

Reclamation

Although he was nearly fifty, the professor had -- as they say -- aged gracefully. It may have been the oddly secluded lifestyle of a Hogwarts professor, although rumour had it that he'd been wild enough in his youth; it may have been, as he was often teased, that he'd never married. There were always the rumours, as well, that he had managed to inveigle Nick Flamel into sharing the Philosopher's Stone, or somehow otherwise preserved his youth, but the truth was that he did not actually look youthful. He was no immortal -- he was merely a very well-preserved forty-eight. It helped that he charm-dyed his hair; perhaps some of it was still as black as it had been at twenty, but on the whole he was leaning towards salt-and-pepper in a general sense, and he did not like it.

Still, no one would have denied that even if he had greying hair, he would be handsome. He was naturally a slim man, neat and well-groomed, with high cheekbones and a strong chin, a patrician nose, less than the usual amount of worry-lines around the mouth and equally fewer than expected laugh-lines around the eyes. His hands were still strong, as nimble and sure as they ever had been, and his mind was, if anything, keener than it had been at twenty. Certainly in the years since he had taken the post of Defence professor he had learned more than he thought possible -- funnily enough, as it turned out, teaching taught you a lot about human nature.

He stood at the window of his office on the third floor of the school and gazed out at the snow-covered grounds, across which a band of students was making cheerful tracks as they returned from a Hogsmeade visit. There was Potter's boy, bareheaded and messy-haired, always with his companions, as inseparable as if they were a single unit. The boy showed an inordinate amount of promise, but he was lazy and, with wealthy parents, he had no reason to study particularly hard.

The professor shook his head and sat down at his desk, pulling a sheaf of papers towards him for marking. There was a book sitting underneath them, a slim volume which had been delivered by owl post that day, and he was saving it as a reward for when he finished. It was a new work in his pet field of study; he was desperately eager to sink his teeth into it, but he'd been putting off these essays for far too long already.

He looked down at the first one and sighed. It *would* be Potter's.

Just then there was a knock at the door and, when it swung open slightly, a tawny-haired head poked around it.

"Professor Gaunt, am I interrupting?" asked the boy.

"My god, Remus, you are, Merlin be praised," the professor said, grinning. "Please. Interrupt. Interrupt a lot."

Remus Lupin took off his ragged snow-damp cap and came into the room, unwinding a terribly gaudy muffler from his throat and hanging hat, muffler, and cloak on the hatstand in the corner. The professor noticed, even as Remus tried to hide it, that three of the fingertips on his right glove were worn clean through.

"What can I do for you this beautiful Saturday afternoon?" Tom Gaunt asked with a white-toothed smile.

"Hardly beautiful," Remus answered sourly, coming forward to sit in the chair on the other side of the desk. "Bloody cold is more like it."

"Well, pull up to the fire, then. I saw you lot coming from Hogsmeade -- enjoy yourselves?"

Remus sniffed. "I dunno, it gets tiresome after a while, doesn't it? Same old shops. Same old jokes and sweets."

"You're old before your time, lad."

"Yes," Remus said, rather unexpectedly. "I often think I am."

Tom gave him a sympathetic look. It wasn't easy for the young man, he knew that; he'd been a scholarship boy himself and while Remus had two whole parents to Tom's single, estranged, and senile Muggle father, Remus had an entirely separate set of problems that were far worse than blood kin that didn't give a damn if you lived or died.

"I suppose those of a...scholarly nature tend to find transient pleasures rather repetitive," he said carefully.

"Geeks bore easily?" Remus suggested. Tom smiled.

"Did you have something in particular you wanted to discuss?" he asked, rising and crossing to the small cabinet concealed behind a false stone panel in the frame of the fireplace. He opened the panel and took out two wooden goblets and a bottle of firewhiskey.

"Well, sort of," Remus said uncomfortably, as the professor turned and held up the bottle queringly. "Oh -- yes please, just a little."

"Moderation in all things, hm? How Gryffindor," Tom sighed. "I wish I'd had you for one of mine, Remus, I'd have kicked your arse and made a politician or a hedonist out of you."

