Harry Potter and the Half-God Prince

by MarcusRowland

Summary

While Harry, Hermione and Ron are on the run from Voldemort, the odd contents of a book rescued from Grimmauld Place lead to a huge change in plans. HP/Wonder Woman Crossover. Now with title illo!

PLEASE NOTE - CHAPTER 20 HAS BEEN REVISED.

Notes

All characters are the property of their respective creators, and this story is not intended to infringe on their copyright. Please don't sue... This is a Harry Potter crossover with Wonder Woman and other DC Universe characters. Details of crossovers and other notes are at the end of chapters.
I currently have several chapters written and will post more as I finish new chapters so that I stay ahead. I wasn't going to post this until I'd finished the whole story, but Elle magazine has apparently run a feature on Emma Watson (Hermione) that includes a photo of her in a Wonder Woman Halloween costume, so I thought I'd get the first chapter out before there were fifty other crossovers out there...

"That's odd," Hermione said their second night in the tent.

"What is?" asked Ron.

"I was just looking through the books we took from Grimmauld place, and I found this inside a hollow copy of The Annotated Most Potent Potions." Hermione showed them a polished wooden box, a little over a foot square and four inches deep. "I found the book with its cover locked on the shelf on the potions room in Grimmauld Place just before Remus turned up, I only just got around to opening it." She opened the box and held up an odd metal machine with several dials. "It looks like reconstructions of the Antikythera mechanism. Why would Snape own something like that? And why would he hide it there?"

"Snape?" asked Harry. "Why do you think it's got anything to do with Snape?"

"His name's inside the front cover of the book, before the hollow part."

"What's an antithingy mechanism when it's at home," asked Ron. "And why reconstruct it? Are you sure it isn't cursed or something?"

"The original machine was a mechanical computer built by the ancient Greeks a couple of thousand years ago. It was used to calculate the position of the planets and phases of the moon. Divers found it in 1900, but it was really badly corroded, it took decades to figure it out. This one isn't cursed - there's a preserving spell on it, I can't detect anything else."

"What's a computer?"

"You really should have taken muggle studies, Ron. It's a machine for solving complex mathematical problems. Scientists think that the Antikythera mechanism was used to keep track of the planets and the calendar for religious reasons. Probably not as accurate as the calculations we learned in Astronomy class, but they got results a lot faster."
"So why don't we use something like that now?"

"There are better magical alternatives, like the astronomy globes they sell in Diagon Alley."

"Even so, maybe someone made it for the magical market before the astronomy globes were invented," said Harry.

"It's too crude. This was mostly hand-made, the gears look like they were filed not machined. And all of the dials are labelled in ancient Greek. It's a replica. If it was real it would be a priceless antique."

"How do you know it isn't?"

"Don't be silly. Quot annos!" She swished and pointed her wand at the machine, then stared at the spectacular lack of results. "Bloody hell!"

"It's real, isn't it?" said Harry.

"It's too old for that spell to measure, which means it's either protected against that spell in a way I can't detect, or at least as old as the Julian calendar."

"Let's pretend I have no idea what that means."

"Honestly, Ron... It means that it was made before 46 BC. It's probably worth a couple of million pounds if it could be authenticated."

"What's that in galleons?"

"Two million was a bit over four hundred thousand, the last time I checked the exchange rate."

"Cool!"

"Don't go buying a new broom just yet, the preservation spell would probably make it impossible to prove it's that old, at least by Muggle techniques."

"It's still pretty cool," said Harry. "I wonder why Snape had it. Anything else in there?"

"Some papers, haven't checked them yet. Let's see... an invoice from Slug and Jiggers for seven bezoars and a load of potions ingredients, sold to a Rafael Prince in November 1918. Wasn't Prince Snape's family name? I think it's an itemised list for the month, not a single order. Probably Snape's grandfather, or some other relative. I'd guess he was making a lot of restorative and regeneration potions and poison antidotes."

"Potions must have run in the family."

"You could heal a couple of dozen people with this stuff, I wonder why he wanted so much."

Ron moved to look over her shoulder. "Even I know that one, they were fighting one of the big muggle wars then, a lot of soldiers came back wounded and poisoned. My great-aunt Tessie used to go on about it before she splinched herself, she pretended to be a muggle... um... nurse and managed to slip some potions into the medicines at the muggle hospital and do a few healing spells, reckoned she saved more soldiers than all the healers in the hospital put together. The muggle papers called it a miracle, and the Ministry reckoned it was a bit too close to violating the Statute of Secrecy. They fined her and nearly snapped her wand."

"I don't remember anything about that in History of Magic," Hermione said with a frown.
Harry shrugged. "It probably got left out of the books. Wouldn't want to give impressionable kids the idea of helping muggles. What else have you got there?"

"More potions receipts up to July 1922. The amount he's buying gradually decreases, the last one is just stuff you'd need for mild tonics."

"Maybe some patients died, others got better," said Ron.

"Okay. Muggle photo of a woman, nobody I know, a brunette with long hair. Muggle sort of clothing, dress looks like the twenties or thirties, so do the cars, and that's the Arc de Triomph in Paris in the background."

"Cor!"

"Let's have a look," Harry joined Ron to stare at the picture. "Bloody hell, she's gorgeous. Who is she?"

"No idea. Okay, if you two are finished perving over someone who probably died before you were born..." Hermione turned to the next paper "Letter in French, dated April 21st 1920, addressed to Rafael Prince again. Signed by... good grief, signed by Nicholas Flamel! Let's see how much French I remember, haven't used it much since the Tournament, this isn't going to be a word for word translation. Um... Rafael, I have visited your client and administered three drops of the Elixir as requested. I regret that a larger or repeated dose is contra-indicated as it would create a permanent dependancy on the Elixir. There was a marked improvement in his condition, which will hopefully be permanent with careful use of the potions you supply. I think that there is now every hope for a full recovery. Your beautiful 'cousin' - that's in quotes for some reason - assures me that she will continue to monitor the situation, and has a better alternative to the Elixir available once he has recovered. Since owl post is not routinely available to her she has asked me to forward this package, a small gift which she hopes will be useful at a time of great need. She will send the activation procedure separately. We will be in Britain in the New Year; until then my best wishes to you and your wife." A better alternative to the Elixir? What the hell does that mean?"

"No wonder Snape hid it," said Harry. "If there was something like that Vol... Riddle would be all over it."

"Greasy git probably wants to keep it for himself," Ron said with a sneer.

"What else have you got there?"

"Table converting ancient Greek numerals to Roman numerals and modern numbers. Table of the English and Greek alphabets. Table comparing various calendars. And... okay, this looks interesting..."

"That's French again," said Harry, looking over her shoulder.

"I noticed. OK, muggle paper and fountain pen for the writing, I think. The address just says 'Paris, November the fourth 1981'. Harry, that's..."

"Just after my parents were killed. I know."

"Severus, you must know that it is not in my power to help you. You are twice foreswarn, once to your childhood friend and once to your 'Dark Lord', - that's in quotes - the Moirai - whatever that means - do not forgive such betrayal, especially when it results in death, and I doubt that you would survive their intervention. I grieve with you for your friend's death, but she is with Hades now, and if what you have told me is true I am certain that Lily will have attained the Elysian Fields. - that's
pretty much Heaven in Greek mythology, I think. There are ways to survive apparent death, and I agree that your former master may have used them, but none of them apply to your friend. Any resurrection would be a thin semblance of life, and lead to nothing but sorrow. - Oh, Harry..."

"It's okay, Hermione. We've seen how resurrection worked out for Riddle, I wouldn't want to inflict that on my parents. You might as well read the rest."

"Before you do," said Ron, "I'm pretty sure the Moirai are the ancient Greek Fates. It came up a couple of times in Divination class."

"Good grief! Thanks, Ron, I never thought that class would actually be useful for anything. I am aware that I am in your family's debt, but I must beseech you to find another way for me to repay it. Perhaps when he is of age I might aid the boy; if you are right about your former master he is likely to need my help. Signed with a capital D, nothing else. That's where it ends."

"D for Dumbledore?" Harry looked at the letter. "It doesn't look like his handwriting, unless it's his brother or something... Can you tell us anything about the writer?"

"Not Dumbledore. It's a woman, from some of the word endings, very clear handwriting, no corrections, perfect French spelling. Judging by all the Greek references I'd guess a classical scholar with an interest in the field, or maybe someone who still worships those gods."

"And?"

"And what, Harry? I'm not bloody Sherlock Holmes."

"Who?"

"Oh, for... a famous detective, Ron. Would it kill you to read some of the books I recommend?"

"Gotcha! Elementary, my dear Hermione! He's pretty clever for a muggle."

"Arse," Hermione said affectionately. "Okay, it sounds like you can do something to the mechanism to contact her, unless the gift was something different."

"I'd guess that it's some sort of rune magic," said Harry. "You said that the only magic you could sense was an anti-corrosion spell, so it must be something like.. like.."

"Like a combination lock. There must be an incomplete rune pattern that only completes when the dials are manipulated. What I don't see is how the runes are powered up, you'd need to do it before you completed the pattern."

"Is the anti-corrosion spell rune based?" asked Ron.

"Let's see..." Hermione cast a different analysis spell. "Yes. I can't see the runes though, they must be inside it."

"If there are more gears inside," said Harry, "I'd guess that it's engraved on some of them, and already powered up as the anti-corrosion spell. But when you turn the dials to the right pattern they move to form a second rune set that activates something."

"And we can't see which ones without taking it apart, and that probably destroys the spell."

"There must be something else in there that shows how to use it," Ron said angrily, "otherwise what use is it?"
Hermione shrugged, showing empty hands. "Not that I can see."

"Did you check for hidden compartments?"

"There isn't really room, Harry, the machine took up most of the space in the box."

"Maybe it has an extension like your bag. Another compartment."

"Sod it, I should have thought of that. Alohamora!"

With a soft click the bottom of the box hinged up, revealing a tray underneath, with padded niches containing some small potion bottles, measuring cups, and glass and silver stirring rods. Hermione lifted out the tray to reveal a rectangular silver dish with a flat lid, two sealed black parchment packages, and a small leaflet, again in French.

"What is all that?" asked Ron.

Hermione read through the leaflet for a moment then smiled. "It's a kit for developing and printing magical photos, though the process looks a lot more complicated than the one Colin used to use. I think most of his ingredients were ready-mixed." She studied the envelopes. "The lumpy one says 'Caution! Exposed!', I suppose that means film, the other one is printing paper."

"It's a bit big for film," said Harry.

"It'll be roll film, a lot bigger than anything modern muggle cameras use. Anyone see any reason not to try it?"

"Works for me," said Ron, "but you're the potions whiz, you'd better do it."

"If this blows up in my face I'll remember you said that. Now for the first steps we need a darkened room..."

Forty minutes later Hermione crossed her fingers, raised her wand, and cast the lowest-powered Lumos spell she could manage. There were seven pictures. The first showed the woman from the picture they'd seen earlier, standing in front of the Eiffel Tower, blowing a kiss toward the camera. The others showed the same women in various locations. Each picture showed a few seconds of action, repeating endlessly.

"Any way to know what she's saying?" asked Harry.

"Sorry, not unless you can read lips. She's probably speaking French anyway."

"Fat chance. Okay, can you finish off the process so we can look at them in better light? Maybe there's something we'll spot if we check carefully."

"They just need to soak a while longer." Hermione carefully covered the dish with the lid. "We can have more light now. Let's cook the rest of those eggs and have a bite to eat while we're waiting."

Twenty minutes later Hermione got the pictures out of the dish, rinsed them, and used a drying charm to get them ready for examination.

"They're pretty small. Can't make out much detail."

"Whoever put this kit together didn't include an enlarger, Ron, they're just contact prints. Let's try something. Engorgio!" The pictures started to expand. Hermione waited until they were about a foot across then ended the spell. "I think I stopped it before the pictures distorted."
"That's a lot better. She's still moving, so I think it's okay. Well done!"

"Thank you, Harry."

"What he said."

"Thanks, Ron. Okay, any thoughts?"

They stated at the pictures. After a minute or so Harry looked at the negatives. "I'm drawing a blank here. Maybe the order they were taken is important. That'd be that one with the Eiffel Tower, then I think this is the platform of some sort of station..."

"Montmartre metro station," said Hermione, "there's a sign in the background."

"Next one she's standing in front of a big church."

"No idea on that one."

"Standing on the doorstep of a building."

"Again, no idea."

"Another station, a big one this time, standing on the concourse, I think."

"That's the Gare du Nord, the main station for Paris."

"Then she's standing in front of some sort of racing car, except it's on the street and loaded with tons of luggage and cans of petrol."

"That's the Monte Carlo rally, some of the cars start from Paris."

"After that she's in front of the Arc de Triomphe, just waving at the camera. I think the picture we saw in the box must have been taken with a muggle camera at the same time, she's wearing the same clothes. And there's a blank negative at the end."

"It's a bit bloody cryptic."

"Think positively, Harry. Any thoughts, Ron?"

"Well, if you don't think it's too obvious, all of the pictures she's in except the first and the last have something with a number in them, and she looks toward it in the picture. The metro station is platform one, then there's a clock on the church showing eleven o'clock, the house is number eleven too, then she's standing in front of platform nine at the Gare du Nord, then the car is number eighteen."

"He's right, Hermione."

"He is. Okay, let's see. One, eleven, eleven, nine, eighteen. Doesn't mean much to me. Wait a sec... if we write the digits down, we get 11111918, which could be 11 11 1918. That's a date! November the eleventh, 1918! Armistice Day, the day the First World War ended."

"It can't be that simple!"

"Why not, Harry? Most wizards wouldn't even know the significance, so they might not recognise it as a date."
"I suppose it's worth a try. So we need to convert the date into the Ancient Greek calendar. Um... Hermione?"

"Riiight. You two wash the dishes or something, let me work it out. Preferably without any interruptions, okay?"

"Right, Hermione."

"You've got it!"

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"23rd of Pyanepsion, Ol.673.2!" Hermione shouted triumphantly. "Now I just need to convert the figures into Attic numerals and work out which of these symbols is Pyanepsion, and we're done."

"What can we do to help?"

"Clean the bathroom or something, Harry, just keep quiet while you're doing it."

"She's got a bit of a strop on," Ron whispered as they backed away.

"Maybe we shouldn't be asking her to do all the thinking."

"But she's so good at it!"

"Zip it and let me get on with this in peace!"

Harry mimed zipping his lips, Ron just looked puzzled, and they got out of the way.

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"OK, these are the dial settings we need. Do you want to try it, Harry?"

"Better leave it for the morning. It's nearly midnight, I'd rather be wide awake."

"Good point. And if this has something to do with France their time is an hour ahead of us, it's nearly one there. We might be trying to contact someone who's asleep."

"Let's get to bed, we can decide what we want to do in the morning."

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"We need to get food," said Ron. "Maybe we should sort that out before we mess about with the machine."

Harry rubbed his eyes. "I've been thinking about it most of the night. I don't know why, but I have a feeling that it's really important. And if it goes horribly wrong, I'd sooner that it was at the start of the day so that we've got more time to get well away from here."

"It's a bit early for shopping anyway," said Hermione, "most places don't even open until nine, and people on a real holiday probably wouldn't go shopping first thing in the morning. We might as well try the machine first."

Ron's stomach growled. "Bollocks. Okay, let's make it unanimous. Hermione, can you get it working?"
"What's the magic word?"

"I don't know, I thought you were just going to turn the dials."

"I think that what the prat is trying to say is please, Hermione."

"Okay, sorry, right, a bit slow today, must be the hunger. Please, Hermione, show us poor feeble males how to make the bloody thing work. Please!"

"Better, though a bit more abject grovelling wouldn't come amiss." Hermione got the machine out of the box then paused. "Maybe we'd better get the tent packed first, in case we have to leave here in a hurry."

"Oh come on, Hermione!"

"She's right," said Ron. "It'd be a bit awkward if it sent up a big flare of magic showing where we are, and we were still packing when the Death Eaters showed up."

"Good point." They spent a few minutes collapsing the tent and packing. Hermione put the mechanism down on a tree stump, checked her notes carefully, and painstakingly adjusted the dials.

Nothing happened for a few seconds, and there was an overpowering feeling of anticlimax. Then the machine began to vibrate, and its sides seemed to fold in on themselves, clicking and whirring as it began to change shape, becoming rounder and a little longer, curved rather than flat.

"It's a Transformer!" said Hermione.

"A what?"

"It's a muggle thing, Ron, don't worry about it."

The machine continued to change for a minute or so, then stopped.

"It looks like a bird lying on its back."

"It's an owl!" Harry cast a silent levitation spell and lifted it into the air, waited until the feet were more or down, and lowered it to the stump. There was a loud click, and its eyes irised open and it turned its head in a complete circle as it looked around.

"What's it for?" asked Ron.

The metal wings opened and it shook them out, curved metal plates folding and twisting in complex patterns, then lurched into the air and flew toward Hermione, who ducked as it tried to land on her shoulder, then toward Ron, who dived out of the way. Harry stood his ground and held out his arm, remembering all the times Hedwig had flown to him. It landed, metal claws gripping his sleeve, and stared at him, then looked around at the others.

"Hello. What's your name?"

Ron and Hermione cautiously stood, wands at the ready. The owl stayed on Harry's arm, but stretched one wing toward Hermione, the other toward Ron.

"What do you think, Hermione? Should I be trying to get away from it?"

"It hasn't killed you yet, I think there's a good chance it doesn't want to. You know, I'm sure I've seen something like this before, wish I could remember where."
"I think it wants us to touch it," said Ron.

"Has to be a portkey!"

The owl nodded its head, apparently in agreement, and waved its wings at them again.

"It's too cute to be evil." Hermione put her bag on her arm, reached out with her free hand and gently gripped a wing tip.

"You're both mental. Oh well, we're probably doomed whatever we do..." Ron took hold of the other wing tip. The owl's head began to spin again, and suddenly they all felt a sensation like a hook in their navels and were spinning with it, whirling through a confused coloured blur.

Abruptly it ended, and they found themselves lying on the carpeted floor of a large comfortable-looking room, with crammed book-shelves alternating with wide windows on two of the walls. Hermione recognized a plasma TV on the third wall, with racks of complicated-looking electronics and shelves of disks and cassettes. The fourth wall had some framed paintings, none of them looking magical, and two doors, both open, and they could hear music from another room. There was a settee and two armchairs, a gleaming baby-grand piano, and a coffee table which they'd narrowly missed. The owl whirred, clicked, and transformed back into its original form.

"Where are we?" whispered Harry.

Hermione sat up, and murmured "Wherever it is, I can smell baking."

Ron's stomach rumbled loudly.

Hermione stood and cautiously moved to a window, then helped the boys to their feet, whispering "I can see the Eiffel Tower! We're in Paris."

"Hello." All three of them turned toward one of the doors, where a beautiful woman wearing a blue dress with a belt of braided golden cord and broad silver bracelets had suddenly appeared. Impossibly, she seemed to be the woman from the photographs. "I'm Diana Prince. Since you got through the wards I'm guessing Severus sent you. Which of you boys is Draco, and who are your friends?"

TBC

Crossover with Wonder Woman, of course, mostly the 2017 film but also some background from the comics. I'm ignoring casting information and leaked plot details etc. for the forthcoming Wonder Woman 1984.
Hermione tried to think of an answer that wasn't a complete fabrication. "It's a bit complicated. We weren't really expecting to end up here, not exactly, Professor Snape left the machine but he had to leave in a hurry, we had to work it out for ourselves."

"I take it Voldemort is back, and Severus wants you out of the way."

All three of them winced, and Ron's stomach growled again.

"We'll talk in the kitchen, it sounds like you need something to eat."

"That'd be great," said Harry, "We've only had eggs the last couple of days, and they weren't very good."

They followed Diana through a large dining room to a modern muggle kitchen. "Let's see, what can I do quickly that isn't eggs... do you all like spaghetti?" They all agreed that they did, and Diana put on a pot of water onto the stove, got a plastic tub of Bolognese sauce from the freezer and put it into a microwave, then added salt, half a packet of dried spaghetti, and some dried herbs to the water. "This won't be as good as if I made it all fresh, but it's fast."

"Professor Snape didn't really explain things," said Harry, "are you his cousin or something? I know that his mother's name was Prince."

"Not exactly. The Prince family helped me many years ago, and part of the help was the use of their name when I needed a new identity. You could say I'm adopted." She turned back to them, her belt suddenly un wrapping from her waist and forming a coil of glowing rope in her hands. "Now... I've been patient, but I think we need a little more honesty here."

"Which probably makes these two Hermione Granger and Robert Weasley."

"It's Ron, not Robert."

"What's a horcrux?"

"A soul fragment."

"Whose?"
"Voldemort's."

"What do you plan to do with it?"

"Destroy it, if we can figure out how."

"Did Severus actually give you the mechanism?"

"No. He left it in a house we were using, we grabbed it when we had to run."

"From Voldemort?"

"Yes."

"Then I don't owe you any obligations or life debts?"

"Um.. not that I know."

"Excellent." The rope fell from them, and wound itself back around her waist. "Let's eat, and then we'll work out what I can do to help you."

Ron pulled his wand, and the rope snapped out again, wrapping his hand and arm so that it would be impossible to use it to cast a spell. "Ron, I really mean you no harm, unless I am seriously provoked. Now are you willing to put that away?"

"I suppose."

"You suppose what, Ron?"

"Yes, I'll put it away."

"Thank you, Ron." The rope flew back to her hand again. "Does anyone else have an objection to a quiet friendly meal?"

"Um, not me," said Harry.

"No," said Hermione.

"...so right at the end of the First World War my lover was gassed and caught in an exploding aeroplane, the gods alone know how he survived the fall, the burns, and the poison. He would have died in hours, but one of his friends was a squib and knew how to summon magical help. Rafael Prince helped Steve, and I swore a life debt to him and his descendants and took their name, partly because I needed to call myself something, and partly in tribute to their help. So far as I know only Severus remains from the family."

Ron swallowed a large mouthful of spaghetti. "Wait a minute. They helped you in 1918. That's.. um.. seventy-nine years ago."

"Yes."

"I know that witches and wizards can live a long time," said Hermione, "but that's not it, is it? You don't seem to have aged at all."

"No, I'm not a witch, although I do obviously know about them and have a little magical ability. Technically I'm what you'd call a magical creature. Amongst other things, I'm immortal."
"Oh Merlin." Harry put a hand to his forehead. "Don't tell us anything about how you do it. Vol... he sometimes knows what I'm thinking."

"It wouldn't help him if I told him personally," said Diana. "It's my nature, not something he can copy or steal."

"Your nature?"

"I'm a demigoddess."

Hermione's eyes widened. "A WHAT?"

"I am Princess Diana of Themyscira, the daughter of Queen Hippolyta of the Amazons and Zeus. I was born about five thousand years ago."

"Get real!"

"I am real, Ron." Diana casually picked up a steel ladle and bent it double, then twisted it into a knot, squeezed it, and rolled it between her hands until it was compressed into a more or less solid ball. "You could probably do that with magic, of course, but you'll notice I didn't use any spells."

"Wicked!"

"I try not to be. I am, however, limited by my oath to the Prince family and to Severus. In particular, I gave him my word that I would stay out of the war with Voldemort and provide a safe haven if needed. He mentioned his godson Draco, I was expecting him to send the boy here if things got too dangerous in Britain."

"Then you can't help us?"

"I didn't say that, Harry. I can't help you directly, at least not with the war, but there are other things I can do that may indirectly help your cause. For example, I can destroy the horcrux if you want me to."

"How can you destroy it?"

"I've slain a god, I doubt that the amulet would put up as good a fight."

"Wouldn't that count as taking sides?" asked Hermione.

"You've brought it into my home, that means I have the right to treat it as a threat."

Harry smiled. "I'm not going to argue about that."

"I'm a little disappointed in the owl, actually, it shouldn't have brought anything dangerous to me."

"We were wondering about that," said Hermione. "Where does it come from? Is it really an Antikythera mechanism?"

"Yes and no. Hephestus built the original machines for us about three thousand years ago when Themiscyra had more trade with the outside world, without one it's almost impossible to find us. Some non-magical copies were built by followers of Archimedes around 250 BC, the mechanism that was found in the sea was one of them. They won't help you find Themiscyra, but they're good navigational aids for more mundane purposes."

"You must have added the date setting later."
"The servitor form was built in by Hephestus, I simply changed the activation date when I gave it to the Prince family."

"It's weird... I keep thinking I've seen something like the owl before."

Diana smiled. "I'd imagine that the reason you think you've seen it before is that you saw a film called Clash of the Titans, I was an art consultant for the production company and made a few suggestions for special effects."

"That's it! I saw it on TV years ago. Which reminds me, what was the point of all that rigmarole with the photos?"

"Well, Rafael knew the correct setting and should have passed it on to his heirs, but he wanted to make sure that if something happened the family would still have a way to contact me. It was unnecessarily complicated, but that's wizards for you."

"About the amulet..." said Harry.

"We'll deal with it after lunch. Which reminds me, the cheesecake should be defrosted by now, and I have ice cream and fruit to go with it. Are you all ready for dessert?"

They were.

Diana went out while they were eating, and came back a few minutes later wearing an outfit that had them staring; a sleeveless red and gold armoured girdle and short skirt that seemed to be made of strips of leather, metal bracers on her arms, a gold tiara, a sheathed sword, and a circular shield slung on her back. The coil of glowing rope hang by her side. Metallic boots completed the outfit. "If this thing is as dangerous as you think, I prefer to be armoured."

"That's an interesting costume," said Hermione. "Doesn't it get a little cold sometimes?"

"No. We'd better do this in the basement, there's more room to swing a sword, and less to break there if anything goes wrong." She led them downstairs. One side of the cellar was set up as a gymnasium, the other as a workshop. Diana effortlessly picked up a four foot piece of four by eight timber and put it across two trestles. "Put the amulet on there, at the mid-point between the trestles."

"Okay." Harry put the amulet where he was told, and backed away as Diana unsheathed her sword. "Should I command it to open?"

"Better not." The sword looked as lethal as the Sword of Gryffindor, with a golden hilt and a long silvery blade, with symbols none of them recognized engraved along its length. She held it in both hands, then raised it, seemed to meditate for a moment, then swung it round her head several times until the movement was a blur, and Hermione fancied she heard a whip-like crack, as though the blade was travelling faster than sound. Almost too fast to see she swung it down into the Horcrux. With a ringing noise that nearly deafened them the halves of the Horcrux and the timber flew apart, leaving a cloud of black smoke that pulsed and wailed, and the sword embedded nearly a foot into the concrete floor.

"Don't let it touch you!" shouted Harry.

Diana let go of the sword and snapped the rope toward the cloud. It wrapped around the smoke and somehow confined it, forming a loose ball which floated in mid-air and rapidly contracted, tighter and tighter until no smoke was visible, then continued to shrink until the shrieking stopped in a last agonized cry. She smiled and said "That's one problem solved" as she pulled the sword from the
concrete. The floor around the blade cracked, but the sword was completely undamaged. As she wiped off some dust the rope unknotted itself and slithered back to her waist.

"Merlin's soggy underpants!"

"Don't be crude, Ron. What next?"

"There's still something here." Diana concentrated for a moment, then said "Now we find a way to get that thing out of Harry's head without killing him."

"The scar?"

"I'm sorry, Harry, it's not just a scar. I think you've already guessed that."

Harry seemed to sag. "You're saying it's a Horcrux?"

"Some sort of soul fragment anyway. Now that the Horcrux is gone I can sense it, like a fainter version of the amulet. It isn't just a curse scar."

"Bugger."

"What can we do to help?" asked Ron.

"There's a ritual to summon my uncle, he may be able to help, but we can't do it until tonight. Can any of you play a musical instrument? Or sing?"

"Which uncle are we talking about?" Hermione asked nervously.

"Hades, of course. Who else would you ask about souls?"

"Riiiight."

"I can play pan pipes but I'm not very good," said Harry.

"And I played violin in junior school, though I'm a bit rusty. And I sang in the choir."

"How about you, Ron?"

"I can sing a bit, and I used to have some bongo drums until Mum made me get rid of them."

"Good. We have some time. Can you transfigure the instruments? There's plenty of scrap wood here for you to use. If not we need to get some shopping."

"Harry! You can't just summon Hades and expect to get away unharmed! He's the god of death!"

Hermione plucked one of the strings of the violin she'd made, decided it wasn't quite right, and tweaked the transfiguration a little more.

"I'm not asking him for a favour for myself. Vol... Tom's trying to cheat him, I'm trying to make sure he doesn't get away with it."

