, filling Crouch's painstakingly-neat Ministry office. Crouch appeared not to have heard. In the corner, a young man with short, straw-colored hair, not much more than a boy, really, scribbled what they were saying onto a long scroll of parchment.

"So, you suggested Black as the Secret Keeper. Why is that?"

"I already told you. He and James were very close. In addition to that, he has a brilliant mind. Sirius and James came top of their year in many things, except for those areas in which Lily—" He stopped suddenly, bowing his head.

"What can you tell me about Pettigrew?" Crouch said suddenly. The young man was smirking as he wrote.

Dumbledore looked placidly at Crouch. "Why do you ask?"

Crouch shrugged. "Well, for a start, was he also in Gryffindor, with the others?"

"Yes. They were all in Gryffindor."

"All?"

"James, Sirius, Peter and Remus Lupin."

"Lupin, Lupin....That sounds familiar," he mused, then shook himself. "Why do you reckon it was Pettigrew who went after Black? He certainly showed his Gryffindor stuff, didn't he?" Crouch said cheerfully.

"I don't know why, specifically. *Perhaps* he was rather upset that one of his friends had betrayed two of his other friends!" Dumbledore's voice rose once more. The boy in the corner was smirking again.

"Why wouldn't he get this Lupin to help him, then? Two against one. Better odds, that."

Dumbledore shook his head. "I don't know. I haven't any idea where Remus is. Perhaps Peter didn't either...."

Crouch's eyes lit up. "Wait! I know why that name is familiar. He's a werewolf! Arrested a couple of years ago as a murder suspect!" He looked very pleased with himself for remembering. "Ah, well, that explains why Pettigrew probably didn't ask him for help. He must be one of You-Know-Who's people as well; perhaps he and Black went in together. If Pettigrew had taken Lupin along, it probably would have been one against two, not the other way round...."

"Remus Lupin is not—"

"—a Death Eater?" Crouch smirked now. "And when you recommended Black as the Potters' Secret Keeper, were you aware that *he* was a Death Eater? Are you aware that a number of other former Hogwarts students who finished school in recent years are *also* Death Eaters, and that we have them in custody?" He said this as though their being Death Eaters was Dumbledore's fault.

"Of course I do not know that, Barty. You have been remarkably unforthcoming about information of that sort until it suits you to divulge it," he said smoothly. "But I daresay that I would not be surprised for *some* former Hogwarts students to turn out to be Death Eaters, unless Lord Voldemort has been *importing* all of his followers."

Crouch and the young man both drew in their breaths at his use of the name; Dumbledore scrutinized the boy, who looked back defiantly. He recognized him now; he hadn't realized he was working *here*, in *this* office. It seemed a strange thing for his father to do; he'd never previously shown a bent toward nepotism (if anything, his natural tendency seemed to be quite the opposite). The boy had been a prefect who had finished school two years earlier. He hadn't been Head Boy, though, and had been more than a little bitter about that, too, Dumbledore remembered.

"One of the Death Eaters we have apprehended was brought in *from Hogwarts*. He is a former Slytherin and has been making the ludicrous claim that he has been spying for *you!* What could he mean by that? That last time I checked, *you* were not the Minister." He surveyed Dumbledore through narrowed eyes. "He and my son were friends for a time, but Barty tells me that he eventually began to suspect what the Slytherin was up to, and that he even tried to recruit him. My son! A Death Eater!"

Dumbledore swallowed, but answered calmly. "That might either have been part of his cover, something he'd been commanded to do, or something that occurred before he changed his mind about his loyalties. Or more than one of those things. Whatever the case, I can tell you that Severus Snape—for it can only be he to whom you refer—is again loyal to the Ministry. You must have misunderstood the part about his 'spying' for *me*. I have a number of friends who are Aurors, and I keep my ear to the ground, giving them whatever information crosses my path that may prove useful. Sometimes it crosses my path in the form of another person, such as Severus. No one is 'spying,' for me." He said this very calmly, looking up into Barty Crouch's face, seeing that this martinet of a man did not believe this, but had no proof to the contrary beyond the testimony of a young man whose credibility was suspect because he had admitted to having once been a Death Eater.

"And how do you know that this Slytherin did not ever feed you false information, knowing that you were going to be passing it on to Aurors?"

"Because everything he has told me since he confessed the error of his ways has proven to be of great use to—the Aurors. And if he had not told me of the danger to the Potters, they would have been completely unaware of it."

"Hm...And *that* turned out well, didn't it? You recommended Sirius Black to be Secret Keeper, and *he* turns out to be *another* Death Eater!"

Dumbledore's eyes were very hard as he looked at Crouch over his half-moon spectacles. "Believe me when I say that that will haunt me for the rest of my life, Barty."