"I wouldn't think of Gryffindors as moderate," Remus said drily, accepting the half-full goblet.

"No, but you're all such archetypes. Gryffindors think like novels; you're some ascetic scholar from the eighteenth century." Tom gestured in the air. "But you didn't come here to talk about House mentality. Is something bothering you?"

Remus looked down at his cup. "Yes. I had a question, and I'm not sure who else to ask, but...well, you'll want to ask me questions too and some of them I can't answer."

Tom arched an eyebrow.

"I was wondering what you knew about horcruxes," Remus asked.

The world froze, for just a minute, and Tom reeled mentally; he could feel the sudden tension in his shoulders and jaw. Surely these were his sins come back to haunt him.

"You are right, Remus. I'd like very much to know where you encountered that word," he heard himself say. "Not in my class, I know that."

"No, sir."

"That wasn't an answer to my question, Mr. Lupin."

Remus set his cup on the table. "I...heard of the word through a fellow student."

"Who?"

"I can't tell you that, sir."

Tom was an intelligent man but not a patient one; he had broken his oath not to use Legilimency on the students many hundreds of times in the past eighteen years. Oaths were a necessary evil to keep Dumbledore from fretting, but that didn't mean Tom was obliged to stand by them. Remus was more difficult than most, but not impossible to read.

"Severus. I see," he said. Remus looked startled. "It's very...eighteenth-century of you not to rat on a fellow student, Remus, but Severus is barely sixteen and he does not understand the forces he is reckoning with. Believe me, I know whereof I speak."

"Sirius nicked his Dark Arts textbook because he lost his own, but he got tired of all the writing in the margins so he nicked mine and left Severus' in its place. It was the only thing I really didn't know anything about, so I had a look around the library to see what he was up to..."

"...like the good soldier you are, hm?"

"Sir?"

"Wanting to make sure it wasn't a weapon to be used in the little war you lot are having?"

Remus didn't meet his eyes.

"Go on, then."

"That's all, really," Remus mumbled. "I couldn't find anything about it so I thought I'd ask you."

"Can you show me what was written?"

Remus' eyes widened. "I didn't bring the book, Professor."

"No, of course not..." Tom pressed his fingers to his lips. "Perhaps fortunately for Severus, information about horcruxes is very limited...indeed, there is only one book in the world which dares to expound upon it, of which there are five copies extant. I own two."

Curiosity sparked in Remus' eyes. "It must be really rare, sir."

"And for good reason. It is an abomination to nature," Tom answered quickly. "If it were to be wiped from the memory of humanity -- well, perhaps that's extreme," he said, catching himself. He had a scholar's love of information, and couldn't bear the thought of losing even something so horrifying as the horcrux.

"Sir...what are they?" Remus asked, looking a little awestruck. Tom gazed at him a while before replying.

"You, I think, would understand my abhorrence of them, Remus. You can't fathom harming another human being and you have no desire to -- " he stopped, abruptly.

"I'm sorry," Remus said quickly. "I was just curious..."

"Perhaps in a few years, when you have the proper perspective to appreciate such things," Tom replied. "Yes, I think...when your first child is born, come ask me again."

Remus looked at him curiously. "Professor Gaunt...I can't have children."

Tom blinked. "Oh -- of course, Remus, I'm so sorry. Er. That does make things awkward, doesn't it?" He sighed. "I think you are wise enough and foolish enough...come and ask me again in five years. If you still wish to know, I will tell you."

"What about Severus, Professor?"

"Ah. Yes." Tom seated himself, staring down at the essays but certainly not seeing them. "That is troubling. Will you bring me the book?"

"I can, sir, but then I won't have one."

"I'll give you a new one."

"Sir, if he finds out Sirius is the one who got him in trouble, it'll be even harder to keep the peace."

"Don't worry, Remus. I'll tell him I found it and recognised the handwriting."

Remus looked uncertain, but somewhat comforted. "All right. Shall I bring it tomorrow?"

"Yes, I think so. For now..." Tom sighed. "I have marking. Tomorrow morning; I'll be in my office by ten. I'd like to speak to him about this as soon as possible, so perhaps by noon?"

