

PA390

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PA390

by [Auror_School_Dropout](#)

Summary

Andromeda Tonks realizes that her cousin never got his trial. The Wizarding World will never be the same.

Notes

When I started this, it was supposed to be a series of 1k word drabbles set across a span of years from Sirius's (eventual) trial to the end of the canon series. It was supposed to follow Sirius's grief, recovery, and adult life through the eyes of everyone except him. The whole thing should've been 20k or less. Famous last words.

That original idea still survives, though it's... grown... slightly in scope. I currently have it roughly sketched out to be about seven arcs of 20k or less each, but we'll see how that goes. The plan is to edit and schedule each arc as I complete it, posting a chapter at a time.

I'll update characters and possible triggers as I add arcs to the story. For the current one, while there is no on-screen violence, there is discussion of the deaths of the Potters and the aftermath as well as non-consensual Legilimency.

An important note: I do not support JKR and do not share or endorse her transphobic views. I stand with my trans sisters.

Andromeda Tonks V the DMLE

The first thing Andromeda Tonks thought when she heard the news was that there was some kind of mistake. Her cousin Sirius loved that prat Potter more than his own brother. Nothing—no bribe, blackmail, threat, or torture—would ever make him turn against James. And yet, there it was, splashed across the front page of the Prophet: POTTERS DEAD; MANHUNT UNDERWAY FOR TRAITOR SIRIUS BLACK.

She folded the issue of the Prophet and went to be sure Dore was properly dressed for the day. Andromeda had finally given in and let the child choose their own clothing. And hair color. And other physical attributes. They'd been a girl more often than not lately, so a visit to the Ministry Department of Records was probably in the offing, but best to let them settle into it a bit, see where the pieces ended up. It would all sort itself out eventually.

Which, she reasoned, was probably also the proper thing to do with Sirius. Sit back. Keep a steady watch. And let everything fall where it may. Blacks were survivors first. He would set everything straight soon.

The second thing she thought, upon learning of his capture several days later, was that Sirius would rot in Azkaban for years. And rightly so, if the paper was to be believed. It apparently wasn't enough to betray the Potters. He'd gone after another of his friends and blown him to bits along with an entire Muggle street.

This, of course, seemed a bridge too far. This was Sirius, after all. Sirius who had been the only one to keep in contact with her, however loose, after she'd married Ted. Sirius who had run away from his ancestral home in the dead of night over the winter holiday without a knut to his name. Only Grandfather's intervention had prevented his formal disinheritance. The papers were hardly talking about the same man Andromeda knew.

Which was why the third thing she thought was that she had to witness the trial with her own two eyes. If he actually was a Death Eater and a traitor, she wanted to see him dragged away to justice. And if he wasn't, then he deserved to have one friendly face in the crowd. Either way, in a few short weeks, the truth would out. She just had to wait for the Ministry to set the date.

And so she waited and read the stories of how young Harry Potter was placed with a member of his mother's family somewhere in the Muggle world. She read the accounts of dozens of "former" Death Eaters coming forth to swear they hadn't gone along willingly but had been coerced by threat or placed under the Imperius Curse. She watched as news broke of her sister Bellatrix being arrested and swiftly tried and sentenced for torturing a pair of Aurors to insanity.

Had she missed the date? Overlooked the story somewhere in the onslaught of news that followed Voldemort's defeat? She combed through months of back issues and scanned every page. A case like her cousin's must have made the paper. And yet, there was nothing. No account of Sirius's trial or sentencing. Not a word since his arrest.

The fourth thing Andromeda Tonks thought was: This is bullshit.

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Work at the Ministry, they'd said. Meet exciting new people from across Europe. Witness the happenings others only glimpse. Get a finger on the pulse of the Wizarding world. What they meant was drown in the flood of arrests and arraignments after the fall of You-Know-Who and then flail to the surface just in time for the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to jump ship before the next wave. Eoin Graham barely had time to file the influx of transcripts, let alone read them.

But that was fine—Eoin wasn't the junior head of archives for nothing. There wasn't a task anyone could set that he couldn't accomplish as long as he had his crew. That was. Until she swept in.

“Andromeda Tonks nee Black,” she said without any niceties. “I need the transcripts of Sirius Black's trial.”

Simple enough. A tap of his wand sent index cards flicking through the catalogue until he found the one he needed. Sirius Black: Pertho Algiz 390. Currently serving a life sentence in Azkaban. With a gesture for Mrs. Tonks to make herself comfortable, Eoin set off into the depths of the archive.

Finding just one document in a storage area larger than a Quidditch pitch and just as many storeys high was equal parts finesse, sharp memory, and luck, as Eoin gladly told anyone who thought it was an easy summer gig. Not that anybody listened to the warning. And, truthfully, he was glad of the help the wide-eyed graduates provided, even as he watched the enthusiasm on their faces dwindle over the months.

Card in hand, he hopped to the proper section and wandered the aisle until he came to the file box for PA390. And found it empty.

Or, rather, nearly empty. A proper case file should contain five documents: the original arrest, including witness statements and Auror testimony; the prisoner's statement and plea; an account of all evidence and prisoner's effects; the trial transcripts; and the formal sentencing. Of those, PA390 had two. Only Black's initial processing and the writ of sentence were present. These, Eoin presented to Mrs. Tonks with an apologetic smile.

“You're welcome to read through the witness accounts—” he began, but the glare Mrs. Tonks fixed him with froze the words in his throat.

“I do not want the witness accounts,” she said. “Neither, before you offer them, do I want your excuses or your condolences. What I want is a direct answer. Why is my cousin in Azkaban without a trial when even Bellatrix Lestrange herself received one?”

Eoin swallowed, trying to gather his wits under the weight of Mrs. Tonks's glare. "Well, ma'am, it seemed, from reading former Director Crouch's statement, that Black was convicted and sentenced without the formality of a trial due to the overwhelming evidence of his guilt. I-If you would only read the corroborating statements—"

"I'll take the name of your interim director, please."

In the end, Eoin gave her the name, if only to get the very persistent Mrs. Andromeda Tonks out of his archives. And regretted it every day for the next two months.

It began innocently enough: a letter addressed to Interim Director Amelia Bones from the very same Mrs. Tonks. She requested, quite reasonably, that PA390 be reopened and properly tried. Madam Bones being a busy woman—and the Sirius Black matter already having been resolved quite some time ago—she sent a polite refusal.

The next day brought two letters, and the following brought four, each more strongly worded than the last. Madam Bones's undersecretaries resigned the letters to the rubbish bin, but each that they discarded reappeared on their desks before they even returned to the office. So they began shuffling them to the archives for storage instead.

By the end of the first week, letters had begun to arrive by the dozens, pouring in through the post drop. They filled one document box—filed under N for nuisance—and then another, and still they came. At his wit's end, Eoin cast the next day's into the fireplace, content to let that be the end of it. The following morning, the letters had been charmed to flap about like parchment bats, diving and swooping at the heads of every worker in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, its archives, or any unfortunate courier who had the ill luck to be happening by at the moment.

Two months in, the DMLE was a space under siege. The letters arriving daily outnumbered the official post, filling the air like buzzing gnats. The workers ducked for cover beneath their desks, wands at the ready to shoot down any letter near them.

Finally, Eoin made a break for it. He took the corridor to the Interim Director's office at the run, a flock of the cursed things streaming behind him. He skirted into the office and slammed the door shut.

"Madam Director," he panted as a rain of parchment wings beat against the wooden door and frame, "I think it's time to reconsider your position on the Sirius Black case."

Auror Smallwood V PA390

Chapter Notes

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Brynn Smallwood wrapped her arms tighter around herself as the wind whipped off the crashing waves. Her Auror's robes lashed around her slight figure, and her usually-sleek, cropped dark hair roiled like a living thing. The prison towered over her, a fortress of bleak stone on a bleaker island in the middle of the frigid North Sea. Azkaban.

Merlin, she hated this place.

The cold grew sharper as she approached, seeping into her bones like it was alive. Which, considering what was inside the prison, wasn't too far off.

At the towering doors, she inserted her wand and muttered her passphrase. Bolts slid aside as she retrieved her wand, the scrape of ice on steel setting goosebumps up her arms that had nothing to do with the chill. With one last look over her shoulder at the weakening sun, she stepped in and let the doors slam shut behind.

The inside of Azkaban was black as the rock it was carved from and just as silent. At least, it was on this level. It would be a different story once she reached the cells. Off to her right, the torches lining the stairwell sputtered to life to light the way to the one she needed.

This was a ten-minute errand, she told herself. Up to the cell, fetch the prisoner, back to the Ministry. She made herself take one step and then another and then to begin to climb.

Two storeys. Three. Four. Perhaps slightly more than ten minutes since she couldn't Apparate within these walls. The cold grew worse, a shiver of doubt growing at the edge of her mind.

Then came the sound, a terrible, trembling wail welling up out of the blackness above her. Her training took over; Brynn sprinted up the remaining flights toward the sound and burst through into the corridor.

At the far end, a half dozen Dementors clustered around a single cell like vultures around prey not quite dead yet. Their wraithlike black cloaks billowed in an unfelt wind, hands like rotting corpses' grasping at the bars. The inhuman keening that sparked her instincts spiked--

"Expecto patronum!"

Her Patronus exploded from the tip of her wand, bright as a comet after the flickering torchlight. The gleaming silver horse charged the Dementors and sent them away shrieking. She'd catch hell for it later, and it wouldn't give the prisoner very long of a reprieve, but at least she'd bought them a minute's reprieve. Not even convicts deserved that depth of misery.

Brynn took a moment to catch her breath, the cold air burning in her lungs. As she did, the whimpers from the poor soul in the cell subsided, but a more eerie sound took its place. Applause.

From down the rime-crusted corridor carried a slow, rhythmic clapping. Fingers tightening on the hilt of her wand, Brynn crept forward. The sound came from the cell at the corner, barely within the orange glow of the last torch. The prisoner stayed back from the light, propped in the far corner, but there was no mistaking the arrogant tilt of his head or the smirk that tugged at his lips. Sirius Black.

"He'd been at it for days," he said, voice rough with disuse. "Thought I'd never get a good night's sleep with him carrying on like that. I owe you one, Smalls."

"*Smallwood.*" Brynn leveled her wand at him. "On your feet, Three-ninety. Now."

His head dropped back against the wall and he gave a sharp, bark-like laugh. "Is that any way to talk to an old friend after so long? It must be almost a year by—"

He broke off as her Stunning Spell struck the stone beside his face.