"What if he decides the way to do that is to kill you too?"

"If he's that ruthless he ought to go after Tom to get the rest of the Horcruxes."

"You'd still be dead, mate," said Ron, punctuating his words with a bongo beat.
"I know, but if I put Tom on Hades' radar I'd probably take him down with me. Anyway, can it hurt to ask? If Diana's there he shouldn't just attack us."

"I hope not," Diana said as she came in with tea, having switched back to her dress. "It's been a while since I've spoken to him, and he's not the kindest of gods. But he knows that I can kill him if I have to, and I will do so if it becomes necessary to protect you."

"That's not entirely reassuring."

Diana put her hand on the golden rope. "I'm sorry, I have a tendency to be blunt. This lasso compels truth in those it binds, but its magic affects me too. I find it difficult to lie or shade the truth about important things. I can do so if I must, if there is a greater good to be served or as a ruse of war, but it isn't easy for me."

"What happens if you kill Hades?" asked Hermione. "It seems a bit... difficult. And if you could, without death wouldn't there be a huge population crisis?"

"He isn't Death in the sense you mean. He's the Lord of the afterlife for my family's pantheon and their followers and friends. But he does have powers that might help."

Harry thought for a second, then asked "What happened the last time you spoke to him?"

Diana looked pensive. "It was in 1969. Steve was killed during an intelligence operation in Vietnam, I asked Hades if he could be spared."

"What happened?"

"We reached a compromise. He was born again, somewhere in the world, and when the Moirai deem the time to be right we will be reunited."

"It sounds a bit vague," said Hermione. "What if he's really old when you meet?"

"Then we will enjoy the time we share together, and meet again in his next life if the Moirai will it."

"It might be a long wait."

Diana smiled. "Who says I'm waiting? I've had my share of lovers to while away the time. Look me up when you're older, I think you'll shape up quite nicely."

Harry blushed. "Er, I'm sort of dating someone."

"Actually I meant Hermione."

"Oh!" Hermione blushed an even brighter red. "Amazon, right... wow... umm... I'm... um... I'm not really into girls."

"Just teasing. But if you ever change your mind..." Diana winked. "Now, how are the instruments coming along?"

"I think we've more or less got them working," said Harry, trying to ignore some fairly lurid mental images and failing badly, "but what are we going to play?"

"It needs to be a good tune that speaks of death."

"That we can perform with pan pipes, a violin, bongos, and Ron and Hermione singing."
"It has to be your choice, not mine. I'm sure you'll think of something."

"Music about death. And I've got to think of it?"

"You'd be surprised how often it comes up in music. You can ask Ron and Hermione for suggestions, of course, but you must make the final decision. And make it a good choice; right now there must be many calling out to all of the lords of the afterlife."

"Why now?" asked Hermione.

"You hadn't heard? My namesake died two days ago. I'm going to her funeral service on Saturday."

"Your namesake? Do you mean Princess Diana?"

"Yes. She died in a car crash early on Sunday morning. A few kilometers from here, as it happens."

"Oh no! Mum's a huge fan, she'll be really upset."

"Anything to do with Voldemort?" asked Harry.

"I have some contacts in the Ministere des Affaires de la Magiques, as of yesterday they don't think so, and it's my impression that they are reasonably competent. Which reminds me, be careful with your spells, if you're arrested for any reason they'll probably deport you to Britain."

"And hand us over to the Ministry," said Harry.

"I'm afraid so. By the way, if you do go back to Britain don't mention the word Voldemort, there's some sort of magical trace, anyone using it is tracked. The Ministere posted a warning to travellers yesterday."

"Wonderful. Is there any good news?"

"I've thought of some tunes," said Hermione. "But they're muggle music, Ron, I hope you're a quick study."

At eleven-fifteen that night, shielded by Hermione's best muggle-repelling charm, they set out for Père Lachaise Cemetery, a mile or so from Diana's home. She was wearing her armour again under a black hooded cloak trimmed with feathers.

"Any reason for this particular cemetery?" asked Harry.

"Jim Morrison is buried there, which makes it a place of pilgrimage for rock fans, so it's a good place for the music you've chosen. And you can get in reasonably easily, the gates here shouldn't be protected against magic. The wizards mostly use Montparnasse, they have a lot of spells to keep out intruders."

"Okay." Harry had only the vaguest idea who Jim Morrison was, but was prepared to take her word for it.

"We need to start playing before midnight. But remember, it may take a while to get a response."

An hour later, in a vaguely Grecian mausoleum Diana had led them to, Harry played the last notes of Stairway to Heaven and they paused to sip some water before launching into the next song on their play-list, Another One Bites the Dust.
"Are you sure this is going to work?" Hermione asked at the next pause.

"He knows we're here," said Diana, pouring a glass of wine from a bottle, then pouring it out onto the flagstones. "He probably heard you rehearsing too, but these things have to be done the right way." She looked past them and added "Don't they, Uncle?"

"Well, well, well," said a wheezing voice, "what have we here? My favourite niece, and some... well, let's be charitable and say musicians." A figure walked into the circle of witch light at the centre of the mausoleum. He was about seven feet tall, wore a grey chiton, and carried a sceptre with two horns. Behind him loomed a huge three-headed dog, bigger than Fluffy, which Harry guessed was the original Cerberus. "What brings you here?"

"You already know," Diana said patiently, pouring another glass of wine and handing it to him.

He waved a hand; a stone throne appeared and he sat on it. "I know, but the supplicant must tell me in his own words."

Harry squared his shoulders, trying to feel some trust but not sure it was there. "Okay. Lord Hades, there's a wizard in Britain, he goes by a lot of different names but the real one is Tom Marvolo Riddle. He's trying to become immortal, and he's made some Horcruxes from fragments of his soul. I think that one of them is inside my scar. He's already died once and come back to life, and he'll be unstoppable before long. We entreat your help before it's too late."

"My help doing what? Spit it out, boy."

"We want to stop him, Lord Hades. If we can destroy the Horcruxes it ends his immortality, and I might possibly be able to kill him."

"So what's in it for me?"

"You prove that nobody can escape death?"

"Nobody can. It doesn't matter if they live ten minutes or ten thousand years, everybody dies."

"You get to torment him for all eternity?"

"With the damage he's already done to his soul, he isn't getting an afterlife."

"Shouldn't people know that? Know the consequences of trying to escape you?"

"Hmmm... No. The fewer people that know about Horcruxes the better. If you tell everyone that trying to escape death is bad, you're telling them that there's a way to try. Why do you think so many idiots poison themselves trying to make a Philosopher's Stone? Voldemort killed hundreds to make and protect his Horcruxes. So again I ask, what's in it for me?"

"Knowing it's the right thing to do?"

Hades laughed.

"Okay, maybe I'm asking the wrong question. What would you have me do?"

"Finally! Finally you ask the right question! Well, there's a trinket I've taken a fancy to, you could give it to me. Nothing that's useful to a mortal, just..."

"That's enough." A stranger walked into the circle of light. A young-looking woman, beautiful, with raven black hair and pale skin, wearing tight black jeans with a studded leather belt, a black tank top,
high black leather boots, and a top hat with a long black feather in the band. There was an ankh amulet on a cord around her neck, and an odd mark, like an oval over an inverted question mark, marked in kohl around one eye. "You know that isn't for you. And definitely not for mortals." She reached up and scratched one of Cerebus's heads, and he wagged his tail.

"I'm sorry," said Harry, "you're...?"

"Death. Hello, Harry."

TBC

Author's note: I'm mixing and matching different versions of Diana's back-story, her age is canon for the New 52 comics. Bubo the owl (a metal owl animated in stop-motion by Ray Harryhausen) was important to the plot of Clash of the Titans (1981); he makes a cameo appearance in the 2010 remake.

Diana, Princess of Wales died in Paris on Sunday 31st August 1997. It's Harry Potter canon that the trio steal the locket and escape to the country on September 2nd 1997; see timelines on the Harry Potter lexicon. The Ministere des Affaires de la Magiques is the French governing body for the Wizarding World according to Pottermore. All other French in this and later chapters courtesy of Google Translate, apologies for any errors.

There are multiple versions of Hades in DC comics and animated film, ranging from neutrality to supreme evil. I've chosen to go with more or less neutral but self-serving. If you want to imagine him having the same voice as Mark Hamill playing Joker I won't object. And yes, that's Death of the Endless from the Sandman comics, also part of the DC universe, all disclaimers apply.
"Who are you talking to?" asked Hermione.

"Can't you see her?"

Ron shook his head "Sorry, mate, see who?"

"Better leave Harry alone for a minute," said Diana.

Harry ignored their discussion, focusing on Death. "This is very confusing."

Death nodded sympathetically. "It's a little complicated. Basically, Hades rules the Olympian afterlife. When someone associated with that particular pantheon dies I take their soul and pass it on to Charon, who relays it to Hades. Hades finds them a home in his realm. It's a very important role, of course, but it has a narrower focus. He sees a few souls a year, I handle just under a hundred and forty thousand a day. That's just humans on Earth, of course, it's endless quadrillions if you include every living thing across the multiverse that's capable of understanding the idea of death."

"Um... okay? What were you two talking about? The thing Hades wanted?"

"Can we shelve that for a moment? I'd rather talk about your enemy."

"What about Vo... Riddle?"

"You can say his name, he can't hear you here. He's already dead, even if he doesn't think so, and he's pretty much destroyed his soul. When the last part of it dies there'll be nothing left for me to pass on to any afterlife. Which reminds me, do you want the bit that's in your head?"

"Merlin! Of course not!"

"Stand still a second." She stepped forward and touched his brow. Harry felt a sudden searing pain, and Hermione gasped as the scar on his forehead began to bleed for no apparent reason. Harry saw Death step back with a tiny wisp of dark smoke on her hand. She put her hands together for a moment, and for a second Harry thought he heard beating wings as it vanished.

"Harry, your scar!" Hermione tried to move toward him, but Diana held her back.

"It's okay, Hermione. That thing's gone now."

"Here." Death handed him a lollipop. "Honeydukes butterbeer flavour."

"Thanks!"

"Where did that come from?" asked Ron, staring at the lollipop.

"Not now, Ron," said Diana.

"I think this might be a bit less confusing if they could see and hear you," said Harry.

"Not a good idea. People who see me sometimes get weird ideas, and I can live without more creepy stalkers. Barring the odd near-death experience, most people only see me twice. Once when they're born, once when they die. You wouldn't be seeing me now if it wasn't for that thing in your head. It may have sensitised you, don't be surprised if you start to see me around. By the way, don't even
"Think about showing anyone your memories of me, it really won't work."

"Okay. What's the thing that Hades wants?"

"You remember the Mirror of Erised." It wasn't a question.

Harry nodded. "I remember. What about it?"

"There's something even more dangerous inside the snitch Dumbledore left you. A stone that gives its user the ability to summon the dead, but what they do and say is determined by the user's will. They say what you want to hear, their personalities are less authentic than a wizarding portrait. You think that you've brought the dead back to life, but in the end it's as big a con as the Mirror, and even more seductive. I really have no idea what Dumbledore was thinking about when he gave it to you. It's useful to someone who actually rules the dead, like Hades here, but it can destroy the mind of a normal mortal."

"Maybe he wanted me to trick Tom into using it."

"His soul is already badly damaged, unfortunately that means he's less vulnerable to its effects, he could do an immense amount of harm with it before it killed him. Remember the Inferi? Now imagine an unlimited army of them under his complete control, everyone he's ever killed, everyone they kill, and so forth."

"How do you know all this?"

"Dumbledore, mostly. He seemed to think he had to justify himself to me."

"What did he say?"

"I've told you as much as I can. Probably more than I should."

"If I give it to you what will you do with it?"

"Get rid of it permanently."

"And if I give it to Hades?"

Hades shrugged, but the effect was to make him look even shiftier. "I have no plans to use it." Harry guessed that there was an implied 'yet' at the end of the sentence.

"Okay," said Harry, "that makes things a lot clearer." He dug into his pockets, found the snitch, and gave it to Death. "Sorry, Hades, no offence, but if it's that dangerous I'd sooner it was gone for good."

"How do I open it?" asked Death.

"There's invisible writing on it that says 'I open at the close.' Not sure what that means."

"Cute. Okay..." She vanished for a fraction of a second, reappeared in slightly different clothes and a black bowler hat, and handed him back the Snitch, opened and empty. "Sorry to keep you waiting, I stopped off to feed my goldfish and lost track of time."

"It was only a fraction of a second. How did you get it open?"

"Took it to the last seconds of the universe, of course. Seemed a lot of fuss for such a little stone, but never mind."
Harry resolutely kept his jaw from dropping. "Okay... Now, about Voldemort..."

"I can't take sides, Harry. You'll have to find the Horcruxes... or is it Horcruces...? and take care of him for yourself. My elder brother will probably be annoyed with me as it is."

Harry decided to let that one pass, he was confused enough already.

"Can you give me any advice?"

"Nope." She grinned, handed him three more lollipops, patted his cheek, blew Hades a kiss, and walked out of the circle of light.

"Blast!" said Hades, in disgusted tones. "Well, that's it, she makes the rules, I can't intervene. Lovely to see you again, Diana, but next time let's just do lunch. Do you have any plans for the rest of that bottle?"

"It's yours. But before you go, I was hoping you could tell me if there's any news of Steve?"

Hades looked surprised. "Isn't he back yet? That's odd, he should be. Let me look into it, I'll try to get back to you in the next week or two."

"Thank you." Diana handed him the remains of the wine, and he stood, vanished the throne, and strolled off out of the light with Cerberus at his heels.

"What in Merlin's name was that about?" asked Hermione, dabbing Harry's forehead with a tissue and digging into her bag for essence of dittany to heal the wound.

"I'm really not sure I know," said Harry, unable to stop grinning, "but Tom's not in my head any more, I'm still alive, and I've got lollipops for everyone!"

"They're called the Endless," said Diana, sitting crossed-legged on the piano stool in her apartment, and looking unusually serious, "and they are as old as the universe itself. I've seen Death a few times, she's actually the nice one. Remember, she doesn't actually kill anyone, she just looks after the transition. The elder brother she mentioned is allegedly Destiny, but nobody ever sees him. Morpheus, the Lord of Dream, is far more terrible."

"Why is he the terrible one?" asked Harry.

"You visit his realm every time you sleep, and he is not always a kindly host."

"Nightmares," said Ron. Diana nodded.

"How can I find out more?" asked Hermione.

"Don't. Coming to their attention isn't wise."

"She confirmed that there are more Horcruxes," said Harry. "I just wish I had more of a clue where they are."

"Where would a wizard hide something valuable?" asked Hermione. "Could be in someone's mansion, I suppose, but most of the inner core of Death Eaters were in prison, it'd be a big risk if their homes were searched."

"Could still be in Hogwarts, there might be hiding places we've missed."
"Or another cave somewhere."

"Fat chance of finding that."

"We should ask the goblins," said Hermione. "They know more about tunnels and caves than anyone else."

"They wouldn't look," said Ron. "They don't care what happens to wizards."

"They do with the right motivation," said Diana. "I might be able to help with that, let me think about it."

Hermione snapped her fingers "Wait a minute... Harry, did you say the thing that she took from the snitch was a stone?"

"She said so, I didn't see it."

"Then I know what it was. It's mentioned in one of the stories in *Beedle The Bard*, a stone that seems to bring back the dead."

"You're kidding," said Ron. "That's a fairy tale."

"Why don't you talk about it in the morning?" suggested Diana. "I don't know about you, but I could do with some sleep. Hermione, you can use the small guest room, you two can share the larger one. And tomorrow we'd better see about some laundry, I think..."

In Somalia a raven glided down to a promising-looking corpse left over from a guerilla ambush and decided that the eyeballs still looked edible. He was busy prying one out with his beak when a familiar voice said "Hello, Matthew. Enjoying your meal?"

"He's already dead, lady, it's not like I'm hurting him."

"Nobody's complaining. Finish up, then I'd like you to take a message to my brother."

"Which one?"

"The one you work for, of course. Tell him I think the Prodigal may be about to make a comeback. He'll probably want to give me a call."

Matthew let go of the eyeball. "You're kidding."

"Nope."

"That's gonna stir up some serious shit!"

Death grinned. "Yep."

"Hades and Death both wanted the stone, so if the stone was real, maybe the wand and the cloak are real too," said Hermione.

"Fat lot of good that does us," said Harry. "All that the wand does in the story is get its owner killed."

"About the only useful thing in there is Death's cloak of invisibility," said Ron, "and you've already
got one that works pretty well."

"You don't think..." began Hermione. "No, forget it, it's stupid."

"You might as well tell us."

"The story doesn't say that Death ever gets them back. The wand keeps changing hands, the stone just fades out of the story when its owner dies, and the cloak gets handed on to the wizard's son. What if they just went on that way, and someone still has the wand and the cloak. Passed on from victim to murderer or thief, or from father to son."

"Get real," Ron said uneasily. "It's just a stupid story."

"How old is your cloak, Harry?"

"It's been around since my parents were killed, and my father had it well before that, so at least eighteen or twenty years. What about it?"

"It's unusual. Invisibility cloaks don't usually last more than five or ten years. They wear out, or the spell wears off. Yours is still perfect. It fits the story."

"Or maybe Dumbledore found a version of the story that fitted the materials he had available, including the cloak," said Diana.

"I never heard of any other versions," said Ron.

"I have." Diana went to one of the crammed bookshelves and found a thick leather-bound volume. "Here we are. *Legenden der Nördlichen Wälder*, Legends of the Northern Woods, first published in 1465. One of the stories is a German origin for the Wand, *Die Waldnymphe und der Verfluchte Zaubertab*, The Wood-nymph and the Cursed Wand. A young witch is captured and raped by an evil wizard, when she escapes she transfigures herself into an elder tree to hide from him. He chops down the tree and uses the wood and her hair to make an unbeatable wand, but it's cursed and haunted by her spirit; she gets her revenge by betraying him and everyone who subsequently wins the wand. Some of them go mad, others have their magic fail at a crucial moment. There's nothing about the stone or the cloak in that one. I'm sure that there must be other versions. I know that Hades does have an invisibility cloak, he wore it when we met in 1969, but I could see him through it, I really doubt that anything could stop Death from seeing anything she wants to. There are probably other stories about the stone too."

"But why? What would Dumbledore gain by it?" asked Harry.

Hermione thought for a moment. "It would make sense if he's somehow found a way to trick Riddle into using a wand that won't work properly on you, maybe cursed to kill him, and wants to give Riddle the impression that it's unbeatable."

"Wait a minute," said Harry, who had been leafing through the book and looking at its woodcut illustrations. He turned it around to show Ron and Hermione a picture of the wand. "Recognize anything?"

"It does look familiar somehow," said Hermione.

"It ought to. Look at the little carved lumps that look like elderberries. I've only seen that once before. It's Dumbledore's wand, or a lot like it."

"It could just be a traditional carving. Dumbledore's old, maybe it was something that went out of
fashion since he got his wand."

"If not... Merlin, it would mean that he was carrying a cursed wand as long as we knew him. One that makes people go mad."

"A lot longer," said Ron, "he has the same wand on his Chocolate Frog card, that goes back to the fifties."

Hermione pulled Dumbledore's copy of *Beedle The Bard* from her bag. "If he only read this version he might not know about the curse, and he might not have spotted it if it was really subtle."

"It would explain an awful lot," said Harry. "Our first day at Hogwarts, I remember Ron said that he was mad. Maybe you were right, Ron."

"I last met Dumbledore in 1944," said Diana. "The wand he was using then was shorter and plainer. But I have seen a wand like this before; Gellert Grindlewald visited Paris in 1925 when he was trying to build a popular political movement, there was a reception I attended. He was carrying it."

"So Grindlewald got the Elder Wand somewhere and was carrying it before the big war, Dumbledore had it afterward? Why would he do that?"

"Maybe he grabbed it in their big fight," said Ron. "If his own wand was damaged he might use it without checking for curses."

"And whatever else the thing is, it's a powerful wand."

"I think that there's something we're overlooking," said Diana. "Death said that her elder brother would be annoyed by what happened last night. To me that means that something's happened to change Harry's fate."

"Maybe two things. I gave away the stone, and Death took that bit of Riddle from my head. Dumbledore must have been counting on both of them. We've probably messed up all his plans."

"Then to hell with Dumbledore and his plans!"

"Ron!"

"Sorry Hermione, but if the old coot's plan was that brilliant, why the hell didn't he tell us about it? Why leave us to grope around in the dark? Everything we know tells us that the stone and Harry's connection to Riddle were bad news, why wouldn't we get rid of them if we had the chance? He knew he was dying, he had months to set things up, and did sod all to prepare us. He left us cryptic toys, but couldn't be arsed to tell Harry how the hell we're supposed to use them. I say we find our own way to sort this out, and forget about trying to make his scheme work when we know bits of it are missing."

"'No fate but what we make,'"

"What?"

"'No fate but what we make.' It's a quote, I'll show you some time. You're right, Ron. Dumbledore's gone, he isn't pulling the strings any more. We need to come up with our own plan, something that plays to Harry's strengths, and preferably something Dumbledore and Riddle would never have thought of."

"Such as?"
"Honestly, Harry, do you expect to come up with a brilliant scheme in ten seconds?"

"It'd be nice, Hermione, and you've pretty much done it before."

"While you are busy scheming," said Diana, "I need to go pack, my flight's in... gods, in four hours. Can you look after yourselves for a couple of days?"

"We really ought to get out of your hair," said Harry. "We shouldn't impose."

"Nonsense, I'm enjoying the company, and I think you need to take a break. I'm sorry to have to leave like this, but I'd already accepted the invitation before you arrived."

"Invitation?"

"I told you, I'm going to my namesake's funeral."

"Won't another Princess Diana turning up raise a few eyebrows?"

"Officially I'll be there as Diana Prince, art restorer and historian, I've done some work for the Queen's collection. But in fact she knows who I really am, I've known her since she was a teenager."

Harry thought for a second. "Is there any chance you could send a message while you're in Britain?"

"Who to?" asked Hermione.

"Snape."

"Anything you tell him might end up getting to Riddle!"

"That's the general idea. I want to stir things up a little..."

TBC

Author's notes:

This chapter initially gave an incorrect figure for the death rate in 1997, because the death rate per thousand was then higher than it is now. Thanks to Redwood Rhiadra on fanfiction.net who pointed out the correct numbers: 8,732 deaths per thousand people per year, in a global population of 5.84 billion.

There is rarely only one version of a folk tale, and when it's something like the Elder Wand there are probably dozens of variants. Beedle seems to have targeted his stories at children, somewhere out there was probably some wizarding equivalent of the Brothers Grimm and other folklore collectors who were writing for an older audience and didn't leave out the nastier elements. All translations by Google, apologies for any errors.
Muggle-Borns Under The Bed

The Leaky Cauldron was quiet for a Friday evening. Not surprising with Death Eaters on the prowl, of course, and so many Muggle-borns in hiding, but definitely not good for business. Tom wiped out a few glasses and thought about 6 Down in the Prophet's weekend crossword: "Monster King of Serpents (8)" It wasn't Anaconda, which would have otherwise been his first guess, the second letter was A, and King Cobra was too long and two words. Care of Magical Creatures had never been his best subject. Best to leave it for now. 12 Across, "Liquid Luck (5,7)" was pretty obviously Felix Felicis and gave him I as the sixth letter in 6 Down... Basilisk, of course.

The street door opened, and Tom looked up to see a statuesque blonde in a dark green hooded cloak, a stranger he didn't recognize. She nodded to him without speaking then went straight through to the back courtyard. Glancing out, Tom was surprised that she simply touched a finger to the wall, rather than using a wand, and that the opening to Diagon Alley immediately appeared.

"I'd like to send an owl, please."

The Owl Post counter clerk didn't look up from the ledger he was writing. "Inland or overseas?"

"Inland."

"Letter or parcel?"

"Just a letter."

"That'll be two Sickles for the standard service, three for express delivery."

"What's the difference?"

"Express goes to the nearest post office by floo then gets owled from there. We guarantee next day delivery."

"Express then, I think."

"Any insurance?"

"No thank you."

"Under the current emergency regulations I'm required to take your name and warn you that messages may be checked by the authorities. Howlers are not permitted."

"Thank you." The blonde handed him three Sickles and a sealed scroll. "Severus Snape, Hogwarts School please."

He noted the destination in a ledger. "Sign here please, miss."

She scrawled "A. Nonymous" illegibly. The clerk turned to drop the scroll into the bag for the Hogsmeade post office, by the time he looked back she was gone.

"What's your ladyship doing out in the alley at this time of an evening?"

The blonde looked up, annoyed. She was nearly back at the Cauldron, and wanted to be gone fairly
quickly. "None of your business." There were three men, all in robes, only the speaker had his wand drawn. Probably not Death Eaters, more likely thugs taking advantage of the current climate of fear.

"We'll be the judges of that. Now then, let's see some gol.. awwwk!" She grabbed him by his wand hand, crushing fingers and twisting it towards his partners, snatched his wand from his hand, and punched him in the chest. He fell to the cobbles, wheezing, as the others fumbled for their wands. Five seconds later another joined him on the ground, his wand snapped, as the last man turned and ran. The blonde snatched up a bottle from the gutter and threw it; it hit the back of his head and he fell, unconscious.

"Useless idiots." She thought about snapping the wand she'd taken but decided that it might be useful if she needed to pretend to be a witch again. As she went back into the Leaky Cauldron the first hags appeared from the shadows and began to relieve the groaning wizards of their money and valuables, to be followed by various internal organs if the Aurors didn't arrive first.

Ten minutes later, reasonably sure that nobody was watching, the blonde entered one of the listening booths in the Virgin Megastore at Oxford Circus. She turned so that nobody could see her face or hair and listened to the number one hit, Will Smith's *Men in Black*, as Hermione's polyjuice potion wore off and her own face and dark hair reappeared, then took off the cloak and dropped it into a capacious shopping bag. If anyone went looking for the blonde they'd be out of luck, it was more than a thousand years since Hippolyta had last ventured into the World of Men. Diana still had some of her hair in a locket if she ever needed the disguise again. On her way out Diana bought the CD and a couple of others, then took the tube to Notting Hill, walked a mile or so in a roundabout route, then got a taxi back to the Hilton on Park Lane. She was reasonably sure that nobody had tried to follow her, but it never hurt to take a few simple precautions.

She decided to get an early night before the funeral, but called Paris first. Hermione picked up the phone with a cautious "Allô, qui est là?" as they'd agreed. In the background Diana could hear familiar music.

"It's Diana. Everything all right?"

"Fine - We're introducing Ron to James Bond and pepperoni pizza. He likes both, I think. By the way, I love your laserdisc player, it's much better than videotape."

"The sound and picture quality are definitely an improvement, though I'll probably switch to DVD once more disks are available, you should be able to watch most films without changing sides."

"Maybe I'll wait for that then. How did everything go?"

Diana didn't want to get too specific. "No problems I couldn't handle, he ought to get the message tomorrow. Relax and try not to make too much mess, I'll be back on Sunday evening."

"Okay. Thanks again for letting us stay."

"You're welcome. And try to eat some fruit and vegetables, pizza is not a balanced diet. There's plenty in the refrigerator and the larder."

"Don't worry, I've got that covered for tomorrow, I just thought a bit of a treat would be nice."

"You're probably right. I'd better get on, tomorrow is going to be a long day and I need to get some sleep. Enjoy the rest of the film."

"Right. Goodnight!"
Severus Snape worked his way through the usual pile of paperwork that came with the job of headmaster, even at the weekends. The senior staff had done a lot of the work for Dumbledore, but only a week into the new term it felt like they were going out of their way to make things difficult for him. Most of them wanted to revive the old house system, the new teachers imposed by the Dark Lord were so busy handing out punishments that course work was already slipping, and Slughorn was a perpetual nuisance, trying to start up his ridiculous Slug Club again and whining about potions room safety. The old headmasters' portraits that should have advised him were rarely helpful, they seemed to be obsessed with issues made obsolete by the current political climate. Even the governors were being a nuisance. Malfoy had been bad enough when the Dark Lord was out of favour, wanting all school contracts to go to his cronies, now they were supplying sub-standard goods and inflating prices. Unless things improved quickly his potions work for the Dark Lord would start to slip, the consequences didn't bear thinking about.