"Of course, sir."

"Remus -- " Tom said, as the boy stood to leave.

"Yes?" Remus asked.

"This is very grave business. Please keep it to yourself. This isn't like animagery, it's far more serious. I tolerate a certain amount of ambitious overreaching in intelligent students because it sometimes produces such fruit, but nothing good can come of anyone attempting to create a horcrux. Much better you put it from your mind."

And, as he spoke, he peered at Remus with more than simply his eyes; when the boy nodded, Tom saw that it was an honest nod and he was quite frightened of his professor's earnestness.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Remus," he said more kindly.

"Thank you, sir," Remus answered, and left Tom alone in his warm office with a bottle of firewhiskey and his memories.

It was autumn, a different time of year and a different year entirely when Sirius Black came to speak to Tom Gaunt, looking not a whit older than sixteen, for all he was twenty and out in the great wide world. Tom disliked Sirius because, he suspected, Sirius reminded him far too much of himself at that age; uncontrollable, adventurously, destined for some disaster sooner or later, full of the arrogance that came in the Purebred blood and brilliant beyond his years.

He seemed unusually circumspect, actually; he was wearing sober dark robes and his face was pale, not its usually ruddy red from the wind or brown from the sun. But then he had good reason to be quiet and mindful today.

Tom, himself in black robes, did not feel like dealing with Sirius Black today of all days, but he

didn't see much of an escape; Minerva was on the other side of the room and Dumbledore was nowhere to be seen. Almost everyone else was either a former student or a complete stranger. He regretted withdrawing to this little, quiet corner of the room to hide.

"Hullo, Professor," Sirius said quietly.

"Sirius," Tom replied. "Holding up all right?"

A fleeting, dry smile. "Not exactly my own personal tragedy."

"No, but it's always difficult, I think."

Sirius studied him. "How many of these have you been to?"

Tom frowned down at the glass of weak punch he was drinking. "None like this one."

"It was done up very properly -- "

"I don't mean that," Tom said.

"Oh. Yes." Sirius stuffed his hands in the pockets of his robes, looking oddly ashamed. "Professor..."

"Yes, Sirius?"

"Do you feel....responsible, a bit?"

"Responsible?" Tom asked. "Why should I feel responsible?"

"No, I don't mean...it's just..." Sirius shrugged. "Doesn't everyone, when it happens like this?"

"Severus committed suicide, Sirius," Tom said. "Everyone always thinks it's their fault. It's rarely true."

Sirius bit his lip. "But what if it is?"

Tom studied him. "You are not the world upon which the sun rises and sets, Sirius."

"It's just..." Sirius looked away. "At school -- you know -- what we did to him, all the time -- "

"Yes, I do know."

"And -- but we stopped -- but maybe we didn't stop soon enough -- " Sirius cut his eyes away, and his face began to sharpen into the lines of a young man fighting some deep emotion.

"Sirius, lad, you can't possibly blame yourself for this," Tom said firmly. "Had you even seen him in the past four years?"

"Sometimes -- not often --" Sirius said, and then the tears that had been threatening broke through. Tom grasped his arm and pulled him even further from the crowd, through a door and out into a little corridor that probably led to the loos or something. Sirius went obediently enough, and Tom pulled him close, pressing his face to his chest, sighing. He hated touching people, but he knew what was expected, and what was needed.

Sirius even *wept* like a bully wept, shamefully and fighting it every second, but he pressed his face against Tom's robes and clutched at his shoulders while Tom patted the back of his head awkwardly.

"Sirius, this guilt -- for someone you so despised? Even if you regret what you did, you can't think that you are the only reason he's dead?" he asked. It was distressing, this grief; it had not been a part of Tom's plan.

"I don't know," Sirius gasped thickly. He was snotting on Tom's new robes. "After the last time --"

"Ah. Yes. I remember."

"I swore I'd never do it again, I swore I wouldn't try to kill him, but what if I -- I don't want it to be me!" Sirius protested.