Crouch appeared not to have heard this. "Of course, considering that You-Know-Who is now gone, and that it is all through Black's betrayal, one could look at this as something in which you had a hand. And I *have* heard that you are the only one You-Know-Who ever feared...was it because you knew his Achilles' Heel? The key to his defeat? After defeating Grindelwald, I shouldn't be surprised at all..." His voice was dripping with suspicion. The young man's quill scratched.

Dumbledore glared at him for a long moment before bursting into laughter, removing his glasses and wiping his eyes with the end of his beard before replacing them across his long, crooked nose. Crouch looked quite affronted by his laughter.

"Oh, thank you for that Barty. One thing I needed today was a good laugh. Are you seriously suggesting that I am angling to be the next great Dark Lord myself? Because I can assure you that I am not. I am content to be a humble school headmaster. I do not yearn for the power of which you speak..."

"A *humble* headmaster, is it?" Crouch said, still sounding very suspicious. "A *humble* headmaster who holds in his hands the future of every child in the wizarding world! Who shapes the minds and futures of every magical person born in the British Isles! That's more than a little power, in my book!"

Dumbledore looked calmly at him. "In its way, yes, it is. And I have endeavored to use that power with utmost responsibility. If there is anyone who feels I have not, I should be delighted to hear the citations of times when I was derelict in my duty."

Crouch sputtered, then suddenly Albus Dumbledore found himself with an accusatory finger pointing in his face. "You were derelict in not informing the Ministry that a Death Eater had confessed to you! He should have been taken into custody and—"

"No," Dumbledore said quickly. "His life would have been in great danger. I worry that it is in danger now; I understand that there are Death Eaters that have infiltrated the Ministry." Suddenly, the young man dropped his quill and quickly summoned it back into his hand, resuming his writing. "Now that their leader is gone, they may wish to go underground again and forget that they were ever so misguided as to follow Voldemort. But underground or not, they will still be here unless something is done to find them..."

"Death Eaters in the Ministry!" Crouch cried, indignant. "That is preposterous!"

Dumbledore stood now. "No more so than for them to be in any other job!" he bellowed. Crouch backed up slightly. "Lord Voldemort had his people in every level of wizarding society! To think that the Ministry is immune—*that* is preposterous!"

Crouch swallowed and backed up a little more.

"Now—if you are quite done, may I please see Sirius Black?" Dumbledore asked, suddenly placid.

"No," Crouch said tersely, without hesitation. "He is not receiving visitors." Crouch's jaw was set; Albus hadn't been confident that he would be permitted to do this, but it had been worth a try. He nodded, conceding defeat on one matter.

"What is to become of him?" he said sadly.

"He's going to Azkaban for the rest of his life," Crouch answered with a cruel offhandedness that belied the severity of the sentence. Dumbledore's eyes widened.

"Without a trial?"

"He's as good as confessed! Keeps talking about it being all his fault, laughing fit to kill....What do you think a trial would accomplish? Yes, he could do that for an audience. Or we could have mayhem in the courtroom when someone tries to blow him up—"

"Blow him up?" Dumbledore frowned.

Crouch leaned toward him and spoke in a confidential whisper. "Between you and me, the Howlers have been flying thick and fast around here. For Black. He's lucky he hasn't been blown up already. We've got a special detail on handling owls for him. Bloody hell, we're lucky some of our own people haven't been killed. There are some who are *not* happy that Black betrayed his friends, if you get my meaning. He'll be far safer the sooner he's in Azkaban....Not that he deserves to be. Someone like *him* makes me wish we still had the death sentence. But at any rate, dementors can't be hurt by exploding Howlers, no matter what someone has put in them—they're very useful that way. Not that Black *deserves* to be safe, as I said, but the rest of us will be safer, too. It's a bloody menace, keeping him here. Innocent lives are at risk..."

Dumbledore nodded sadly. "I see. And he said—he said it was his fault?"

"I said so, didn't I? Yes, he keeps repeating that. And you wouldn't believe the job we had in London yesterday, cleaning up Black's mess! Of course, we also told the press that we collected him on Sunday, to keep the Howlers from flying at *us*, as well. Yesterday would have been considered an unforgivable delay. The Howlers that have been arriving here for Black are bad enough—we don't need more. Between you and me, I still think we got him into custody in good time, and saying it happened a few days earlier is neither here nor there. In fact, I even told the *Prophet* that it was lucky we kept it hushed up for as long as we did, or there would have been even more Howlers. And I made certain I told the reporter that none of the Howlers are reaching Black, so hopefully they'll stop coming." He grinned, very pleased with himself. Dumbledore did not comment. "Oh, and Pettigrew is getting the Order of Merlin, First Class. Posthumously, of course. Poor little bloke evidently didn't know what he was up against..."

"Yes, very sad," Dumbledore said sincerely, remembering Peter Pettigrew. How very surprising that he had decided to run after Sirius. His magical abilities had never been up to James and

Sirius', or even Remus'....

"Well, if you'll just show me where I can collect Severus now, we'll be going...."

"Collect? Snape? What makes you think that is happening? And where would you be taking him?"