The morning post arrived with the *Daily Prophet* and a dozen or so scrolls. The *Prophet* was drearily predictable, of course; more "Muggle-Borns under the bed" scare stories, this time adding some extra spin suggesting that any witch or wizard seen in mourning might be a Mudblood follower of the so-called Princess Diana, and saying that Aurors would be watching out for attempts by Undesirable Number One or Two to attend the funeral. Personally Snape doubted that Potter even knew who the Princess of Wales was, his ignorance of most subjects was astonishing, but it was always possible that Granger might take an interest.

Even this early in the term the letters were the usual mix of special pleading for students with low marks or high detention levels, cronyism, belated correspondence for Dumbledore, and one attempt at mail fraud - he really doubted that the Minister of Finance for the Nigerian Magical Assembly wanted to move 668,821 Galleons out of the country via Hogwarts' vaults, and needed the transaction fees up front. And near the bottom of the pile:

*Professor Snape*

*I think we've made some progress figuring out what Dumbledore meant to do about Voldemort. Tell Voldie he'll need to be on his toes. I'll be in touch.*

*Best wishes,*

*Harry Potter*

Snape ran some basic tracing spells on the parchment and found nothing useful. Sent by the public owl post from Diagon Alley, someone might be sent there to investigate. The seal had been undamaged when he opened it, and there was nothing to suggest it had been read, but he wasn't going to try to fool himself into believing that the Dark Lord was unaware of the contents, it would be like him to let it go through as a test of Snape's loyalty. He wondered at the tone of Potter's message. It was provocative but revealed very little, he had a feeling that Hermione had probably edited it. It might be a fishing expedition, an attempt to find out Voldemort's plans or gauge his own loyalties.

Best take it on its own merits. There was really only one viable course of action; he wrote a note requesting an audience with the Dark Lord, opened a floo connection, and threw it through. He knew better than to floo call or walk through to Malfoy Manor unannounced. Voldemort would summon him when he was ready. Later, when he knew the Dark Lord's reaction, he'd talk to Dumbledore's portrait. After recovering from the inevitable *Cruciatus* spells, of course...

"It's half past ten in Britain," said Harry, "Snape should have had the morning post by now."
Hermione watched the TV, showing the funeral guests entering Westminster Abbey. "Even if he has, it'll probably take at least a couple of hours for him to see Riddle, and longer before we can get a reaction."

"I think we should get set up anyway."

"Not yet, I'm still trying to see if Pius Thicknesse is there, or someone else from the Ministry. If there's nobody it might mean that they're breaking off relations with the Muggles completely. If there is someone there it might tell us something useful about the current Ministry, and.... oh Merlin, what the hell is she wearing?"

"Who?"

"It's Umbridge! There, in the queue right behind what's-his-face, the guy who presents that arts programme on BBC2, looking like she's been sucking lemons all morning!"

Harry stared. "Oh good grief!"

"At least she's wearing black, but she's still got that stupid bow and handbag. I think she just cast a colour-change spell on one of her usual outfits. Look who's with her!"

"Ron, you're going to want to see this!"

"Why?"

"Blackmail material! It's Percy, and he's practically kissing Umbridge's arse!"

Ron took a look and swore. "Any way to get a photo, Hermione?"

"Sorry..."

"Could she do anything to disrupt the funeral?" asked Harry.

"Nothing too overt, not without breaking the Statute of Secrecy, and even Umbridge isn't that stupid, at least I hope not. There's nothing we can do about it from here anyway."

"I wonder if she'll be sitting anywhere near Diana."

"They ought to show the interior of the Abbey again soon, we'll see."

The camera switched back to the funeral cortège on its way toward the Abbey, followed by a procession of five hundred mourners, with silent crowds lining the streets. "Merlin, that's a lot of people."

"That's just the tip of the iceberg. This is being shown live all over the world, there must be a couple of billion people watching."

"Merlin's teeth!"

In the Dreaming, Morpheus stared into a mirror, which reflected Death. "You were right, my sister."

"Planning to do anything about it?"

"A little protection, I think. There's unrest amongst the wizards, any accidents at this stage would be unfortunate. I've sent Matthew to keep an eye on things for now, pending a more effective deterrent."
"Thanks!"

"Thank you. It will be good to have the Prodigal back."

TBC

Notes:

Will Smith's *Men in Black* was the UK number 1 music single in the week of August 31st 1997. At that point DVD was a recent introduction, with disks expensive and unavailable for many films; videotape was still popular and 12" laserdiscs were the leading high-quality video format, but their manufacturing and distribution costs, weight, bulkiness, and limited capacity meant that they went obsolete fast once DVD took off.
Carmen Avis!

Diana noticed an oddly unattractive woman in her forties or fifties enter the cathedral, wearing a black twin-set and a hair-bow instead of a hat, who had the look of someone who has smelled something bad but is trying not to mention it. Her clothes went badly with her complexion and features. She was accompanied by a tall red-headed man in his twenties wearing an old-fashioned looking suit. There was something familiar about him, and after a moment Diana realized that he looked like an older version of Ron. Possibly a wizard, which might mean that the woman was a witch. Ron hadn't said much about his family; the man didn't look old enough to be his father, maybe a cousin or older brother. They were ushered to a pew three rows ahead of Diana, and she kept an eye on them as the last guests took their seats. In a momentary lull before the service began she heard the woman start to say something about "awful muggles" then stop as she realized that nobody else was talking. The red-head looked embarrassed, the woman just looked peeved. Hypothesis confirmed.

During the service Diana thought about talking to them, but there really wasn't much point. The little she'd heard suggested that the woman probably wasn't on Harry's side, and she didn't know enough about either of them to risk it. At the end of the service they got up to leave, and for the first time Diana noticed the man who had been sitting next to them, a blond in his forties with nicotine-stained fingers. They met in the aisle.

"Hello John, it's been a while. How on earth did you wrangle an invitation?"

John Constantine grinned. "Bird I met clubbing the other night said I needed to be here and gave me an invite. God knows where she nicked it from, but I thought it might be worth a shot. How about you?"

I'm an old friend of the family. But I do have some business for you if you're interested."

They made their way outside, and resumed the conversation once they were clear of the crowd. "Did you notice the people sitting next to you on your right?"

"Wand wankers."

"Know anything more specific?"

"The frog-faced bint is big in their toy government, didn't know the other one."

"Heard any rumours about them lately?"

"Some sort of coup, last I heard. Old Dumbledore's bought it, and the death eaters are back in a big way. Triumph of evil, etcetera etcetera. Really tempted to summon up a demon or two and let them loose to show the arseholes what real evil's about."

"Better not. What about Harry Potter?"

"Hero type allegedly, never met the poor bastard."

"The Endless are taking an interest in him."

"Oh bloody hell... Which one?"

"Death definitely, probably some of the others."
"Wonderful. So you're helping him?"

"What gave you that idea?"

"C'mon, Princess, I know you. Always helping the underdog."

"Want to lend a hand?"

"Probably not a good idea, love. That boy's got all sorts of destiny riding on his shoulders, with my luck I'd screw things up for him if I get seriously involved. Plus I'm pretty sure you're all the help he needs."

"Flatterer."

"Realist."

"Well, if you're sure... Could you help me out with some information, at least, a couple of addresses?"

"Sure. What do you want to know?"

"Is this going to work?" asked Ron.

"I don't see why not." Hermione stared at the tent, which they'd set up in Diana's basement, and set up a magical light to make it look like there was sunshine outside. "There's nothing in there to say where we really are, and the wards on this house plus the ones on the tent should make it impossible to detect our location."

"What about noise?"

"The mufliato spell I cast on the room will keep out the traffic noise."

"That's not what I meant. Shouldn't there be... well, wind, and birds, that sort of thing?"

"Good point," said Harry. "Carmen avis!" Some small cartoon-ish birds materialised and began to chirp. "They ought to keep going for an hour or so."

"Cute."

"Ginny likes them."

Hermione giggled. "If you do it again make sure they don't make a mess of her dress. She wasn't very happy last time."

"She never said anything!"

"Of course not, it was sweet of you to make them for her, and it took her a while to notice the stains. Just... maybe next time a little less anatomical accuracy, they don't actually eat so there's no need for... the other end."

"Balls. Okay, thanks for the warning."

"Are we ready to do this?"

"I am," said Harry, "But Ron, you'd better stay out of it, you're still supposed to be ill at home. You
can eavesdrop with an extendable ear, keep it down at floor level and the portrait won't see it."

"Okay. Anything I can do to help from outside?"

"Can you moo like a cow?"

Ron stared at him, then said "Moo," extremely unconvincingly.

"Never mind, it was just a thought. Just stir up the birds a bit if they seem to be about to start singing in chorus."

Hermione stared at him. "You really did steal the idea from Disney, didn't you?"

"Well... maybe, just a little. They shouldn't do it if Ginny isn't around."

"Prat!"

"And thanks for the vote of confidence, Ron. Just keep them sounding natural."

"I can do that. Good luck!"

"Thanks!" Harry and Hermione went inside the tent, carefully shut the flaps, and made sure that there was nothing visible that might dispel the illusion that they were camping out somewhere.

"I think it's OK," said Harry. "Do you want to do the honours?"

"OK." She opened her bag, saying "Maybe he'll know what's happening in Hogwarts," groped around for a moment, and pulled out the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black they'd taken from Grimmauld Place. In the portrait Black seemed to be asleep, but Harry thought he saw one eye open slightly.

"Professor Black? Headmaster? Can we talk, please?"

The portrait stopped feigning sleep. "Do you have anything worthwhile to say, Potter?"

"We wanted to check that you're all right, and ask what's happening in Hogwarts. We thought your portrait there would know."

"Term has started, of course. The new headmaster is maintaining good order." They questioned him for several minutes, listening in horror to his version of good order, maintained by Death Eaters and frequent curses.

"Is Professor Snape in his office at the moment?"

"No."

"Do you know if he received an owl from me today?"

"Yes, I believe so. He seemed to be somewhat annoyed."

"Do you know if he's discussed it with Professor Dumbledore's portrait?"

"That would be between the Headmaster and Professor Dumbledore."

"Could we speak to Dumbledore? Can you call him to your frame or something so that we can ask him?"
"Only to my portrait in Hogwarts. Or my portrait there might visit Dumbledore's frame and pass on a message."

Hermione said "We were hoping that the Headmaster might have discussed Harry's message with Dumbledore, and that Dumbledore or the Headmaster might have some advice for us. Would it be possible for you to ask him?"

"Very well." Black walked out of the frame, and was gone for several minutes. Eventually he came back into view. "The Headmaster has not spoken to Professor Dumbledore today. Dumbledore suggests that you try later; if the matter raised required the attention of Mister Riddle, Professor Snape would have to deal with him first."

"Okay. We're probably going to have to move soon, we'll contact you again tonight or tomorrow."

"Very well."

Hermione put the portrait back into her bag, which was charmed to be soundproof, and carefully closed it, then let out a relieved "phew!"

"Right! Think he guessed anything?"

"Hope not. Let me just make some notes. Give Ron the all-clear and get rid of those bloody birds!"

After the service Diana went back to her hotel, changed into a conservatively-cut dress, put on the feather-trimmed cloak she'd worn in Paris for the ritual to summon Hades, pinned and belted to look like stylish robes, tucked the wand she'd taken the previous evening into her sleeve, and walked back to the Leaky Cauldron, this time undisguised. There were a few more customers, all of them eyed her suspiciously as she approached the bar and said "Un whisky de feu s'il vous plait."

"Sorry, love, I don't speak French. Was that a fire-whisky? Ogdens all right?"

"Pardon, monsieur, my English is not good. Oui... yes, a fire-whisky. Ogdens is bon... good." She put a couple of galleons on the counter.

Tom poured her one, and she swallowed it and belched. "Another. And one for yourself."

"Thanks! Visiting from France, are you?"

"Oui. Pardon, yes, I visit Gringotts, then I 'ave business with a British cousin. Is your cheminée... ah, fireplace... a public floo?"

"That's right."

"Bon. And is there one in Hogsmeade?"

"The Three Broomsticks is the one most people use."

"Bon. Merci. Another!"

"Are you sure, miss?"

Diana put enough money on the bar to cover the drinks with a generous tip. "Oui!" She took it in another gulp, and exhaled toward one of the lanterns that lit the pub, igniting the fumes as a cloud of blue fire. "Now I am ready to talk to les gobelins. Keep the change."
She stood, went out to the back room, and tapped the wall with the stolen wand, taking care to touch it with a finger as she did so. The wall opened for her, and she went through to Diagon Alley.

The barmaid murmured "Blimey, Tom, those Frenchies can knock it back."

"When she comes back out remind me to sell her a hangover potion, she'll need it."

Diana walked to Gringott's, nodded courteously to the goblin guards, and ignored the human guard who waved a probity probe at her; she wasn't carrying anything it was likely to recognize as magical, apart from the wand, let alone anything Dark. Inside she moved to one of the cashiers, a grey-haired goblin with a sour expression, and said "I need access to my vault but I don't have the key with me." She'd deliberately left it in the safe in her room, but there was no need to tell the cashier that.

"Name."

"Diana Prince."

"One moment." The goblin got a ledger, leafed through it, frowned, and eventually said "There's nothing here."

She lowered her voice. "The vault was set up in 1928, I haven't used it since the sixties."

"Hrmnm..." He went and found another ledger, and eventually found her details. "Vault number?"

"5239"

"Security password?"

She leaned closer and murmured "Themiscyra."

He handed her a printed form with the vault number and other details, and a quill which Diana sensed was magical. "Sign here please, the fee for a temporary key is two galleons, or five for a permanent replacement."

"Temporary, please, I know where I left the original."

She tried to sign, but the quill didn't seem to want to work. "I think that something's wrong."

"Hmmm... it needs a little of your blood, for some reason the spell isn't taking it."

"You're welcome to take a few drops."

The goblin took the pen back, sharpened it, and stabbed at her finger. The quill splintered, leaving her skin unmarked. The goblin's eyes widened a little. "You'll need to see the Head Goblin." He climbed down from his stool as the ledgers closed and padlocked themselves shut.

"If you have a goblin steel blade I can probably get some blood for you, there's no need to go to a lot of trouble." Even if it was exactly what she wanted them to do.

"Follow me." He lowered his voice. "This isn't just for identification, it's our standing instructions for certain clients in the present emergency."

Diana followed him to a large opulently-furnished office where another goblin was reading through a stack of papers, and waited as the first goblin whispered to the Head Goblin for a moment then left.
"Thank you for waiting," he said a moment later, closing his file. In Greek he went on "I'm Tonguetongs, Gringrotts' current Chief Goblin. Your Highness, Gringrotts is as always ready to provide service to all of our customers. However, in view of the current political situation we are advising certain favoured overseas customers to limit their exposure in the British wizarding economy."

"You're expecting a financial crisis?" Diana replied in perfect Gobbledygook.

Tonguetongs grinned, showing sharp fangs, and switched languages to match her. "It's already begun. Why do you think the Ministry of Magic has guards here?"

"That's certainly one reason, but I can think of others."

"Go on."

"Before I do... While I have every confidence in Gringrotts, I need to ensure that you are not a thrall of the so-called Dark Lord or the Ministry of Magic. Will you permit me to verify this?"

"Veritaserum will not work."

"I have my own means. It is neither painful nor dangerous."

"I see you carry a wand, but truth spells are little use on goblins."

"It's for show, not for use. I have different methods."

"Very well."

Diana released the lasso and snapped it to loop around him.

"Interesting. Not Goblin or Dwarven work, I think, who made it?"

"Hephestus."

"Interesting if true. Now, how... ah, I really can't lie while this is around me, can I?"

"How did you know?"

"I was going to dispute the craftsmanship involved in its manufacture, and if possible persuade you to sell it to me."

"Very well. Are you under the control of the Ministry of Magic or the so-called Dark Lord?"

"I despise both, and neither controls me."

"Does Gringrotts support the Dark Lord?"

"Of course not, he's bad for business!"

"If I gave you an opportunity to cause him problems, would you do so?"

"If I could do so without endangering myself, the bank, or our profits."

"If you could minimise the risk?"

"I'd be delighted."
"And are you prepared to keep everything we discuss today secret, regardless of any other decisions you may subsequently make?"

"I am."

"Thank you." The lasso untied and snaked back around Diana's waist. "Did you ever wonder how the Dark Lord survived?"

"Naturally."

"Have you ever heard of a thing called a horcrux?"

His eyes narrowed. "Our curse breakers come across them occasionally. What of it?"

"The Dark Lord hid one in an underground cave, which made me think of your tunnels. It wouldn't surprise me if there was one or more concealed in your vaults, probably deposited by one of his associates. One of those who escaped from Azkaban, for example."

"More than one? That's a disturbing thought."

"Definitely. I can't see it as good for business."

"What would you suggest we do about it?"

"I recall that your regulations prohibit some dangerous dark objects from being deposited. Would horcruxes be covered?"

"Not explicitly, but the rules might be interpreted that way."

"I'd suggest taking a look - discreetly - and neutralizing any you find. They're probably cursed in addition to their main function. Perhaps replace them with similarly cursed replicas, that will stop anyone looking too closely, then remove the Horcrux if you can, or dispose of them if you can't. Basilisk venom will do the trick, I'm told, so will Fiendfyre, or if you can get them to me I can do it. It's essential that their master doesn't know until they're all gone, of course."

"Interesting... We'll certainly consider it."

"As incentive... a thousand galleons per horcrux destroyed, subject to verification. Seven hundred if you bring them to me and I destroy them."

"Twelve hundred and nine hundred."

"Eleven and eight."

"Agreed. Given the circumstances we'll forego a written contract; I think that you are good for your word, and it may be inadvisable to keep records before the matter is concluded."

"Agreed. I should warn you, the containers may be important works of art and craftsmanship, possibly Goblin work. You will be reluctant to destroy them, but I must strongly recommend it if you can't remove the horcrux."

"I'll bear that in mind."

"Thank you. Contact me via my Paris bank if you have news."

"Of course. Now, I understand that you need access to your vault and don't have your key?"
"That's right. I need a few papers and a little cash."

"Your hand, please."

Diana held her hand out and with difficulty he made a tiny cut with a razor-sharp goblin blade. "Impressive. If you or others like you die we would be interested in negotiating for your hides. Almost as strong as dragon-skin, and presumably much lighter."

"That isn't likely to happen."

He handed her a golden blank key. "Press this to the cut." As she did so notches and grooves formed on the key, followed by the number of her vault. "Two galleons."

"Thank you."

"Young Rathskull is waiting outside and will take you to your vault. May your day be profitable, and your enemies incur penalty clauses."

"May your enemies be audited and your accounts pay dividends."

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"Are you sure this is a good idea?" asked Hermione, looking around the street nervously.

"We've got a few hours to kill," said Harry, "nobody's looking for us in Paris, and you said yourself we need more potions ingredients and supplies. Some papers would be good, we've missed the last few Prophets and Quibblers."

"We don't know for sure that nobody's looking for us. The Lestrange family come from France, so do the Malfoys, for all we know they've got relatives looking out for us. And there are probably a lot of British refugees here, people on the run from Voldemort, along with spies keeping an eye on them. It might be risky, especially if we go into the wizarding quarter without identification or French wizarding money. Come to that, we haven't got much of any sort of wizarding money. We'd need to change some muggle money."

"Diana left us the keys to the house," said Ron, "she must have realised we'd want to go out, so it can't be that dangerous."

"How about a compromise?" said Harry. "You've got polyjuice on you, right?"

"Naturally," said Hermione.

"So we'll take some just before we go in, and stay less than an hour."

"That's not a good idea. We've got enough left for four or five doses, and it would take months to make more. We should save it for real emergencies."

"Damn. Okay, what about muggle disguises? We could get wigs or something, maybe some makeup to cover my scar."

"Hmmm... that might work. But whatever we do, we'll need to change some pounds for francs first, and whoever does that will need a passport. I've got mine, but it says I'm 17, I'm pretty sure that's not an adult in muggle France. Plus my name may be on some sort of wanted list."

"Hermione, we're wizards. I'm pretty sure that we can fix the documents fairly easily."

"It's a bit unethical, Harry."
"It's not like we're trying to steal anything."

"Okay. We're heading into the tourist areas, keep your eyes open for a Bureau de Change sign. When we go in I'd better do the talking."

"Since you're the only one that actually speaks French that's probably a good idea."

"Thank you captain obvious," said Harry.

"Just trying to be supportive."

"I'm beginning to think that Diana might have some sound ideas about men... stop grinning, Ron. You too, Harry."

TBC

Notes: John Constantine is from DC then Vertigo comics, most notably Vertigo's *Hellblazer* series, and has worked with most of the DC universe's heroes including Wonder Woman.

Apologies - I tried really hard to avoid the cliche of Goblins sounding like Klingon-Ferengi hybrids, but it's still there to some extent. Believe me, it could have been MUCH worse...
Dear Diana

It was Pomona Sprout's turn to be duty teacher; since it was a Saturday afternoon that meant that she was stuck in the staff room marking while most of the other teachers were relaxing. In the case of the Carrows and Snape that meant that they were probably torturing puppies or grovelling to Voldemort, she hadn't seen them since breakfast and didn't particularly want to. The only other teacher in the room was Horace Slughorn, who was telling one of his interminable stories about living the high life in Vienna before Grindlewald's war. Pomona mostly tuned him out, apart from counting how many times Slughorn described a minor celebrity with the words "dear old" - she thought she was up to eighteen, but it could be twenty.

Just after four Filch came in, saying "Lady to see Professor Snape."

"Is he in his office?"

"Out somewhere, I think."

"I'd better see her then."

Filch went out, and came back a few moments later with an attractive brunette witch who appeared to be in her thirties, wearing a stylish feather-trimmed robe. Horace looked at her, did a double-take, and said "Diana! How are you, dear lady?"

She kissed his cheek and said "Horace! I'd heard you were retired, evidently that was wrong. How lovely to see you again." She turned to Pomona and said "Apologies, it has been many years. I'm Diana Prince, I was hoping to see my cousin."

"Your cousin?"

"Severus Snape."

"I'm afraid he's gone out somewhere. Can I help at all?"

"Not really, it's family business and needs to be discussed privately. I don't mind waiting."

"I must admit, I never really thought of Severus as having family."

"It's not exactly a close connection. I think Severus and I are all that's left, and I live in Paris and haven't seen him since his mother died."

"That would explain it." She rang for a house elf, and one appeared a moment later. "Would you like some tea?"

"Coffee, if you have it."

"Of course. Horace?"

"Oh, tea would be lovely. And some of those little marzipan cakes, perhaps?"

"Why not? I'll have tea too, Wilkiss. And if you can find Professor Snape please tell him that his cousin is here to see him."

"Professor Snape is not in Hogwarts now," said the house-elf, "but we will tell him when we sees him." He disappeared as abruptly as he'd arrived.
"Do take a seat," said Pomona. "If you'll excuse me, I really need to carry on with my marking. The second years seem to have some rather curious ideas about pollination, and I need to disabuse them of their errors."

"I'll look after Miss Prince," said Horace. "Now then, Diana, how's dear Steven?"

"He died some years ago."

"Ah." There was an awkward pause, interrupted when Wilkiss reappeared levitating two trays.

"And that German lady, Professor... ah... Maru? Such interesting theories!"

"She's also dead, I'm afraid. Her last attempt to brew the Elixir of Life went badly."

Horace poured the tea while Diana helped herself to coffee. "Only to be expected, I suppose. Without a Philosopher's Stone it's almost impossible. And for a muggle to try it..."

"She succeeded several times."

"Really? I had no idea."

"There were ethical issues about her methods, especially her test subjects, and she spent some years in prison. I believe that all records of her work were destroyed, and her surviving associates obliviated once the German Ministry found out what she was up to."

"Remarkable. You, on the other hand, don't look a day older than the last time we met."

"I moisturise." There was something in her tone of voice that seemed to make Slughorn wary, and he didn't ask any more questions.

Fifteen minutes later Wilkiss returned, saying "Professor Snape can see you now," and led Diana out.

When they were gone Pomona said "What the hell was that about?"

"What?"

"You know bloody well. 'Dear Diana', who you've mentioned in a lot of the stories you've told me over the years. I thought she'd be about ninety."

Horace looked smug but wary. "Well over a hundred, I believe. But please keep it to yourself. There are those..." He wrote a glowing V with the tip of his wand "...who crave longevity."

"Of course. You're really not joking?"

"We first met at one of Flaumel's parties in Lyon in 1922. She doesn't look a day older."

"Vampire?"

"It's mid-summer and this room has windows. But it irks me to admit that I simply don't know. It isn't the Elixir, the side-effects of that are readily apparent. I've never seen her appear to be tired or ill, and she's extremely strong. I've never even been entirely sure that she's a witch, although I noticed she's carrying a wand today. And I've heard her called 'Princess'; my best guess is cursed exile from one of those little magical kingdoms, Guilder or Florin say, with the spell preserving her youth until she's allowed to return."
"Princess Diana. That's weird..."

"Just a coincidence, so far as I know. Just a coincidence."

"We've got a few hours to kill', he said," Hermione said furiously. "'Nobody's looking for us in Paris', he said."

"Hermione, calm down!"

"As for you, mister 'I'm pretty sure that we can fix that fairly easily! Grrrr..."

"All right," said Ron, "I admit it, it was a bad idea. But we're okay, and I'm pretty sure that we weren't recognized."

"No thanks to you," said Harry. "'We've got away from them, we might as well stop for some noodles.' I ask you!"

"Nobody told me there was a Chinese wizarding quarter!"

"Now we've got half the wizards in Paris looking for junior Death Eaters with counterfeit francs! Not to mention that weird guy with the big hat and the lightning..."

"At least they don't know it's us they're after," said Hermione. "Let's keep it that way. There's a supermarket on the way back to Diana's place, we'll get food there and you and Harry can cook it."

"I can do breakfasts," said Harry, "but I'm not that good at other things."

"Same here," said Ron.

"Time to learn then, because I want a decent bloody meal, and you two are going to pull your weight cooking it for a change. Am I making myself clear?"

"Crystal."

"Good. Because if I was as evil as the Prophet claims I'd be shopping for some new minions about now. Let's get out of here before anything else goes wrong."

"Diana?" Severus Snape said with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. "What an unexpected surprise."

"I was in the country for a funeral, and I thought I'd drop by. It seemed a good time to review my obligations." Diana looked around the room and its assorted portraits and magical gadgets, and seemed less than impressed.

"Take a seat."

"You don't look well, Severus. Should I assume that your... ah... Lord is being his usual self?"

"That's one way of putting it."

Diana gestured to one of the portraits, whose subject had an ear trumpet aimed at them. "Might we have a little privacy?"

"If we must." Snape tapped one of the ornaments with his wand, and shutters rolled down over each of the paintings. "They're soundproof, of course."
"Good. Now then... nearly twenty years ago you asked me to stay out of this. I agreed, reluctantly, because you implied that you had the matter in hand. What was the plan, Severus, get close to him then take over?"

"I was young and idealistic..."

"You joined a racist death cult. Unless you were planning to destroy it from within from the outset I can see no way that you could possibly think it would end well."

"I miscalculated. When you couldn't save Lily I..."

"Do you still want me to stay out of it?"

There was a long silence.

"Do you want me to rescue Draco?"

"That would be difficult at this stage. The Malfoys are very close to the Dark Lord."

"That's not what I asked. Do you want me to rescue Draco?"

"There would be retaliation against his mother, at the very least. And the Dark Lord would be able to find and summon him. He has taken the Dark Mark."

"I see. Do you want me to try to keep them both alive? What about the father?"

"Lucius has made his own bed, he can lie in it. I take it that this is where you tell me that the only way to keep Draco and Narcissa alive is for you to get involved in the war."

"No. It's the most likely to be successful, in the long term, but there are other possibilities. I might be able to persuade Hephestus to shelter them, for example, though he'd probably try to seduce Narcissa and put Draco to work at his forge."

"And you would then feel that you've fulfilled your obligation and join the fight."

"Naturally."

"The Dark Lord is... there are reasons why this shouldn't be your fight."

"You told me about the prophecy when your friend was killed. Nothing in what you told me precludes my helping the boy."

Snape stared at her appraisingly, and eventually said "I heard from Potter this morning. Would you know anything about that?"

"Do you really want an answer?"

"I. No, I don't. I really don't need one, do I?"

"That's up to you."

"Very well." Snape thought for a moment. "I release you from all debts you may have incurred to my family, implied and otherwise. I ask you to save Draco and his mother if you can. Beyond that, do what you like."

"Thank you. I agree to your terms." She stood, and flicked her lasso to wrap around him. "Now, I
came here today to discuss maintainance of family graves in Paris. If you are questioned you will remember talking about the costs, and an eventual reluctant agreement that your contribution will rise from fifteen to twenty-four galleons a year beginning next year. We discussed nothing else."