"It would be slightly more seemly to be this grieved over the death of a fellow human being, Sirius," Tom chided gently. "But I think you may rest assured...no, look at me," he said, taking Sirius by the shoulders and separating them. He cupped Sirius' chin in his left hand and lifted it so that the boy's tearstained face looked up at his own. "This is not your fault, Sirius. Listen to me. This is not your fault, and it is sheer ego to believe it would be."

Sirius swallowed and sniffled, raising a hand to wipe his eyes angrily.

"This is not your fault, Sirius," Tom repeated, sending out gentle tendrils into the boy's mind to sooth him slightly. "There will be accountability for this death in the next life, but it will not be yours."

"How do you know?" Sirius asked, and Tom was saved from having to answer by the appearance of Remus Lupin in the corridor.

"There you are --" he said, then cut himself off abruptly. "Oh -- sorry -- was I --"

"No, Remus, your timing is impeccable as always," Tom said with a small smile. "Come take him away and give him a drink; talk some sense into him."

"I wasn't crying," Sirius said. Remus reached out and took his shoulder, gently pulling him away from Tom and to himself.

"I know," he said. "There's a little garden outside; I'll bring you some food from the reception. Go on."

He released Sirius and pointed the way; the dark-haired boy snuffled a little and went as obediently as a child. When he was gone, Remus moved closer to Tom, lowering his voice.

"Professor," he said quietly. "Severus didn't kill himself, did he?"

Tom regarded Remus, a Remus who had grown into a man who knew more than was good for him. Like Tom, actually.

"It is better for his mother and his friends that it should be thought so," he answered. "Trust me."

"What could he have done that this was the better alternative?" Remus asked.

"I can't tell you that, Remus."

"Was it you?"

Tom gave him a square look. "Yes."

"Do you ask me not to report you to Magical Law Enforcement?"

"No, Remus. You wouldn't be believed. Leave this. It's too deep for you, as little as you know. You will simply have to trust me; and if you cannot trust me, you will simply have to keep your peace and keep as far from me as possible." Tom tilted his head in the direction Sirius had gone. "Go to your lover; he needs you."

Remus' eyes widened slightly; Tom had known many of their secrets over the years, but clearly Remus was unaware he'd known that. He left hurriedly, almost running away in his haste to escape Tom's presence.

But the next day Remus returned to his job at Hogwarts as Tom's research assistant, and nothing was said between Tom Gaunt and his assistant about the confession Tom had made in the hallway, other than a passing remark that Sirius was feeling less poorly now that the funeral was done with.

The next summer was a fruitful one for Remus' friends; Tom had more news of them than of most of his old students, since Remus worked with him for a significant portion of each week. James Potter and Lily Evans -- now Potter -- were having a baby; Peter Pettigrew was getting married to

a nice Muggle girl, a folklorist who found him fascinating, and Sirius was publishing his first book. He was full young, but then he'd always been a dreamer and the London Magical Publishing Company thought it might raise their tone to print a novel written by one of the Black clan. In addition, being the outcast of the family, it would cause a scandal, and scandals sold books.

Sirius did not know real scandal yet, however, that much was clear. Tom was actually surprised to see Remus on time and in his office that morning, considering the Daily Prophet, and he said as much.

"Why, what's in the Prophet?" Remus asked with a grin, unpacking the books he'd brought up from London for Tom.

"You haven't seen it?" Tom asked.

"No -- after the signing party last night, we slept late. Sirius was still asleep when I left. Thanks for coming, by the way; I know it meant a lot to Sirius. He was so terribly nervous," Remus continued. "Did his book get panned or something?"

"It's a bit worse than that, I think," Tom said, offering him the Prophet. It was folded to show the headline below the crease: Sirius Black's Scandalous Novel Overshadowed by Scandalous Life.

Remus glanced at the photograph, which showed Sirius happily posing for a photograph with one arm around James' shoulders and the other, rather more closely, around Remus. The caption read "Sirius Black at the premier party of his first novel, *The Silent War*, with friend James Potter and rumoured catamite Remus Lupin."

The silence stretched out before them, slowly. Remus was staring in shock at the paper clenched tightly in his fingers, and Tom didn't want to push him into saying anything before he was ready. Finally Remus slowly turned to the article itself and read, his face darkening in fury at each new sentence.