"To Hogwarts."

"What for?" Crouch asked, suspicious again.

"To be my new Potions Master." *Hopefully, when I offer Severus the job, he'll see the sense in it....and my current Potions Master will go along with the idea of beginning his retirement....*

"Potions Master! What's wrong with the one you have now?"

"He wishes to retire," Dumbledore said, shrugging and throwing his hands up helplessly. "As I am the one vouching for Severus Snape, it is only appropriate that he should be my responsibility, so, as he has extensive experience with potions from working in his uncle's apothecary, assigning him the post of Potions Master seemed like the right thing to do."

"And your current Potions Master just *happens* to be retiring," Crouch said, clearly unconvinced.

Dumbledore smiled sunnily at him. "That's right." *And hopefully, I can also keep him safe from Death Eaters—whether they are in or out of the Ministry.*

Crouch looked like he might reject the idea for a moment, but finally he nodded and waved him to the door, then addressed the young man. "Show Professor Dumbledore to Snape's cell and take care of the details of releasing him into his custody." He turned back to Dumbledore. "All I can say is—you'd better be right about Snape. If a single parent comes to me complaining about the Hogwarts Potions Master being a Slyth—I mean, a Death Eater—"

"Being a Slytherin and being a Death Eater are not synonymous, Barty. You should know that. Evidently, at least one Gryffindor was a Death Eater," he said sadly. Crouch nodded.

"I would never have seen that coming. A Gryffindor serving You-Know-Who and a Slytherin spying on him. It's like the world turned upside-down."

Dumbledore shrugged. "As I said, Voldemort recruited followers from all walks of life. Remember what I said about Death Eaters in the Ministry, Barty. Look to your own house," he said ominously.

The straw-haired young man seemed to be choking on something; he dropped his quill again, and the parchment on which he'd been writing rolled onto the floor and across the room, unfurling as it went. Crouch lazily waved his wand at it and caused it to roll backward across the floor and leap onto his large mahogany desk.

"Don't dawdle, boy. I need you to draft a memorandum to the department when you return." He looked significantly at Dumbledore. "No stone shall be left unturned. Everyone in magical law-enforcement is going to be questioned in detail. If there are any Death Eaters here, we'll find them and deal with them *most* severely." He seemed to have changed his mind about Death Eaters in the Ministry being 'preposterous.' "It is one thing to be a Death Eater—it is another to pretend to be a loyal employee of *this* department." He partially unrolled the parchment on his desk and frowned. "And we'll have to get you one of those newly improved automatic quills, boy. Your penmanship is terrible. I'll be glad when my clerk returns from his holiday." He rolled up the parchment again and put it in a drawer. Together, Dumbledore and the young man moved toward the door.

They walked down the corridor and quickly arrived at the doorway to the central portal hub; stepping through, they were actually going from an abandoned Tube station in the southern part of the city to a hidden part of Westminster Station, below the Houses of Parliament. They didn't go through any of the portals leading to other Ministry departments, however, in other abandoned Tube stations, but walked down another corridor, finally arriving at the holding cells, and Severus Snape's cell in particular.

"I'll get a guard," the young man said, starting to move off. Dumbledore shook his head.

"Don't bother. I'd rather we didn't have to deal with *them*."

Dumbledore put his hand to the door, causing it to swing open a moment later, striking the stone wall noisily. The boy's face went white. "You see?" Dumbledore said. "I could have done that from the start, but I didn't, did I? I went to your father and got *permission* to take Severus with me. If he was your friend, I'm surprised that you didn't speak to your father on his behalf." He looked penetratingly at Barty Crouch's son before turning and walking calmly into the cell. Severus was asleep on the pallet, looking pale and drawn; he was so exhausted that the door striking the wall had not wakened him.

"Speak on his behalf!" young Crouch cried, incredulous. He glared at Snape as his dark eyes opened slowly and he started to sit up in confusion. "As if I would speak up for a bloody *traitor*!"

When he saw who was in the room with him, Severus sat up quickly, tense and poised to leap out of the way of unfriendly curses. The confusing thing was—Dumbledore was also present.

Dumbledore *and* Barty? It didn't make any sense to his sleep-addled brain. *Perhaps I'm still dreaming*, he thought groggily.

Then Barty's words sank in: *A traitor*. He remembered Barty putting the Cruciatus Curse on him, on the knoll overlooking Godric's Hollow....

"What's happening, sir?" he asked Dumbledore, licking his dry lips and trying to pretend that he wasn't keeping careful track of Barty out of the corner of his eye.

"I'm taking you back to Hogwarts with me, Severus. And offering you a job. We can discuss the details once we are back in the castle. We only need to fill out some forms and retrieve your wand. Come along. Your ordeal is over," he said gently, nodding at him.