"Unfortunately I remember things differently."

"You won't if you are questioned, and if it is important that you forget. And afterward you will remember again. Think of it as an additional level of occlumency. It isn't the first time we've done this."

"What?!"

"In Voldemort's presence, if you are asked about me you think of me as a distant relative you barely know, and have done so for many years. When you first turned against him you asked me to do it, and remove the memory of having asked. You'll forget again after I leave."

"If you can do that... can you do the same for some other memories? It would help considerably."

"If they aren't too old. Beyond a few days it gets difficult. A month or more and it is impossible."

"Damn. Thank you, then I think that's all."

Diana maintained the lasso's hold on him. "One more thing; you may hear from Harry Potter again, do you wish me to apply the same protection?"

"That... might be very useful."

Twenty minutes later Diana left the castle via the floo in Snape's office, coming out at a public floo on the outskirts of Salisbury, fifteen-odd miles from Malfoy Intrinsica, the village nearest Malfoy Manor. She felt like a little exercise, so she made her way out of town at a fast walk, stopping along the way to buy a pair of binoculars and a map of the area and make a phone call, then started to run.

TBC

Notes: Guilder and Florin are borrowed from The Princess Bride.

We only see one vampire in Harry Potter canon, in one paragraph of Book 6, and we learn nothing of their capabilities or weaknesses, except that they dislike garlic. I've assumed that they are more or less as described in most legends.

The Chinese wizard with lightning is of course from Big Trouble in Little China. And yes, that was a noodle incident.

I've stretched the powers of the lasso a little, but not much. In comics and TV canon it has been shown as erasing memories when necessary, the protection against occlumency shown here seems a logical extension.

The village of Malfoy Intrinsica is borrowed, with permission, from A.J. Hall's fanfic. I'm not planning to use much apart from the name.
"What do we really know about her?" asked Ron, helping himself to some potatoes. "She's been helpful so far, but for all we know she's setting us up for something."

"I don't think so," said Harry. "She's given us the run of her house, and there's nothing stopping us from walking away if we want to. She's really trusting us a lot."

"You don't know the half of it," said Hermione. "My mother's interested in art, I've picked up a few things. The paintings in the TV room include a Picasso and an early Georgia O'Keeffe, and that little bronze in the hall is a numbered first-series Degas casting. Most of the more modern books are first editions, and a lot of them are signed. Also her clothes... I'm no expert, but she's wearing expensive styles, and I'm pretty sure they're not copies. I know that most of that won't mean much to you, Ron, but believe me, she's loaded. And she's trusted us not to help ourselves or damage anything."

"That's all good, I suppose, but remember her first question? She was expecting bloody Draco."

Harry sprinkled some Tabasco sauce on his steak. "I think that was more of an obligation than anything else. She's got a debt to Snape, she expected him to use it protecting Draco. She didn't even know what Draco loooks like."

"That's true. Okay, maybe I'm just being paranoid."

"Ron, we need to be paranoid. Half of my problems over the years have come from being not paranoid enough. I'm undesirable number one, Hermione is number two, and you'd be on the list too if they knew you were with us. But I really don't think Diana was lying to us. You felt that lasso, if she's getting even a tiny part of that every time she uses it I can't see her betraying us."

Hermione took some peas and mushrooms. "Let's just go with it for now. We've spent weeks stressing out, we really need this break. It gives us a chance to make some plans."

"Talking of which, we need to decide if we're going to try our luck with Phineas Black again, and a lot of that boils down to what side Snape is really on."

"He's an evil git, what else is there to say?"

"It's a lot more complicated than that, Ron. I'm pretty sure Dumbledore wanted Snape to kill him, and there are a lot of things that make more sense if he's working against Vo... sorry, really need to stop saying that... Riddle."

"You're right, of course, but working against Riddle doesn't necessarily mean that he's on our side. He could be planning to help us finish him off then stab you in the back and take over as leader of the Death Eaters."

"Why Snape? Wouldn't it be Malfoy?"

"That's probably Malfoy's plan if he spots a weakness and thinks he can get away with it," said Hermione, "but I'm willing to bet that Riddle has contingency plans for dealing with him if he ever summons up the nerve to make a move. Malfoy has delusions of competence; Snape actually is competent, and most Slytherins respect the sod. That's more than you can say for Malfoy, all they like about him is his money. Snape doesn't prance around going 'look at me, I'm rich, and powerful' but I think he's probably a lot more dangerous if he wants to be."
"Any thoughts, Ron?"

"We can't trust him. We can't even talk to him directly, the bloody picture could be changing what we say, or what he says, and we'd never know." 

"Agreed. Things we don't mention then... okay, that Ron's with us, anything about Diana, that we're in Paris, and that we're hunting horcruxes. Keep it vague, just say we can't figure out what Dumbledore wanted us to do, and ask for his advice. Then we ignore anything that sounds like it might be a trap."

"In other words, we tell him we're clueless," said Hermione, "which we are. Why the hell didn't Dumbledore leave us an instruction manual? What were we supposed to do, stumble around blindly until we got it right?"

"We destroy all of the horcruxes, then I kill Voldemort."

"How? By having happy thoughts?"

"We already know Dumbledore's plan is buggered," said Ron. "He left us a jigsaw puzzle and we've thrown away some of the pieces. It was probably a crappy puzzle anyway."

"Agreed. Okay, it's quarter past eight in Scotland, let's think about what we need to change in the tent before we talk. Any thoughts?"

"It'll already be getting dark, so we'd better switch off all the lights outside and use a couple of lanterns to light the interior of the tent. No birds this time, maybe make it sound like it's raining? And get your clothes a bit wet too?"

"Good idea, Ron. Can you fake the rain?"

"Should be easy enough."

"If Snape is betraying us maybe it'll get the Death Eaters scrambling to find places where it's raining."

"It's Britain in September, it's bound to be raining somewhere."

"Okay. Let's clear up, and aim to start talking about nine their time, ten here."

As they headed for the stairs Hermione noticed a flashing light on the phone. "There's a phone message. No, two messages."

"Someone must have called while we were out," said Harry. "It might be Diana."

"I'd better play them. I hope it isn't something private." Hermione pressed the play button. BEEP! "This is Diana. I've questioned Severus, I believe that he will not voluntarily betray you to his master, but I'm certain that he is trying to hide something, probably some detail of Dumbledore's plan, and that even he doesn't know all of it. Be very careful if you are still planning to communicate with him. I'll be back tomorrow afternoon." BEEP! "Princess? This is John, you forgot to give me your hotel number. I asked around, the bloke you want is Anton Pouchard, best in Paris and stays bought once you pay him. I don't have an address, but Joey Three-Fingers should know where to find him. Hope it helps. Still working on the other thing, I'll get back to you if I learn anything."

"Okay, the first one wasn't unexpected, I suppose," said Harry. "No idea what the other one was about, except he sounded like he was from Liverpool."
"I expect we'll find out when Diana gets back."

"Do we still contact Snape?" asked Ron.

"Don't see why not. We weren't planning to trust him anyway, now we can be sure that we need to be on our guard."

Diana skirted Malfoy Intrinsica, spotting nothing in the village that suggested a significant magical presence, then ran cross-country to a ridge that overlooked the village and Malfoy Manor. It was a quiet evening, already getting dark, the only noises birds, water flowing along some streams, occasional cars, and sounds from the village as patrons went in and out of the pub.

The manor wasn't hidden or unplottable; it was too big, and too close to populated areas, for that to be practical. It was on the Ordnance Survey map and aerial photographs of the area and she guessed that muggle-repelling charms and other spells ensured that nobody went there or noticed anything unusual going on, without actually concealing the manor completely. At the moment there were few signs of occupation; lights in a few windows, but nothing to suggest a gathering of Death Eaters. She gauged the distance to the manor and estimated it at about a kilometer, with greenhouses visible beyond the house. Then she noticed movement behind the house.

There was a large paved terrace behind the building, at least twice the size of a tennis court, with two parallel lines of statues of (she assumed) Malfoy ancestors ruling the space into thirds. Steps at the far end led down to the lawn. There were three wizards there, one of them Lucius Malfoy, along with a device on a tripod that looked like an over-sized surveyor's theodolite. They talked for a while, then Malfoy made a "let's get on with it" sort of gesture and raised his wand, casting a spell at the statues.

The figures slowly climbed down from their plinths, picked them up, and carried them off to the sides of the terrace, then climbed back on to them and froze into immobility. The wizard nearest the tripod adjusted something, and a glowing circle of blue light appeared on the ground, about fifteen metres in diameter. The third man walked to the edge of the circle, consulting an instrument that looked like a compass combined with a crystal ball, and tapped the ground with his wand. A green light appeared. He walked round the circumference of the circle, touching the ground with his wand at intervals, until there were five evenly spaced lights, then made an intricate wand gesture. Lines of green light spread from one dot to the next, forming a pentagram... no, the lines were extending out too, it was a pentacle. When it was complete the circle disappeared, while the green light turned white, and slowly faded leaving neat white lines painted on the paving stones.

Malfoy shouted something, and a procession of house-elves came up from the lawn, each somehow balancing a huge bundle of firewood on its head, and built neat stacks in each of the outer triangles of the pentacle. Malfoy shouted again, and the elves scuttled clear. Diana noticed that they seemed to be taking care to avoid touching the lines on the ground. All three wizards began to cast spells around the pentacle, and glowing writing appeared, settling to the ground as more white paint. It took a moment for Diana to recognize it as Enochian.

By now it was getting hard to see, but Malfoy did something - it was impossible to see what - and each of the statues raised a wand to cast light down onto the terrace. Diana guessed that the spell was built into the statues, used to light the terrace at need. It made reading the lettering a lot easier, and she carefully copied the text into her address book. She didn't know the language well, but she knew a man who did.

As she wrote Malfoy and the other wizards talked, and made a few corrections to the lettering. Whatever they were doing, it didn't seem to be accomplishing much. Then the wizards started walking back around the pentacle, the lettering seemingly sucked back into their wands. The house
elves returned and took the wood back to a pile in a corner of the grounds. Finally, the wizards erased the lines of the pentacle. Malfoy checked his watch, and they went back into the house as the statues began to return their plinths, and themselves, to their original positions.

Diana wasn't sure what to make of it. A dress rehearsal for preparing for some sort of magical ritual seemed the most likely explanation. Given the size of the pentacle, and what she knew about Malfoy, she suspected that she wasn't going to like whatever they were planning.

She waited another hour, then set out to test how well the site was protected, her original reason for being there. A witch could probably cast a few spells to check for magical defences; Diana had other methods.

She found a stone roughly the size of a tennis ball and pitched it on a flat trajectory within a few feet of the manor's roof. It wasn't deflected, and went on to hit the ground well outside the manor's grounds. She lobbed a second stone high over the manor. It fell exactly where she had aimed it, smashing a pane of glass on the roof of the most distant greenhouse. After a minute or so someone she didn't recognize, a man in rough-looking robes, came out of the main building and started to look around outside, using his wand and a *lumos* spell for lighting, eventually finding the damaged greenhouse. He didn't seem to have any way to tell where the stone came from, and went off towards the wall furthest away from her, looking for intruders.

It wasn't a conclusive test, of course, since the greenhouse might be outside any magical protection, but it looked like the manor either lacked wards against physical attacks, or didn't have them active at present. It wasn't a huge surprise; she knew that spells that gave passive protection, such as anti-apparation and muggle-repelling charms, used relatively little magical energy. Wards against physical attacks needed a huge power supply, proportionate to their strength and the size of the area they protected. The manor building probably had some protection, but it would take time to activate and wouldn't be done casually.

She watched until nine, didn't see any sign of a guard patrol, thought about visiting the village pub and asking about the manor, but decided that there was too much risk of someone reporting it to the Malfoys. Eventually she ran back to Salisbury, and on a hunch took a train instead of the floo back to London, getting back to her hotel a little after midnight.

"Now what do you want?" asked Phineas Nigellus Black.

"Do you know if Professor Snape has talked to Dumbledore's painting yet?"

"He has. Dumbledore asks if there is any progress? Professor Snape is also here, if you wish me to pass on any message to him."

"Anyone else?"

"No."

"What about the other paintings?"

"You may be assured of their discretion. They answer only to the Headmaster or Headmistress."

"You didn't when I contacted you today, neither did Dumbledore's portrait."

"Professor Dumbledore anticipated that you might try to contact him this way, and prevailed upon Professor Snape to make an exception for you."
"Okay. Umm... Are you sure there's no way we can talk to them directly?"

"Positive."

"Damn. Okay, first thing, I need to check that Dumbledore is really there. Ask him what he told me he saw in the Mirror of Erised."

Black repeated the question, seemed to listen for a moment, then said "socks."

"Okay. Now a question for Professor Snape. What did you say is Dumbledore's greatest weakness?"

There was the same infuriating pause. "He always wants to believe the best of people. Ah... Dumbledore didn't like that answer."

"Okay. Tell him... tell them both that I think we're making progress, but I'm confused about how we're supposed to finish it."

There was a long pause. "Okay," said Harry. "If Dumbledore doesn't want to tell us, ask Snape how he thinks Dumbledore planned to end this."

There was a pause, then Black said "Mutual destruction... be quiet, Dumbledore! Professor Snape believes that if Riddle kills you after all of the horcruxes are destroyed, it will kill him too."

"Why?" asked Harry.

"Your scar is also a horcrux. Oh, that's interesting, Dumbledore didn't know that Snape had guessed that. They're arguing about it."

"If you can get a word in," said Hermione, "ask them what happens if Harry is killed earlier? Will destroying all of the other horcruxes kill Voldemort?"

A minute or so passed, then Black said "You would have to kill Voldemort too. He and Potter are linked by their wands, by the Horcrux, and by the resurrection ritual, none of that would apply if another horcrux was the last."

"And none of you thought about telling me this?" asked Harry.

"Dumbledore didn't want to burden you with it."

"Bloody hell."

"Just a second," said Hermione, sliding the painting back into her bag and checking the silencing spell was still active. "Harry, we need to tell them that plan won't work."

"Why? Dumbledore did his usual trick, he kept me in the dark, and if we're right about the Elder Wand he was insane when he died. Snape's not much better. How am I supposed to trust them?"

"We can't, not entirely. But they know a lot more about magic than we do, and I think our goal is the same. Like it or not, I think they're our best chance for finding an answer."

"Sod it... Ron, did you hear all that?"

Ron popped his head through the flap. "Yeah, the extendable ear is working well. What the hell were they thinking?"

"It's Dumbledore, I'm sure of it," said Harry. "I think Snape might have told me if he thought it
would help, Dumbledore was trying to be kind."

"Dumbledore was off his head."

"So what do we tell them?"

"The lot," said Ron, "If we tell them the horcrux is gone, the first thing they'll ask is how we can be sure. The only way to answer that is to tell them Death took it. And the only way to explain that is to tell them about the stone."

"Hell... Okay, but we don't tell them that Diana's involved or where we are."

"Snape'll probably guess. How are we supposed to have summoned Death?"

"We tell them she turned up on her own and offered to take the Horcrux if we gave her the stone," said Hermione. "We don't confirm any other suggestions. This house is well shielded, it isn't behind a fidelius but there's enough protection that I'm reasonably sure they can't trace us."

"For all we know Snape did the shielding," said Ron. "And he probably knows the address anyway."

"I checked the wards, it looks like French rune work. Diana said she has contacts in their Ministry. There isn't much we can do about the address, I suppose."

"Okay. We tell them as little as we can, stay alert and keep our wands handy, just in case we're wrong to trust them."

"Okay. Ron, better get back outside, maybe slacken off the rain noises gradually. Harry and I will get this finished as quickly as possible, then I think we'd better get some sleep."

"Okay."

They waited a moment, then Hermione took a deep breath and opened the bag.

"Sorry for the delay," said Harry. "Tell them that there's a bit of a problem with their plan..."

**TBC**

**Note:** Hermione was probably wrong about the weather - September 1997 was unusually warm and dry, with very little rain in most parts of the UK.
"Well, that certainly put the cat amongst the pigeons," said Black. "If Dumbledore wasn't dead I think that the shock would have killed him, and Snape's not much better."

"Tell them both that if I'd known what Dumbledore had in mind I might have done thinks differently, although I would have preferred to have been told before I was signed up for a suicide mission. I still don't know why they gave me the stone, what the hell was the point of it? Ask them to try and come up with a new plan. We'll get back in touch... um, let's say Monday evening. And whatever they come up with, I don't want any more bloody surprises. I want all of the details up front."

"I shall try to phrase that a little more tactfully."

"Don't. They got us into this mess, they might as well know what I think about it."

For a moment Black's lips quirked, as though about to smile. "As you wish."

"Thanks. If you have any suggestions of your own please join in, so long as I know who's suggesting what."

"Very well."

"I'll talk to you all on Monday. Good night."

"I could probably help you more if I wasn't in the dark," said the painting.

Hermione said "I'm sorry, there are too many risks. Good night." She slipped the painting back into her bag and reactivated the silencing spell.

"OK. Ron, what did you make of that?"

"Still trying to imagine Dumbledore's face when you told him. We've got to come up with a better way to contact them, we're missing too much working this way."

"You'd still have to stay out of sight."

"Sod it."

"Maybe we could get a pair of mirrors, like the ones Sirius gave you. Get one to Snape somehow and cut out the middle-man."

"Nice idea, Ron, but Sirius never told me how he made them."

"There's a shop that sells magical mirrors in Diagon Alley, maybe we could just buy a pair."

"Which part of Undesirable Number One are you having trouble with? Really can't see going there on a casual shopping trip somehow, especially since we've got sod-all wizarding money. And I'm a bit iffy about heading back to the wizarding quarter here after all the trouble we had."

"Not a good idea anyway," said Hermione. "I looked up magic mirrors when you told me you had one and there's a big security issue. To make them you start out with a sheet of enchanted mirror glass then cut it in two so that the halves are magically connected. Supposedly nobody can listen in. But I can't see anything to stop the maker starting with a bigger sheet of glass and making three or more, with the extra ones charmed so that people using the other two don't know that someone is
"spying on them."
"Could you make a pair?"
"Not really. Understanding the basic theory is one thing, but the practical spellwork is complicated and a lot of it seems to be trade secrets, special mirror coatings and spells and so forth. Sirius managed it, but I think he must have had more information than we do. Maybe the Blacks owned a magic mirror business, they had their fingers in a lot of pies."
"Oh well, it was a nice idea while it lasted."
"Let's clear up and head to bed."
"Works for me."

There was one call," Hermione said the following afternoon, "someone called John, sounded Liverpudlian. He left someone's name and details of how to find him. It's the second message on the answering machine."

Diana played back the message and thought for a moment. "Okay, this isn't the sort of business I can do over the phone. I need you and the boys to get ready to go out after I've made a couple of calls. Wear ordinary clothing, no robes or visible wands. Where are they anyway?"

"In the basement, working on some spells to disguise our location the next time we contact Snape."

"Good idea, but it's going to have to wait. Tell them to be ready in about twenty minutes."

"What's this about?"

"We're going to have to get you back into the UK, and for that you'll all need papers. John's put me on to someone who can forge them."

"Couldn't we just use the owl again?"

"I've been warned not to. International portkeys into Britain are being diverted to Ministry of Magic holding areas."

"Right. I'll tell the others."

As Hermione went downstairs she heard Diana on the phone. "John, what can you tell me about ritual magic? I need to pick your brains."

Although the shop was usually busy at weekends, things had been much quieter since the change in government. On Sunday afternoon Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes was almost empty; some regulars, and one stranger who seemed to be working his way round the shop, examining every item, a tall, pale-faced man in black robes. Verity eyed him cautiously, wondering if he could possibly be a vampire; there was something about him that made her very uneasy. Eventually she summoned up the courage to speak to him. "Can I help you at all, sir?"

He seemed to think for a moment. "Are your self-writing quills accurate?"

"Depends on the source. They can copy from a printed book without errors, but dictation or copying handwriting can be a bit iffy, especially if you don't speak or write clearly, they write the nearest word that seems more or less right. I heard of a poet who deliberately used them that way - read
some verse out, let the quill write down what he seemed to say, then read that out to another quill. It got very strange."

"Excellent. I'll take fifty."

"Fifty? I can give you a thirty percent discount for that many." She wrote it on her pad and did a quick sum. "If you wanted sixty it'd be a fifty percent discount, that would actually be cheaper."

"Thank you, do that. Now then... Peruvian Darkness Powder... How dark is it?"

"Blocks all light completely while the spell lasts, each pack comes with special glasses you can wear to see through it."

"Hmmm... perhaps not, then. And daydream charms, how many varieties do you offer?"

"I think the full range is about twenty-five but I'd have to check. Some of them are special orders."

"I'll have three of each."

"All of them? Some are a bit... specialised, sir. For ladies or gentlemen with... well, with unusual tastes..."

"Three of each, please, regardless of their nature, I have an interest in dreams."

"I can give you a fifty percent discount for those, too. But I might have to order some specially and send them on later if we're out of stock."

"Do that... And one box of canary creams, a nose-biting teacup, and three of your catalogues." She added them to the order.

He reached into his cloak, and for a moment she thought she saw the darkness of space, lit by occasional stars, before dismissing it as a trick of the light. He produced a grey leather bag, and poured out more galleons than it should have been able to hold. Of course most wizards could do that. "Take it from this, and keep the change. You've been very helpful. Send everything to Vault One, Gringrott's Bank."

"Vault One?" She wrote it down, trying to imagine who might possibly have such a low-numbered vault. "What name, sir?" There was no reply. When she looked up he was gone. She checked that the gold was real, wrote the order out neatly and rang it into the till, put the change into the tips jar, and started packing it. And tried not to think about a film she'd seen in Muggle London few years earlier. With the exception of the pale skin her customer had looked nothing like David Bowie.

"Your scar is healing very nicely," said Diana, leading them to a black BMW 3 series saloon parked a little way down the street.

"With the horcrux gone there's nothing to stop the healing potions working," said Harry.

"We'll have to cover it with a little makeup today, but it should be all right without it by next weekend. Ron, that's the driver's seat, would you mind sliding over?"

"Sorry, most cars I've seen have the driver on the other side."

"Britain does things differently from France. Buckle in, everyone. Ron, the metal part slides into the grey plastic thing there."
"Got it."

"Where are we going?" asked Hermione.

Diana started the engine, waited for a break in the traffic, and drove off. "I need to talk to a gangster, then we're getting you some identity papers. Passports, driving licenses if any of you know how to drive, and anything else I can get to make you look more convincing."

"I can drive a bit and I've got a motor scooter license with a provisional license for cars," said Hermione. "Ron crashed the last time he tried. What about you?"

"Get real, the Dursleys wouldn't have let me take lessons. Why the sudden urgency?"

"I took a look at Malfoy Manor while I was in Britain... Apprenez à conduire, imbécile!" Diana shouted as she swerved to avoid a collision. "Malfoy's getting ready for some sort of major outdoor magical ritual. Not the sort you're used to, probably something very dark. I saw a rehearsal, at a guess they're going to try to summon a demon."

"Merlin, what am I supposed to do about that?"

"They were preparing the spell with Enochian lettering painted around the pentacle, I don't know the language very well but I recognized a few words, my friend John is working on the rest. What I know already is that it's not going to happen until the full moon which is on the sixteenth, so we've got ten days."

"To do what?"

"Get back into the country without raising alarms. If they manage to summon it, I'll do my best to kill it. But I'll need backup, I can't fight Vol... Riddle and his followers on my own at the same time."

"Oh bloody hell!"

"It may not be necessary. John's working on the problem, it may be something he can stop."

"You've mentioned him a couple of times."

"John? Yes, he's... well, I suppose you'd call him a sorcerer, but he isn't anything like the kind of wizard you're used to. He doesn't use a wand, and his magic tends to involve rituals; summoning, banishing, exorcism, that sort of thing."

"Demonology?" asked Hermione. It was the darkest magic she knew of, and totally illegal. She hadn't dared tell her parents that it was even possible.

"That's certainly part of it. But he's on the side of the angels, I think, though I gather he doesn't have a high opinion of them either, and certainly wouldn't give Riddle the time of day."

"Why not?"

"I think the term he used was 'wand-waving Hitler wannabe.'"

Harry grinned. "Sounds fair to me."

"Talking of Hitler," said Hermione, "they've been rounding up Muggle-born witches and wizards and their families. I'm afraid they might be planning... well, some equivalent of what the Nazis did. They don't really regard Muggles as human."
Diana pulled over to the side of the road. "I wish you'd mentioned this earlier. When we get back to the house I need you all to tell me everything you've learned about this. How it's being done, where they're being taken, exactly who is involved."

"Okay."

"Hmmm... this isn't quite where I meant to park, but it's close enough, we might as well walk from here." She rummaged in her bag and found a compact. "Harry, lean forward for a moment." When he did Diana patted a little powder over his scar. "Not too bad, though my complexion is just a little darker than yours. We'll stop off at a pharmacy and get the right shade before we get the photographs. Although you're a lot closer to his shade, Hermione, do you have anything?"

"No, I forgot my cosmetics when we left the house in London, haven't had a chance to replace them yet."

"Then we'll get everything you need, and we can use a little on Harry."

Harry did not look enthralled.

"Just for the scar, Harry. Though a little lipstick and and eye shadow would go a long way towards changing your appearance when we disguise you for the journey to London."

"I'll pass, thanks."

"All right then, we're about to meet one of the most dangerous men in Paris. You'll have to come with me, he needs to be sure you aren't gendarmes, all you need to is be polite and respectful, don't mention magic or anything to do with it, don't mention your names, and let me do the talking unless you're asked a direct question."

"Okay."

"Joey is a sweetheart, but his whole business is built on trust and respect, anything less will not be received well."

"You make him sound like the Godfather," said Hermione, getting out of the car.

"Like Sirius?" asked Ron, still struggling with his seat belt.

"I think I know which film we'll be watching tonight, if we're not doing anything else," said Harry. "It's got lots of violence, you'll love it."

TBC

Notes: Verity is a canon WWW employee, about all we really know about her is that she's a young blonde witch. The film she's thinking about is Labyrinth (1986); however, this is not a Labyrinth crossover. Updating may be a bit slower from now on, I've been posting faster than I write.
"One more thing. When you meet him, don't offer to shake hands, and avoid any other physical contact."

Before anyone could ask questions Diana led them into a dimly lit and nearly empty bar and said something to the barman, who nodded toward a curtained arch. Inside there were two tables; two obvious bodyguards sat at one drinking coffee. The other was occupied by a tall thin black man, his skin oddly wrinkled and marked with pale patches, who was eating fettucini. He rose when he saw Diana.

"Bonjour, Diana" He had an oddly resonant voice.

"Salut, Joey, comment vas-tu?"

Joey shrugged, raising both hands expressively. Three of his fingers, two on the left hand and one on the right, were stubs without knuckles.

"Do you mind if we speak English? My young friends here don't speak French very well."

"Sure." He spoke English fluently. "Sit down, what would you like to drink?"

"I'm driving, so just an orange juice, please."

"What about the kids?"

"Sparkling mineral water, please," said Hermione

"Could I have a Coke, please?"

"A butterbeer would be nice."

"I don't think we have that," said Joey, "is it some sort of British brand?"

"He's from the west country," Hermione said hastily, pre-empting any chance Ron would ask for pumpkin juice instead, "it's the local name for ginger beer." For once Ron took the hint and didn't say anything.

"That we have. Rene, take care of it."

One of the bodyguards nodded and went into the bar.

"What's this about?"

"These three decided to have an adventure," said Diana, "and managed to strand themselves in France with no money and no passports. I can take care of the money, but for reasons I'd rather not get into we can't just go to the British embassy, and we need to keep it out of the news, so I need papers good enough to get them back into the country quietly. John Constantine said I should talk to you about seeing Anton Pouchard, so here we are."

"Constantine? How is the rat bastard?"

"Still alive. I saw him in London yesterday, at my namesake's funeral."
"How the hell did he get an invitation?"
"A girl he met in a bar gave it to him."
"Sounds like Constantine."

Rene came back with the drinks. Diana lifted her glass. "À votre santé!"
"Cheers."

Diana nodded towards the teenagers, and they also said "Cheers!"

"How soon do you need these papers?"
"Friday at the latest, earlier if possible."

"It'll cost you, he doesn't have many passports suitable for kids their age. That and making it a rush job is going to add to the price. Fifteen thousand francs each. But if you return them undamaged he'll refund five thousand."

Diana didn't seem surprised by the price. "Okay."

"Are you sure you want to pay for this?" asked Hermione. "It's a lot of money, and we won't be able to pay you back for a while."