"We aren't friends." Brynn jerked the tip of her wand skyward. "Up. Now. Or my official report will say you tried to run. Believe me, after all you did, I would love the opportunity to hit you with another stunner."

Slowly, he gathered his long limbs in and pushed to his feet. He'd lost weight; his uniform hung loosely from his frame, his once-handsome face gaunt. His bare feet had chafed red, and his threadbare blanket slipped from his shoulders as he stood. He didn't even shiver, as if he didn't feel the cold at all.

Or, evidently, any guilt.

For most, nine months in Azkaban would have been enough for the weight of their crimes to at least begin to crack their resolve, but he met her gaze levelly. She'd expected there to be little trace of the man she'd known from the Order, the one she had recommended for Auror training. But despite his physical state, his grey gaze was as keen as though he'd hardly been here a day.

"Where are we off to, then?" Black held out his wrists expectantly, and with a flick of her wand, the charmed shackles she'd been sent with slapped themselves on. "Don't think I'm due a shower for another year or two at least."

Brynn clenched her jaw and opened the cell door. It wasn't too late to just drop him in the North Sea, she told herself as she paraded him back through the prison and past the other

convicts. Several—probably the newest arrived and not yet mad—shouted lewd guesses as to where she might be taking him.

For his own part, Black strode down the corridor as if it were his personal parade, waving and blowing theatrical kisses as best as his shackles would allow. He continued his little swagger all the way to the top of the stairs.

“Walk,” Brynn growled, prodding him in the back with her wand when paused on the landing.

“Aren't we moving a little quick?” he asked, throwing her an exaggerated wink over his shoulder. “You know I'm shy.”

“I said *walk*—”

This time, it was her shoulder she put into his back and--shit--sent him tumbling. A hasty snap of her wand caught him a half-flight of freefall later.

Careful, Smallwood, she chided herself. For all his strutting, Black wasn't as steady on his feet as he appeared. And it wouldn't do for her to actually accidentally kill him.

“Thanks, Smalls. I was wondering how I was going to manage the stairs. Atrophy and all,” he said, righting himself. “Happens, you know, without adequate nutrition or exercise.”

If he'd been smug before, it was only show. Now it had given way to something else. Rage.

Brynn only caught a moment of it, the briefest narrowing of his eyes, the set of his jaw, before the cover-all smirk returned. She gestured him forward with her wand, keeping a cautious distance now.

“Get on with it, then.”

The remaining flights took longer than she'd have liked, her ten-minute retrieval stretching for an hour or more. Black leaned heavily on the frigid stone walls for support as he navigated the steep stairs, and he had to sit at every half-flight landing to rest before hauling himself up again for another ten steps. She let him have his time—under no circumstance was she getting that close again. It had been careless to allow it once. Bound or not, weakened or not, it would only take a second's inattention to lose her wand and then her life.

At last, they reached the entrance, and she unlocked it. The immense double doors swung inward, ushering a cold sea breeze through. She'd expected him to shiver. She hadn't expected the full-body gasp as he gazed out at the stretch of rock and surf that made up the island and its surroundings. Black stepped tentatively over the threshold as if onto shards of glass and turned his face up into the night wind.

Brynn reached into her robes and pulled out a photograph. The last one she had of the Order all together, before James and Lily had gone into hiding with their son. Before anyone knew what Black had done.

He'd gone a few steps away from her, gaping at the sky as though he'd never seen the stars before. She spun him about and slapped the photo to his chest, the Portkey that would dump him into his holding cell at the DMLE. It seemed fitting that the people he'd betrayed would be the ones taking him to finally face his actions head-on.

“Enjoying the view, traitor? Because you'll never see it again,” she said. He glanced at the photo, his mouth dropping open. Before the Portkey activated, she met his wide-eyed surprise with a glare. “After all this is through, I hope you get the Kiss.”

Director Bones V Reasonable Doubt

Chapter Notes

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There were several things that Interim Director Amelia Bones did not suffer lightly. Injustice, chiefly, but also prejudice, disloyalty, duplicity, and arrogance. All of this meant that, faced with the ruinous young man who had once been Sirius Black, she wasn't quite certain which aspect of his presence here she should disdain the most. On the one hand, she despised that her predecessor had ignored the rule of law and cast Black into Azkaban without a trial, thus necessitating her intervention now, nearly ten months after the fact. However.

On the other hand, there was little doubt in the way of Black's guilt. Testimony from two highly-respected Aurors and witness statements from over a dozen Muggles all pointed to his overwhelming culpability. But in the end, it was her desire to give Black his day in court—as well as to end his cousin Andromeda's assault on the DMLE—that settled her on this course of action.

Two days after Mr. Black's arrival at the Ministry, she went to see him in his holding cell. He was a terrible sight, even after a scrub and a change of clothes. He'd been so promising once, a bright young wizard who defied everything his family stood for. But perhaps some evils truly did run blood deep.

“Have you been told why you're here, Mr. Black?” she asked the figure huddled in the farthest corner. He, apparently, hadn't moved from that spot since his washing except to eat and relieve himself.

Even now, he hardly glanced her way, fixated as he was with the crinkled photograph he clutched. “If you're going to have me killed, let's just get on with it,” he muttered. “I won't have you make a spectacle of me.”

A guard stepped forward, wand in hand, to discipline him for his cheek, but Amelia waved the woman away. If words were the only weapon Mr. Black had at his disposal, let him fling them how he would.

“That is one possible outcome, yes.” That, at least, wrenched his attention from the photo in his hands. “Should your guilt be proven, I intend to use this case as a deterrent to any Death Eaters still in hiding. Your execution will be swift and public so we can put to rest any claim of your being denied due process.

“If, however, we are able to prove your innocence, then we’ll be setting right a grave wrong done to you by former Director Bartemius Crouch.”

Black stared at her as if she'd told him Earth had two moons. “You’re giving me a trial?”

“Potentially,” Amelia said, raising a finger. “I will be using a Pensieve to review the memories of several key witnesses. I also have investigators using forensic spells on the artifacts recovered from you at the time of your arrest, including your wand. Should *that* examination prove indecisive, you'll be invited to give your testimony. Do you understand?”

But Mr. Black had already withdrawn back into himself. He curled his knees to his chest and resumed his examination of the photograph he held. In spite of herself, for the sake of the young man he’d once been and for the law she held so dear, Amelia sincerely hoped she could offer him the chance at the latter.

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When Amelia returned to her office, the space had been set up for the first part of her review. Two comfortable chairs sat on either side of a low table, one of them occupied by Headmaster Dumbledore.

The usually-chipper man seemed almost somber today, dressed in robes of a relatively sedate deep purple as opposed to his typical flamboyant fashion. His long, silver beard was even restrained, bound with a tasseled ornament. She was glad to see that, jovial as he was, he understood the gravity of the undertaking.

“Thank you for joining me tonight, Headmaster.” She extended a hand to Dumbledore, which he rose to take. After a brief, warm shake, he resumed his seat, and she folded neatly into her own. “You brought the Pensieve?”

He bent to unbuckle the fastenings on the large carpetbag at his feet. “As well as the memories you requested from Hagrid, yes.”

Dumbledore lifted the shallow stone basin from the bag and settled it on the table between them. Beside it, he set a small glass phial that seemed to be filled with silver mist: the memory of Rubeus Hagrid from the night the of Potters’ murder.

“I must confess, Madam Director,” he said, “I’m unsure of your decision to reopen this matter. As much as I would love to believe Sirius had no involvement in James and Lily’s deaths, I'm doubtful we’ll find any evidence to the contrary. This may set a dangerous precedent, especially if you continue on in your office, suggesting that you’ll re-investigate any number of Voldemort’s supporters.”

It also meant, she realized, that she was casting doubt on his testimony in specific. It was largely at his recommendation that the Black case was closed, after all, so he would have a certain amount of clout to lose if she reopened it.

She wavered a moment, pinned under the weight of Dumbledore’s gaze as though gravity had

increased. Then she shook it away. Surely there was nothing to find, and the whole matter would be moot.

Amelia grasped the rim of the Pensieve, the rune-etched rim icy under her palms. “I understand. May we proceed?”

Dumbledore gave a small nod, plucked the vial from its place on the table, and pulled the stopper. He poured the contents into the shallow basin, where they eddied and pooled like shimmering ribbons in a breeze.

At his urging, she lowered her face nearer to the Pensieve. The ceaselessly swirling mass smoothed, turning glasslike, until it seemed that she were looking down on a small cottage from a window above it. Part of the house’s roof had been blown away, and as the window swooped nearer, she could make out the debris of singles and plaster littering the lawn.

She nearly pulled away—there was no obligation for her to see this ridiculous investigation through to its end. The Potters were gone; a senseless tragedy that no amount of prying would undo. What would reopening it really accomplish aside from tarnishing the image of the Ministry and stealing her time and attention away from Susan?

The thought chilled her. There were no memories to view of the night her brother and his wife were murdered. The Death Eaters responsible had slipped away, likely folded themselves back into civilized society. Her niece would never have definitive answers for what happened to her parents or the security of knowing that those involved were punished. But Harry? Amelia could give him that surety.

She steadied herself and looked again at the scene below her in the bowl, near enough to make out the growing crowd of Muggles swarming to gawk at the ruins. “I’m ready.”

“Hold on tight, then.” Dumbledore’s steady hands landed on top of hers. “And stay close. Memories can be difficult enough to navigate when they’re not magnified by strong emotion.”

Taking a deep breath, Amelia leaned forward and let the cool, fluid memory well around her. She had heard that falling into a Pensieve was akin to plunging headlong into icy water: terrifying; dizzying; disorienting. With Dumbledore to guide her descent, though, it was more like sliding along a cool, slick chute. They soared around the house, circling as they fell, until the Pensieve deposited them with a soft thump outside of the Potters’ gate.

“‘Scuse me,” said a rough voice to their rear.

Amelia reflexively stepped aside to let Hagrid by. It occurred to her only after that he hadn’t been speaking to her or Dumbledore but to the assemblage of Muggles, witches, and wizards massing on the sidewalk. Hagrid gently nudged his way through the crowd, several of those gathered unsure if they should stare at the wreckage or at this giant of a man in their midst.

“Friends o’ mine inside,” Hagrid said as he cleared the last of the throng and stepped through the gate. Useless though it was, he latched it behind him. “Jus’ gonna check on ‘em.”

Clutching a pink umbrella tight in his oversized fists, Hagrid strode up the walkway toward the house. Madam Bones made to follow him, but Dumbledore caught her arm lightly.

“Remember, we can only observe, Amelia. No matter what you see, it has already occurred.”