Severus swallowed, looking back and forth between Dumbledore and Barty, but he stood and followed the two of them into the corridor, keeping a close watch on his former co-conspirator. In the office of Prisoner Processing, he and Dumbledore both signed forms saying that he was being released on Dumbledore's testimony and into his custody. He was given back his wand, which felt wonderful and right to be in his hand again. When they were about to leave, however, the elder Crouch appeared in the doorway.

"I wonder, Dumbledore, might I have another brief word with you? It is about Pettigrew's O.M."

"Of course, Barty," he said, nodding, following Crouch into the corridor. Severus was left standing awkwardly next to the son, to whom he'd pretended to be a friend for so long; he looked down at him and found, to his great consternation, that the other young man was looking right back.

"*Don't think you'll be safe there*," Barty hissed at Severus suddenly. "Or that you'll be believed if you tell anyone about *me*. I know where your uncle lives, too. You will *not* live to regret being a traitor to our Master." With a final glare at Severus, he strode from the room, just as Dumbledore returned.

Severus looked over his shoulder at the Prisoner Processing clerk first, then said under his breath, to Dumbledore, "Sir, Barty just said to me—"

"*I know*," the old man said quickly, looking around cautiously. His voice was very low and even. "*I heard everything*."

"But—but how could you?" Severus said in disbelief. "You were in the corridor and he wasn't speaking loudly...."

"It is unimportant how. I heard. Let us make a side trip to Dunoon before going to Hogwarts. Do you think your uncle could be convinced to close up the shop for a while and take a little holiday?"

Severus nodded. "Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me—thank your former friend for being rather a dunce. *Now* I understand why he called you a traitor. And why you didn't dare reveal his name."

Severus frowned. "What?"

Dumbledore smiled. "I merely meant that the one you truly betrayed was Lord Voldemort." He looked at Severus for a moment. "Do you know what I have in my office?"

Severus opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. He'd only been to Dumbledore's office a few times during his time at Hogwarts; the first time had been to find out that his parents had been killed by Aurors.

"Well, a lot of things, sir," he said haltingly, vaguely remembering the clutter that was the headmaster's office.

"No, no—I meant my phoenix. You saw my phoenix, didn't you?"

Severus nodded. "Yes. Yes, I remember the phoenix."

"Did I have occasion to tell you his name? My memory is failing me." Severus shook his head. If he'd been told the name of the phoenix, it had fled his brain. "His name is—Fawkes. A famous traitor. He is burned in effigy every year on—why, *this* day. I just realized!" he added brightly. "Tonight is Bonfire night for Muggles. They will have celebrations all over Britain, celebrating the defeat of a traitor. Had you never wondered why wizards do not observe this holiday?"

Severus shook his head again. "I—I just thought—it's a Muggle festival, sir—"

"I am merely saying, Severus, that one person's traitor is another person's freedom-fighter. Fawkes was actually a wizard, helping a group of Muggle friends who were being persecuted for their religious beliefs. He was supposed to have attempted to blow up—well, the very thing that is far over our heads at this very moment: The Houses of Parliament. There are also those who think that there never was a Gunpowder Plot, that the real plot was to frame one of the rebels—it mattered not who. In that a wizard does not *need* gunpowder to blow up anything, it is highly unlikely that he did what he was accused of, but that can never be put into Muggle history books, now can it? Not to mention that there are very few people who *want* to know the truth. The legend is far more important.

"At the time, there were those to whom Fawkes was a hero." He smiled at Severus. "One man's traitor is another man's freedom-fighter," he said again, giving Severus a penetrating look. "Fawkes did not really die, you know," he said in a conspiratorial whisper. "Well, he did die eventually, of course, from ripe old age. He escaped his captors. The Crown couldn't admit that they hadn't managed to properly kill Fawkes, that he'd got away. So they pulled some poor soul out of one of the prisons, killed him properly, and claimed it was Guy Fawkes. And today, Muggles still celebrate the defeat of the most notorious traitor ever...."

Shaking his head and sighing, he said, "Ah, well. We need to be off. There is much to do."

"Yes, sir. And—thank you again, sir."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at him and he afforded Severus a gentle smile. "You are quite welcome, Severus. You are *quite* welcome."

\* \* \* \* \*

Wednesday, 23 December, 1981

Alex followed Lowell Faulkner down a dingy alleyway between two buildings in Knockturn Alley that seemed ready to collapse at any moment; they probably would have, too, he thought, were it not for the fact that there was probably some magic holding them together. He and Lowell were making their way to a pub where they'd gone before; the publican didn't ask any questions about their only wanting a room for a couple of hours. Just in case anyone noticed them, they walked with their hoods obscuring their faces and usually entered the pub through the back door. Alex would have been very shocked to see anyone he knew in Knockturn Alley (and he knew that they would be shocked to see *him* there) but they took the precautions just the same. You never knew when—

"Bloody hell!" Lowell's voice exploded next to him, making Alex jump. The alleyway led to the gate to the meager back garden of the pub. But someone else was already opening the gate. Alex and Lowell hung back in the alley, crouching next to a large dustbin, watching.