"Don't worry," said Diana, "I'm good for it."

"Okay," said Joey. "Drink up. I'm expecting more company and it isn't the kind any of you would like to meet." He scribbled some numbers on a napkin. "I'll let Anton know you're coming, call him on this number in about two hours and he'll tell you where to meet him. You'll need to pay the money into this account by noon Tuesday at the latest. Okay?"

"Okay. And thank you."

"Anything for a friend. And you, kids, any word of this gets out and I'll introduce you to my garbage management business. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal," said Harry. Hermione and Ron nodded their agreement, though Harry suspected that he didn't know what garbage management meant. Harry wasn't certain either, but he was pretty sure that body parts came into it somewhere.

When they were outside Ron said "I know that bloke's your friend, but there was something very creepy about him."

"Joey has Hansen's disease," said Diana. "He's receiving regular treatment so it's not infectious, but it's never going to go away completely. It affects his voice, and indirectly his behavior. For example, he never shakes hands because he doesn't have much feeling in his fingers and can easily hurt them without noticing."

"Hansen's disease?" said Hermione. "Leprosy?"

"Yes. He's from New Orleans, they still have a few cases a year there. He came to France for clinical trials at the Institut Pasteur in the eighties, married a French woman, and ended up living here. Her family belonged to the Unione Corse, the French-Corsican version of the Mafia, he was a member of the New Orleans mob, and it apparently worked out well for all concerned."
"I wonder if there's a magical cure."

"I asked Nicholas Flaumel a few years ago, it's a magic-resistant organism, antibiotics actually work better than potions."

"I won't be able to pay you back until I can get into my vault," said Harry.

"The exchange rate is about 9.7 francs to the pound at the moment," said Hermione, "so it's about fifteen hundred and fifty pounds each with four hundred and ten back when the passports are returned. Or... let's see... about three hundred and ten galleons each with an eighty galleon refund."

"You could buy enough brooms for a team with that sort of money. For two teams if you went a bit down-market."

"Let's not say that too loudly, Ron."

"Maybe we could work some sort of transfer through a French bank?"

"Not a good idea, Harry. All international transfers go through the Ministry."

"Definitely not," said Diana, leading them across the road. "We can sort out the finances when it's all over. For now I'm happy to pay for things."

"It's probably going to be a hell of a bill by the time we're done."

"Don't worry about it. If we run short I can get John to give us some racing tips. He's never wrong."

"How does he do that?" asked Hermione.

"Cartomancy mostly, I think. The big problem is apparently a lack of bookies who are still prepared to take his bets."

Instead of going back to the car, Diana led them to a restaurant on the next block. "We might as well stay in the area until I call Pouchard. He probably doesn't live too far away. Meanwhile I think I'd like some crepes and a coffee, how about you? Then if there's time we can see about your cosmetics, Hermione."

"Crepes?" asked Harry.

"Fancy name for pancakes, mate."

"Oh, right. Yes please."

"That'd be nice," said Hermione.

Eventually Anton Pouchard came to them, driving a VW Camper van which was set up as a tiny photographic studio, with a four-lens Polaroid camera on a tripod and some neutrally-coloured backgrounds that could be pulled down like roller blinds. He was short fat man who reminded Harry and friends of a younger Horace Slughorn, and none of them trusted him an inch. He claimed not to speak English, and Diana had to translate for him.

He leafed through a loose-leaf file checking pictures and other details. "I don't often get asked for passports for teenagers. What's it about?"

"That's between us and Joey," said Diana.
"As you say, none of my business. You're lucky you want them now, next year the British switch to passports with digitally printed photos, not glued on and laminated, they'll be much harder to fake. Now then... I can do a fifteen year old girl, but... no, much too short. Wait, here we are, eighteen years, height is a couple of centimeters out but with the right shoes nobody would notice. Black hair, looks a little like her but she'd need hair dye and a bit of luck. If we replace the picture in the passport it'll stand routine checks, provided we don't change the name or the passport number. They're in the British computer system, I can't do anything to change them there."

"We'll go with the existing name and passport number for all of them."

Pouchard wrote down the name, Nan Pilgrim, and the passport number.

"Let's see... now for him... hmm... too old, too fat, too tall... Here we are... age sixteen, same height, even wears glasses and has black hair. We can get away with the original photo if he can do something about that scar. Five percent off if I don't have to change anything."

Diana nodded, and Pouchard added another name, Timothy Hunter, and another number.

"Now let's see about the redhead. Can he speak Italian?"

"No, and it really needs to be a British passport anyway."

"Okay, okay. Hmm.... Here we are. Right height, a couple of years older but I can fix that, definitely needs a new photo, only problem is that it expires in seven months and I can't change that."

"That's not a problem."

Luke Kirby joined the list. "I'll get the changes made. Give me twenty-four hours to double check that they're still okay before you start using the names and numbers for anything. I'll contact Joey if there's a problem, and he'll let you know when they're ready. Anything else? Joey said something about driving licenses. I can make them, but I can't get them into the British system, so they might be more trouble than they're worth."

"What about licenses for learner drivers?"

"Yes, I can do that. There's the same problem, but I guess the might not bother to check them for a minor offence."

"Get them one each, and anything else you can do easily."

"That will be an extra thousand francs each, fifteen hundred for the works."

"The works?"

"A used wallet or purse with bank cards, railway season tickets, that sort of thing, different for each of them. They won't actually work, but they add versimilitude."

"The works, then."

"What about you?"

"I've made my own arrangements."

He took pictures of Ron and Hermione and confirmed that Diana knew the payment method, then drove off.
Diana waited until he was out of sight, then said "We won't be able to see about tickets for at least another day. I think we need to sit down somewhere and decide what we're going to do once we get back to Britain."

"Deal with the demon thing, I suppose, then try to find another way to get rid of Vol... Riddle."

"First," said Ron, "we really need to know why you-know-who even wants to summon the thing. It's like one of those muggle things, a... a nuke. It's just as much a threat to him as it is to us."

"Nuke," said Hermione. "And you're right, of course. He's winning at the moment, why would he even think it was necessary?"

"Let's head back the house and try to work it out."

"Crucio!"

Luna Lovegood fell to the Dark Arts classroom floor, sobbing with pain. Amycus Carrow stared around the room, defying the students to comment, holding the spell for several seconds. "In future you will bring a sharpened quill to my lessons. Sharpened, do you understand?" Luna lay there gasping.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes, Professer Sparrow."

"Crucio!" Luna screamed, and Carrow smiled. "Detention tonight, Miss Lovegood. You too, Weasley. I will have order in my classes. Now go to your next lesson."

Ginny helped Luna to her feet, and supported her as they left the room. "You shouldn't provoke the bastard."

"I'll be okay."

"Why do you do it? You know he seizes on any excuse."

"I want to learn to fight through the pain."

"Riiight."

They passed a lavatory, and Luna stopped. "I need to wash. You go to potions, I'll catch up in a couple of minutes."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Okay."

Luna went into the lavatory, ran a tap, and washed her face, staring into the mirror. The face that stared back at her was her own for a moment, then one eye turned silver-grey, the other green. "Hello again."

Her reflection waved, and butterflies flew from her hand into the lavatory, settling in Luna's hair. "You won't find answers in pain. It's too easy to find. Answers are always the last place you look."
"I know... but if he hurts me, maybe he doesn't hurt someone else."

"People that like to hurt people like to hurt people, hurting people just makes them want to hurt more people. It's a whole hurty thing."

"So what do I do?"

"Let me be you."

"That's... would I come back from that?"

"Maybe, you don't know until you try. What have you got to lose? You're already talking to your own reflection..."

**TBC**

**Notes:** Joey Three-Fingers and associates are OCs. Nan Pilgrim was a young witch and the heroine of Diana Wynne Jones' *Witch Week* (1982). Timothy Hunter was a boy wizard (with magically created pet owl and glasses) and protagonist of Neil Gaiman’s *The Books of Magic*, (1990 onward). Luke Kirby was a boy wizard and protagonist of *Summer Magic*, a serial appearing intermittently in the comic *2000 AD* (1988 onward). None of them will appear in this story, although Hunter is an associate of John Constantine. And yes, that was Delirium of the Endless talking to Luna. Updating will probably continue to be slower from now on.
"We've completed the vault check," said Bill Weasley, laying a report on Tonguetongs' desk.

Tonguetongs looked up from the file he was reading. "And?"

"We found Dark traces, but no Dark artifacts with anything like the thaumic signature you described. There was one, almost certainly, the traces are too strong for anything else, but it was removed from the bank within the last week or so."

"Where was it stored?"

"The LeStrange vault, as you suggested. The vault was visited by Narcissa Malfoy on Friday, nobody else has opened it recently."

"How did she access the vault?"

"She had the key and a letter of authorization with the LeStrange seal. The seal can only be applied by one of the senior members of the family; beyond that, your guess is as good as mine. The Probity Probe team detected a strong Dark spike as she was leaving, but their job is to check incoming customers, not outgoing."

"So it's been there for at least a couple of months, we only started probing then."

"Several years at least. If I had to make an estimate I'd say at least ten, more like fifteen to twenty."

"So... placed there before the end of the war, I'd imagine. What else can you tell me? What shape and size is it?"

"Something small enough for one woman to carry, beyond that your guess is as good as mine. It was probably in a partially shielded container, a treated mokeskin bag or something of the sort, you really wouldn't want to carry something like that in your bare hands, and with the levels of dark magic we detected it would be almost impossible to manipulate its size or weight."

"Find out who escorted her to the vault and see what they remember. Is all of that in here?"

Tonguetongs gestured at the report.

"Yes sir. If I can make a suggestion, it might be worth looking inside the vault."

"Is there anything else in there on the prohibited list?"

"Not that I can detect from outside. But we're probably missing low-level items, the taint is drowning them out."

"In that case leave it for now, test again in a few weeks; if anyone opens the vault we'll get a better reading, but our customers pay for security and confidentiality, we can't break either just because there might be something dark in a vault that we can't detect from outside."

"Yes sir."

"Let me know if you learn anything more." Tonguetongs returned to his reading, and Bill went off to check the records of Narcissa's visit.

Once he'd finished with the file Tonguetongs went down to the vaults and took a complex route of
tunnels to the basement of the tallest office block in that part of London, which the Goblins had secretly owned since 1975. If it was ever necessary to abandon the Bank they planned to evacuate through Muggle areas, the last place wizards would be likely to look for them, collapsing the vaults behind them. It would wreck the wizards’ economy, but he didn’t necessarily see that as a disadvantage.

The route to their base on one of the supposedly unoccupied floors bypassed Muggle lifts and stairs, using concealed passages in the building’s service core. His office there was spartan, built for efficiency in an emergency, but had a few Muggle tools impossible in the Alley. He wrote a brief covering note and began to fax it, and the report, to Paris.

"The more I think about the Ministry of Magic, the more I’m convinced it’s a cargo cult," said Hermione.

"A what?” asked Harry.

"Ron, apologies in advance; you're going to find this offensive."

"I'm beyond finding excuses for the Ministry. Tell us."

"Okay, cargo cults have been around for a long time, but a lot of the modern ones started in the forties, during the second world war. Ron, that was the Muggle war that was mixed up with Grindlewald’s war. As part of it both sides began to build military bases on a lot of islands in the Pacific, starting with airstrips... landing places for aeroplanes... on islands where the natives were pretty much in the stone age. And then planes started landing, and the natives saw them unloading food, and tools, and guns, and lots of other things they wanted. And some of them got the idea that the planes were being sent by the gods and that the Japanese and Americans were using magical rituals to make them land and steal the cargo from the natives. So they decided that if they made a good enough copy of a landing strip and the structures that went with it they might be able to fool the gods into giving them the cargo instead."

"What's that got to do with the Ministry?"

"Well... I can't help feeling that when the wizards started hiding some of them had a look at how Muggle governments seemed to work and said ‘we can do that’ without bothering to find out what the checks and balances were, and built a copy that sort of worked without most of the supporting structure that goes into a real government. Because there's no way a real government goes that crazy that fast."

"You're sort of right," said Ron. "But there's a reason for it. It ought to be in the History of Magic course but you know how useless that is. Dad told us about it. What happened was that the Wizengamot lost a lot of people in Grindlewald’s war, and some of the old ruling families just died out completely, or were absorbed by relatives. It ended up with there being a lot fewer seats and everybody doing multiple jobs to keep it going, like Dumbledore. So after that war they tried to expand again, but a lot of the people who came in weren't really up to much, so the power tended to concentrate with the people who could get things done. And of course it all went to hell again when Vold.. Riddle came along. A lot more families gone, more incompetence generally, and people like Fudge and Umbitch get power because there's nobody really competent to oppose them."

"He's right," said Diana. "In the twenties and thirties the Wizengamot was about twice the size and seemed to be a lot less... ah... stupid. The same thing happened to a lesser extent in the rest of Europe, there was a long period of reconstruction after Grindlewald's war, the big difference was that Riddle never got very far outside the UK. There were a few Death Eater sympathizers but he never
had the same sort of power base he had in Britain."

"Why was that?" asked Harry.

Ron grinned. "Too many Veelas. They've married into a lot of families in Europe, it's hard to be really fanatical about pure blood when your granny isn't exactly human. Trouble is that most of them don't like the British climate, so far as I know Fleur is about the only one our side of the Channel."

"That's as good an explanation as any," said Diana. "There are other reasons, of course, but basically Britain was unlucky."

"So how did Grindlewald gain power in the first place?"

"He was a different sort of fanatic, Harry," said Hermione. "He wanted to rule the muggles and end the Statute of Secrecy completely. It was all supposed to be benevolent, for the greater good, but it was soon obvious that it was just an excuse to seize power and control people. It could never have ended well."

"Okay, so the way we get a stable government in Britain is to import more Veelas. Nice idea, Ron, but I really can't see most of the girls from Hogwarts going for the idea. Too much competition."

"I think the priority is to get rid of Riddle," said Diana. "We can worry about effective government later. Let's focus on..." Diana paused, listening to something they couldn't hear. "Excuse me a moment." She went out of the room. As she opened the door they heard a faint warbling noise.

"What was that about?" asked Ron.

"Sounds like a fax machine," said Hermione. At Ron's look of incomprehension she added "A way to send written messages by telephone."

"How do they get them through the wires?"

Hermione was still trying to explain when Diana came back. "We have a problem. The Goblins have finished checking their vaults, and I think that Voldemort may know we destroyed his horcrux. We destroyed it on Thursday, Narcissa Malfoy removed something really Dark from the LeStrange vault on Friday morning, probably another horcrux. It could be a coincidence, but I doubt it."

"Which one did he know about? The locket, or the one in my head?"

"It could be either or both."

"Wait a minute," said Hermione, "that can't be right. We know Snape saw Riddle on Saturday morning, he took him the message Harry sent. He doesn't seem to have done anything unusual while Snape was there, and Snape and Dumbledore were taken by surprise when Harry told them the one in his head was gone. If Riddle knew he would have probably called all of the Death Eaters in on Friday to question them, and he didn't. You saw Snape on Saturday afternoon, did he mention anything like that?"

"No, and I used my lasso to check his intentions; he would have mentioned it if anything like that was happening, even if he didn't know what it was about."

"He knows about the horcruxes," said Harry, "he knew there must be one in my head."

"Then it must be a coincidence," said Ron. "Or something warned them, a prophecy maybe."
"It's always possible, but there isn't much we can do about it if that's the case."

Harry touched the remnant of his scar. "Or he needed it for some other reason. You said they were getting ready for some sort of demonic ceremony when you were watching Malfoy Manor, could it be related to that?"

Hermione's eyes widened. "I think I know what it is. We think Vol... Riddle, damn it... put a horcrux into his snake, right? It's his familiar, stronger and more intelligent than any snake should be, and at least five times the size any venomous snake should be. If his current body is ever killed he'll take over in that form and carry on. Okay, that's bad... but what if he was able to do the same thing to a demon, transfer a horcrux to it and make its body his?"

"Fuck!"

"Ron, language! Sorry Diana."

"I've heard worse, Hermione. And you're right, it does seem like the sort of thing Riddle would try. Demons are effectively immortal and incredibly powerful, if he can somehow bind one to his will long enough to transfer the horcrux then... well, as Ron said, we're fucked."

Harry rubbed his forehead again. "Then we're just going to have to stop him."

John Constantine finished his translation of the symbols Diana had provided and wondered if there was any point blagging a plane ride to somewhere well out of the line of fire. It was a while since he'd visited Nepal. He lit another cigarette, inhaled deeply, and stubbed it out, then flipped it onto a map of Britain. It bounced twice then landed tip down in Wiltshire and started to burn. He gave it a few seconds then lifted it off and blew out the smouldering paper. There was a neat hole in the paper, centred on Malfoy Intrinsica.

"Bollocks." He picked up the phone and dialed Paris, and went to look out of the window as he waited for Diana to pick up. Across the road half a dozen people were waiting for a bus, unaware of what fate might have in store for them.

"Princess... yeah, it's John... okay, yeah, I've finished the translation. They're going to try to summon Akrasiel... No, you probably haven't heard of him... No, he isn't a demon exactly, he's a Fallen Archangel. Best known as Raguel, the Archangel of Divine Vengeance. He isn't in the Bible, except for the Book of Enoch, and that doesn't even say he Fell... Thing is that isn't his name any more, it was taken from him when he fell, so there's no way to control him. If Tommy-boy tries his ritual he'll have more trouble than he can possibly handle... No, there are lots of other names he's used, but I wouldn't bother trying to memorize them. None of them work, except maybe to get his attention."

He listened as Diana explained Hermione's guess. "Christ... yeah, that sounds bloody plausible. The bastard probably has the name Akrasiel and thinks it's all he needs, he's certainly arrogant enough... Okay. Okay, yeah, I'll see you in a few days. Let me know what you'll need, I'll do my best to help."

He finished the call and hung up, then lit another cigarette. "Oh well, no point giving up now."

"Those'll kill you in the end." He spun round, and saw Death sitting on the table where he'd left the map.

"You ought to know."

"Actually I don't. That's my brother's job, not mine. I just pick up the pieces after things end."
"Fair point. Well, I'm still alive, so far as I know. What can I do for you?"

"Nothing, really. I was in the area and thought I'd say 'hi.' Considering what's probably going to be happening next week, there may not be time to talk much if we meet again."

"Got any helpful hints?"

"Not really. It sounds like you've already covered the basics. Want to get coffee?"

"Don't know about you, but I could murder a curry."

Death hopped down from the table. "Isn't that supposed to be my line?"

"Couldn't resist it. No? Okay, coffee it is."

TBC

Notes: Akrasiel is mentioned as the Archangel of Divine Vengeance (with several other names and roles) in the Book of Enoch but does not appear elsewhere in the Bible. His Fallen status is my idea, for the purposes of this story. The curry line is from Terry Pratchett's Mort (1987).
Part of the Plan

Chapter Summary

Rating changed due to disturbing content.

Diana winced, ducked under Ron's wild swing, grabbed his wrist in an iron-hard grip, and took the sword from his hand. "Okay, let's just agree on something here. I won't try to teach any of you swordplay, and you won't try to teach me magic. We'll concentrate on our own strengths, that way we'll all have all our eyes and limbs when we go back to Britain."

"Are we really that bad?" asked Harry. "I did kill a basilisk..."

"Yes, and you were bitten and nearly died. All three of you are reasonably agile, but we've got just over a week, it simply isn't enough time. I could teach you a little, probably just enough to mess up your fighting reflexes completely. You'd be trying to cast spells with your swords, or parry with your wands."

"What about you?" asked Hermione. "You'll be fighting wizards and a demon with nothing but a sword and shield."

"I'm a lot tougher and faster than I look, and my weapons and armour were crafted by Hephestus. I think I have a reasonably good chance. Do you want to test me?"

"With stunners, maybe?"

"They don't affect me much, but I'll know if you hit me. All right, all three of you against me. Let me go back a few meters, that way you won't be hitting each other if you miss me." She backed away to the far side of the gym. "On the count of three... one... two... three!"

All three of them began to cast, and dodged hastily as Diana parried the red rays with her sword, shield, and wrist bracers, sending them back the way they'd come. After the first few she began to advance toward them. Ron went down to one of Harry's spells, reflected from her shield, Hermione circled around, trying to get behind her and get a spell through her guard, while Harry kept up steady rapid fire and dodged with reflexes honed by years of Quidditch, casting "Rennervate" to revive Ron as soon as Diana looked toward Hermione. Eventually Hermione succeeded, and a spell hit Diana's shoulder. It seemed to fizzle out without effect. She raised a hand to signal the end of the fight. "Good. You work well together, all three of you, you'll be much more effective that way than with swords."

"You're right," said Ron, wiping sweat from his forehead. "It felt like I knew what I was doing then, apart from underestimating how well you can aim the spells you deflect, I just don't feel that way with the sword."

"It's a pity that none of you are beaters, that would give you more of the reflexes and muscles you need for more physical forms of combat, but we have to work with what we've got, which means wands for you three."

"Okay."
"Now, have you finished putting together your shopping list?"

Hermione produced several sheets of paper. "This sheet is potions and ingredients, this one is for a joke shop if you can find one, and this is the expensive one - brooms."

"It's rather a lot. How much can you hide in your bag?"

"Quite a bit, but the maximum length is about three feet, we couldn't get brooms in there. We'll need another way to hide them."

"No we don't," said Harry. "The tent has furniture bigger than that and collapses to fit in your bag, if we get some brooms we can store them in there."

"Oh... sorry Diana, I should have thought of that."

"Out of interest, how much could you pack in there?"

"I've never really tested it. I've seen wizarding tents with big armchairs and stoves, so probably quite a lot, ours is a bit basic though. Some of the boards and things are longer than a broom so that ought to be safe enough. Anything much bigger and heavier and I think there might be problems."

Diana studied the list. "Four brooms. You've given me a lot of choices here, is any particular model your favourite?"

"Nimbus sell throughout Europe," said Harry. "All of us have used them, so they're probably best if you don't mind the cost. You can probably get a Nimbus 1700 or 2000 fairly easily but the 2000 is still pretty expensive. The 2001 would definitely be a special order, I really wouldn't bother looking for one."

"Any other makes I should consider?"

"Cleansweep 7 or maybe the 11. The 11 is probably a good one for you and Hermione, it's reasonably fast and a lot more stable than the 7."

"Stable is good," said Hermione. "And preferably something with good cushioning charms. I don't think Nimbus had women riders in mind, so definitely a Cleansweep for me."

Diana noted her preference. "That's enough to give me a starting point, if all else fails I'll go with the seller's recommendation for a teenage Quidditch player, that should be reasonably suitable for your needs. What else do we need?"

"The potions and ingredients are all pretty standard stuff, you shouldn't need to order anything specially... well, maybe the boomslang skin, but I've got some left so at a pinch we could manage without for a while."

"Anything else?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, if you can find a joke shop they ought to sell stuff we could use as distractions in a fight. Dung bombs, magical fireworks, that sort of thing. Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder if they have it. I've listed everything I can think of."

"That all looks reasonably straightforward. Anything else? Ron?"

"You'll think it's stupid..."

"Possibly, but don't let that stop you."
"Some Quidditch balls. Several sets if we can get them into the bag."

"You were right," said Harry. "It does seem stupid."

"Let a few bludgers loose when people aren't expecting them, set to stay near ground level, and you've got instant chaos."

"That's brilliant, except they'd go after everyone, not just our enemies."

"Hermione can fix that."

"What? No I can't."

"Bet you five galleons you can," said Harry. "If a house-elf can do it, the smartest witch in Hogwarts should have no problems."

"Smooth," said Hermione, "and very flattering, but I can't make any promises."

Diana added them to the list. "Anything else?"

"Omnioculars, maybe? Harry got us some for the Quidditch World Cup but none of us thought of packing them, they'd be really useful for watching from a distance."

"Would ordinary binoculars do? I have a couple of good pairs, and a camera with a long telephoto lens."

"Omnioculars really are better," said Harry. "You can record images and zoom in, slow things down or speed them up."

"And they don't need batteries or film," added Hermione.

"Okay. Anything else?"

"Food. Self-heating meals, instant snack boxes, that sort of thing. Or the muggle equivalents, I suppose."

"I'll get both."

"I can't think of anything else," said Harry, "which probably means there's something vital we've forgotten."

"Books and maps, of course!" said Hermione. "We've got most of what we need, but a good gazetteer for wizarding sites in Britain would be useful. Maps too. We still don't know what they're doing with Muggle-borns; they're probably shipping them to Azkaban, but with the number of people affected there might be camps elsewhere. We need information to find them."

"I'll see what I can find," said Diana, "but Diagon Alley is probably a better bet once we're back in Britain. At the moment nobody's looking for me, I should be able to visit Flourish and Blotts easily enough. That should work for other things, though I'd prefer to buy in Paris where possible, it should make it a little harder to trace anything back to me. Now then... what about weapons and armour?"

"You just proved that we're rubbish with weapons," said Harry, "I really can't see much point loading ourselves down with things we can't use. Maybe knives, they're always handy for other things, but anything else is just going to be weight we have to lug around."

"What about guns?"
"No way," said Harry. "They were tried a few times in the first war, Riddle has some sort of protective spell."

"It's one of the first examples in the year 3 Arithmancy text book," said Hermione, "a ward that reverses the vector of projectiles. It's pretty much automatic once you activate it. Bullets just head back the way they came. Newton invented it, Grindewald perfected it. It's even more effective than jinxing guns, and Chinese wizards figured that one out a thousand years ago."

"And armour?"

Harry shrugged. "Dragon-hide coats would be good, they block most magic, but you're talking seriously expensive and hard to find, and a bit conspicuous. And I'd imagine they're sod-all use against demons."

"They're over-rated anyway," said Ron. "They're good if someone casts a spell directly at your body and it isn't too powerful, but they wouldn't protect you from something like the bite of snakes created by Serpentoria or a spell that threw a ton of rocks at you, or fire or explosions caused by magic. You'd cook if someone hit you with Fiendfyre. The killing curse goes straight through them, and they don't help if a spell's aimed at your head or legs."

"Fiendfyre?" asked Hermione. "I've heard of it, but I thought nobody knew the spell any more."

"V... Riddle did, so some of his Death Eaters probably do too. It's the sort of thing they'd love."

"What is it?" asked Harry.

"Sort of a conjured fire monster, a bit like the old idea of a fire elemental. They can burn anything, and it's almost impossible to put them out."

"Okay, let's steer clear of that."

"I'll check if the coats are available anyway," said Diana. "Even if they aren't very effective, they might be better than nothing. All right, this will probably take a few hours. When were you planning to contact Severus?"

"This evening about ten," said Harry.

"I should be back well before that. When you set the tent up again put it in the workshop area if you can, I think that there's room and we won't have to move it if we use the gym again."

Dolores Umbridge walked through Diagon Alley, escorted by two minions, with Travers at her side. As they passed Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes she pointed out the U-No-Poo advertisement in their window.

"..Hem.. It's disgraceful that those Weasley hooligans should be allowed to sell their filthy products, let alone advertise them with a poster making veiled scatological references to the Dark Lord. Something must be done."

"What did you have in mind?"

"The premises must be thoroughly inspected and all products tested for safety. It would be terrible if there was an ..ahem.. accident with all those fireworks and potions. Most ..hem.. regrettable."

"What sort of tests did you envisage?"
"Oh... let's see, are their products safe if they're dropped, smashed, or set on fire, or all of them at the same time? What happens if they're mixed together? That sort of thing. I'm sure that we have some suitably ..hem! enthusiastic inspection staff. Some Snatchers, perhaps? It might be a nice change of pace for them. Get them to test everything in the shop, we really must be seen to be thorough and enforce safety standards. Oh, and check that there is nobody of ..hem! dubious ancestry working or hidden there, they seem just the sort to consort with that sort of scum."

"I know just the men for the job. Would tomorrow afternoon suit you?"

"Whenever is convenient. But the sooner the better, I think."

"Of course. Leave it with me."

"Thank you. Now, I really must get back to the Ministry, so many things to do."

"Absolutely."

Travers walked on toward Gringotts, Umbridge went into the Magical Menagerie to order some cat food then back toward the Leaky Cauldron. At roof level a raven watched and listened. After they separated it took off, circled over them, then flew towards the Ministry. Behind it Travers angrily cleaned bird droppings from his hat.

Diana got back at five, and unloaded a car full of shopping which they lugged down to the basement. "Better not put any of it inside the tent," said Hermione, "Phineas Nigelus might notice if he saw we had a load of equipment."

"Okay," said Harry. "Mind if we unpack out here?"