She nodded her understanding and set off after the groundskeeper. She caught up to him as he reached the front door. It hung on one hinge, the remnants of a Blasting evident in the charring around the frame. Hagrid ducked and fitted himself through, and she followed into the living room.

Beside her, Hagrid sucked in a short breath, and she felt her own lungs do the same. She had expected the room to be in ruins, the pieces of the Potters’ lives scattered like the missing roof on the storey above. Instead, as if to mock what had happened, everything remained in the ordered disarray familiar to any family with a toddler.

Half of Harry’s toys poked haphazardly out of the chest in the corner, the other half piled against it as if he’d tried to put them away himself. Cups of tea, long since cold, sat forgotten on the table. A blanket lay discarded beside the couch. It looked as though the Potters could come downstairs at any moment and pick up their story where it left off.

Except for the cracked plaster in the wall across from the door and the red that streaked down from it to collect in a dark pool against the baseboards. According to the reports, that should have been where James Potter died. But he was not there now.

“Albus,” she murmured, indicating the spot with a nod of her head. Bootprints smeared the blood before tracking it upstairs.

Apparently, Hagrid noticed it at the same time, for the umbrella came up with a snap. He held it before him like a sword, his shaggy head sweeping side to side as he took in the rest of the room.

“James?” he called. From the story above came the sound of a child crying but no other answer. Hagrid edged toward the stairs, pink umbrella poised. “Lily?”

Amelia stalked after him, Dumbledore behind her. Hagrid followed the trail of blood to the first door at the right of the stairs and pushed it open. Two covered figures lay in the bed; the footprints led to it and then away, growing fainter. This answered, at least, where the body of James Potter had gone, though Hagrid didn’t approach to remove the blanket.

Harry cried again from down the hall, and Hagrid put his back to the wretched sight and padded toward the room at the far end. Umbrella at the ready, he nudged the nursery door ajar.

“Sirius?”

Amelia ducked under Hagrid’s outstretched arm and into the wreckage of the room. Here was the carnage she’d expected downstairs. Sirius Black sat by the shattered window in a rocking

chair, the only thing still standing. Everything else—the lamp, toys, even the crib—had been strewn about by whatever had blasted away the ceiling and roof above.

Black didn't answer, just continued gently rocking the crying baby he clutched to his chest. Black's boots and the hems of his sleeves were stained red, and he stared blankly ahead with bloodshot eyes.

"It's all righ'," Hagrid said, putting his umbrella aside as Black took a deep, shuddering breath. The groundskeeper moved to take Harry, but Black only clutched the squalling toddler tighter. "It's all righ', Sirius. C'mon, give 'im over—there ya go."

Amelia drew back as Hagrid tucked the child inside his massive moleskin coat. She couldn't feel her surroundings, but she imagined the night was cold, especially with the room now open to the elements. Eventually, warm and snug inside Hagrid's coat, Harry quieted.

"Why didn't Black take the boy and run, Dumbledore?" Amelia asked. "He had ample time."

Dumbledore, watching from the nursery door, heaved a sigh. "I've asked myself that same question, Amelia. Despite watching this memory countless times, I've never come any closer to an answer."

"Perhaps he did have some love of the Potters, still? Or was having second thoughts now that the deed was done?"

Dumbledore didn't respond, his attention fixed still on the figures in the memory. He watched them from over the rim of his half-moon glasses like a distant problem he was trying to bring into focus. "I'm afraid there's only one person who could tell us that, and I don't imagine he'd be so inclined."

Black wiped his eyes on his sleeve, he and Hagrid having also exchanged words while she and Dumbledore spoke.

"I'm doing better, thanks, Hagrid," Black said as he stood and held out his arms. "I'll take Harry back now."

The bigger man shifted his weight from foot to foot. "'Fraid I can't do that. Orders from Dumbledore—I'm supposed to take 'im straight ter 'is aunt's."

"To—to Petunia?!" Black sputtered. At Hagrid's nod, he pressed on, "To Petunia *Dursley*. Lily's magic-hating, go-back-to-freak-school, don't infect my family with your nasty witchcraft sister. *That* aunt?"

Hagrid gave a sheepish nod. "It's Dumbledore's orders, is all. Thinks he'll be safer there, y'know, with all the Muggles around. Til he knows what happened ter Yeh-Know-Who."

A shadow came over Black's face.

"Don't be foolish, Hagrid." Black's voice was still pleasant enough, though louder. "I'm

Harry's godfather—he belongs with me.”

He smiled, a tight stretch of the lips that didn't reach his eyes. His posture changed, spine straightening, one foot sliding backward. He didn't yet have a wand in his hand, but only an idiot wouldn't recognize a wizard shifting into a dueling stance.

Hagrid, evidently, was just such an idiot. “An' I'm sure Dumbledore meant no harm by it. But I got my orders, and it's ter the Dursleys he goes. Yeh can take it up with him.”

“Do you think this is a *game*? Harry goes with me—I'm not asking!”

Whatever Black had been about to do was, mercifully, interrupted by young Harry Potter himself. From within the folds of Hagrid's coat, the boy gave a trembling wail.

“Oh, shh—shh—” Hagrid pulled the moleskin of his coat aside to reveal the red-faced Harry. The boy sucked in another lungful of air and let out a long, shrill wail as Hagrid patted his back. “Now look what yeh done, Sirius, yer scaring the tyke. Now yeh just settle down, both o' yeh.”

He hummed to himself, swaying back and forth the long minutes until Harry quieted again. Black watched, the fight draining from him as the boy went still in Hagrid's arms.

“Help me find something ter wrap 'im up in?” he asked, still rocking gently.

Amelia expected Black to argue, but he actually fetched a thick blanket from the closet and shook it out. “How are you getting to Surrey?”

Hagrid patted one of his coat's many pockets. “Dumbledore gave me a Portkey. Should pop me righ' over.”

“Oh, Merlin—Hagrid, you can't take Harry by Portkey!”

Harry fussed again, and Hagrid shot Black a warning look before shushing them both.

“My point stands,” Black insisted, though quieter. “A Portkey's fast, but it's terrifying even when you know what's happening. He's been through more than enough tonight.”

Black hesitated and then reached into his robes. “Here.” He held out a tiny silver key on a chain. “There's a motorbike parked on the lawn; it's mine. It flies. Handles like a dream, practically drives itself. It's got about a dozen or so Muggle-repelling charms and notice-me-nots on it. Harry loves that bike.”

“Not the one yeh an' James worked on?” Hagrid asked, and Black nodded. “I couldn't take that from yeh, not now, 'specially.”

“You can, and you will. It's safer for Harry. And besides.” Before Hagrid could stop him, Black shoved the key into the giant's hand and stepped away. “I won't be needing it anymore.”

Hagrid stammered a protest, but Black had already turned and disappeared down the hall. When Hagrid didn't follow him, Amelia set off after Black at a run. As she dashed back through the house, the walls faded to a muted grey. Portraits lost their definition; even Black himself, just ahead, seemed lost in a haze. How far would the memory reach without the observer present?

By the time they reached the front lawn, she could barely see him through the mist building in her vision. Black rounded the corner of the house, away from the prying eyes of the Muggles, and pulled his wand from the pocket of his robes.

"Peter," he murmured to himself. "James and Lily are dead. And, when I find you, so are you."

~ ~ ~

"I see you reached the limits of Hagrid's recollection," Dumbledore mused, his placid voice drawing Amelia back to her own office: the thick, plush upholstery of the chair; the tick of the clock on the wall. "What we could do with just a few more seconds."

He pushed a cup of strong, sweet tea toward her, and she took it in her shaking hands. As she took a careful sip, Dumbledore explained that the exhaustion and the tremors sometimes accompanied visiting potent memories.

"Did you learn what you needed?"

Amelia shook her head, thanked Dumbledore for his time and the use of the Pensieve, and excused herself to record what she'd witnessed. If anything, the memory had raised more questions than it had settled. Dumbledore had sent Hagrid to the Potters' the instant the monitoring charms he'd set around the house had failed. And yet, somehow, Black had beaten him to the site. That weighed strongly on his guilt.

There was also the fact that he was the Secret Keeper; nobody who knew Potter and Black during their days at Hogwarts or after could have any doubt of who the first choice would be for such a crucial task. He also threatened Pettigrew, which she'd heard plainly in the memory. Black's voluntary breaking of the Fidelius and then resolving to finish the job he'd started was the only solution to all of those issues.

However, For all that, when faced with an unprotected, crying toddler, he'd taken the time to comfort the child. He had given Harry over to Hagrid—reluctantly, perhaps, but he'd done it nonetheless—and ensured that they both had safe transport. Black had even, in what she could only assume was a fit of guilt, placed the Potters' bodies together and covered them. None of that made sense when stacked against the rest.

Assuming, then, that he'd been coerced. Secret Keepers couldn't reveal details about the object of their protection under Imperius, but the rules on what precisely counted as *willing* disclosure were murky at best. If another family were threatened, perhaps, or if it came down to the weight of his own life versus the secret he carried. There weren't many who would be

able to resist under such conditions.

Which *still* wouldn't answer for what he had done to Peter Pettigrew.

Amelia thrust her quill and ink away. So much for her open-and-shut case against one of the most hated Death Eaters in Britain.

Auror Smallwood V Director Bones

Chapter Notes

I do not support JKR and do not share or endorse her transphobic views. I stand with my trans sisters.

Brynn took a steadying breath and raised a hand to rap on the door. “You sent for me, Director Bones?”

The Interim Director glanced up from the pile of parchment strewn over her desk, straightened her monocle, and cleared a space among the clutter. “Smallwood. Excellent. Have a seat.”

The few times Brynn had seen this office prior to the Black affair being reopened, it had been immaculate. No stacks of reports or the piles of statements that now cluttered the worktable beside the desk. Which, she supposed, only spoke to the attention Director Bones was devoting to the task. Now, she set out a fresh roll of parchment, pot of ink, and a Dicta Quill, which wet its nib and poised itself to write. Brynn settled into the chair across the desk from her, back straight, head up, hands folded in her lap.

“What can I do for you, ma'am?” Brynn asked, trying to ignore the scratching of the quill as it jotted down her question. Sixteen years around magic and she still hadn't quite gotten used to objects moving on their own. At least in the Muggle world, things stayed where you put them.

Steepling her fingers, Director Bones fixed Brynn with a long, cool stare. Merlin, it was unnerving how the woman never seemed to blink.

“Sirius Black.” Director Bones’s voice kept her even, matter-of-fact tone. “Tell me everything you know about him.”