"I saw Peter at the party last night...he'd had a lot to drink," Tom finally offered.

"It was an open bar," Remus answered tightly.

"I'm sure if he did say those things to the reporter, it's because he didn't know the harridan was taking everything down."

"I'm not."

Tom raised his eyebrows at the younger man.

"Peter can't keep his mouth shut," Remus said. "Everyone knows that. We thought we might be able to keep him quiet about this -- there wasn't any question of never telling him, he's not blind."

"But he wouldn't have told a reporter on purpose, would he?" Tom inquired.

"I'm no man's catamite, Professor. Sirius and I are equals," Remus said furiously.

"I know that, Remus. I do," Tom protested. "But why on earth would he tell someone those things in the article, even if he were drunk?"

"Because he's a vicious little bastard when he doesn't get his way," Remus snarled, crumpling the paper.

"What?"

"He told her," Remus said, with what Tom recognised as the calm of rage, "Because I'm fucking Sirius and he isn't. It used to be enough to tag along after James and Sirius and kiss their arses; when the rest of us grew up, it wasn't anymore. He'd rather see Sirius ruined than see him happy with someone else."

He looked down at the tightly-balled paper in his hand. "I'm sorry. Would you mind terribly if I took the day off?"

"Of course not." Tom gave him a small smile. "Don't let Sirius kill him, Remus."

Remus paused in the act of opening the door. "With all due respect, Professor, I do not think you are one to make jokes about murder."

And Tom became aware that Remus had neither forgotten, nor did he intend to forget, the confession of the previous fall.

Perhaps fortunately, the additional and unexpected publicity had sold books and Sirius had been restrained, but only just, from murdering Peter Pettigrew. All scandals seem more important at the time than in retrospect, at any rate, and it affected Remus and Sirius apparently not a whit. The only thing that changed, from Tom's point of view, was that Peter Pettigrew was written out of existence entirely. Remus never spoke of him again.

Horace Slughorn retired (thank god; what a tiresome old ass he had been) and Remus was asked to take his place. Remus was not the most brilliant at potions that Hogwarts had ever seen, but he was a good teacher and he worked hard. He had good motivation, too. The Wolfsbane potion was already being discussed in scholarly journals, and Remus was determined to learn how to brew it if it killed him. Which, if he kept testing it on himself, it might. Or it might kill Sirius; he was already developing an ulcer over it.

It was spring, the first year that Remus was Potions Master, when Tom came to see him after yet another abortive try at the Wolfsbane potion. He was barely able to move; Tom sat next to his bed

while Sirius cooked dinner with Harry in the kitchen.

"I don't see why you need this so badly," he said. "Remus, you have someone to keep you safe during the moons. I remember what it was like for you before that, but James and Sirius aren't going anywhere."

"I want to be able to remember," Remus said softly. "I want to keep my mind, Tom."

"Is it worth risking your life?"

"It is." He struggled to sit up, slowly. "Besides, James might be going away."

"What?"

"He's moving out of Godric's Hollow. He and Lily are divorcing."

"Divorcing?" Tom asked, surprised. "I didn't even know they were having troubles."

"They've kept it very quiet. I knew, but not through anything they told me. I probably knew they were in trouble before they did," Remus added. He stopped to catch his breath. "That's why Harry's here."

"I wondered -- surely he didn't spend the night?"

"No...came this morning. Lily didn't want him there while James moved his things out."

"Sensible, I suppose," Tom said dubiously. "I don't pretend to understand families."

"No...you never had one, did you?" Remus asked. It would have sounded impudent in someone who knew Tom less, cruel to someone who knew him more.

"Not to speak of," Tom answered. "I'm told my father died last year. He had other children, but they're nothing to do with me."

"I don't imagine you'd have much in common."

"No. Not much," Tom said. "Do you know why James and Lily are...?"

"They were never well-matched," Remus said slowly. "But I think it became more evident after Harry was born; such different ideas about how he ought to be raised..."

"If you tell Harry that," Tom said, "It will be the worst day's work you've ever done, Remus."