"Go ahead," said Diana. "No dragonhide coats available, I'm afraid, but I think I got nearly everything else. The brooms are in the big brown paper parcel; when it gets dark it might be a good idea to test them."

Harry ripped into the paper eagerly. "Three Firebolt 2000s and one Cleansweep 11? Um... which one is for you?"

"I'll take a 2000," said Diana. "They seemed to handle well enough when I tried one, though I agree with Hermione about the cushioning charms. Fortunately I'm a little more robust than mortals, it doesn't bother me."

"How about the balls?"

Diana raised an eyebrow. "Not a problem for me, Ron, but I'm sure you'll tell me if either of you experience any discomfort."

Ron and Harry turned bright red.

"Let us not go there," said Hermione, trying to keep a straight face, "it is a silly place."

"And easily damaged, I believe."

"Riiiight."

"Moving on," Harry said hastily, "I think Ron was actually asking about the Quidditch balls. Were you able to get any?"
"Two complete sets, and one I got cheaply that's missing the snitch. That gives you six bludgers."

"Excellent. We've been working on some ideas... well, mostly Hermione's working on it, but Ron and I made a few suggestions... with a bit of luck we'll have something to test in the next day or two."

"One thought," said Diana. "The wizards you'll be fighting presumably know about Quidditch. What's to stop them conjuring up bats and fending off the bludgers?"

"Nothing, really, but while they're doing that they won't be able to do much else. It ought to be a good distraction."

"Let's get the rest unpacked, and you can show me how to use the omnioculars and the other equipment."

The first thing Dolores Umbridge noticed when she entered her office was a stranger, a blond man in muggle clothes; slacks, a white T-shirt, and a leather jacket. He wore dark glasses and was sitting in her chair with his feet on her desk, throwing darts at one of the cat pictures on the wall.

"hem hem!"

"Ah, Senior Undersecretary Umbridge. Or may I call you Dolores? Delighted to meet you." He rose to his feet, and the door slammed shut behind her. "We have much talk about." Despite herself, she felt attracted to his perfect physique.

"Who are you, and what are you doing in my office?"

He smiled, showing perfect teeth. "A mere servant of my Lord. He felt that we should be better acquainted. He particularly admires your innovative approach to corporal punishment." He held out his hand.

Umbridge blushed, tucked her wand into her belt, and reached out to shake his hand. He smiled again, took it, and bent to kiss it. Suddenly she felt searing pain, and looked down to see that two of her fingers were gone, their stubs bleeding profusely. She gasped, went for her wand, and realised that it was in his other hand. He raised it to his mouth and bit off the end. "Mmm, dragon heartstring, very chewy. What a shame you never learned wandless magic, this would be much more fun if you could put up a fight."

She tied to pull free, but he held her effortlessly as he ate the rest of her wand, crunching the wood and appearing to relish it. "Now then... what lovely eyes you have..." He took off his glasses, revealing empty eye sockets lined with teeth. "I think they'll suit me very nicely." He reached for her right eye, his fingernails long and sharp, and she started to scream.

Outside the tent Ron's spells were creating a reasonable facsimile of the noise of a stream, while he and Diana listened via extendable ears. Inside it, Harry and Hermione stared at the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black.

"What is it now?"

"Is Professor Snape there?" asked Hermione. "We need to check a couple of things."

"He is here, but Professor Carrow is in the office, talking to the Headmaster. I don't think it would be a good idea to interrupt."
"Any idea how long he's likely to be?"

"No, but Professor Carrow has been complaining for nearly twenty minutes, I suspect that the Headmaster will lose patience with him soon."

"What's he complaining about?"

"I'm sorry, portraits in the headmaster's office aren't allowed to discuss anything that happens there."

"Wait a minute," said Harry. "First, you've told us what was said there in the past. And second, I'm not asking a portrait in the Head's office, I'm asking this painting, which is my property as far as I know. Aren't you supposed to advise the Black heir?"

The portrait looked angry, then seemed to consider it. "That remains to be seen, I think, but you are certainly a possible heir. You really should have been sorted into Slytherin. Very well, Professor Carrow appears to have issues with some of the students."

"Which ones?"

"Miss Lovegood appears to be the current target of his ire."

"Luna?" said Harry. "Why on earth...?"

"She persistently calls him Professor Sparrow, talks incessantly about non-existent animals, and is generally disrespectful."

"Has he crucioed her?"

"Yes, of course. It's now the mandated punishment for any breach of discipline."

"And you're okay with that?"

The portrait shrugged. "It lacks flexibility, I suppose, but I'd imagine it's effective."

"And you're okay with it?"

"What exactly would you propose I do about it? I'm a portrait... one moment... Ah, the Headmaster has told Professor Carrow to put his concerns into writing, and Carrow is leaving. I don't think either is happy."

"When Professor Snape is on his own please tell him we're here. And Dumbledore's portrait too."

"I've told the Headmaster. He is ready for you."

"Okay... please ask him if there's anything he can do to stop Carrow hurting the students."

There was a long pause, then the portrait said "The Headmaster can't stop them completely, the Dark Lord ordered them to use Crucio to maintain order. He is, however, doing his best to make it difficult for the Carrows to use more physically harmful punishments. Requests must be submitted in writing and in triplicate, and the Headmaster has already rejected an application twice on the grounds that the writing was illegible. He is prepared to take more active steps if necessary."

"Can't he... oh, I don't know, do something to make them think that they're using Crucio, but stop it from actually happening?"

"If it were only the Carrows that might be possible, but all of the prefects serve the Dark Lord, and
have permission to use the spell. It would be impossible to stop all of them without word getting to the Dark Lord."

"That isn't good. Please ask him to try to find a better solution."

"Is that all?"

"No. Ask him if Riddle is preparing for a ceremony later this month."

Again there was the exasperating delay. "He has been warned to expect to be summoned around the middle of the month. He asks if you know why?"

"We're pretty sure he plans to raise a demon."

"Hmm... the Headmaster is swearing. Dumbledore says that even Riddle isn't that insane."

"Hermione, your turn."

Hermione leaned over the portrait. "Tell them both I've read Die Waldnymphe und der Verfluchte Zauberstab, The Wood-nymph and the Cursed Wand, and that we know the true history of the Elder Wand, what it really does to its users, not the rubbish Beedle printed. And ask them when did Riddle rob Dumbledore's grave and take the wand?"

There was another long pause. Then the portrait said "It was never there to be stolen. Dumbledore was carrying a lesser wand when he died, transfigured to look like the Elder Wand, the Headmaster gave the real wand to Riddle a few hours after his death."

"They wanted Riddle to get the wand? They wanted him insane?"

"Dumbledore informs me that it's all part of the plan."

TBC

Notes: If guns worked against powerful wizards someone would have presumably shot Grindlewald and/or Voldemort. The anti-gun spell mentioned is not canon (sorry...), it's just a hand-wave to explain why they're not used.

Although it's often mentioned in fanfic, in canon Harry apparently hadn't heard of Fiendfyre before he encountered it in the Room of Requirement during the Battle of Hogwarts. For story purposes Ron and Hermione are better informed.

Added The Corinthian, AKA "the eye guy", from Sandman, described by its creator as "Not the most social of nightmares."

I've been asked to clarify the timeline a little, since a lot has happened in relatively few days:
The Antikythera Mechanism is found on Wednesday 3rd September 1997, and the trio arrive in Paris and meet Diana on Thursday morning. Slytherin's amulet is destroyed in the afternoon, and Harry meets Death just after midnight.
On Friday they discuss the Elder Wand and Diana flies to London for Princess Diana's funeral. Diana also visits Diagon Alley and sends a message to Severus Snape for Harry.
On Saturday Diana attends the funeral, meets John Constantine, visits Snape, and scouts out Malfoy Manor. In the evening, after a run-in with various Chinese wizards, Harry contacts Snape via portrait, and explains the flaws in Dumbledore's plan.
On Sunday Diana returns and they meet a gangster and arrange to get forged passports.
On Monday morning the Goblins complete their initial check of Gringotts' vaults and let Diana
know that a Horcrux was probably removed, and John Constantine contacts Diana to let her know what he's learned.

Everything in this chapter occurs on the afternoon and evening of Monday 8th September 1997. The full moon, demon summoning, and possible apocalypse are scheduled for Tuesday 16th...
When Travers arrived at the Ministry his secretary brought in his usual cup of tea and cauldron cake, and said "Did you hear about Umbridge, sir?"

"Don't you mean 'Senior Undersecretary Umbridge'?"

"Not any more."

Travers smiled. "What happened?"

"Some sort of nervous breakdown last night. Snapped her wand and started screaming her head off, the security guards found her in her office trying to gouge her own eyes out with the remains of the wand. She's in the violent ward at Saint Mungos."

"Who's taking over her post?"

"Well... most people seem to think you are."

"Oh! Well, send some flowers to her, nothing too expensive, and keep your fingers crossed. If I get promoted I'll still need a good secretary, and I think that post is a couple points higher on the pay scale."

"You might want to think twice about the flowers. Seems they found some papers while they were cleaning up the mess, she was a half-blood. There were a few rumours, but no proof until now."

"I always thought there was something off about her. Right, forget the flowers. No, on second thoughts treat yourself to some, or a box of chocolates or something, and charge it to my expense account as 'entertainment.'"

"Thank you, sir. Do you still want me to call in a Snatcher team for a briefing?"

"Hmm... no, leave it for now, it was some damn-fool idea Umbridge had, if she was secretly a half-blood there's no telling what she was really up to, and the Snatchers are doing good work in the field. I need to review all of my contacts with her, make sure that she wasn't working against me or the Dark Lord."

"I'll start looking out the paperwork, there are probably memos and other papers that are relevant. I should have a report by the end of the afternoon."

Harry buttered a croissant and said "Okay, I think we've got to face facts. Dumbledore's portrait is off its head."

Hermione looked up from her breakfast. "I think it was a stupid plan too, but it might have worked if... well, if you still had a horcrux in your head, and if Dumbledore had been right about how the Elder Wand works, and nothing whatever went wrong including your death and resurrection. We still don't know that he was wrong, of course, though I think we can definitely say the wand causes insanity."

"I don't get why he isn't adapting to things going wrong."

"He's a portrait," said Ron, putting aside the Prophet's chess problem, "what did you expect?"
"What you get is Dumbledore's personality when it was painted," said Hermione, "which was obviously well after he got the Elder Wand. When you talk to it you get a response, but after a few hours it reverts back to the default setting. Oh, it probably remembers what you tell it, to some extent, but it has to be reminded repeatedly. It's like an advanced version of ELIZA."

"Who's Eliza?"

"Not who, it's 'What'; it's a computer program... um, a machine that imitates people a little, Ron. It takes what people tell it and quotes bits of it back to them, so that it sounds like they're having a meaningful conversation. But at the end of the day you're mostly talking to a set of preset responses and a fixed recording of his personality."

Harry rubbed the fading remnant of his scar. "Great. So it's still obsessing with the original plan, which doesn't have a hope of working, and now Riddle's using the Elder Wand so I can't even pull off the brother wand core trick any more. He had some of my blood in his body, but that was more than two years ago. By now his body will have replaced it."

"It's probably a magical connection, not simple biology. I really doubt it's very strong though, or even Riddle wouldn't have risked using it when the blood of anyone who regarded him as an enemy would have worked. That's most of magical Britain!"

"It's best that we know now," said Diana. "Things would be far worse if we thought Dumbledore's plan was worth pursuing. Now we know that we need to find our own way to defeat Riddle. And I think that Severus has finally admitted that he can't follow Dumbledore's plan blindly, he'll be looking into alternatives."

"Let's hope he doesn't decide to go back to serving Riddle," said Harry. "I wouldn't put it past him."

"I don't think so. He hates Riddle, if anything I'm worried that he may try an assassination attempt on his own; I don't think he'd succeed and it would remove our only access to Riddle's camp. You're contacting him again tonight?"

"I said tonight if we could, but maybe we should leave it until tomorrow night. That gives him more time to come up with something, and we can say that we had to move camp or something. I don't want him to realise we're just sitting in your basement. If you're wrong about him that could be very nasty."

"You're probably right."

"That reminds me," said Hermione, "I wanted to ask you something. You were around during Grindlewald's rise to power, weren't you?"

Diana nodded. "Yes, for some of it. Why?"

"Well... You must have known that he was pretty much immune to bullets, there was at least one assassination attempt with muggle weapons."

"Two, and several magical attacks."

"Wait a minute," said Harry. "You knew that, you know that guns aren't much good against wizards, but you still asked us about them?"

"Yes. And now you're wondering why I asked, I'd imagine."

"Pretty much, yes."
"Why do you think? No prompting him, either of you."

"Um... you wanted to be sure that we knew what we were doing?"

"Exactly right. I need to work with people I can trust, not cowboys. You showed me again that you've thought it through, at least to the extent of researching your enemy and knowing things that probably won't work."

"Okay. Any more tests coming up?"

"They wouldn't be much of a test if I warned you, now would they?"

"Oh Merlin," said Ron. He imitated Moody: "Constant vigilance!"

Diana stared at him for a moment and shook her head.

"Moving on," Hermione said hastily, "I'm going to need your help enchanting the bludgers, Harry."

"Why me?"

"Because if we cast some of the spells in Parseltongue they'll be a lot harder to break. Riddle can probably do it, but if things get sufficiently chaotic it may take him a while to think of it."

"I'm not a Parselmouth any more, that was part of the horcrux."

"Are you sure?" asked Diana.

"Well, it stands to reason."

"I don't think it necessarily follows," said Hermione. "It'd be like learning another language, it becomes part of the speech centre of your brain. Maybe the horcrux is where it originally came from, but I can't see it vanishing completely after so many years."

Ron scribbled on a paper napkin for a few seconds, and handed Harry a badly drawn picture of a curled-up snake. "Try talking to this, mate."

"Seriously? Okay..." He stared at the picture. "Hello, snake. See, nothing."

"Harry, mate, you were hissing."

"Merlin! Let's try that again... Open the Chamber of Secrets!"

"Well, you hissed something again, I don't claim to understand it."

"Let me try something," said Hermione, standing up and walking a few feet from the table and waved her wand in a sweeping curve. "Serpentsortia!" A red and brown snake about four feet long materialised at the end of her wand, dropped to the floor, and squirmed toward Harry.

"Merlin, give me some warning next time! Stop, go to sleep."

"Finite Incantatem!" The snake vanished. "What did you tell it to do?"

"Stop and go to sleep."

"There you go then. Congratulations, you're still Hissing Sid." At Ron's confused look she added
"Sorry, obscure Muggle reference, don't worry about it."

"Okay... I suppose, provided there isn't a bit of the horcrux left in me. But you could have done something a little less drastic. What if it bit me?"

"I'm not an idiot, Harry, I visualised a corn snake when I cast the spell, they're harmless."

"I didn't know you could do that."

"I'm surprised you haven't read up on snakes and snake magic," said Hermione. "You have a really unusual talent, I would have thought it would be a good idea to be able to tell your asp from your... damn it, can't think of a good snake name that rhythms with elbow!"

"El boa?" suggested Ron. They stared at him. "Didn't the snake you told us about have a Spanish accent? The one you let loose in the zoo?"

"Mexican," said Harry, "and it was all in my head anyway, we were both speaking Parseltongue."

"That kills that joke..."

"If you're thinking about languages I'd imagine you know how to modify the bludgers," said Diana. "How much progress have you made?"

"I've worked out how to get through the protective enchantments," said Hermione, "the ones that are supposed to stop tampering, and I've got a good idea of the spells we need to cast. If we take it slowly and carefully I'll have them ready for the new spells tomorrow morning."

"We've got time, I can't realistically see us travelling before the weekend."

"Why so long?"

"I paid for the passports yesterday morning, we ought to have confirmation that the names and numbers are safe to use some time today or tomorrow, and the actual passports on Thursday or Friday. As soon as we know the passport details are safe I'll see about booking tickets. Ideally I'd like to arrive at the same time as a lot of other passengers so that we aren't too noticeable. On Friday and Saturday most travellers are headed the other way, we might attract attention, so Sunday afternoon would be the best time. That's when a lot of people return from holidays and shopping trips to France, and it will give us all of Monday and Tuesday morning and afternoon to get into position."

"That doesn't leave much time if anything goes wrong."

"Then we'll have to make sure it doesn't."

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After her last class of the day Luna Lovegood took a walk in the grounds, apparently wandering aimlessly, gathering some flowers and mushrooms which she braided into her hair. When she neared the Whomping Willow she looked around to make sure that nobody was watching, then used a long stick to press a knot near the base. The branches moved to one side and the roots slid apart, revealing a low-ceilinged tunnel which she quickly entered. The roots waited for her to pass then closed behind her, as she cast Lumos to light her way. She was most of the way to Hogsmeade when she heard Crucio! and collapsed in pain.

When she looked up Alecto Carrow was standing over her, wand raised. "So, my pretty, you thought you'd play truant, did you? Well, you've made a bad mistake." She cackled for a moment. "You're outside the school grounds now, which means that you're fair game. Petrificus Totalus!"
Luna's arms and legs snapped together. Carrow studied her for a moment, then vanished Luna's robes and tie, leaving the skirt, blouse and cardigan she wore underneath. Another spell tore her clothes and dirtied her skin and hair. "There we are, now, the very picture of a mudblood on the run, all ready for the Snatchers. They'll want to know where you stole your magic, I'd imagine." She pretended to listen, but Luna couldn't say anything. "Cat got your tongue? Oh yes, nearly forgot." She picked up Luna's wand, snapped it, watched as the core burned away, then tucked it into Luna's cardigan pocket. Luna glared at her as Carrow waved her wand again. "Locomotor!" Luna's body rose a few inches into the air, and followed Carrow along the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack. As she floated her eyes gradually shifted colour; one silver-grey, the other green.

John listened to the phone and swore, adding "Pick up, you git..."

At his third attempt there was an answer. "Blood speaking."

"Hello, Jason, this is John Constantine. Can you spare a couple of minutes?"

"No, but I'm sure you won't let that stop you."

"Know what Akrasiel is up to these days?"

"Akrasiel? Decomposing, I'd imagine."

"Decomposing?"

"Well, subliming into the ether, whatever you want to call it. He's gone, anyway."

"Dead?"

"For want of a better word. Unless someone with sufficient power feels like reshaping him again he's gone."

"What killed him?"

"Michael, allegedly. As I understand it, Akrasiel exceeded his authority, Lucifer got annoyed and removed his protection, and Akrasiel lost the subsequent argument. Michael ended the problem permanently."

"That's odd. Any idea why someone would try to summon him now?"

"Ignorance, I'd imagine."

"Okay... hypothetically, if a really evil wizard tries the rite for summoning him at the next full moon, what sort of rabbit are they likely to pull out of the hat?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Since he isn't around they'd either get nothing or someone else in the vengeance business. Or a random demon that feels like a free ride to Earth, of course."

"Wonderful."

"One moment... Etrigan suggests that you consider the date very carefully."

"And?"

"I'd imagine that there may be some especial astrological or magical significance, beyond a mere full moon. And... ah, Etrigan is laughing at me."
"Any idea why?"

"When he's in this sort of mood there's no talking to him. We're obviously missing something important."

"Any suggestions?"

"Talk to Lucifer. He may be willing to confirm the story, or have some suggestions."

"Thanks. I'll give it a try."

TBC

Notes: ELIZA was one of the first "artificial intelligence" programs, a "therapist" that used a few simple rules to parse text entered and give "meaningful" answers. It ran in a few kilobytes of code, but somehow convinced multiple users that there was some real intelligence at work. It was adapted to most versions of the BASIC programming language.

For story purposes Harry retained the Parselmouth ability after the horcrux was removed. There is nothing in the novels to contradict this, although J.K. Rowling has since stated that he lost it.

Captain Beaky & His Band (Not Forgetting Hissing Sid!!) was the title given to two albums of poetry by Jeremy Lloyd, set to music by Jim Parker and recited by various British celebrities, released in 1977 and 1980.

The demon Etrigan is a prisoner in Jason Blood's body in DC and Vertigo comics.
A tall figure swathed in a grey hooded cloak appeared in Morpheus' throne room, a huge leather-bound book in its hands and chained to its body, saying "You're meddling."

"Just a moment." Morpheus signed the scroll he'd been writing and handed it to a pterodactyl which took it in one claw and flapped away. "Brother, always a pleasure. You were saying?"

"Voldemort. You're meddling." Destiny did not sound pleased.

"I haven't really done much, just protected a couple of artists who have been doing some good work with dreams. Oh, and our oldest sister has disposed of some soul fragments."

"I noticed. All of this stems from the discovery of one book, and the mystery it concealed. The House of Mystery is in your realm, and the Library of Dream contains all books."

"I'm aware, and I've checked. My library has two hundred and eighteen variant copies of Most Potent Potions, including seven with versions of that particular modification, none of them are missing."

"In all of my records, until things changed, Snape took the book with him when he left Grimmauld Place, and the secret of the machine died with him. It should take Potter nearly a year to overcome Voldemort, if he does. Now the path of events has shifted, and is still unstable."

Morpheus shrugged. "You're the master of fate, not me. I would have assumed that you were responsible if I didn't know better. Something made him change his mind, I suppose, but it's none of my doing. We have to cope with the consequences as best we can. Does it really matter?"

"If I knew exactly what triggered the change, I might be able to undo it."

"You really don't like surprises, do you?"

"No."

"Tough. It looks like you'll be getting some. Look, this is ridiculous. Say one or another wizard dies early, or a demon is raised that stayed in hell in the original timeline. Assume the worst case, thousands or millions of lives changed. Does it really matter? This is one world in one galaxy in one universe in endless trillions, a trivial change to the paths of your garden. A few millennia and nobody will remember or care."

"You are as short-sighted as your predecessor. Things should not change."

"I'm a realist. Things have changed, I'm not going to waste time trying to change them back. I'm going to go with the flow, and suggest that you do the same."

Destiny disappeared again without replying. Morpheus sighed and clapped his hands, calling "Lucien!"

A harried-looking man with straggly brown hair and pointed ears appeared, wearing an old-fashioned looking suit with a tailed coat and pine-nez glasses, and carrying a tall stack of books. "My Lord?"

"The new book that you mentioned, the one about the Potter boy... what was the title again?"
"Harry Potter and the Half-God Prince?"

"That's the one. Find the copy with the most lurid and misleading dust-jacket picture, send it to my eldest brother with my compliments. Make sure to remind him that it's still a work in progress."

"Isn't your brother blind, sir?"

"He won't mind the cover then."

"At once, my Lord."

On Thursday Diana came back from another shopping trip with art supplies, suitcases and the passports. "I've booked us on the Boulogne-Dover hovercraft on Sunday afternoon, with backup tickets for the ferry if the hovercraft isn't running for any reason."

"What's a hovercraft?" asked Ron.

"Umm..." Harry thought for a moment. "It's a bit hard to describe. It's sort of a giant muggle mechanical flying carpet, big enough to carry a load of cars and passengers, but it only flies a couple of feet above the sea."

"Don't tell dad, he'll want one."

"He'd have a job getting it home," said Hermione, "I don't think you could fit one of the big ones into the Great Hall at Hogwarts. Why the hovercraft? Wouldn't a plane be better, or the Channel Tunnel? Or the ferry if you really want to go by sea?"

"It's much faster than the ferry," said Diana, "and I don't think many pure-blood wizards will know about it. It's fairly noisy, so the other passengers aren't likely to try to talk to us. Also, there are ways to escape from it quickly if there's an emergency, I don't think that would be so easy in a tunnel or a few miles up. The main down-side is that some passengers get a little seasick, but I think it's a risk worth taking."

"You've really thought this through."

"Steve and I were involved in Resistance operations during the Second World War, we had similar transport problems sometimes, especially when Grindewald's thugs were working with the Gestapo."

"That sounds pretty horrible."

"It's in the past, thank Hera. Now, we need to work on the details of your cover identities, and our strategies for getting through customs..."

"I've been going through Umbridge's files," said Travers. "I've cancelled a few operations which seemed to advance her agenda rather than yours, My Lord, but there's one I think should be pursued." He unrolled a map of Diagon Alley and laid it the table in front of Voldemort's throne, pointing at one of the shops. "This new joke shop in Diagon Alley has repeatedly posted advertisements which might be interpreted as puerile attempt to mock you."

Voldemort lifted his wand, seeming to study it, and ran his fingers along its length. "Have a care, Travers."
"Extremely puerile, My Lord, and almost too petty to mention, but Steiner reports that there may be some small effect on the morale of our enemies. I feel that they might usefully be made an object lesson. Accordingly, I would like to request permission for a limited operation in the Alley. A protest by an enraged group of citizens angered by their disrespect for authority, for example, ending in a 'tragic accident.' But..."

"Crucio!" Travers fell, writhing in agony for a few seconds. "Do not mime quotes in my presence, Travers, it's unseemly and leaves your hands wandless. The English language has ample ways to emphasize such things verbally, you don't need vulgar gestures. You were saying?"

Travers bowed deeply as he rose. "My apologies, My Lord. I was about to add that at this stage I feel that overt participation by Death Eaters might be counterproductive, suggesting that the petty jibes of shopkeepers actually matter or concern you."

Voldemort thought for a moment. "Very well, but make sure that nobody involved carries the Dark Mark. I'm sure that you can drum up a suitable mob easily enough. Some Imperios, a sufficiency of drink, a few paid thugs to make sure that things get out of hand..."

"Of course, My Lord."

"See to it. But take your time and do it right."

John checked that the protective and anti-eavesdropping runes on and around the phone were still in place and intact - he really didn't want his eardrums melting - then dialled Los Angeles.

"This is Lux." It was a woman's voice, one John didn't recognize.

"Mister Morningstar, please."

"Who's calling?"

"John Constantine." The other phone hung up. "Bleeding wonderful." John dialled again.

"Thank you for calling Lux. All of our lines are busy right now, but if you'd like to hold we'll waste your time needlessly until you give up or die of old age. Preferably both."

They had caller ID, of course, or some magical equivalent. "Yeah, right. Tell Lucifer someone's trying to summon Akrasiel. I just want to check that the bugger's really dead."

"Wait."

John held and tried not to think about the phone bill. His chances of surviving until it was due were probably pretty low anyway...

"Constantine? What's this about Akrasiel?"

"Hello, Lucifer. You know about the Death Eaters?"

"Several were sent to my realm before I retired. Nasty little men, really didn't do their name justice. Such a shame their leader was too frightened to die properly, I was really hoping to collect the full set."

"He's back, and he's planning to summon a demon on the full moon, that's next Tuesday. Unless I've made a bad mistake with the translation he's after Akrasiel."
"That would be an interesting trick. Akrasiel has been... well, reinstated in Heaven, or will be once his rehabilitation is complete."

"I'd heard he was dead."

"Worse... he never actually fell. The bastard turns out to have been a double-agent working for Michael. He spent millennia worming his way into my inner circle and spying on us. When I retired the new management were proactive in purging my remaining supporters; he and Michael faked a messy death and went home. Fortunately I still have a few contacts up there, one of them told me the real story."

"I don't think the wand-wavers know that. Okay, if they tried it who would answer the call?"

"Not Akrasiel, he's still in rehab as far as I know; even if he wasn't, any ritual to summon or call him as a demon would most certainly fail unless he happened to feel like doing a little smiting. I doubt he'd bother for anything much short of Sodom and Gomorrah. They're more likely to get some bottom-feeder, I'd imagine. Although... you said they're doing it this month?"

"Yes, next Tuesday," John repeated.

"Ah... in Britain?"

"Yes, Wiltshire."

"You may have a problem." Lucifer didn't sound too unhappy about it.

"I'd noticed. Etrigan seemed to be fixated on the date too. What am I missing?"

"You really don't know?"

"Not the foggiest."

"You've looked at a calendar, I'd imagine."

"Yeah, and all the usual sources. Doesn't seem to be a particularly apocalyptic date. No major religious festivals, no prophecies, nothing numerological of note."

"You're slipping, Constantine."

"Don't suppose you feel like dropping a hint?"

"I'm retired, Constantine, not reformed."

"Fair point. Oh, one other thing, there are some soul-sucking demons working for the Death Eaters, the wand wavers call them dementors. Look like crappy grim reapers. Tobin's Spirit Guide says they're from Hell. Know anything about them?"

"Ah yes, one of our more creative demons contracted to sell a few to their little government in the seventeenth century. What on earth are the death eaters doing with them?"

"They've got hundreds of the buggers, they've been roaming the country for the last month or so."