Brynn’s hands curled into fists in her lap, her deep brown skin straining white across her knuckles. “He’s a traitor and a murder, ma’am. That's all I need to know.”

The Director arched one grey eyebrow. “Believe me, I understand your sentiments. But I am also given to understand that you’ve known him for over a decade. If I’m to get any insight into Black’s case, I need to know *everything* that you do.”

At last, she looked away to get her wand and let Brynn compose herself. With a swish, the Director summoned a small tea service for them and gestured for Brynn to help herself. While Brynn busied her hands with pouring the tea, Director Bones leaned forward

attentively, lips pressed to her steepled fingers.

“From the beginning, if you please.”

Brynn bit back a sigh. “I met Sirius Black in my fifth year.”

She’d just made Prefect and couldn’t have been prouder of that gleaming badge on her chest. If she’d known precisely who it would mean wrangling, she’d have refused it on the spot.

Black was what Mum would have called a born troublemaker. Especially when he was paired up with Potter, and it only multiplied once Pettigrew and Lupin rounded out their little group. He couldn’t seem to help himself, often going out of his way to antagonize his relatives in Slytherin.

Not that she could particularly blame him, not with the slurs that seemed to drip from their mouths whenever he was in earshot. But that didn’t mean that she could let him break rules and get away with it, so their earliest interactions hadn’t been pleasant. She’d been duty-bound to dock House Points from him and his friends, which made all five of them an unpopular presence in Gryffindor Tower.

That had changed about halfway through the year. Sirius and his lot hadn’t made it back to the common room before curfew, so she’d taken her wand and gone to collect them. She found the boys up to their knees and elbows in a brawl with several of the older Slytherin students.

She had waded into the fray and, after the spells and punches stopped flying and all but two of the little snakes slithered off, she got the whole story from them. Brynn barely knew the two first-year Slytherins except that they were twins. Muggleborns, at that, she learned.

“Punish me for it if you have to,” Sirius had said, his chin jutted out. “But if the professors won’t do anything to shut Narcissa’s big mouth, then I’m going to keep putting my fist in it.”

Black should have lost points. He and his friends should have brought Gryffindor so far behind that nothing short of a perfect year would have made it up. But then Brynn caught a look at the two young Slytherins. They’d only known magic existed for a couple months at most, and hadn’t that been terrifying enough when she was a first-year without also being tormented by her own housemates? Brynn was strict, yes, but she wasn’t cruel.

“Here’s the deal,” she had said, eyeing up Black and the others. “I’m going to take these two to Madam Pomfrey. If you lot are in bed before I make it back to the tower, I didn’t see a thing.”

She’d never seen four young Gryffindors sprint faster.

And so had begun a tentative partnership between her, the two Muggleborn Slytherins, and the newly-minted Marauders. They never discussed it properly, but everyone fell naturally into their role. Black and his friends would play all manner of pranks throughout Hogwarts, but “somehow” the Jones twins were always the ones that Brynn caught in the act and

brought to Slughorn to be disciplined. The two little snakes lost points faster than the rest of their House could earn them back, and Slytherin watched one House Cup and then another slip out of reach.

It was Brynn's seventh year then, and the slurs and insults slowed to a trickle among most of Slytherin's student body. The majority of them had more important things to worry about than a couple of Muggleborns intentionally throwing points away.

But most wasn't all. Gradually, the Marauders' target shifted. It became less important to punish Slytherin as a whole and more so to make Hogwarts miserable for a certain insufferable sect. By that point, everyone knew that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had supporters in the school, but nobody dared to do anything about it. And, really, Death Eater sympathizers—and even recruiters—within the walls of Hogwarts were nothing compared to the actual Death Eaters outside them.

“By the time I graduated, I could tell Black was going to be a force unto himself. Potter was the arrowhead, but Black was the drawn bow. Put together, the Wizarding world would never know what hit it.”

Brynn sipped her tea and grimaced. It had long since gone cold while she talked. Director Bones warmed it with a brisk flick of her wand.

“And then?”

Teacup cradled in her hands, Brynn settled back in her seat. “I didn't see him again for several years.”

After graduating, she'd gone straight into the feeder program for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. The courses to qualify for Auror were brutal, leaving little time for anything except training and sleeping, and sometimes not even the latter. And, thriving as she did on the cutthroat competition, they were the best three years of her life.

When next their paths crossed, Brynn had just earned her full credentials, and Black had graduated from Hogwarts a few months prior. She'd been sharpened, honed by three years of intense practice and then sent out to act as the DMLE's right hand in the middle of the worst war the Wizarding World had seen since Grindelwald. Black, meanwhile, had grown from a teenage boy full of elbows and spite to a young man made of equal parts confidence, competence, and fearless resolve. What he didn't have in training, he made up for in determination.

They ran into each other as each followed the trail of a trio of Death Eaters who had been terrorizing the Muggle communities around Norwich for months. Brynn and her senior partner Harper were on assignment from the Ministry, and Black—

“I am well aware of Dumbledore's little vigilante group,” the Director said with an impatient wave of her hand. “You don't need to hide your involvement with them; I'd be more surprised if they hadn't recruited you or at least attempted. Continue.”

Brynn fought down the heat climbing the back of her neck. It was too much to hope that her extracurriculars during the war had gone unnoticed. But at least Director Bones didn't seem angry, only annoyed by that particular detail.

"We caught the Death Eaters, ma'am. You won't find mention of him in the official report for obvious reasons, but Black was instrumental in the arrest."

At Director Bones's nod, Brynn pressed on. After that first capture, she and Black had met up several dozen more times. Sometimes accidentally, but more often it was engineered by one of them or the other. It was a great help to Brynn's cases to have someone who wasn't, strictly speaking, bound by the oaths she'd taken as an Auror. And she liked to think the information she provided was more than worth the risk the Order took by associating with someone not officially brought on board. Then, about three years ago as the fighting moved more into the open and the casualties grew, Black had brought her into the Order formally.

And then everything changed. She'd gone home for the holidays and found her mother's house ablaze, the Dark Mark a livid green into the sky among the roiling smoke. Her mother and younger brother had, mercifully, been killed swiftly before the fire was set.

Brynn slammed her teacup down, hot water sloshing over the rim. She stared at the spilled tea that soaked her hands. She could feel the heat of it like embers under her palms, up her arms, as she'd tried to force herself through the conjured flames. Like Black's hands on her wrists, holding her back.

"Merlin, I hated him. He kept saying that just because I had leave to use deadly force, that didn't mean I *should*. And, besides that, I shouldn't go off alone and without thinking. Not when it was that personal. I listened. Looking back, I suppose he was trying to protect his allies."

"I hate to say it but, regardless of his reasons, he was correct."

Director Bones held out a napkin, and Brynn took it and cleaned herself up. At least it gave her somewhere else to look while she got herself back under control. It had been awhile since she'd related the story, and looking at it in a fresh light only dug new knives into the old wounds. She could kill Black herself for that alone.

When she handed the napkin back, Director Bones shook it out and folded the once-again bone dry cloth crisply. "We can stop for now, if you need to. I know it's a difficult topic."

But the Director had never let her own loss get in the way of her job, no matter what the case. Even now, she listened to Brynn's story not impassively or coldly but resolutely. It wasn't that the Director didn't care. It was that there was something she cared about more. And Brynn could respect that and rise to meet it.

She swallowed hard and waved away the offer, both to stop and of a fresh cup of tea. The last thing she needed was something else to spill all over herself or the Director's desk.

"Let's move on, then," Director Bones said. "Tell me about Pettigrew."

“It was two days after the Potters died. Pettigrew burst into the DMLE like he’d seen the Grim. He kept looking back over his shoulder as though he were being followed. He said Sirius Black was trying to kill him.”

Pettigrew looked nothing like the round-faced boy Brynn knew from Hogwarts, the jovial one among the Marauders. Or even like the man from the Order who’d helped process all the incoming reports to look for patterns and plan where to funnel their attention. His eyes—bloodshot and sunken into dark rings—never stopped moving until they lit on a friendly face. He’d all but collapsed at Brynn’s desk.

“You have to help me,” he’d begged. “Sirius knows where my flat is. I just came from there, he—he destroyed it. Everything’s all blown apart. My wards are wrecked. He’s coming for me!”

No matter how badly she wanted to, she couldn’t offer him much. Not a guard, not a place to hide. With You-Know-Who only recently defeated, Ministry resources were stretched as it was, and the DMLE was overworked to the point of collapse with rounding up the suddenly-leaderless Death Eaters before they went to ground. But they couldn’t pass up the chance to apprehend the worst one of all, either. So, with leave from then-Director Crouch and Pettigrew to use as bait, they set up a sting.

“I’m sure you know how it went from there.”

“I don’t, actually.” Director Bones plucked a folded packet of parchment from the pile on her desk and held it out. Brynn recognized her own writing from almost a year ago, the account she’d given of Black’s capture. Her wax seal was still intact—

“Former Director Crouch didn’t even read it before Black’s sentence was passed down?” she asked. It was so small a thing, but the wrongness of it sat in Brynn’s stomach like a weight.

“One of many, if you’ll pardon me, bones I intend to pick with my predecessor,” the current Director said. “I’ll review it myself after, but if you’ll indulge me for now.”

It was simple in theory. Public space, lots of Muggles present, Pettigrew seemingly alone. Black wouldn’t dare attack under those conditions, and as soon as he showed himself, Brynn and Harper would make the arrest. If they’d only known how wrong it would go.

It started with Pettigrew himself. He only had to hold it together for a few short minutes once Black appeared, but he couldn’t seem to hold still. He kept pacing, breaking the line of sight. He would stand in the center of the crowded square for a few minutes, and then he’d wander around the corner onto the neighboring street and back again. He fiddled with his wand, smoothed his hair, and paced out of view again.

“We should call it,” Harper said, watching as Pettigrew made another circuit. “If he panics, the whole thing is blown.”

Brynn shook her head. “He can do it. He has to. We’ll only get one shot at this.”

Harper had tapped his wand against the palm of his hand and stared down at the street below. “Ten minutes. If Black doesn’t show in ten minutes, then we think of something else.”

And, as fate would have it, the bastard reared his head at nine minutes and eighteen seconds.

Brynn huffed a sigh. “Pettigrew panicked and started yelling at Black about how he’d betrayed the Potters. Black must have said something, because Pettigrew forgot what he was supposed to do and ran. He skirted the corner before we could get ourselves between him and Black, and—”

“And then the explosion,” Director Bones finished.

“Right. By the time we made it to the site, there was nothing but a crater. Blast had knocked Black clear into a building. He picked himself up, looked at what he’d done, and he just... started laughing. All those people dead, and he was *laughing*.”