The person holding the gate open was a young man with yellow straw-like hair. Alex's jaw dropped. "Lowell! Do you see who that is? That bloke from your house who was seeing Snape!"

Lowell nodded, and under his hood, Alex could see him turn even whiter than he already was. "I see him," Lowell whispered.

"I wish I knew how Snape fooled Dumbledore into hiring him. You are so lucky you're already out of school! And here's his *boyfriend*. Isn't it weird? We've never seen anyone we knew before. But now—"

"Sssh!" Lowell hissed at him. "Shut up!"

Alex clamped his mouth shut, fighting the urge to argue, but too fascinated watching what was going on. From the edge of their vision, bounded by the building against which they cowered, three wizards appeared. No, two wizards and a witch. All three of them were levitating bodies. (Did no one notice *anything* in Knockturn Alley? he wondered.) The woman was levitating a very small boy, no bigger than a toddler, while the other two were levitating a man and woman who were still clutching brown paper-wrapped parcels and some bags with names of Diagon Alley shops on them, as though they'd tired of doing their Christmas shopping in the normal fashion and were now deciding to be novel and do it horizontally.

Alex swallowed, watching the three bodies be guided through the gate. "What is this?" he said aloud. Lowell did not hush him this time. The gate closed behind the strange party.

"I think this is something we don't want to mess in," Lowell said with a shaking voice. "Let's go. Today—this just wasn't meant to be—"

"Go!" Alex cried out, louder than he meant to. "It looked like those people were being kidnapped. The Ministry is still trying to round up Death Eaters, you know—"

"Yeah, well, that's great for them, but it's not *our* job. Let's get far away from here before they come out again and figure out that we saw them." Lowell took out his wand.

"But we should at least get some help—"

With an abrupt *pop!* Lowell was gone. *Bloody hell*, Alex thought. *Why can't he ever remember that I can't Apparate?*

He was of-age now, so, legally, he could. If he could pass the test. He'd tried *four* times, and had decided not to try again out of sheer embarrassment (he suspected that he had already brought far too much amusement to the employees of the Department of Magical Transportation). He had decided that he was sticking to brooms; it was a time-honored way for witches and wizards to travel, he'd argued to Lowell. The problem was—he hadn't brought a broom with him. He'd Flooed to the Leaky Cauldron and met Lowell outside Quality Quidditch Supplies. Of course, he could go back

to the Cauldron, Floo home again....But somehow he just couldn't. He had to find out whether the man, woman and child he'd seen levitated through the gate were all right.

He crept down the alleyway, his heart in his throat, holding his hood well beyond his face with his left hand while he reached into his pocket with his right, feeling better when his fingers were wrapped around his wand. He withdrew it slowly, keeping his hand down so that the wand was hidden amongst the folds of his cloak. When he reached the fence enclosing the yard, he searched the wood planks for a knothole, and when he found one, he pointed his wand at it carefully, whispering an incantation under his breath, hoping it would work.

It did; the small piece of wood fell into the yard, and Alex froze for a minute, hoping the noise wouldn't alert anyone to his presence on the other side of the fence. If they were Death Eaters, they'd probably throw curses first and ask questions later (if they asked questions at all).

But when he nervously stepped toward the fence and put his eye to the hole, he realized that no one had probably heard a thing when the small oval of wood had fallen; no sounds of any kind could be heard from the enclosed yard.

Alex's jaw dropped. He could see three wizards putting a curse on the man, while the one witch trained her wand on an auburn-haired woman with a pleasant, round face, guarding her but not cursing her. The man and woman were now lying on the ground. Alex could see the crackling amber light connecting the wands to the victim. The witch, had dark, heavy-lidded eyes and jet-black hair; one of the wizards cursing the man was very young, and Alex recognized him as Lowell's former housemate, Barty Crouch, Jr. The other two men, who looked so similar to each other that Alex assumed they must be brothers, were laughing as they trained their wands on the poor man.

Then they broke the spells and seemed to be talking to the victims, gesticulating wildly. The man was shaking his head and looked like he was saying *No!* repeatedly. The woman looked defiantly at their captors, speaking with a hatred on her face such as Alex had never seen. But she was interrupted in mid-word, it seemed, when the curses began again. This time they were both being cursed, two curses for each victim.

Not a sound emanated from any of them. Alex could see their lips moving when they were saying the curses, and they seemed to be able to hear each *other*, but Alex could not hear them. The man and woman being tortured had their mouths open in silent screams, while their bodies contorted under the spells being cast upon them. *What curse is it?* Alex wondered. But almost as soon as he thought it, he realized there was only one likely answer.

*Cruciatus.*

Each victim was experiencing *two* Cruciatus Curses at once, and earlier the man had had *three* on him at once! Alex saw with horror that the child, who was just a baby, really, although he could walk, was sitting apart, crying dreadfully, his face contorted and red, his eyes squeezed tightly shut, but squeezing tears out all the same. Once again, not a sound reached Alex's ears. Watching the eerie tableau before him, Alex was starting to think he'd gone deaf.