"Then they must be breeding. Well, I'll certainly have to put a stop to that, they give real demons a bad name. Are they likely to be present for the summoning?"

"It's possible, they might use them to guard the ritual, keep out gatecrashers."
"Let me have all the details."

"Are you planning a personal appearance?"

"I have minions for that sort of thing. Now, the details."

"Okay... if you'll tell me why this month is so special."

"Very well, spoil my fun. Take a look at an astronomical calendar, it will tell you all you need to know."

"Okay, thanks. Right, it's a place called Malfoy Manor in Wiltshire, near a village called Malfoy Intrinsica. Big mansion with a ton of spells to keep out the hoi palloi..."

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**Goodbye England's rose**
May you ever grow in our hearts
You were the grace that placed itself...

Diana switched off the car radio as they drove aboard the hovercraft, and followed directions to their parking spot in the hold.

"Shame, I was enjoying that," said Hermione.

Diana set the hand brake. "We can't stay with the car, it isn't safe if there's an emergency. You'll have plenty of chances to hear it, I imagine, it was only released yesterday and it's already at the top of the British charts." She looked around. "All right, we need to get to the passenger seats. Watch out for other cars boarding as we cross the hold. It's that door over there."

Looking back, Harry saw two crewman start to secure the car to the deck with heavy-duty straps, and wondered how rough the crossing would be if that was necessary.

"Blimey, you weren't kidding about the size of this thing," said Ron. "It really flies?"

"At about sixty or seventy miles an hour in calm weather, though it starts off slower. You'll see in a few minutes."

---

"In there, bitch." A masked guard pushed Luna Lovegood into one of the cells below Malfoy manor.

"There's no need to be rude."

"Crucio!" The guard laughed and slammed the door before she recovered, locking Luna in. There was dim light from a wizarding lamp, and she looked around to see several strangers and one familiar face, Garrick Ollivander.

"I thought you might be here."

"Are you all right, child?"

"I'm fine," said Luna. "They're not really very good at this. Pain only hurts if you let it bother you."

He looked at her again, and his eyes widened as he saw something he recognized in her eyes. "My Lady..."

She shook her head warningly. "Luna. Is everyone all right?"
"We're all hungry," said one of the other prisoners, "but they need us alive to be hostages. For now, anyway."

"For now." She carefully pulled some of the mushrooms from her hair, and threw them into a dark corner. "Give them a few hours to grow, and we ought to have plenty to eat."

"You were expecting to be taken prisoner?" murmured Ollivander.

"I was counting on it."

"Purpose of visit?" asked the customs official.

"I'm visiting Windsor," said Diana. "I need to check on some art restoration I did at the castle last year, these students are interning with me."

"Why are British students interning with someone who works at the Louvre?"

"We're on our gap year," said Hermione. "The idea is to see if we're cut out to be restorers before we start art school next year. If we are, the National Gallery and the Louvre will assist with extra training courses."

"We're always short of good restorers," said Diana.

"So far it's been brilliant," Harry said enthusiastically, "there's all sorts of weird techniques I'd never heard of. Some of the ways they used to make paint are really bizarre, and it all has to be matched perfectly."

"Tim's right," said Ron, then held a hand over his mouth. "Sorry, still a bit queasy from the... bleauuugh!" He hastily turned away and vomited onto the tarmac.

"Luke's not a good sailor," said Hermione, handing Ron a tissue. "He really didn't like the crossing."

The customs officer eyed him with distaste. "We get a few like that, even on days like this when the Channels like a mill-pond."

"Sorry," Ron wheezed, "I'll be OK once the ground stops heaving."

"Get some water once we're through." The official looked at the passports, opened one of the suitcases and looked through a mess of teenage clothes and art supplies, then stamped their passports and let them get back into the car and drive on. They stopped off at the terminal building, and Ron disappeared into the lavatory for a few minutes, coming out looking a little better but still very pale.

"We'd better stop off in town and get a meal before we get on the motorway," said Diana. "I think Luke will be better once he's had a good meal."

"If I can keep it down."

Once they were back in the car and driving away from the Hoverport Harry said "That was awesome! Your brothers are geniuses."

"Yeah, right. Bloody Puking Pastilles; I took the antidote, but my mouth still tastes like something died in it."

Hermione gave him a bottle of mineral water. "Drink it slowly, you're probably still a bit dehydrated. Anyway, it worked, he didn't ask you any questions. I was worried you'd say something weird."
"Weird for muggles, I mean."

"Where are we headed?" asked Harry.

"It's a three hour drive to Wiltshire, we really do need to get a meal first, and I need to contact Constantine, find out if he has any more information. There's a good Chinese restaurant in town, I've eaten there a few times. I've never seen a wizard there, too muggle and foreign for them, so it ought to be fairly safe."

"Works for me." The others agreed. She drove for a few minutes, then parked in the paved courtyard in front of a large restaurant. There were a couple of other cars and a taxi parked there, nothing that looked suspicious or magical.

"Usual rules," said Diana. "Keep the conversation boring and avoid references the public might not understand, we can talk properly once we're back on the road."

"Or I can cast an anti-eavesdropping spell," suggested Hermione, "it's really low power, nothing anyone would notice."

"All right."

They went inside, and a smiling waiter intercepted them, bowing to Diana. "My lady, it is good that you visit our humble restaurant again. A table for five?"

"Four, actually."

"Ah, but your friend Mister Constantine is here, he said that you would be joining us."

"Did he now..." Diana frowned, then smiled. "Well, he always was good at reading the tea-leaves." At the waiter's confused look she added "We might as well join him."

"Any special warnings?" Harry asked as the waiter led them to the back of the restaurant.

"Not really. You'll see for yourself."

The waiter led them to a table where a scruffily-dressed blond man was drinking a glass of beer and reading the *News of the World*. He looked up as they approached and stood. "Ullo, Princess. Got some friends in tow, I see."

"I thought you were expecting us. Allow me to introduce my friends; Nan Pilgrim," she gestured to Hermione, "Luke Kirby," to Ron, "and Timothy Hunter."

"Are you indeed? I knew a Timothy Hunter once, nice lad. You look a lot like him. You'd better all sit down, we've got a lot to talk about."

The waiter produced menus and took a drinks order, then left them. Constantine waited until he'd turned away and made a quick intricate gesture with nicotine-stained fingers. A glowing circle crossed with a complex pattern of lines appeared and vanished again. "Right, now we can't be overheard, and nobody will recognize any of you."

"Mind if I check?" asked Hermione.

"No, but don't wave your wand around, there are limits on what the spell covers. And don't talk about anything important while the waiter is at the table."

"No problem." She cast a silent spell with her wand shielded by a menu. "Okay. That's pretty good
for wandless magic."

"When will you people get it into your heads that there are other types of magic. A wand's just a focus, there are others just as powerful."

"What do you use?" asked Harry.

"Trust me, you don't want to know."

"So, you have news," said Diana.

"I finally got hold of Lucifer yesterday, didn't see much point in worrying you over the phone."

"Lucifer?" asked Ron, his eyes bulging. "The Lucifer?"

"Yep."

"You summoned Lucifer?" Hermione said incredulously.

"I phoned him. He's retired, hung up his wings and lives in Los Angeles. He was actually pretty helpful for once."

"Why would Lucifer be helpful?" asked Harry.

"At a guess, because he lives here, it's where he keeps his stuff. He doesn't want to see a global disaster any more than we do."

"What sort of global disaster did you have in mind?" asked Diana.

"Well, to cut a long story short, your pals won't get Akrasiel if they try to summon him, he's not actually a demon. That's the good news..."

Constantine paused while the waiter delivered wine for Diana and soft drinks for the teenagers.

"And the bad news?"

"Something I missed. I was so obsessed with spirits and demons I missed a fairly important detail. Tuesday evening isn't just a full moon, there's going to be a total Lunar eclipse."

"And?" asked Harry.

"Did you ever hear of a demon called Eclipso?"

TBC

Notes:

Tobin's Spirit Guide is borrowed from Ghostbusters; the Ghostbusters will not be appearing.

Elton John's re-release of Candle in the Wind, referencing Princess Diana's death and supporting her charities, went on sale and straight to number one in the charts on Saturday September 13th 1997.

The cross-Channel hovercraft service no longer exists, it was made obsolete by faster conventional ferries and the Channel Tunnel, and finally shut down in October 2000. I travelled on it a couple of
times in the 1960s but never by car so may have the details of vehicle travel wrong; apologies for any errors.

Congratulations to Vitruvian on Twisting the Hellmouth, who spotted where this was going and was kind enough to make his review private at my request.
"I've heard of many demons," said Diana, "but Eclipso is new to me. It seems an odd name for such a creature."

"What about you?" asked Constantine, "Any of you read about him in magic school?"

Ron and Harry shook their heads. Hermione thought for a moment. "Some sort of god of tides and natural disasters?"

"Well done. Someone actually opened a text book or two. Okay, that's about it. He started out as another archangel, but nobody is sure which one. Scholars gave him that name a few hundred years ago because for some reason he doesn't usually manifest unless there's an eclipse. Theory is that he's a bit like Etrigan, bound to some poor bastard and only able to break loose if there's an eclipse and the conditions are exactly right, but nobody's ever proved it. The tidal thing is mostly a coincidence, there are a lot more lunar eclipses than solar and they're always at the full moon. Last longer too. He was mostly in the same business as Akrasiel, instrument of the divine will, striking down with great vengeance and furious anger."

Diana smiled. "You stole that from Pulp Fiction."

"It's a great line. They got the quote a little wrong, but that's the general idea. Find people who give God problems and smite them. Eclipso's gig was natural disasters, really wholesale mass destruction. Probably not Sodom and Gomorrah, pretty sure that was Akrasiel, but Pompeii was definitely one of his, and there's a theory he took out Atlantis. He's supposedly Fallen, but he never joined Lucifer's crowd or took his orders so God only knows. And I mean that literally."

"Could you ask?"

"You know that angels won't talk to me, love. Too much blood on my hands. They're all arseholes anyway, wouldn't give a human the time of day unless God gave them orders to do it. And since nobody's heard from the bugger in a couple of centuries I wouldn't hold my breath waiting."

Hermione looked upset. "Seriously?"

"What do you care?" asked Constantine, "According to the god-botherers you lot are all damned anyway. Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live and all that."

"Actually the original word was 'poisoner,' and if you must know I still go to church. Not when I'm at school, they don't have a chapel, but when I'm at home."

"And that ought to tell you something. Your mob don't like religion, and with good bloody reason. Witch-hunters and all that."

"Getting back to Eclipso..." said Harry. "What are his powers?"

"Elemental. Earth, air, fire and water. Volcanoes and earthquakes, storms, tidal waves, that sort of thing. He'd probably use those before anything man-made; say he wanted to destroy one of the nuclear power stations on the coast, he'd use a tidal wave or an earthquake rather than making it melt down on its own like Three Mile Island or Chernobyl. Like I said, wholesale. That doesn't mean he can't smite things directly, it just isn't usually his first choice."

"So if he's summoned in Wiltshire?"
"Let's see... assuming he actually takes the call, there isn't a snowball's chance in hell he'll actually want to play ball with the Death Eaters, they'll be making demands and treating him like a servant, so he's probably going to want to punish them, which means he'll probably level the place. That's a good way in from the coast so tidal waves are probably out. If he uses an earthquake to flatten it it'd probably take out most of Salisbury too, maybe Southampton if the fault lines ran that way. Of course if he gets really narked and raises a volcano that's probably most of south-west England buggered, but it's probably not his first choice, too slow. Trouble is, he's not going to stop there. Once he's let loose he stays around, the only thing that can stop him is full daylight."

"The next morning?"

"'Fraid so. I got a friend to check the details, the moon's going to rise about seven-ten, five minutes before sunset, and with the eclipse already well under way. It'll be a total eclipse by the time it's visible from the manor a few minutes later, and stay that way for an hour or so. If they try to raise anything in that hour there's a good chance we're stuffed, he'll be free at least until the following morning. If he has the sense to stay on the night side of the Earth he could probably keep going forever."

"He can move that fast?" asked Ron.

"Easy. Fallen archangel, remember. Now leave it for a minute, food's coming."

The next few minutes passed in the usual ritual of passing bowls around and explaining the different dishes to Ron.

"What I don't get," said Constantine, "is why he chose this moonrise for his bloody ritual."

"Easy," said Harry. "He got rid of Dumbledore at the end of June, and got hold of Dumbledore's wand a few days later. Say he spent a month or so getting used to it, that means he's ready to trust it by the start of August. By then he's going mad... more mad, so..."

"Going mad?"

"Oh, right. Brief version, he's got the Elder Wand; it's super-powerful but we're pretty sure it's cursed, makes people go mad. It explains a lot of the shit I've been put through in my life, Dumbledore had insanely complicated plans for me to finish off Vol... sorry, you know who... but never explained them to me properly. We eventually found out that it all hinged on me dying and coming back to life again, but that wouldn't work now anyway."

"Nice bloke. Why did he want you dead?"

Harry thought and decided that it really didn't matter if anyone knew now. "There was a bit of... Tom's soul stuck in my scar."

"Tom?"

"You know who. The one who's been causing all the trouble."

"You know his real name? His true name?"

"Yes, it's Tom Ma."

Constantine held up a hand in warning. "Don't say it out loud, he might have it cursed like his fake name. Write it down, make sure you spell it right, including any middle names." He handed Harry a felt-tip pen and a paper napkin.
"Why?"

"If I know his true name I may be able to use it. Probably can't get a curse to stick, but there are other ways to skin a cat." Harry began to write, and Constantine added "Okay, so you were saying about the scar."

"Dumbledore thought that the only way to get rid of it was to have the bastard use the killing curse on me, but Death took it away without hurting me at all."

"She's been around a lot lately. Turned up at my gaff a few days ago, gave me a hell of a start. Any idea what's got her knickers in a twist?"

Harry gave Constantine the napkin and shrugged. "Must be the demon thing."

"Not likely. People summon demons all the time, this one's more powerful than usual but she sees that sort of thing happening all the time. She was there when the dinosaurs were wiped out, and she'll be there when the sun goes out or some idiot does some damn fool thing to wipe out the human race. She's on every world with life in the universe, in billions of sodding universes, she must see catastrophes thousands of times a day. If she let it bother her she'd be as crazy as her little sister and she really isn't. So whatever's got her taking an interest isn't something as everyday as a lot of people dying."

"I don't think my mind works that way."

"Of course not, you're more or less sane apart from the hero thing and you're human, so you give a shit for the human race. Any road, we're wandering off topic. You were saying why he wants a demon."

"Immortality," said Hermione. "He's stored bits of his soul in several receptacles, he thinks he can't die until they're all destroyed. The thing in Harry's head was more or less accidental. We think he wants to attach one to a demon."

"Bloody hell, he really is a loony. I didn't think anyone had gone that route since Rasputin. You'd think by now people would know it never works for long, synchronicity pretty much guarantees that the soul pieces will turn up sooner or later. And giving part of your soul to a demon would be giving it a nice little snack."

"He and his followers killed Harry's parent's, two of Ron's uncles, and another few hundred on top of that, and tortured a lot of them. He's not exactly mister stability."

"Well then," said Constantine, cracking his knuckles. "We'd better bloody stop him before he ups his body count."

After the meal Constantine and a driver he introduced as Chas headed off in the taxi Harry had noticed outside, destination unknown. "We'll meet up in Salisbury Tuesday morning. I've got a few things to do first. Update me will, get rat-arsed, summon spirits from the vasty deep."

Hermione grinned. "Why, so can I, or so can any man, but will they come when you do summon them?"

"They'd bloody better, the amount I'm paying them. Might have known someone called Hermione would know that one. Your parents Shakespeare fans?"

"With a name like Hermione, would you expect anything else?"
"Point. Well safe trip, see you Tuesday."

"We'd better get moving," said Diana, "we've a two or three hour drive ahead of us, and I'd like to get as much as possible done before it gets dark."

They were soon on the move, with Harry in the front passenger seat trying to navigate with the aid of an AA road map, and Ron and Hermione in the back. About fifteen minutes later Diana turned down the radio (and the third repetition of Candle in The Wind they'd heard that afternoon) and said "Do any of you mind me giving you a little unsolicited personal advice?"

"Personal?" Hermione asked nervously.

"Yes. Nothing to do with our plans, just a little advice."

"This sounds ominous," said Harry, "but go for it."

"Might as well," said Ron, "you've got us all curious now."

"Okay. Don't get involved with John Constantine. He's charismatic, he's a powerful wizard, he's reasonably handsome, he used to be a minor rock star, and he's bisexual, so any of you might be tempted. Don't give in to it. We can work with him, but keep it at that."

"He's really a bit old for any of us," said Hermione, "and neither of these two are gay." Harry and Ron nodded agreement.

Diana overtook a lorry and moved back to the middle lane. "It doesn't matter. In case you didn't notice, Hermione, he was flirting with you for a moment before we left. I don't think he meant anything by it, but Constantine has an uncanny knack for forming relationships that end really badly. I'm not your mother, I can't tell any of you what to do, but I can give you advice. And my advice is simple; don't sleep with him, don't go on a pub crawl with him, don't let him get seriously entangled with your life. One of his lovers cursed him, many years ago, and every relationship the man has ever had ended badly. Often with someone's death. Make sure it isn't yours."

"Okay," said Harry. "Wasn't really planning anything like that, but I'll bear it in mind."

"Me too," said Ron.

"And me."

"I'm pleased to hear it," said Diana, changing lanes again, "apart from anything else, he's probably had every sexually transmitted disease known to man, and a few that are usually only seen in demons."

Ron spluttered slightly, and Hermione looked a little disgusted.

"Good to know," said Harry, "consider us duly warned."

"You're welcome." Diana raised the volume of the radio, and the next few miles passed without conversation.

"Salisbury has a small wizarding community," said Diana, "mostly to the north for access to Stonehenge, so I've booked us rooms in a motel on the south side of the town, it's about as muggle as you can get. Even so, you might want to be careful not to attract attention. Let me do the talking at reception."
"Where's Malfoy Manor?" asked Harry.

"About fifteen miles south-East," said Diana. "Near a village called Malfoy Intrinsica. There's an Ordnance Survey map of the area in the glove compartment."

Harry studied the map until he found it. "Right. Hey, it's actually on the map, I would have thought it'd be unplottable or something."

Hermione looked over his shoulder. "It's too big and too close to heavily populated areas. People must drive past it dozens of times a day, and the walls are visible from the road. They've probably got some muggle-repelling charms to make it look like there's nothing interesting there, but anything more would be impractical."

"Hogwarts is bigger," said Ron, "and they keep that hidden. Why can't they use the same spells on the manor? Or a Fidelius spell like Grimmauld Place?"

"Honestly, Ron, you really ought to pay attention to History of Magic occasionally. Hogwarts has been unplottable for more than a thousand years, long before there were maps of that part of Scotland, and it gets harder every year to keep it from being mapped properly, even with the cooperation of the Muggle government. Malfoy Manor is much more of a problem; the Malfoys were given the land that includes the village during the Norman Conquest, a reward from William the Conqueror, but for a lot of the time since then they were absentee landlords living in France. Any protections they had on the original manor must have been lost, spells like that need to be renewed every decade or so. They moved back here during the French Revolution. The current Malfoy Manor is Georgian, built on the remnants of the older building, but by then there were detailed maps of the whole country, accurate to a few yards, it would have been impossible to remove it from all records and keep it that way."

"What about a Fidelius?"

"It only works for a smallish building, like Grimmauld Place or Harry's parents' cottage, with a tiny number of people in the know. The complexity of the spell rises with the area covered and with every person allowed to enter. A mansion is way too big. No, the best you can do is keep people from noticing the weird stuff, like your parents do with the Burrow."

There wasn't really room to set up the tent in any of the motel rooms, so they used a few spells to make Harry's room look like part of a ruined house, with Ron and Diana listening in from the bathroom.

"I have news," said the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black. "The Dark Lord has lost some of his followers and dementors."

"How did that happen?" asked Harry.

"They were tasked with guarding some undesirables, to use the current cant; on Saturday night someone killed all of the guards and apparently destroyed the dementors, or at least drove them off."

"What happened to the prisoners?"

"They were still captive when more guards arrived. Some were questioned vigorously, but none of them knew what happened. The lights went out, then they heard screams."

"How were the guards killed?" asked Hermione.
"Most appear to have been burned alive."

"Does Professor Snape have any theories?"

There was the usual interminable pause. "No."

"Okay," said Harry. "I have no idea. Is there anything else I should know about?"

"Miss Luna Lovegood is a prisoner of the Dark Lord."

"What?"

"Miss Lovegood is a prisoner of the Dark Lord."

"How do you know?"

"She hasn't attended classes for several days. The Headmaster's suspicions were aroused and he used legilimency to check the prefects and some of the staff. Miss Carrow caught the girl trying to leave the school grounds and gave her to supporters of the Dark Lord, she is being held prisoner with other hostages at Malfoy Manor."

"She's a pureblood, why would they want her?"

Another pause, then "A hostage, a means of keeping her father under control."

"Merlin, we've got to help her."

"The Headmaster advises against that, Mister Potter. While the Dark Lord is not usually there, any rescue attempt would undoubtedly lead to his being summoned, and the Headmaster doubts that you are ready to fight him."

"If he isn't at Malfoy Manor, where is he?"

"His residence is concealed by the Fidelius spell, the Headmaster cannot tell you."

"Damn. Okay, thanks. We're probably going to have to leave here in the next day or two, it looks like this place is scheduled for demolition, but I'll try to contact you again tomorrow night."

"Very well... one moment, Professor Dumbledore says he has a message for you."

"Okay, I'm waiting."

"He believes that your love, your concern for others, will carry you through this ordeal. Try to remember that."

"Riiight. Okay, thanks, we'll talk again tomorrow if we can."

Hermione carefully put the painting back into her back and checked that the silencing charms were still in place.

Harry reversed the spells on the room, obviously fuming. "My love will carry me through this ordeal? What the hell was Dumbledore smoking when his portrait was painted?"

Ron and Diana came in from the bathroom. "Love is always good," said Diana, "but in this case it's probably wishful thinking."
"What in Merlin's name happened to the dementors?" asked Ron. "Why kill the guards and get rid of the dementors but leave the prisoners behind, it doesn't make any sense."

"Yes it does," said Diana. "John said Lucifer intended to do something about the dementors. Now some dementors are missing. I really doubt that whatever he sent would be concerned about the fate of prisoners, if anything we should probably be thankful that they're still alive."

"He's moved fast," said Harry. "Constantine talked to him on Saturday afternoon, that's only a few hours before they were killed."

"Lucifer no longer reigns in Hell, but he undoubtedly has resources on Earth. Let's hope that nothing worse happens."

"Okay. What about Luna and the other hostages the portrait mentioned?"

Diana shrugged. "We'll have to rescue them."

"While fighting off all the Death Eaters, the Dark Lord, and a bloody demon."

Hermione gave him a look that told him he was being an idiot. "Nobody ever said that it would be easy, Harry."

TBC

Notes: Complete details of the September 1997 lunar eclipse can be found here:

"Great vengeance and furious anger" is a quote from Pulp Fiction (1994), allegedly from Ezekiel 25:17 although the wording differs to some extent from all common Bible texts:

And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who would attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon thee.
"Is there any way we can get a look at the manor?" Ron asked over breakfast. "Don't get me wrong, Diana, your sketches are pretty good, but it's not the same as seeing it for ourselves. Maybe we could fly over and take a look?"

Harry shrugged. "They're bound to have wards to detect anything magical coming anywhere near the place. Diana got away with it because she doesn't use our sort of magic, but I can't see flying over on a broom without them noticing, even if I was invisible. Going anywhere near there before we have to would probably be pushing our luck."

"Hmm... Let me check something." Diana went out, leaving the trio to eat, and came back a few minutes later. "We're in luck. There's an aircraft charter company at Old Sarum airfield, about ten miles from here, and I have a pilot's license. There's nobody there until ten, but with a little luck they'll have something we can charter that I'm qualified to fly. A sightseeing flight over Stonehenge that just happens to overfly the manor, without going within the area its wards protect, shouldn't be too difficult to arrange."

"That's going to cost a fortune," said Hermione.

"Let me worry about that."

"You're being very generous about this," said Harry, "but-"

"But nothing. I earn a very good salary. And you know who my father is, do you really think I'm short of money?"

Hermione looked at her oddly and blushed slightly. "I always thought that the shower of gold thing was a metaphor."

Diana blushed too. "Yes, well, that's a different matter. Gold isn't actually very useful in the muggle world, it attracts too much attention, but every now and again a windfall of some sort comes my way. In the month I bought my house I won a hundred and fifty thousand Francs in the French national lottery and a twenty-five thousand pound UK Premium Bond prize. Which was odd because I'd never actually bought any lottery tickets or bonds. Now, if you're satisfied I can pay to hire the aircraft?"

Harry realised that she was talking to him. "Oh... right, sorry. When do you want to leave?" He made a mental note to ask Hermione about the metaphor later.

"If we leave in an hour or so we ought to be there by the time they open. But we might have to wait a good while before we get airborne."

"Then we'd better make sure we don't get hungry while we're waiting," said Ron, heading back toward the buffet for a second helping of scrambled egg and bacon. Harry got up to join him.

"One question," said Hermione. "Wouldn't that have been a better way to get back to Britain?"

Diana looked startled. "You're right. There are a few practical problems, but I really ought to have thought of it. Apart from anything else, you could have bailed out on brooms once I was over the UK, avoided customs completely."

"Umm... if it's all the same to you, please don't suggest that to the boys, or they'll try sky-diving with
brooms or something."

"Hmmm... sounds like fun, but maybe you're right."

"Diana's taking a hell of a long time," Harry said nervously.

Hermione looked up from the copy of *Popular Mechanics* she'd found on the waiting room table. "Not really. There's a lot of paperwork to fill in, and the office guy said that Diana had to be checked out on the controls, it's a model she hasn't flown before."

"Why doesn't that fill me with confidence?"

"Because you don't like the idea of someone else flying you? Relax, Harry, it's a legal requirement, not a sign that we're all going to die."

Ron looked over from the window. "Don't say things like that. The hover-thingy yesterday was bad enough."

"You were sick deliberately, Ron."

"I think I might have been anyway. It was horrible well before I ate the snack."

"Oh joy. Better get over it, it can't be much longer."

As if on cue the door opened, and Diana came in saying "...high time they introduced fuel injection, carburetters are a joke in a modern aircraft."

The man following her said "No argument here, it's... bloody hellfire!" He dropped his clipboard and pulled a wand from his sleeve. "Bloody hell, what are you doing here, you sodding idiot?"

"Hello Oliver," said Harry, his own wand already in his hand. "Nice to see you. It's been a while."

Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes occupied a prime corner location in the Alley. On Monday at noon Travers was watching from a second-floor window across the street. Right on time the 'spontaneous demonstration' started, rapidly gaining numbers and volume as more 'outraged citizens' joined in, including a few that Travers hadn't hired. You could always count on a few drunks around lunchtime. He smiled as someone threw a brick at the window, then realised that it had turned into a squawking chicken and was trying to run away from the shop. The next brick bounced back, hit one of the protestors without doing any apparent harm, ricocheted onto another, and kept going until it was clear of the crowd and fell to the ground, then bounced off into the distance.

One of the hired thugs charged at the door, which spun round like a muggle revolving door and spat him out again at enormous speed.

"Hello Diagon Alley," said a voice obviously magnified by an Amplifying Charm. "Thanks for taking an interest in our products! We'll be demonstrating more in just a moment. Ten... Nine... Eight..."

Someone threw another brick, and Travers wondered why they bothered. It swerved in mid-air and flew back, shedding dozens of red envelopes. Howlers, from the look of it, except that they were opening by themselves.

"Six... five..." The voice was almost drowned out by the howlers as they started to sing, each
bellowing the Hogwarts school song to a different off-pitch melody. Some of the rioters ran, clutching their ears, others tried to attack the envelopes. More retreated, injured by friendly fire.

"Two... one..." The giant mechanical head over the shop door raised its top hat, and half a dozen pyramidal boxes fell into the street, bouncing oddly until they were spread evenly along the sides of the shop, then suddenly seemed to erupt, spraying out something that looked like mud. As it spread the rioters started to sink, although the depth should have only been a fraction of an inch, and the rest fell back. Within a minute the street on both sides of the shop was awash, and reeds began to sprout from the surface of the mud, followed by dozens of woody stems that quickly grew upwards, sprouting green leaves when they were a few feet high. Mangroves, he guessed.