Brynn shook her head, trying to dislodge the sound from her memory. A rap at the door drove it off the rest of the way.

Harper entered, looking better than Brynn had seen him in months. After the Black incident, he’d been hard-pressed to concentrate in the field, and it had taken a toll on his work in the aftermath of the war. His transfer to forensic magics seemed to be treating him well. Now he had his greying hair cropped short and a pair of tiny round glasses perched on his slender nose.

“Sorry to interrupt, Director Bones,” he began, indicating the sheaf of parchment he carried, “but I finished the examination on Black’s wand, and...”

Harper tapped a finger against the report he carried. It was a nervous twitch he’d developed in the wake of that day. He usually managed to keep it hidden—it was dangerous for them to have such an identifiable tell—but it still sneaked out from time to time. Usually when he was about to deliver bad news.

“And...?” Director Bones prompted when he didn’t continue.

Harper caught himself in the midst of his fidget and shoved his hand into the pocket of his robes. “Well, ma’am, there’s a problem. Black didn’t cast any Blastings.”

Director Bones V Public Perception

Chapter Notes

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Bonus chapter this week! It's a short one, so I felt bad holding it back a whole week. Enjoy!

Not many people around the DMLE had ever had the privilege of surprising Interim Director Amelia Bones. Fewer have gotten her to swear. In the span of three sentences, Kendrick Harper had done both. Her stupor didn't last long, though. Propriety be damned, she rounded her desk, snatched the report from his outstretched hands, and skimmed through it herself.

"My findings are on page--" he started, but she flicked her monocled gaze his way and froze the words in his throat.

"Smallwood," Amelia snapped, and the younger woman shot to her feet, "you're dismissed. Harper, can you recreate these findings?"

At his stunned nod, she spun on a heel and marched off toward the forensic workrooms. He followed a half-step behind as she fired questions at him over her shoulder.

"Methodology?" she demanded.

"Standard *Prior Incantato*."

"How far back?"

"Twenty spells."

"How quickly can he cast? Have you interviewed his former professors? Classmates? Could he have had a second wand on his person that he discarded?"

Harper answered her as best as he could, but each "I don't know" or "Not yet, ma'am" or "Highly unlikely, ma'am" only fueled her canter to his workstation. There were too many variables here, too many unknowns, and far too little time. She had weeks left before Minister Bagnold expected her to present this case before the empaneled Wizengamot. The evidence had to be airtight, or this time Black would be shipped off for good.

If Amelia thought her own office was in shambles, it had nothing on Harper's workstation.

Notes on scraps of parchment lay strewn about amid cans of half-empty cans of Muggle sodas and dried-out ink pots he'd forgotten to cap. Amelia barely suppressed a wince.

Once, Kendrick Harper had been the pride of the Aurors Division. Many pegged him as a successor for Alastor Moody, himself. Clearly, those days were past. He'd be laughed right out of the trial if—

Amelia shook the thoughts away. He only had to speak clearly and present his findings. It was hardly as though the entire court was going to tromp through his workspace. She could salvage this.

"You're certain of your results?" Amelia asked, turning her attention to the wand lain out on the desk. "Beyond a doubt?"

"I spoke to Ollivander about it," Harper said, pulling the transcript of the discussion from underneath his unfinished lunch. "Twelve inches, mahogany, dragon heartstring. By all accounts, this wand is a powerhouse. It could definitely have created that crater in the hands of someone who knew what they were doing with that kind of oomph.

"But there's the problem. Like I said, there's no Blasting of any kind anywhere in the last twenty spells Black threw. Not a Bombarda, not a Confringo, not even an Incendio if he was lucky enough to actually hit a gas line."

Amelia pressed him on it. "Multiple witnesses reported seeing Black, wand drawn, shouting something before the explosion. What did he cast, then, if it wasn't a Blasting curse?" Harper consulted his notes, but Amelia cut him off with a wave of her hand. He *had* to purport himself with authority. "Don't read it to me. Tell me. Or, better yet, show me."

He nodded and produced his own wand from inside the folds of his robes. Murmuring the incantation, he tapped his wand to the tip of Black's. Slowly, he drew the two apart. In the space between appeared the spectral image of a dome, a reflection of the last spell this wand had thrown.

"What is that?"

Amelia leaned closer, leering at the shimmering dome through her monocle. She'd seen the echoes of dozens, maybe hundreds, of spells recalled in this manner. Curses, protections, even silly jinxes. But this? She walked around it, taking in the glass-smooth walls, the complicated lattice of spellwork shimmering around the rim. This was something new.

"That would be the reason this examination took so long," Harper said. "I've never seen anything like it, so it took me a few days to break down the components. Probably would have been easier if the echo were fresh, but seeing as it's so old, it's missing a lot of the nuances I wanted to look for. Another few months and I might not have been able to get a read from it at all."

He paused expectantly, clearly waiting for her to be impressed. She fixed him with an irritated leer.

“Oh. Right. Well. It’s—” he pulled the two wands further apart as he backed up, stretching the image so that it grew to nearly a meter.

“It’s a modified Shield Charm. I nearly didn’t recognize it in this form because, usually, Protego manifests in a two-dimensional, wall-like shape, slightly curved around the caster. The spell has an outward directionality. It’s designed to deflect, right? To keep something out. In this case, this little beauty’s directionality is inward.”

“Which means?”

“I talked to Smalls--Auror Smallwood--about it. She’d seen Black and his friends working on something like this during the war. They were trying to design a way to trap a spell and contain it, but as far as she knew, they never got it to work.” Kendrick said, giving his wand a flick and breaking the connection to Black’s. “If I’m right, Black didn’t throw the Blast; he tried to stop it.”

He held out the final pages from his report, and Amelia scrutinized his work for a breathless moment before handing them back. “Would you be prepared to testify to that?”

“I stand by my work,” Kendrick said with a shrug. “I can’t actually recreate whatever it is that Black did without the exact wand movement and incantation, and the echo doesn’t give me that much information. But in theory, if he tried to contain a blast like that, it would have been like--” he cast his attention around, landing on a discarded cola, “--like shaking a soda can.

“Contents under pressure,” he explained when she stared at him blankly. “Once whatever is holding it in gives way, the explosive potential goes up exponentially. Contained and then released under the right circumstances, any fourth-year could have made that pit.”

~ ~ ~

Though the holding cell was outfitted with a cot, Black wasn’t on it. Instead, he had propped himself up in the corner on the floor, his head leaned back against the wall, so still that it seemed he’d died. For a brief moment, Amelia wished he had; Minister Bagnold had been sending her missives every few days to wrap this up quickly and discreetly, and neither seemed to be in the offing. Every day seemed to turn up new questions, new inconsistencies in the story.

But, no, his chest still rose and fell, though shallowly. She’d have to see this through to the messy, sticky end.

“Options?” she asked the two healers from St. Mungo’s. They fell back from the cell to join her a respectable distance away.

“He’s not healthy enough for a proper interrogation,” said one, and the other added that she didn’t recommend Veritaserum, either. “Your best choice is to have a conversation with him. Or see if he’ll give over his memories of what happened voluntarily. Maybe bring in someone

that he trusts to get the truth of what he knows, if you don't think he'll talk to your people.”

Amelia sighed. “I think you'll find that's a very short list. Most of his former classmates are dead or Death Eaters, and the few that are neither were either involved in his arrest or are actively avoiding this investigation.”

“Then I suggest you find some way to convince one of them to cooperate.” The senior of the healers, a woman by the name of Maple Zheng, signed her report and handed it over. “I won't clear him for an interrogation. If you proceed against my advice, I won't be held responsible for the consequences.”

Which was how Amelia ended up spending her entire weekend writing entreaties to everyone she could think of who was in any way familiar with Black. His family, such as remained of it, was strictly out of the question. Smallwood proved frustratingly tight-lipped as to who else was in the group she and Black had joined; even when faced with a charge of impeding an investigation, she didn't give a single name. And, given her involvement in his arrest, it seemed unlikely he'd speak to her. Teagan and Ifan Jones—the mischievous Slytherin twins who sometimes associated with the Marauders—refused to be brought in and, as they were both employed downstairs, she had no means to force them. The message she sent to Remus Lupin returned to her unopened.

Nobody, it would seem, had enough faith in Black's innocence to associate themselves with his trial.

Finally, she wet her quill and penned one last letter. She had been hoping not to trouble Dumbledore again so soon, since he had already been so kind as to loan her the Pensieve as well as his groundskeeper's memories, but as the list had dwindled away to almost nothing, so had her hopes of resolving this before Halloween. However, the Headmaster was willing to take time out of his demanding schedule to help her once again. She could only hope that whatever he uncovered would be enough to decide this matter one way or the other.

Dumbledore V Black

Chapter Notes

I do not support JKR and do not share or endorse her transphobic views. I stand with my trans sisters.

Ministry protocol said that anyone who entered a holding cell had first to consent to a search and surrender their wand. Those entering the C-block cells, where Sirius was being detained, were also required to submit the reason for their visit in writing to Minister Bagnold herself for prior approval. But Dumbledore had never been one to follow the rules, strictly speaking.

When one of the DMLE guards at Sirius's cell offered a hand for Dumbledore's wand, he only smiled. "I don't believe there's any need for that, do you? I'm not so infirm yet that I would lose my wand to a convict."

"Can't be a convict if you were never actually convicted," Sirius drawled from the corner of his cell, "but what do I know?"

The two guards stationed at the barred door exchanged a glance—they likely hadn't been instructed in what to do should their directions from the Minister go directly opposite to Amelia's orders to do anything the man she was sending down said. And doubtless they hadn't been prepared to have Dumbledore himself before them. Eventually, they allowed him in but turned to watch and ensure Sirius behaved.

At the sound of the door opening and closing, Sirius raised his eyes from the spider he'd been tracking across the wall. "What do you want, old man?"

"Easy, Sirius," Dumbledore said. He settled himself onto the cot and gave it an experimental bounce. "You really should make use of this. I'm sure it's much more comfortable than the floor."

"Think I'll stay where I am, thanks. What do you want?"

Dumbledore sighed. He had hoped that, given a few weeks here in—well. Perhaps not the most pleasant of environs but certainly better than Azkaban. That being warmer, better fed, and free of Dementors might have softened Sirius's edges slightly. But, alas, it wasn't so.

Dumbledore reached into the inner pocket of his robes. Beyond the door, the guards shifted, no doubt drawing their wands and preparing what they would do if they had to intervene. They needn't have worried.