Maybe, just maybe....Could he do something to get them to stop cursing the poor man and woman? The curses were continuing, the faces of the victims barely recognizable as human anymore, nor their bodies, which were writhing and twisting in ways Alex would previously have sworn that human bodies *couldn't*, and the woman was scratching with her nails at her own arms, marking the skin, producing ribbons of blood....

*I have to do something*, Alex thought, not caring anymore what happened to him. He couldn't just stand by and watch this. He pointed his wand through the knot-hole and cried, "*Finite Incantatem!*"

Immediately, the screams of the man and woman and the wails of the baby assaulted Alex's ears, the sound bouncing off the buildings around them and echoing painfully. *It was a silencing charm*, he realized. The charm had confined the noise to the enclosed space behind the pub. That was the spell he'd managed to break through. Unfortunately, the man and woman were still being tortured. The man was pulling his own hair out now, in clumps, as his body bucked and writhed and his howls continued unabated....

He put his wand through the knot-hole again; the torturers were continuing their work as though nothing had changed. They had no way of knowing that the silencing charm had been broken, as they were hearing just as much noise as before.

Cold sweat broke out on Alex's brow as he was now forced to listen to the man and woman's pain. *How can those monsters just stand there, smiling and laughing, torturing people like this?*

"*Stupefy!*" he cried, at a loss for what else to do. His spell hit home, though, striking one of the two identical men, making him fall over and break the connection between his wand and the woman. He pulled his wand out of the hole and put his eye to the wood, alarmed to see the other dark-haired man walking toward him, a dark fury contorting his face. Alex swallowed, backing away from the wall. *They don't train us for this at school*, he thought desperately. *They tell you what*

*to do when a bloody madman is coming at you with murder in his eyes....*

Alex started running back down the alleyway, wishing again that he had been able to pass his test, wishing with all his heart that he could Apparate. He heard a cry behind him: "*Avada Kedavra!*"

He heard the splintering of the wooden fence as the curse struck it; glancing quickly over his shoulder, he saw the wizard stride through the opening he'd made, his wand pointing at Alex again, who turned to face his attacker now, grasping his wand tightly, realizing that if he was killed by being struck in the back, he would be known for a coward....

*I am not a coward*, he thought grimly, wishing he had the nerve to walk *toward* the man, instead of just standing still. He was quite a formidable man, burly and substantial-looking, and could probably do a good deal of damage even in a purely physical fight. The man threw a curse at Alex and he leapt to the side, colliding painfully with the dust-bins behind which he and Lowell had been hiding earlier. The wizard took advantage of his being jolted by this and cursed him again.

"*Crucio!*"

The scream that was ripped from Alex was a sound he had never known he could make; pain coursed through his body as though it had taken the place of his blood, it was part of him, it was what made his heart beat. It was now the sole purpose of his brain to make him feel pain, endless pain....

Then, all at once, it was gone; the wrench of the pain being pulled away from him was nearly as bad as the onset of the curse, as though one of his limbs had been amputated. Alex was curled in a ball on the dirty alley floor, and standing over him was his best friend's father. Mr. Weasley crouched beside him now.

"Are you all right, son?" Mr. Weasley said grimly, his hand on Alex's arm. Another wizard stood beside him, much older than Bill's dad, with a wizened face and grizzled hair. He was rather frightening-looking, and Alex realized from things that Bill and Charlie had said that this must be the infamous Auror Alastor Moody.

"Um, yeah. I reckon I'll be all right," he managed to say. "The yard-behind the pub-they're still-" He pointed in the general direction and Mr. Weasley nodded. Moody strode down the alley with a strange *thunking* sound, his wand at the ready, robes billowing out behind him. Alex was still trying to get his breath. He wasn't certain how long the curse had been on him, but the thought of experiencing that for as long as the man and woman had was just-unthinkable. *I'd want to die*, he thought, remembering the woman clawing at her own body, perhaps wanting to induce even more pain, but pain from a *tangible* source, a pain she controlled herself.

Alastor Moody saw a dark-haired woman and a wizard who seemed to be a mere boy torturing a man he recognized instantly, despite the way his features were contorted with pain.

"*Stupefy! Stupefy!*" he cried, and the woman and boy froze and fell over, breaking the spell on Frank Longbottom. Frank stopped screaming abruptly, but did not recover like the boy he and Arthur had found in the alleyway. He and his wife lay staring up at the sky, their eyes vacant and unseeing, and it was only because Moody saw the very subtle movement of their chests as they breathed that he knew they were both still alive.

"Arthur! Come here!" Moody called down the alleyway.