"I wouldn't, no fear," Remus said. "I know what it's like, remember."

Tom nodded and they lapsed into companionable silence; from the kitchen he heard Sirius talking to Harry, and Harry's five-year-old voice replying.

"Tom, I need to ask you something," Remus said. "I've asked you once before and you put me off...but I have reason to need to know, now."

Tom tilted his head, curious. "Yes? What's that?"

"In my research...outside of the potion...I've come across a suggested cure," Remus said, pushing himself still further upright, weakly. "It's called an abomination, a worse fate than lycanthropy even, but a cure all the same." He fixed Tom with a steely gaze, odd in such a pale and sickly face. "Horcrux."

Tom glanced down at Remus' hands, plucking at the counterpane. "I see. Yes; I can see how they might be suggested as cure. As you have been told, however, the cost is not worth the prize."

"Please, Tom...I need to know. Ten years ago you told me to wait five years; I waited until I had reason because I've never seen you so afraid of anything. Now...please. Tell me."

Tom leaned forward, resting his head on his steepled hands. "I can't simply tell you, Remus. You need to understand fully what occurred when I was a young man -- there's more to the concept of the horcrux than simply what it is."

"All right," Remus said, and then he smiled. "I haven't much more to do at the moment than listen, you know."

Tom nodded. "Please bear in mind that I warned you," he said as a preface. "You know that my specialty within Dark Arts is immortality."

"I was aware of it," Remus replied drily. Tom's library of books on immortality was legendary, even among collectors. He'd written papers on it for very respected journals, and he owned several harmless and disarmed artefacts which had once been reputed to grant immortality.

"Yes, well, once it was more than simply the hobby of a dusty old professor," Tom continued. "When I was young -- very young, too young certainly -- I was obsessed with immortality. I...wanted to be immortal myself. There are some days I still do, but they are far fewer now."

Remus studied him with fever-bright eyes. "Why?"

Tom laughed. "Why do we do anything? My mother died when I was an infant, and I suppose I was -- am -- afraid of a time when I will cease to exist. Afraid of what comes after. I try to be sure, to have faith in some kind of afterlife, but it is more than the mind of man can fathom, so it is very hard."

"What does this have to do with...?"

"Please just listen, and I promise you will see," Tom said. "I designed little things, a diary that contained a memory of me -- it ended up rather flat, like a portrait would, but I thought I could give it life..."

He shook his head. "I was sick, Remus, sick in my mind. I did many things I am not proud of. I nearly killed a young girl in my foolish ambition, but I was prevented by...well, what I see now was a very timely warning about my conduct, from Albus Dumbledore. So I turned my spare time to other things, darker things, and I discovered...Professor Slughorn was my teacher, you know, he'd explained their function to me. A horcrux is an object whose ingredients include the act of murder."

Remus stared at him. "Murder? Like a sacrifice?"

"Not precisely. When a man commits murder, it is a soul-rending action; quite literally it tears the soul apart as if it were a bit of fabric," Tom said, making a ripping gesture with his hands. He saw Remus' eyes dart down to his fingers, then back up. "When the soul is rent, the murderer casts a spell which captures the soul and encases it in an object he has to hand. The cracked mirror on my bookshelf, you know the one? It was once a horcrux belonging to Grindelwald. Dumbledore made a gift of it to me when I graduated Hogwarts; it had been in his possession for some time."

"I see," Remus said, and Tom could see that he did see -- he saw precisely how a werewolf might use this to his advantage. "That was what the books meant, then?"

"That it is possible to remove the part of the soul that is the wolf? Yes. It would take study and probably...several attempts," Tom said. Remus winced. "Let me continue."

Remus nodded.

"I went to the town in which my father lived, the summer after I uncovered what a horcrux was. I'd never laid eyes on him before. I intended to make a horcrux using my father's death as the catalyst. I had everything prepared..." Tom saw the look in Remus' eyes. "Every child sooner or later wishes their parents dead, particularly a child whose parents wish he had never been born, Remus. It is only the very disturbed who intend to do the deed."

"What happened?" Remus asked.