“Lemon drop?” Dumbledore asked, producing the box from his pocket. He shook one of the tiny candies into the palm of his hand.

Sirius gave his curious, bark-like laugh, but the sound was humorless in such grim surroundings. “I’m not one of your adoring students anymore, Dumbledore, and you lost the right to treat me like one when you testified against me. What. Do you. Want.”

The guards at the door shifted again, and this time it was to them that Dumbledore raised a hand for them to be at ease. While not the ideal reception, the situation was also far from salvageable.

“Recent evidence suggests that I may have been premature in my rush to condemn you, Sirius,” he said. He turned the lemon drop between two fingers before popping it into his mouth and chewing. “I’m here to rectify that mistake. But to do that, I need to know your side of the story.”

This, at least, got Sirius’s attention. He feigned indifference, still, but he picked up his head, watching Dumbledore sidelong. “You want to know whether or not I betrayed them.”

“Oh, not at all. I know that you did.” Dumbledore tapped another candy into his hand and ate it delicately. “Your shouts from the day of your arrest were quite clear: It’s my fault; I’m the reason they’re dead.”

Sirius's shoulders went rigid; his hand coiled into a fist by his hip, where his wand would be sheathed if he had it still. But he didn’t speak. Not yet.

Dumbledore popped another lemon drop into his mouth. “You understand why that could be taken as a confession. So, no, I’m not concerned with the question of *if*. What I need to know is *why* you sold out your oldest friends to Vol—”

“I never would!”

The hapless spider who’d shared Sirius's cell caught the brunt of the outburst, smashed between his palm and the wall. Sirius wiped the mess on the knee of his trousers, glaring down at Dumbledore with red-rimmed eyes.

“I’d have cut off my own wand hand before I told him where to find them!” His voice, as neglected as rusted gears, cracked. “I’d have sooner *died!*”

“And yet you are still alive, and they are not.”

Sirius rocked unsteadily on his feet, a combination of his swift rise and little sleep. He sagged against the wall, the fight gone from him as suddenly and completely as the flame from a torch gutters out when dropped into a puddle.

“They are gone, Sirius.” Dumbledore kept his tone even. The shell Sirius had built around himself was already splintering; he needed only gentle coaxing to get to the core of the matter. “It’s time that the world understands what happened to the Potters. It’s been—”

“Three hundred and twenty-two days.” Sirius shrugged halfheartedly. “Give or take. Hard to gauge without windows. But I can’t be far off. Almost a year James and Lily have been dead, and now someone thinks to ask why.”

“Come and sit.” Dumbledore patted the space beside him on the cot, but even he was surprised when Sirius collapsed onto it.

The guards, who had been angling for a better line on Sirius should the outburst become violent, tensed further. Out of Sirius’s view, Dumbledore traced a sign in the air with his wand tip. The Silencing charm fell heavy as a curtain between the cot and the door; nothing Sirius said would carry into the hall now. He couldn’t force the pair to leave, but he could give Sirius some semblance of privacy.

“Now, tell me.” With a tap of his wand, Dumbledore conjured two clean glasses and a pitcher of cool water. “What happened?”

Again, Sirius gave that hollow, humorless laugh. “I tried to think like you. When James asked me if I’d be his Secret Keeper, I said yes. Then it occurred to me that we had a spy in the Order. Everyone would know who James picked. It would only be a matter of time before Voldemort or his cronies got their hands on me. But I couldn’t tell them what I didn’t know.”

Dumbledore poured a glass of water for him, and Sirius wrapped his hands around it but didn’t raise it to his lips. Instead, he stared down into the water’s trembling surface. “So I asked someone else,” he told the glass cupped between his palms. “Someone I trusted implicitly but whom no one would suspect.”

“Peter?” Dumbledore asked, and Sirius nodded.

“Because he only did support work, was never at the front lines, I thought he’d be easy to overlook. Voldemort would be too busy chasing me to bother with Peter, and—”

A clench of the jaw and a jerk of the arm were the only warnings before glass shattered against the wall. Amid a rain of silver shards and splattered water, Dumbledore threw himself between Sirius and the guards, arms spread wide and wand raised. They couldn’t hear him with the Silencing still in place, but his level stare said it loudly enough: no matter what happened within this cell, Sirius was not to be touched.

First one and then the other, the two guards sheathed their wands and turned away. Whether that was because of Dumbledore or because the so-called mass murderer they were supposed to be protecting him from had finally broken was of no concern.

“It’s my fault,” Sirius muttered, his face buried in his shaking hands. “They trusted me to keep them safe, and I gave them right to him.”

“Sirius.” Gently, Dumbledore settled himself alongside his former student. “Take deep breaths. Look at me.”

After a few deep, shuddering gasps, Sirius lowered his hands but didn't raise his gaze. If anything, he looked worse than he had when Brynn had first brought him from Azkaban. The circles under his eyes had deepened, and he seemed to have lost still more weight despite the better food he'd been provided. Angry red marks ran across his temples and down his face in furrows as if he'd tried to claw out his own thoughts.

"Tell them I did it," Sirius said quietly. "Tell them I'm guilty."

"Why would I do that? If you're convicted—properly, this time—the best-case scenario is that you'll go back to prison. Minister Bagnold is pushing for the Kiss, if not execution."

"Don't you see that would be a kindness?" Now at last he lifted his grey eyes to meet Dumbledore's even stare. "I can't eat. I can't sleep. At least in Azkaban, I don't remember the good times, so I don't miss them so badly."

Dumbledore drew in a long, deep breath and let it out slowly. "Sirius, my boy, forgive me."

Legilimency was not clear and precise the way Muggles thought it was. It was neither science nor art. Rather, it was akin to ripping all the pages from a book, flinging them into the air, and trying to read and make sense of them as they fell. It was, however, sometimes the most direct way to get to the truth of a matter. Before Sirius could grasp the reason for the apology, Dumbledore leaped into his mind.

"Prongs! Answer me, damnit," Sirius growled, flinging a Patronus from the end of his wand. It sped away toward the horizon, and Sirius turned the flying motorbike in that direction and chased after. He fired a second and then a third, following the glowing silver streaks that they left, meteor-like across the night sky.

The memory slipped through Dumbledore's fingers, and he snatched at another. Sirius and Peter huddled around a battered table—Dumbledore didn't recognize the room.

"You're sure you don't want to be there for it?" Peter asked around a mouthful of his supper. "Once we do the charm, that's it. It's the last time you'll get to see them until this is all over. We could do something for your birthday."

"I wish I could." Sirius speared a potato from Peter's plate despite the latter's protests and took a bite. "Dumbledore's got a job for me around Devon."

Dumbledore remembered the task well—he'd been certain it was their best chance to cut off a recruitment push in West Country. Days of searching had turned up nothing, and by the time they realized it was a dead-end, it had been too late for the Potters.

Sirius chewed his pilfered food and swallowed. "Shouldn't take but a week. So let's plan on Halloween. I'll meet you here, you can take me to the house, we'll all have a get-together then."

The scene rippled like heat rising from a cauldron, and the room shifted. The same kitchen, the same table, but all the lights were turned out. Dishes lay forgotten in the sink; the notes of

Order missions were spread over the table as though to be picked up again after a short break. But Peter, who was supposed to be in hiding himself, was nowhere.

“Wormtail?” Sirius called from the front door. He drew his wand and crept forward, eyes darting around the shadowed kitchen and living room. No response. He ran room to room, shouting without answer.

“James, are you okay? Peter’s not here—” With a snap of the wrist, he sent a Patronus out like a shot. Then he raced for the motorbike and took off into the sky.

“What about Moony?” James’s voice interrupted the memory, yanking Dumbledore to the Potters’ house in Godric’s Hollow. Three of the Marauders and Lily sat around the coffee table while Harry crawled under it after a particularly skeptical ginger cat. “Not that I don’t think you can do it, Wormtail, but it’s a lot of pressure. You wouldn’t be able to leave the house. And if anyone finds out it *isn’t* Sirius, they’ll be after you next.”

Sirius paused, teacup halfway to his lips. Delicately, he set it back in its saucer. “Well, the problem with Moony is—”

“Harry, stop it.” Lily grabbed the boy by the ankle and hauled him, screaming, out from under the table.

“*Kittyyyyyyyy!*” he wailed, and Lily turned him about and bounced him on her knee.

“Kitty doesn’t want to play right now,” she scolded. “Kitty will scratch you if you chase him. Remember? Ouch.”

“Ouch...”

Harry gave a solemn nod and, when his mother put him on the ground, went straight back to harassing the cat.

“—everywhere he goes,” Sirius finished, and Dumbledore cursed himself for not paying closer attention. James looked dubious at best.

“You have to admit,” Peter chimed in. “It is suspicious that werewolves are turning against us in droves. Every pack he visits sides with You-Know-Who. We... I think we at least have to entertain the thought that the spy might be Moony.”

Dumbledore blinked, and the scene before him darkened. The cozy living room gave way to a nightmare. Sirius huddled against the far wall, James’s lifeless form in his arms.

“*Get out—*”

The first fist slammed into Dumbledore’s jaw, the second into his cheek. Before the third swing, he managed to throw a Knockback Jinx at his assailant. Sirius crouched before him, flung away by the spell. For good measure, Dumbledore raised a Shield between them, as well. Much as he didn’t blame Sirius for his reaction, he was in no particular hurry to invite

another blow.

“You had no right,” Sirius spat. He shook all over, either from the jinx, the lingering effects of Legilimens, or anger. “You had no right!”

“No, I didn’t have any right to see those things, you’re correct.” Dumbledore slotted his wand away into its pocket, not taking his eyes off of Sirius. “I did, regrettably, have need. I am very sorry, both for what I had to do and for everything that’s happened to you, my boy.”

Sirius rose slowly, his exhaustion eating away at his rage. “Don’t you ‘my boy’ me, Dumbledore. Keep your sympathies and choke on them. You can’t fathom what I’ve been through—you have no idea what it’s like—”

“The guilt?” Dumbledore asked. “The shame of it? The constant wondering if, perhaps, you could have prevented the loss of someone so precious while knowing all the time that you’ve only yourself to blame? I’m afraid that I, in fact, do have intimate knowledge of what you’re feeling.”

“Just go.” Sirius eased himself onto the cot as the shakes worsened. He wound his hands into his hair and curled into a tight ball around himself.

“You should rest,” Dumbledore said. He sent the Shield away with a flick of the wrist and slowly approached. He raised a hand to pat Sirius’s back but stopped himself short. “With time and sleep, the tremors will fade. In a day or two—”

“I said go!”