Arthur Weasley looked down at Alex; he'd known this boy since he had started going to the Hogsmeade village school with Bill, and the thought of someone putting the Cruciatus Curse on him was appalling. He'd had Alex in his house more times than he could count. He put his hand out to him and asked him gently, "Can you stand?"

Alex nodded, looking a bit green; he took Mr. Weasley's hand and gripped it tightly, standing unsteadily. Mr. Weasley looped Alex's arm around his shoulder and together they loped down the alleyway to the yard where Moody was standing amidst the bodies, plus the baby was still crying loudly, his very round little face screwed up and very red. Mr. Weasley went to the baby, picking him up and bouncing him on his arm with a practiced air, shushing the boy and saying, to him, "There, there, now, we're going to take good care of your mummy and daddy, don't you fret...." He looked at Moody. "What's his name? I know Frank and Gemma by sight, but I don't think I ever heard their son's name."

"Nigel, Neil, something beginning with 'N,'" Moody said carelessly.

Alex leaned unsteadily on part of the fence that was still standing. He pointed a shaky hand at the stunned figure of Barty Crouch, Jr. "That's-that's Barty Crouch," he managed to say. Mr. Weasley frowned at him, still bouncing the baby up and down on his arm.

"Barty Crouch? Are you sure you're all right, laddie? I know Barty Crouch, and he-"

"Not the Ministry bloke," Alex interrupted him, speaking with great effort. "His son."

A hand on his shoulder made him turn his head; it was Lowell. Alex wished so many other

people weren't around; he wanted to hug and kiss him, he was so happy to see him again. Lowell smiled shyly at him.

"You said once that Bill's dad worked for the Ministry. I remembered how to get to the Department of Magical Transportation, from when I took my test, and I just asked the bloke there how to get to Mr. Weasley's office. Lucky thing he knew who I was talking about, since I didn't know his first name or the department he works for."

Alex *really* wanted to kiss him now. "So you went for help?"

Lowell shrugged. "I didn't know what else to do. You couldn't Apparate, so—"

Alex heaved a sigh of relief. "I thought you were just running away! I thought—"

"That I'd abandoned you?" Lowell squeezed his shoulder. "I wouldn't do that. I'm not much for dueling, or anything, but I tried to get back here as fast as I could after I told Mr. Weasley that help was needed here. He said he would bring an Auror. I—I waited a few minutes after they left to come back...." he said, hanging his head. "I'm sorry about that. I'm just—just not—"

"It's okay," Alex said softly. "I'm all right."

"All right! Why are you shaking like that if you're all right?"

"Well—the Cruciatus Curse—"

"*Cruciatus!*"

"Hullo?" Mr. Weasley was trying to get their attention. He was still holding the baby. "Would you mind terribly taking him for the moment? I need to help Alastor."

Lowell hesitated at first, then took the squirming baby, holding him awkwardly against his chest. Suddenly, a *pop!* exploded in the small yard, and a young blond wizard appeared, wearing royal blue robes that seemed to be the same color as his bright, snapping eyes, and a matching wizard's hat, trimmed in gold braid. He looked a bit of a clown, and yet, the moment he arrived, he began turning back and forth spasmodically, pointing his wand first at Moody, then Mr. Weasley, then Lowell and Alex, although if this behavior was designed to make him look threatening, it was completely at odds with the rest of his appearance. He was also, oddly enough, smiling broadly the entire time he was waving his wand about and seemed to have double the normal number of large, gleaming white teeth. The ludicrous combination of the wizard's clothes, smile and behavior caused Alex to be somewhat frightened of him. Had a nutter escaped from St. Mungo's? he wondered.

"All right, all right! What's going on, what's going on? Who needs a memory charm?" the insane wizard asked genially.

"Are you an Obliviator?" Mr. Weasley asked him. "Did someone tell you to—"

"Oh, no, no one told me to come," he said brightly, ceasing the wand-waving and straightening up. "Gilderoy Lockhart!" he announced, and it took Alex a moment to realize this was the wizard's name. "I pride myself on keeping my ear to the ground. I check in with the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office on a regular basis, as memory charms are so often needed when Muggles buy items that have been charmed or cursed, and Perkins said his partner had been called away to this Knockturn Alley pub, and I said to him, 'I know just the one you mean, Perkins old boy, always full of disreputable sorts.' And so here I am!"

Alex, Lowell, Moody and Mr. Weasley looked at each other uncertainly. *He certainly likes the word 'I,'* Alex thought.

Mr. Weasley grimaced. "Ah, so *you're* Lockhart," he said slowly. "Perkins has mentioned that, erm, you've come round from time to time—"

"Yes, yes, very helpful, that Perkins!" Lockhart gushed. "He keeps me quite busy at times. Good bloke," he added with a dazzling smile.

"Yes, Perkins does his best to, erm, keep you *busy*," Mr. Weasley said, winking at Alex, who was surprised, after his ordeal, that he had to suppress laughter. Mr. Weasley's partner clearly tried to keep Lockhart out of the way, most of the time. "But—he didn't *tell* you to come here, did he?" He looked like he would very likely be cross with Perkins if this were true.