"I found my father and we fought. Eventually I had him at wandpoint. I could have done it; it would have been quite simple. Terribly simple," Tom said with a shudder. "But...I'm told, or rather I have discovered, that there is a hint of the Gift in my family line -- from time to time the Gaunts throw up a true Seer, but apparently many of us have also been able to see visions in moments of great stress. I saw...something...what a tormented life lay ahead of me, such a miserable existence. A death that was even worse than death, a resurrection to a body that was..." he shook his head. "I still have nightmares."

Remus was watching him now with infinite sympathy in his eyes; it was almost funny that the half-dead werewolf in the bed should be the one feeling sorry for the healthy, middle-aged wizard.

"I couldn't do it. I ran away, all the way back to Hogwarts, half out of my mind. I went mad, Remus, truly mad -- did you know it took me eight years to finish school? It was because I missed a year...I was on the continent, in what a Muggle would refer to at the time as a sanatorium. Albus sent me there, paying for it himself out of his own pocket, for which he would never accept repayment. Greece...it was beautiful, even with the Muggle war going on around us. You should go, some summer; you'd like it. I discovered many things. I changed my name...I no longer wanted to be Lo -- Tom Riddle; I didn't want to be that man anymore, and I was a wizard. It was time I accepted my wizarding blood, however tainted it may have been."

"Not tainted," Remus said. "I don't like to think of blood that way."

"All right; perhaps it's more acceptable to say that the Gaunt name was not...popular, and I felt I had some duty to reclaim it. Odd; the Riddles were merely odious, while the Gaunts were terrible, horrifying inbred people. And yet I chose to be a Gaunt...and I shudder to think what I would have become had I succeeded in committing patricide as Tom Riddle. Almost certainly I would never have become a Hogwarts professor."

Remus was leaning forward, chest pressed to his bent knees, head resting atop them as he watched Tom.

"But you killed Severus, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes. If I had not, it's quite likely one of your friends would have died. He had discovered the secret somehow; it's quite possible that, like I had, he simply asked Slughorn. I should have Obliviated the man years earlier," Tom concluded. "I am a murderer, Remus, but if it consoles you at all, I murdered in defence of myself and of the magical world. I took no pride in it -- I preferred that the truth about his activities go unknown."

"Even though Sirius blamed himself?"

"His pain, in the grand scheme of things, was insignificant."

"It was still pain."

Tom fell silent, and in the silence they heard Sirius and Harry laughing together in the kitchen.

"He seems to have recovered," Tom said gently. "I am afraid to die, Remus, and my passion is the understanding of mortality as well as immortality -- but I will not allow this sort of wickedness to be carried on when I have it in my power to stop it. Do not think that I would not murder you, too, if you attempted it."

They sat in silence for a while until Remus' eyes drifted past Tom, and Tom turned to see Sirius and Harry in the doorway carrying, respectively, a large tray of food and a sticky cherry ice lolly.

"Brung some dinner," Sirius said, setting the tray at the foot of the bed and offering both of the other men bowls of soup. Tom accepted the offer of crackers and crumbled some into his soup, thanking Sirius and eating neatly, quickly. He had the sudden urge to be far away from here, to run and hide from the world as much as from the inevitable end of all human beings. Sometimes the nightmares were not that he lived such a solitary, endless existence, but that now he never would.

As soon as he could, he made his excuses and departed, Apparating back to Hogsmeade and hurrying up the road to his rooms at the castle. He shut the door tightly behind him, locked it, and went to his desk, pouring himself a glass of firewhiskey with unsteady fingers.

With a few swallows of the fiery liquid in his belly he relaxed slightly; he crossed to the dusty windows that looked out onto the Quidditch Pitch and leaned his forehead against them. The sun was setting and all was quiet at his little school, the place he loved above all others in the world, the place he never wanted to leave.

He turned his head and pressed a single finger to the glass at eye-level. Carefully, in the dust on the window, he wrote the letters:

I am Lord Voldemort.

Then, just as carefully, he drew the edge of his palm across the pane, obliterating it, and turned away. He should sleep soon. He had classes to teach tomorrow, and a bad night's sleep always made him feel ten years older.

END