Heaving a sigh, Dumbledore retreated to the cell door and signaled the pair of guards. “I am very sorry, Sirius,” he said, “but I promise you. I will do everything in my power to make this right.”

The DMLE V PA390

Chapter Notes

I do not stand with JK Rowling and do not share or endorse her transphobic views.

Honestly, in the days of Dicta Quills and Pensieves, having an official stenographer for Wizengamot cases seemed a bit superfluous. At least, that was what Eoin told himself as he settled into his seat to the left of Director Bones's podium. But, as he'd seen with everything else in the Black case, if he wanted something done right, he would have to do it himself. Even if it meant taking time away from the archives.

Director Bones began the proceedings with a full recitation of the case, the charges, and the list of witnesses, and Eoin jotted down every word dutifully. At his left, the Dicta Quill scratched along, as well. He suppressed a smirk at the realization that every time Black's full name was read, it transcribed it as 'Serious Black'. Perhaps his presence here was not the waste it had seemed after all.

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, witness for the defense, entered the court first. Eoin had never actually seen the man in person, having been homeschooled with the other Wizarding children in his tiny village. Photos didn't do him proper justice, failing to fully communicate the violent blue of Dumbledore's hat and robes. Embroidered silver comets streaked across the fabric, and a maroon and gold pin at his lapel indicated he was here not just in a capacity as witness but also as Chief Warlock.

Bartemius Crouch, though retired as Director of the DMLE, still attended to be certain everything ran smoothly, especially in cases such as this one. As precise and clean-cut as he was crotchety, he and Dumbledore could not have been more opposite in dress (neatly-combed hair; clean-shaven, crisply pressed maroon robes) or demeanor. When Dumbledore entered, Crouch shot to his feet.

"This is preposterous," he spluttered, his face turning a vivid red. "A Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot cannot give evidence or testimony in a criminal case. Certainly not in a capital one."

Director Bones straightened her monocle and turned to her crimson-faced compatriot. "That's a curious statement, coming from you, Barty. Wasn't it Dumbledore's testimony that you leaned upon so heavily when you first sentenced Black? Sit down."

Chatter and giggles shot around the assembly as Crouch grumbled and resumed his seat. Under the general mutterings, Director Bones leaned over to Eoin and whispered, "Be sure that's in the official report. I don't trust Crouch not to appeal this to Minister Bagnold if I

overturn the conviction.”

Dumbledore argued brilliantly through the cross questioning of three Wizengamot members. Despite his being one of their number, they seemed no more likely to take him at his word than they would take Black himself.

“Director Bones is correct, Dumbledore,” an elderly witch by the name of Eunice Brathwaite said. “Not a year ago, you stood in this very chamber and argued that death was too good for the likes of Sirius Black. That he ought live a long and sorrowful life for what he had done. Do we believe you then, or do we believe you now?”

Dumbledore, who had been stalking the floor in a methodical arc, meeting the gaze of every member of the Wizengamot as he spoke, now turned his attention completely to the venerable Madam Brathwaite.

“You believe me in both instances, Eunice.” He stopped his pacing and stood full before her in all the badges of his many offices. “I would not undertake either endeavor lightly. In both circumstances, I spoke with full conviction in my beliefs. A year ago, I would—and did—swear that Sirius was unequivocally guilty. But a year ago, I did not have the knowledge that I have today.”

Director Bones raised a hand for order and cut off further speculation. “You obtained this new information through Legilimency.” It wasn’t a question. “Please share with the Wizengamot what it is you saw that convinced you of Black’s innocence. It is, after all, not unheard-of for minds to be misread or for the reader to be deliberately misled.”

Dumbledore paused. Then he turned and perched himself on the chair bolted to the center of the platform. A collective gasp went up, and Eoin held his breath. Blessedly, the chains remained lank. What a day it would have been if Sirius Black had gone free while Albus Dumbledore sat chained before the Wizengamot like a common criminal!

“There are dozens of factors that can influence the accuracy of Legilimency,” Dumbledore explained. He spoke calmly and evenly, as if to a student. “For the purposes of this, I will deal with only the primary three. The first being the skill of the caster which, if I may so so myself, was in this case not insignificant. The second element is how close to the surface the thoughts that one is seeking can be found. Given the circumstances, I assumed correctly that Sirius’s attention would be toward the events on which I needed clarity, and the third...”

He paused, tapping one long finger against his lips. “I will venture a guess that every person in this room lost someone during the war. Would I be correct?”

Nods and mutters swept the chamber. Eoin bent his head so as not to make eye contact with anyone. Everyone knew of their own losses and those of their friends and relations. But few outside of himself and his team had seen the result of those losses, the hundreds of people relegated to a name and a date on a file, admitted into evidence in a box somewhere.

“I invite you to think of those people,” Dumbledore continued. “To picture their faces, hear their laughs. Recall those special moments—and now remember that you will never see them

again.”

“Is there a point to this?” Crouch snapped.

Dumbledore stood and walked nearer to him. “That moment, Bartemius, is all a skilled Legilimen needs to read every thought our conversation would have dredged up. In that second, that fleeting instant when the loss becomes real again and the pain sweeps back, the defenses on the mind are at their weakest.

“I am not proud to have done it, but I brought Sirius to that place to get to the core of what happened to the Potters. And, because of that, I can tell you without question that he did not and would not have betrayed them to Vol—”

“Thank you, Dumbledore,” Director Bones cut across him, sparing Eoin from having to write the name. Privately, he could have kissed her, if he didn't think it would cost him his hand or—worse—his job.

Thereafter, Dumbledore narrated what he had witnessed in Black's mind of events leading up to the night of the Potters' deaths, as well as his behavior afterward. A man who had planted false memories with the intent to deceive would have been eager to show them, after all, and Black instead had guarded the most sensitive of the recollections and ejected Dumbledore from his foray. This, combined with the incongruities of the official narrative, quickly proved more than sufficient to dismiss the charges of treason and conspiracy to commit murder, as well as laying to rest any lingering doubt that Black had ever been loyal to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Junior Minister Cornelius Fudge, only within the last year appointed to his position at the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, drummed his fingers on the bar before him. “There is still the matter of Pettigrew. Unlike you, I was there. I saw the crater he left, and I had to help concoct the cover-up. The man was absolutely deranged, Dumbledore. Laughing the whole time! Laughing! Like—like he was at the fair!”

The next witness, a middle-age white man with neat round glasses, stood at Director Bones's instruction to relieve Dumbledore of the floor. He ruffled a hand through his short, greying hair as he glanced around at the severe faces of the Wizengamot.

“Kendrick Harper,” he introduced himself, shoving a hand into the pocket of his robes. He circled the central chair warily, eyeing it as though the chains would catch him up if he strayed too near. “Junior examiner in Forensic Magics, DMLE. I was also part of the arresting pair the day that we caught Sirius Black.”

The obligatory questions followed as to Harper's credentials, his training, his tenure. Every detail of his background from the leave of absence he took after the Black incident through his request to transfer: if the Wizengamot could find it, they dragged out into the light.

“Four years of schooling with the DMLE, three of them in preparation to become an Auror, ten years active service. And you give up the badge over one rough case?” Brathwaite asked. She squinted at him through her spectacles. “I'm sure you saw worse during the course of the

war.”

At some point during the questioning, Harper’s left hand had slipped from his pocket and begun tapping against his leg. He shoved it back into his robes pocket, where the tapping no doubt continued, before he swallowed hard and answered.

“I saw Muggles splattered on the sidewalk, ma’am,” he said. “People I was supposed to stop from coming to any harm. I was the senior Auror on the operation. I could have called off the sting and didn’t. I’d face a dozen Death Eaters alone before I’d do that again.”

Fudge stood and straightened his robes. “There we have it, then. If Pettigrew was indeed the culprit, as Dumbledore supposes, it should have been left to the authorities. Regardless of Black’s motivations, no man who could cause such devastation should be allowed back into society.”

“Except,” Harper interjected as Fudge bent to collect his hat, “Black didn’t do it.”

Fudge paused but only briefly. Then he straightened his robes and plopped the lime green bowler on his head. “Innocent men don’t have a good chuckle beside the bodies of their friends.”

“Believe me, I want the man responsible behind bars as bad as anyone else, but Black is not that man.”

“Then who is?” Fudge’s voice had risen in volume and pitch, the color climbing in his cheeks as all the assembled Wizengamot watched the exchange. “Some Muggle boy with a firecracker?”

“*Junior* Minister Fudge,” Director Bones’s voice rang out as sharply as the rap of her gavel. “You will allow Mr. Harper to present his evidence—uninterrupted—or you will be escorted out. Do I make myself clear?”

Sufficiently cowed, Fudge stowed his hat and sank back into his seat. The laughter around the edges of the room cut off just as swiftly as Director Bones cast a withering glance in their direction. Order restored, she gestured for Harper to continue.

Harper took a moment to consult his notes, the papers trembling as he produced them from the pockets of his robes. Once he’d had hands as steady as a surgeon, or so Eoin had heard. The war took its toll on everyone, it seemed.

“As I was saying,” Harper looked up from his notes and, steadier now, began again. “Black cannot have been responsible for the Blasting Curse that blew up the street that day.”

He presented his research: the exhaustive list of spells that he had pulled from Black’s wand; the modified Protego that he’d reconstructed. He even laid bare his own recollection of the day, riddled through it was with holes and lapses.

“I’d submit it to a review by Pensieve, but...”

Director Bones waved a hand. She and certain members of the DMLE knew already that part of Harper's sabbatical had included time with the Obliviators employed at St. Mungo's. Few outside of those individuals were aware of it; Eoin only knew because he had processed the paperwork. Targeted memory removal in the cases of trauma was an experimental treatment, though, and it was far from exact.

"The problem is that we can't re-process the surviving Muggles, either," Harper concluded. He glared at Fudge, who sank lower, if that were possible. "All of them were Obliviated after only a rudimentary interview, before any formal processing could take place. The physical evidence at the scene, too, was swept clean away without any cataloging."

Eunice Brathwaite pitched her voice above the whispers that followed this remark. "Is there no other account to review?" she asked. "You weren't alone for Black's capture. Someone else must have seen the caster, if it wasn't Black himself."

Director Bones rapped her gavel again to quell the murmurs of agreement that welled in response. "Smallwood has requested to be left out of these proceedings due to her prior dealings with Black. I am honoring that request. Therefore."

Across the room from her, Dumbledore shook his head. If Director Bones saw it, she gave no indication. Instead, she turned to a pair of guards stationed by the entrance to the chamber. "Bring in Sirius Black."