"Oh, no, not as such. He just told me where you were, and I took it upon myself to—"

"Enough dawdling!" Moody bellowed suddenly. "Frank and Gemma need medical attention. And so does that lad, I'll warrant," he said, nodding at Alex. "Arthur—you take him to St. Mungo's and send two ambulances back. I'll keep watch here with this one—" he said, gesturing with his head at Lockhart, "and the other lad. The child seems all right for now...."

Mr. Weasley shook his head, looking at the baby. "Poor little bloke. Seeing his mum and dad tortured like that....You're quite right, Alastor. I'll take Alex with me and send the ambulances." He gave Alex a small smile. "Come on, then. This pub is probably on the Floo network, and—"

"Erm, no. No, it's not," Alex said quickly, then wished he'd bitten his tongue. He had clearly been to the pub before. Mr. Weasley raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, really? All right, then. There's a little shop just down this alleyway, they sell sweets, and I know for certain that we can Floo from their fire." He nodded to Moody.

"All right, Alastor?"

"All right, Arthur," he said gruffly, giving Lockhart a distasteful look out of the corner of his eye.

Moody watched them depart for the sweetshop, the boy leaning heavily on Arthur Weasley's arm. He sighed and bent over the Longbottoms, shaking his head, then straightening up. He wasn't certain how long they'd been waiting, when suddenly, behind him, he heard a voice cry, "*Obliviate!*"

He turned and quickly grabbed Lockhart's arm; the spell moved from the baby Lowell was holding to Lowell himself before Moody managed to force Lockhart's arm up to the sky. He extracted the wand from the wizard's grasp by hand, not bothering with a disarming charm, and felt a mighty urge to put a good hex on him.

"What do you think you're doing, you pillock?" he bellowed at Lockhart.

"The—the little bloke. Weasley said—he saw his mum and dad tortured....Just trying to help. We don't want him traumatized for the rest of his life, do we?"

"He's a baby!" Moody shouted at him. "Are you trying to turn his brain to mush? You can't put a full-fledged memory charm on a child his age! Are you mad? I'll see to it you get the sack for this!"

"But—but—"

"Sod off! I don't need the likes of you here...." An ambulance appeared in the alleyway quite suddenly. Moody grunted. "And not before time, too," he grumbled. "All right, you lad," he said to Lowell. "Bring the wee bairn. He'll need holding on the way to St. Mungo's...."

Lowell looked at the grizzled old man in confusion. "Who are you? Where am I? Why am I holding this baby?" he sputtered. Moody turned to glare at Lockhart.

"See what you've done now! This lad's been hit by part of your bloody memory charm." He put his hand on Lowell's arm, telling him, "There now, you've been memory-charmed, but I don't think it was for very long. A little bit of your recent life has probably dropped out of your brain is all. My name is Alastor Moody, this little one is Nigel Longbottom and you're behind a pub in Knockturn Alley. I'm sure you'll be right as rain again once we get you to St. Mungo's—"

"St. Mungo's," he repeated, squinting and clearly thinking very hard. "Hospital."

Moody smiled gruesomely and nodded at him. "That's right. Hospital. What's your name, lad?"

"Lowell Faulkner. Ravenclaw," he said automatically. Moody beamed.

"Excellent! You seem to be all right after all." He turned to Lockhart. "No thanks to *you*," he added to the blond wizard, whose smile had completely faded. His arms hung limply by his side. "Now, can you just *stand there* and *not* cause any more trouble? Just wait for the other ambulance. You *can* do that, yeah?" Moody turned to Lowell again. "Come along. He likes you," he told the boy, watching the baby play with a tassel on his hood; the Longbottoms' son didn't seem any the worse for wear, but it might be too soon to tell, Moody knew.

As they moved toward the ambulance, Lowell said to him, "What am I doing in Knockturn Alley? I've never been before. My mum and dad will kill me when they find out I was here."

"Ah, well, perhaps we needn't tell them, eh?" He sighed. Evidently the young man had forgotten just enough that he would be useless as a witness to the crime. That left them with the other lad, who was shaken up from being tortured....

"Not tell them? Okay," he said agreeably, sounding much younger than he looked. Moody reckoned he was about seventeen or eighteen, but for some reason his voice was pitched higher now than it had been, as though he were speaking in a falsetto.

"No, we don't need to tell them," he repeated, shaking his head. He levitated the stunned bodies of the Death Eaters into the back of the ambulance and climbed into the front with the young man and the baby just as another ambulance arrived at the side of the pub. He started to watch the orderlies from St. Mungo's levitating the Longbottoms' bodies into the back of the other ambulance, feeling sadder than he remembered in a very long time, when suddenly the ambulance in which they were riding disappeared from Knockturn Alley and he could no longer see the place where Frank and Gemma Longbottom had lost their minds.