PA390 V Black

Chapter Notes

I do not support JKR's transphobic views. I stand with the trans community.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dumbledore swore under his breath as the chamber door opened. In the wake of last Halloween, five of his most invaluable Order members had been lost: James, Lily, and Peter to death; Sirius to Azkaban; and Remus to his grief. This trial was meant to be Dumbledore's second chance, a way to regain his footing ahead of Voldemort's inevitable return.

To that end, Sirius taking the stand before the Wizengamot was Dumbledore's worst-case scenario. The last he'd seen him, Sirius could hardly be trusted to keep on his feet, much less testify on his own behalf.

Yet as he was led into the chamber—two armed Aurors before and two behind, his hands and feet shackled—he didn't stumble. If anything, he seemed to strut despite the chains hobbling his steps. Were it not for the deep hollows in his cheeks and shadows under his eyes, he could almost have passed for the arrogant young man who had once stood at James Potter's side.

"Think I'll stand, thanks," Sirius said, eyeing the chair skeptically.

The words had barely left his lips before the Aurors escorting him hefted him bodily into place. The chains sprang to life, twining like vines around his arms and legs, wrapping across his chest.

"Kinky," Sirius managed as the chains squeezed tight. "I'm flattered, but I'll have to pass. I forgot the safe word."

The bang of Director Bones's gavel split the indignant outcry that followed Sirius's words. "You are here," she said as the din quieted, "to be tried for the charges of—"

"Look, let me save you some time," Sirius shouted over her. "Guilty as charged. Are we done?"

Amelia Bones was not a woman to lose her composure. In all the years that Dumbledore had known her, both during her studies and now in a more professional capacity, he could count the instances he'd witnessed it on one hand. Or at least he could until just that moment.

"Silence!"

She pounded her gavel on the block. The peal echoed over the shouts of the Wizengamot, the

jeers and the insults they hurled. When that didn't work, she took up her wand and fired off a warning; the spell left a smoking scorch on the ground before her.

"Mr. Black," she said, slowly reeling her pitch back to normal, "am I given to understand that you're confessing?"

"Don't know if you understand it or not, but that's what I'm doing." He shifted under the weight of the constricting chains, sitting up as straight as he could. "I did it. I'm the reason they're dead."

"Director Bones, a moment, if you please!"

Dumbledore flung himself from his seat. He planted his feet between her and Sirius, hands spread imploringly. "I'm afraid this is my doing. In searching Sirius's mind, I refreshed his memories of that night and reopened the wounds. What you're hearing is just the litany of a guilty conscience, nothing more. We've already determined his innocence in the deaths of the Potters, and therefore—"

A chorus of groans greeted his words, and Dumbledore clenched his jaw. The proceedings had been longer than anyone had planned; nobody expected there to be any actual evidence to examine, no deliberation to be had. The whole affair was meant to be over before lunch. As if the life of an innocent—though misguided and maligned—man could be measured in cold-cut sandwiches and pasties.

"For Merlin's sake, Dumbledore," Fudge droned from his seat, "he already confessed. What more is there to say? Let's have the sentence and be done with it."

Behind him, Sirius drew breath to launch another salvo, but a quick-thinking Auror's Silencio wisely aborted his efforts to dig himself a deeper grave. As if he had heard neither it nor Fudge, Dumbledore kept his attention fixed on Director Bones.

"Amelia. Madam Director. I'm only asking you to think this through logically and faithfully execute the duties of your office. Justice first."

Director Bones considered her fellows, contempt and impatience writ across every face. If this dragged on for too long, they'd vote against him just for spite.

"Davenport," she said at last, turning to one of the clerks. "Veritaserum. Dumbledore, to me, please."

The lad set off running, and Dumbledore edged nearer to her podium as the crowd devolved into irritated chatter again.

"Amelia, look at him," Dumbledore urged. "He's not well enough. You'll hear the truth of the matter and kill him anyway."

"I know. And so does Black. I doubt he honestly wants to die, and moreover he probably wants to keep most of the event to himself. Remember that it wasn't until you saw him at

Godric's Hollow that he succeeded in throwing you out?"

A slow smile spread across her face, and Dumbledore felt a mirroring one growing on his own. "Are you certain you were a Hufflepuff?" he asked, and her grin widened.

"The Hat and I did have a merry debate, as you recall."

"Director Bones?" The voice of one of the Aurors and a frantic rattling of chains interrupted their conversation. Sirius thrashed against his restraints, his lips working furiously to produce words that his throat refused to voice. "Stunners?"

Davenport returned with the small crystal phial of Veritaserum. Sirius's gaze followed the little vial as it was passed up to the Director, and then his attention landed on Dumbledore. He'd expected anger but not the utter loathing that burned now in those grey eyes.

It wrenched his heart to do it, but Dumbledore put his back to the sight. Doubtless Sirius would hate him for this until the day one of them died—and with all luck, that would be a long time coming—but Dumbledore couldn't help one of James and Lily's dearest friends destroy himself in their names.

At Director Bones's direction, the Aurors lifted the Silencing on Sirius, and the ensuing string of swears was probably unlike anything that chamber had ever heard.

When he finally paused to breathe, Director Bones said coolly, "If you're quite finished. Do you have anything you'd like to say before we administer the potion? Do you recant your confession?"

A chilly silence followed her question, and Dumbledore leaned nearer to her podium. "Let us hope your bluff works," he whispered to her.

But that spark of hope proved to be short-lived. From where he was chained, Sirius said simply, "No."

Too quiet for anyone else to hear, Director Bones huffed a sigh. "It's the only way to clear his name," she said, holding out the palm-sized phial for one of the Aurors. "If he reacts poorly, hopefully we can get him to Mungo's in time."

The Auror to his right reached for the Veritaserum, but Dumbledore shook his head and folded his fingers around the tiny bottle. "I'll do it."

The chamber had gone abruptly quiet. Despite the long proceedings, it would seem nobody wanted to miss the show.

Please, Sirius mouthed as Dumbledore drew closer. He'd seen this look on Sirius several times, the stubborn set of his jaw, the tilt of his chin. The fear in his eyes, though, Dumbledore had seen only once before.

Back at school, Severus—at Sirius's urging—had nearly happened across Remus Lupin

during his transformation. There had been discussion of expulsion, not for Sirius because of his indiscretion or Severus for sneaking off school grounds, but for Remus. Too dangerous to be allowed to remain at Hogwarts had been the school board's argument, and it had taken days to convince them to let the boy finish his studies. Dumbledore had nearly lost.

Then Sirius had barged into the deliberations. Anyone else would have taken it for arrogance, but Dumbledore had seen the terror behind the mask, the desperation brought on by the possibility of being without one of his friends because of his own actions. He'd used his family name, which he'd always avoided as a boy, and said that if they wanted to expel Remus, they had better also be prepared to expel the future Lord Black. Which was how Sirius, unbeknownst to his friends, had been the one to finally settle the matter.

But this time. This time, there was only the consequence of his own actions, and he had to get himself out of it. There was nobody for Sirius to daringly throw himself in front of. Nobody except—

"Sirius," Dumbledore said as he drew nearer. He kept his voice soft. "You have one last chance. If you won't save yourself for your own sake, then won't you think of Harry?"

This, at least, put a crack in Sirius's facade. "Don't you mention him to me," he snapped. "He was all I had left, and you had him taken right from my arms!"

"And it seems I was right to do so," Dumbledore said, pulling the stopper from the bottle, "if you were indeed the spy, as you say."

All the Wizengamot was attentive now, their grumbling bellies and short tempers momentarily forgotten in the pursuit of the tastiest morsel of scandal. As long as Sirius kept his eyes on the bait and not on them, this whole thing might resolve quite neatly.

Sirius thrashed against his chains. "You never would have believed me even if I told you I wasn't, and you know it! Peter had us all suspecting each other while he skirted around the edges. He got me to distrust Remus. Merlin, he even made you look like the traitor! Why do you think we didn't tell anyone about the switch?"

"You've coached him to say all this, Dumbledore!" Crouch slammed a fist on the bar. "You spent almost an hour with him behind a Silencing charm—you could've told him to say anything at all. I don't know what it is you're playing at with all this, but it stops here!"

In a way, Dumbledore almost had to thank Bartimius for his tantrum. It crackled in the air, sharp as magic, as Sirius's hold on his temper, his bravado, and his secrets shattered all at once.

"You want to know what we discussed in the holding cell, you gormless old git?" Sirius shouted over whatever the tail end of Crouch's diatribe was going to be. "I asked him to let me plead guilty just so I can meet Pettigrew again in the afterlife and kill him for real for what he did to Lily and James!"

The chatter began again, buzzing about the chamber like excited bees. Hearing the accounts

from Dumbledore or even from Harper had a slightly less frenzied tone than directly from Sirius Black.

“Kill him for real, you say?” Eunice asked.

Sirius turned as much as his bindings would allow to face her. “Idiot blew himself up. Threw a Blasting Curse at me, and I shielded it. Three days of tracking his arse all over Britain, and all I got was a concussion for my trouble. If I’d actually been able to kill him personally, I’d have turned myself in gladly. It would have been worth Azkaban.”

Now that the seal he’d kept on the truth was broken, Sirius’s interrogation and the subsequent vote was swift. Everything he said matched the testimony presented by Harper and Dumbledore to his defense and filled in the gaps where the evidence had been lacking. He gave his account of going back to Pettigrew’s flat in a rage, hoping he’d show up, and destroying the place when he didn’t. He’d then tracked Peter for days until finding him on the crowded street. Peter had set off a Blasting Curse, which Sirius had trapped inside of a modified Shield charm, the shield buckled, and the rest was as Harper had witnessed it. A horrible accident and criminal intent, perhaps, but not in and of itself a crime.

“Motion to clear Sirius Antares Black of all charges,” Director Bones called at the end of his story.

Slowly, hands raised around the chamber. Not all. Even with all said and done, some were never going to vote with Sirius. But he did, at least, earn over the three quarters needed for exoneration.

“Cleared of all charges,” she said. “Subject is given to the care of St. Mungo’s for psychiatric and physical rehabilitation until such a time as he’s fit for release. Adjourned.”

With one final crack of the Director’s gavel, the chains around Sirius gave way. The healers who, until that moment, had waited in the hall, came forward to take charge of their patient.

Hesitantly, unsteadily, he got to his feet. For the first time in almost a year, Sirius Black stood a free man.

Chapter End Notes

Hi, everyone! Thanks for sticking with me so far on this journey! I'm working on editing part two now, so I hope you'll come along with me as Sirius recovers from his time in Azkaban. Until then, happy holidays and have a great new year!

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