Down in the street one of the more intrepid rioters transformed his shoes into boat-like pontoons and started to shuffle across the swamp towards the shop. About half-way across something green rose from the mire, shedding mud and water. It was roughly the size and shape of a small troll or a very large man but seemed to be made of vegetation. The rioter nervously cast a stunner; the creature reacted, swatting him with the back of an enormous leafy hand, sending the man flying back across the mud. It roared, gazed at the mob contemptuously, and sank back into the swamp.

An amplified voice said "Fred, are you thinking what I'm thinking? Oops, finite incantatem!"

It was suddenly quiet, apart from the last few howlers which were still serenading the rapidly retreating rioters. Travers wondered how he was going to explain the fiasco to Voldemort.

Inside the shop Fred said "Product recall?"

"Maybe, but I was wondering how much would it cost to add a sticker to each box. 'DANGER: DO NOT SET OFF MULTIPLE PORTABLE SWAMPS, SWAMP MONSTERS MAY APPEAR SPONTANEOUSLY!'"

"Well, I suppose it's accurate. Do you think it'll work?"

"Course it will, everyone will buy loads of packs to see if they can get a monster to appear!"

"They don't pay reserve players a good living wage," said Oliver Wood, "so most of us have part-time jobs to make ends meet. Of course I have to keep it bloody quiet, people wouldn't like it if they knew I had such a muggle job."

"But how the hell does a wizard end up as a flying instructor?" asked Harry.

"Mum was a pureblood, but my grandfather on Dad's side is a muggle. He's a helicopter pilot on the oil rigs, he taught me to fly gliders and light aircraft during the holidays. It turns out that the reflexes for both types of flying aren't too different, you just have to learn to use the controls, and I got to be pretty good at it. Now get the hell out of here before someone spots you and we all end up in Azkaban. Do you realise how close we are to Malfoy Manor? They say... well, you know... is there."

"That's the whole point," said Harry, trusting his instincts and ignoring Hermione's angry glare, "We need to take a look at the place. There are prisoners there. Kids from Hogwarts."

"Shit."

Suddenly Diana's lasso flashed out and wrapped around Wood. "I'm sorry, but we can't take chances. Please tell us what you will do now that you know Harry is here."
"Help him, of course. What did you think I'll do?"

"And do you intend to tell anyone?"

"Not until this is all over. After that it ought to be good for a few drinks."

"You've got that right," said Ron.

"What will you do if you're questioned?" asked Diana.

"I don't know," said Wood. "They'd probably Crucio me, I don't think I could take much of that."

"Would you be willing to let Hermione obliterate you once we're finished?" asked Harry.

"If you can do it without turning me into a vegetable. I heard about Lockhart!"

"That was a freak accident with a broken wand," said Hermione. "He did it to himself."

"Okay then."

"I'm sorry I had to do that," said Diana, wrapping the lasso back around her waist. "You'll understand that we have to be careful."

"It's okay," said Wood. "I want to help, but there isn't really any organised resistance now the Ministry has fallen. I've flown a couple of muggle-born friends out of the country, but everyone else has been captured or gone into hiding, and I'm not going to risk exposing them by looking for them."

"You can help us by making sure this flight happens," said Harry. "One thing though... do you live locally?"

"No, I apparate in from Edinburgh."

"Are you going to be here tomorrow?"

"No, I work Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Team practices are Tuesday and Thursday, games on Saturday."

"Not ideal," Harry lied, relieved that Wood wouldn't be in immediate danger if anything went wrong, "but it's probably best if you don't change anything. If they do know you work here it would look odd. To be on the safe side we'd better go with obliteration, just enough for you to forget you saw us and discussed the manor. Okay?"

"Yeah, that's probably for the best." Behind him Diana nodded slightly.

"Okay... anything else we need to sort out before the flight?"

"Just the route," said Wood, turning to Diana and unfolding an aviation map. "There aren't any flying restrictions today, but there are several military bases in the area with helicopter traffic, it's a good idea to stay well clear. And you definitely want to avoid Porton Down, the Ministry of Defence always asks questions if anyone overflies without good reason. So, if the idea is to look like a sightseeing flight, I'd recommend this route here to Stonehenge, maybe orbit Stonehenge a couple of times, then fly back along this route. You'll be within a few hundred yards of Malfoy manor on approach and departure, and enough planes fly in the area that nobody should think it's suspicious..."

"There you are, Tommy boy," murmured John Constantine. He'd been looking through the
microfilmed records at Lambeth Registry Office for nearly an hour before he found what he wanted; the birth record for Thomas Marvolo Riddle, New Year's Eve 1926. He fed ten pence into a slot on the machine then pressed the print button, and waited as the page emerged, copied onto fax paper. "Hrmmm... Careless. Very fucking careless. You're going to regret that..." He folded the paper and tucked it into a pocket, and headed home.

"All right," said Diana, "Malfoy Manor will be visible to our left in about thirty seconds. I'll bank left as it comes into view so we should be able to see it for about half a minute. Is everyone ready?"

"I think so," said Ron, raising his omnioculars to his eyes.

"Twenty seconds..."

Harry practiced with his zoom control. "Ready."

"Ten... Nine..."

Seated on the right side of the plane, Hermione didn't have a particularly good view, but she had other priorities anyway. "Picking up weak muggle repelling spells, nothing that would make us turn yet."

"Coming into view on the left beyond the ridge at ten o'clock."

"Got it," said Ron.

Harry nodded, his eyes still on the manor. "Me too."

"Spell intensity's rising slightly," Hermione said a few seconds later, "better curve away a little, muggles would."

Diana altered course slightly. "On it."

The next half minute passed all too quickly, with Harry and Ron scrambling for last views of the manor in the final seconds.

Harry played back his recording, and tried zooming in and out. "Okay, I've got good coverage of the back of the house, the terrace, and the grounds on the west side of the manor."

"I've got most of that and a bit of the front," said Ron.

Hermione checked a large sketch pad, where three quills with different coloured ink were plotting the nature and intensity of the wards onto Diana's drawing of the house and grounds. "I've got some good readings, but I need the other side of the house for a complete job. At the moment it's passive detection stuff and muggle repelling, but I think it can get pretty nasty if it has to. I can't see any obvious weaknesses."

"There probably aren't any," said Ron. "The Malfoys have had enemies ever since they came back to Britain, they'd have fixed any problems by now."

"Don't erase any recordings," said Diana. "When we come back you and Harry should each use another pair of omnioculars, we'll put everything together back at the motel. Hermione, can you keep the existing spells going, or will you have to cast them again?"

"So far it's okay. Just don't fly too low over Stonehenge, the power of that thing could overwhelm my spells completely."
"No problem. Right, relax and enjoy the scenery for the next few minutes, we'll fly a couple of nice leisurely circuits of Stonehenge then head back on the other side of the manor."

"Maybe a little higher," suggested Harry, "the zoom on the omnioculars can handle it, and we'll see it a few seconds longer."

Hermione shook her head. "Not too much higher or the spells will be unreliable."

"Another five hundred feet, say?"

"Two or three hundred would be better."

"All right. Now sit back and enjoy the view..."

"My Lord," said Lucius Malfoy, "we have interrogated the prisoners and have found no evidence that Potter was involved."

Voldemort lifted his wand, but didn't cast a spell. "Your reasons for this conclusion?"

"Firstly, there is no evidence for the use of a patronus, and it is known that Potter has used one on several occasions. Its form is a large stag."

"And the mudblood?"

"As I understand it, she is capable of casting the spell, but with great difficulty and little power, her form is a small otter."

"You heard this from...?"

"My son, my Lord."

"He is biased, of course. And a patronus might not be needed if Potter has found another way to attack dementors. Go on."

"Secondly, most of the guards were killed by fire, a few by blows of immense force. Potter has never been known to kill, neither has his mudblood accomplice, and there is no reason to believe he has mastered spells with these effects. Furthermore, the burns have a strong Dark taint, yet the cause cannot be identified. It is not Fiendfyre."

"Again, he might have found a new spell, or gone Dark to some extent."

"That is possible, of course, but it sees unlikely given Dumbledore's influence."

"Dumbledore was an influence in my life, Lucius. Crucio." Malfoy collapsed to the floor; Voldemort held the spell on him for thirty seconds. "A small demonstration; one may rise above childhood influences. You may stand."

"My Lord." Malfoy rose, shaking.

"Any other arguments against it being Potter?"

"Yes, my lord. The prisoners were not released, whoever killed the guards had ample time to do so. The deaths occurred approximately three hours before the shift changed."

"Ah. Yes, that really doesn't sound like Potter or his little friends, I suppose. Hmm... are we
completely sure that Moody is dead?"
"Yes, my Lord."
"And that leaves...?"
"Hypothetically... Grindelwald, or an ambitious follower?"
"Why Grindelwald?"
"He's still alive, though imprisoned, and with Dumbledore gone he might believe that there is a chance to escape and complete his conquest of Europe."
"By killing our guards and dementors?"
"A follower might wish to reduce the strength of his main opposition."
"Have Grindelwald's status and condition checked. And find out how easy it would be to eliminate him."
"Yes, my Lord."
"Dismissed."

Hermione covered herself with Harry's cloak, only the tip of her wand protruding from the folds, and said "Miss Prince has completed her sightseeing flight. She chartered the Beechcraft rather than a smaller plane because she's familiar with the model, even though she flew alone. You think it's a bit extravagant but not worth worrying about. You need to give her back her deposit, then you've got a few chores to attend to. Tomorrow is a training day, you're looking forward to that, when you come back to work on Wednesday other things will seem a lot more important than a casual tourist flight."

"Okay," said Oliver, turning his back on Hermione and facing Diana.

"Obliviate!" For a moment Hermione concentrated on the memories she wanted to erase from him, then she covered the wand with the cloak and quietly slipped out while he was still dazed.

Oliver swayed a little, then focused on Diana. "Right, let me just give you your deposit back." He opened the safe and took out the envelope of banknotes she'd given him, checked the total, and got her to sign for it.

"Merci, you've been very helpful."

"Let me see you out."

"There's really no need, I'm sure you have other things to do."

"Yes, I suppose I do. Good afternoon."

"Au revoir!" Diana shook hands with Wood, and walked back to her car, where the others were waiting.

"Everything okay?" asked Ron.

Diana started the engine. "I think so, he didn't seem at all suspicious."
"Obliviation's like that if you do it right," said Hermione. "But it's still horribly manipulative."

"It's better than killing him to keep him quiet."

"No argument there."

"Let's get back to the motel and see what we've got."

"I am Lord Hamster Loved... a bit silly, but definitely a possibility." John scribbled for a few moments. "I am Lord... Shoveled Tram? No... Wait a minute... I am Lord Revolted Sham!"

"Nheeet."

John twisted round and fell off his chair. "Oh bloody hell. That's twice this week. Would you mind at least looking a little human? You're putting me off me beer."

"Shochay." His visitor raised its hands to its face, and took them away looking considerably more human. For very broad definitions of human.

"Thanks."

"Vhoo voss jour ovver vissitor, Consstinteem?"

"Death."

"Und jett jou shtill livv."

"So far, unless you have other plans."

"Dzontt tempft mee."

"You know the Lords of Hell want to keep me alive."

"Dznt meen zi kent hurtz jou."

"True, but I'd prefer to avoid it. What do you want?"

"Vintruszz mee tzu ze prnzess zund zer lytl fzzends tzumuzzo."

"You planning a team-up?"

"Meevee."

"Okay. But don't be surprised if she doesn't go for it."

"Zeee jou tzumuzzo." His visitor seemed to step sideways and disappear.

"Right." John rubbed his temples. "Let's go out and get rat-arsed, then see how I can share the word about Lord Revolted Sham..."

_TBC_

_Notes:_ For anyone wondering, the big green guy was Swamp Thing. It's DC canon that he can appear in almost anything that approximates to a swamp if it has some vegetation. While vegetation
wasn't mentioned when portable swamps were used in the Order of the Phoenix book, the film shows a swamp with reeds. I'm assuming that WWW put some magically fast-growing seeds in every pack.

Since I know very little about it, I'm probably underestimating the difficulty of chartering an aircraft; let's just assume that Diana does have all necessary qualifications and that the charter company really needs the money.

Some dialogue that may be a little hard to follow due to a new character's speech impediment:

"Nheeet." - Neat
"Shochay." - Okay
"Vhoo voss jour ovver vissitor, Consstinteem?" - Who was your visitor, Constantine?
"Und jett jou shtill livv." - And yet you still live.
"Dzontt tempft mee." - Don't tempt me.
"Dznt meen zi kent hurtz jou." - Doesn't mean I can't hurt you
"Vintruszz mee tzu ze prnzess zund zer lytl fzzends t Zionist." - Introduce me to the princess and her little friends tomorrow.
"Meevee." - Maybe
"Zeee jou zumuzzo." - See you tomorrow.

In canon Constantine avoided death from cancer by selling his soul to three different demon lords. If he dies their nature will compel them to go to war for possession of his soul, and probably end with all three dead. Since they don't want that to happen they have a lot invested in him continuing to live until they can find an escape clause.

Apologies - another chapter that seems to have grown quite a bit as I wrote it and back-filled some details that should have been in previous chapters. Next time, hopefully, we'll get to Malfoy Manor...
"Cassidy, it's John. I need your help."

"Fuck off, Constantine."

Cassidy hadn't hung up, so John guessed that he was just being his usual abrasive self. "You still owe me a few favours, mate. And this isn't dangerous, not for you."

"Bullshit."

"Seriously, I just want you to pass on a warning to some of your mates in Britain."

"Which mates?"

"Your sort. Vampires."

"Fuck the lot of them, bunch of wankers."

"I don't love them either, but some of them have been working for the wand-wavers. I just want to tell them that they're on a hiding to nothing."

"What's in it for me?"

"Bugger all."

"Okay, now that I believe. What's the message?"

"You need to tell them that the wizards' Dark Lord has been lying through his teeth, he's been negotiating in bad faith. Hasn't even been using his real name with them..."

Hermione finished a long series of calculations based on the readings her spell had added to the map of Malfoy Manor. "I have good news and bad news. The good news is that it's a fairly old-fashioned sort of warding scheme, so the attack we have planned ought to work. The bad news is that it's a well-maintained warding scheme. For example, there are no trees or bushes along the direct lines from one ward stone to the next, someone's clearing them out regularly. I was able to sense the ward stones from altitude and a good distance, they're high-powered and not exactly subtle. My guess is that there aren't any weak spots as such, we're just going to have to overload it."

"What do you think they do?"

"There are seven main ward-stones around the edges of the manor grounds. This afternoon they were on standby, mostly passive detection spells and muggle-repelling. The muggle-repelling effect goes out a few hundred yards in all directions, which is why we had to change course to avoid the manor, everything else is inside the grounds of the manor. If they go fully active..."

"How bad?" asked Ron.

"Very. The one thing in our favour is the sheer size of the place. They've got a lot of power, but they need to spread it around a big perimeter, and I doubt that they can stay powered for long without Malfoy pumping more magic into the system. Let's see... they want to be able to see the eclipse coming, I'd imagine, which rules out major weather modification. Hmmm... With the tree thing my guess would be a fire-based defence, they'd keep the trees back to stop it spreading. Probably a
defence that can't be canceled by flame-freezing charms. Also anti-apparition and anti-portkey if needed."

"Maybe electricity rather than flame," said Harry. "Wet trees and bushes would interfere with that, they'd have to chop them back."

"Too modern, I think."

"Not if you think of it as lightning. But you're probably right, fire does seem more likely."

"What about an actual barrier, like a force field, something to keep out physical objects?" asked Diana.

Hermione frowned. "Oh, sorry, that's bound to be part of it too, in fact I'm pretty much counting on it. They'll probably put that up first, before they start the ritual, and activate everything else as needed. If we can defeat that any other defenses will probably go down with it. Destroying any two adjacent ward stones will probably take it down too."

"Who would have done the work? Gringotts?"

"I hope not. I'm basing most of my ideas on things Bill and Fleur told me about curse breaking. You can be pretty sure they didn't tell me anything that would harm current Gringott's clients."

Ron grinned. "It isn't likely. Malfoy uses the bank, but the goblins really don't like him, and it's probably mutual. Something about some loans his grandfather defaulted on."

"I would have thought they'd take it out of his vault," said Harry.

"Oh, they did, the old git died penniless, but the mansion and most of the family money were entailed and separate, held in trust for the family. They only got a fraction of what he owed. Lucius makes things worse by putting the goblins down whenever he talks about them. Word gets around. Oh, maybe they'd do the warding work if he paid enough, but 'enough' is probably most of the money in his vault."

"What about the internal layout of the mansion?" asked Diana.

"Nothing," said Hermione. "We know the external layout, but you saw for yourself, we couldn't even see anything when we zoomed in on the windows, just net curtains."

"We need someone who's been inside."

"Not Snape," said Harry. "I know you think he's on our side, and I think he probably is too, but we'd be giving too much away if we asked him and any Death Eaters found out."

"Isn't there anyone else?"

Harry pointed at Hermione, "Muggle-born undesirable number two," at Ron, "Blood-traitor, and we're trying to keep your name out of it anyway," at himself, "Undesirable number one. None of us exactly move in those circles, and anyone we know who does is either with Tom or on his side."

"Slughorn?" suggested Hermione. "He's the sort that probably got invited occasionally."

"He's still at Hogwarts. Really don't want to try getting in there, all of the junior Death Eaters could really ruin our day. And he probably wouldn't have seen where they keep the prisoners anyway."

"I don't think there's anyone my family know that would have been there," said Ron.
Diana thought for a moment. "What about servants?"

"Nobody who'd talk to us," said Harry, "they use house elves and they can't... Merlin's balls, I'm an idiot."

"You've thought of something?"

"Dobby!"

There was a muffled pop. The bathroom door swung open, and a diminutive figure wrapped in a tartan scarf appeared. "Yes, Harry Potter?"

"Diana, meet Dobby, a free elf. Dobby, this is Princess Diana of Themyscira."

Dobby's eyes widened even more than usual. "You is helping Harry Potter?"

"I am. Hello, Dobby." She held out a hand, and Dobby shook it enthusiastically.

"Dobby has heard much of the kindness of Princess Diana, but Dobby is confused. People are saying that Princess Diana is dead."

"That's a different Princess Diana. I know it's a bit confusing."

"Dobby is pleased this Princess Diana is alive and helping Harry Potter. What can Dobby do for Harry Potter?"

Harry squatted down to be nearer to Dobby's height. "We need to know as much as you can tell us about Malfoy Manor."

Dobby grimaced, and twisted his own ears. "Dobby is sorry, Bad Master told Dobby never to talk of this, and even a free elf cannot break such an order. We keeps our masters secrets and our silence."

"But do you want to tell us?"

"Dobby wants to, but Dobby must not. It is Bad Master's secrets."

"What if something made you tell us?"

Dobby shrugged. "If something made Dobby tell, and Dobby could not resist, he would not be disobeying. Not as such." He didn't sound entirely sure about it, but Harry took him at his word.

"Diana?"

Diana's lasso snapped out and wrapped around Dobby. "Tell us about Malfoy Manor, please."

Dobby struggled for several seconds, his eyes bulging even more than usual, then relaxed and smiled. "What does powerful Princess Diana and Harry Potter want to know?"

Dream of the Endless dons his helm, sculpted from the bones of a dead god, then strides out into the Dreaming. He slides and flickers through the currents and eddies of the subconscious, unseen, watching the fantasies of the mortals who have briefly caught his attention.

Voldemort dreams of power and pain, inflicted and received, and of the destruction of all who oppose him. The dreams are crude, generated by a fraction of a soul. Behind it all, buried in every image, the small bullied boy in the orphanage fearing / resenting / despising the world, and hating
Dumbledore for freeing him, empowering him, but never loving him.

Ron dreams of sex. He's making violent love to Diana, who is bound to the bed by her own lasso, begging for more. He's happy to oblige. There's a third figure in the bed, amorphous in form, holding them both. Occasionally the image firms; sometimes Dream sees curly brown hair, sometimes black hair, glasses and a lightning-bolt scar. As Dream watches Ron wakes, unable to remember the dream, feeling horribly guilty but unsure why. He soon falls asleep again, and doesn't dream.

Severus Snape dreams of married life with Lily, the might-have-beens that are his nightly refuge. There is no Harry Potter, no Voldemort, no James, Remus, or Sirius. Dream has no memories of the real Lily's dreams, he was imprisoned throughout her life, but the inconsistencies he sees tell him that there is probably little resemblance to the real woman's personality.

Lucius Malfoy dreams of money and power. Dream is quickly bored.

Hermione's nightmare is an endlessly-branching corridor under Malfoy Manor, trapped and chased by Death Eaters. She wakes, heart pounding, before they catch her, then the door shatters and more Death Eaters burst in. She fights desperately, waking as her last defenses fail, in yet another iteration of the nightmare, this time with Dementors. But Harry's Patronus bursts through the wall to drive them off and stand guard over her bed. Soon she drifts into dreamless sleep.

Bellatrix LeStrange dreams of biting the heads off chocolate Harry Potters. Dream tries one; the chocolate is bitter but delicious.

Oliver Wood dreams of Quidditch tactics, and leading Puddlemere United to victory.

Diana meditates, sitting cross-legged on the floor in her room, her sword in one hand, lasso in the other. She is asleep but not asleep, dreaming but not dreaming, as her consciousness ascends to the plane of Olympus and seeks audience with her father. Dream knows that he will not be welcome there, gods seldom appreciate reminders of the Endless, and moves on.

Dolores Umbridge lies screaming as the Corinthian takes her eyes again and again. The duty healer thinks about giving her some Dreamless Sleep potion; instead she adds to the case notes, a recommendation against the potion, repressing the dreams for now will just make them worse later, best get it over now while Umbridge's eyes heal. Her daughter is at Hogwarts, she remembers how Umbridge treated her, so it's an easy decision to make.

Narcissa Malfoy sleeps fitfully, terrified that Draco is already too deep in Voldemort's thrall, imagining endless failed attempts to get free.

Fred and George Weasley both dream of new toys. Most of their ideas could easily be used for civil disobedience.

Harry dreams of the ritual, of Voldemort summoning Eclipso, becoming him, razing Hogwarts and killing Ginny. Then Harry's dancing with Death in the ruins of the castle, as a band plays *Candle in the Wind*. Death clicks her fingers; the music stops, and she looks at him sadly. "Really not a good idea, Harry. Love the living, love life, not me. But thanks for the dance." She kisses his cheek and walks off into swirling mist, as the music starts again and Ginny taps his shoulder, her face a bloody mess, and asks for the next dance.

Luna Lovegood dreams of dancing too, a stately minuet with a crumple-horned snorkack. She waves to Dream as he passes.

Draco dreams of power, surpassing his father as the Dark Lord's right-hand man, with Harry Potter
caged and impotent, watching the triumph of the Dark.

Ginny dreams of marrying Harry, Great-Aunt Muriel interrupting the wedding at the worst possible moment, and Harry carrying her off on his broom as chaos spreads behind them.

John Constantine dreams of what he's done to Voldemort and smiles.

Dobby dreams of dying free.

In Diagon Alley, lying at the bottom of a swamp which has stubbornly failed to go away, a plant elemental communes with the Green, neither sleeping nor awake. Occasionally what little remains of the human fraction of his consciousness thinks "Christ, what an imagination I've got."

"Will Dobby be okay in your room?" asked Hermione.

Harry swallowed the last of his muesli and glanced around the dining room to make sure that none of the staff were in listening range. "He's fine, watching The Big Breakfast on the TV. Not sure how much of it he understands. I've put a 'Do Not Disturb' tag on the door and locked it with Colloportus, he knows not to let anyone else in."

Ron glanced at his watch. "Nearly nine. Diana must be having a lie-in."

"She said she'd be talking to her father," said Hermione. "Not sure how that works, but I'm pretty sure there's more to it than a quick prayer or two."

"Let's hope he's feeling like lending a hand, we could really use the help, and... she's behind me, isn't she?"

"Unfortunately it doesn't work like that," said Diana, taking a seat. "The Gods don't interfere casually. The world is fragile, direct intervention could be catastrophic."

"So what can he do?"

"I'm reasonably sure he sent you to me. Why else would Severus leave my device where you found it? Why else was John at my namesake's funeral?"

"Coincidence?" suggested Hermione.

Diana shrugged. "At his level there are no coincidences."

"So what did he say?"

"That we'll have help when we need it."

"Well, that's annoyingly cryptic," said Harry. "Not quite in the Dumbledore league, but really... Well, any help is better than none."

Diana smiled. "About half way through that you realised that he might be listening, didn't you?"

"Uh... yeah. Sorry if it was offensive."

"If you were an actual worshiper, or a member of the pantheon, you would have cause to worry. Since you aren't, he's going to ignore anything short of a fairly direct insult. But be careful, you're starting to believe in us, so things could change." She got up to go to the buffet.
"She's winding me up, isn't she?"

Hermione shrugged. "I wouldn't count on it. Why take the risk? You've met a demigod, a god and the anthropomorphic personification of Death since the start of the month, it wouldn't kill you to be polite. And... um, I really can't believe I just said that without being boggled by it. Except I am, a bit."

"I think we all are," said Ron. "I'm getting more coffee, anyone else want one? Or tea?"

"Yes please," Diana said as she sat down. "Just black coffee, no milk or sugar."

Harry glanced at his watch. "Ten hours to go. What else do we need to do?"

"Not a lot, really. Check that everything's ready, but don't obsess about it. If there's anything we've forgotten now's the time to remember it, apart from that rest and keep a low profile; we're supposed to meet John at three, if he's done his part of things we'll be able to set off for the manor at five or so. That gives us plenty of wriggle room if we need it."

"We probably will," said Ron, putting down the coffee. "Something's bound to go wrong somewhere along the way."

Harry grinned wryly. "You're probably right. But imagine the stories you'll be able to tell your grandkids when it's all over."

"Grandkids? What grandkids? I'm not even married yet!"

"You mean we're not even married yet," said Hermione. Ron stared at her. "Are you serious?"

"I might be open to persuasion. If someone actually bothered to try..."

"Okay... have you finished your breakfast?"

Hermione mopped up the last of her egg with a finger of toast, said "Just about," and put it into her mouth. "When you're done let's go somewhere a bit more private, and I'll try and be... persuasive."

Hermione slowly chewed the toast, swallowed it, and washed it down with the last of her tea, stood, and said "About bloody time. Excuse us, we may be a while." She took Ron's hand and pulled him to his feet, and out towards their rooms.

"Young love strikes again," said Diana. "How long have they been avoiding it?"

Harry grinned "Four or five years, I think, though there was a bit of snogging now and again the last couple of years. But Ron's a bit thick sometimes and Hermione's way too patient with him, so it's been slow."

"What about you? The girl they're holding prisoner, is she someone special?"

"Luna? We're friends, but we're not dating. I'd be dating Ginny if we hadn't had to go on the run, and I think Luna's been seeing Neville. What about you? Did your father have anything to say about... um... Steve?"

"Aphrodite confirmed that Steve's still alive somewhere in the world, but for some reason none of
them can see him. She's a little annoyed, we're supposed to be together again."

"Maybe he's hidden by something like a *Fidelius* spell?"

"That's certainly a possibility. It'd have to be a strong one if none of the Gods can find him."

"It's a pity you're not Norse gods, isn't Heimdall supposed to see everything?"

Diana shrugged. "That's what the legends say, but the little I've seen of them doesn't confirm it. Thor is a loud-mouthed oaf, Loki is as crooked as a corkscrew, and both of them were on the side of Grindlewald and Hitler in the forties. I really doubt they would be helpful."

Harry stared at her for a moment. "Every time I start taking this for granted, you say something like that. How is there room for so many different gods?"

"All gods exist if enough people believe in them. I prefer my own pantheon, but I've met others. Usually they don't interact much, but they're around."

"Okay." Harry stared at the remains of his breakfast, then pushed the plate to one side. "I think I've had enough."

"What about Dobby? Does he need food?"

"Good point. I'll take something up." He took an unused plate to the buffet and made a big bacon and scrambled egg sandwich with HP sauce. When he got back to the table he waited until nobody was looking then wrapped it in a napkin, shrank it and popped it into his pocket.

"Will that be enough?"

"I think so, I've never seen him eat much."

Diana finished eating. "Okay, I'm going to go check my equipment, I'll see you a little later."

"Right. I'd better see to things too."

"My Lord," Lucius said nervously.

"Speak."

"I have received an owl from Sanguini."

"The vampire?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Well? What did it say?"

"My Lord..."

"*Crucio.*" Voldemort held the spell on Malfoy for ten seconds. "Now tell me what he said!"

"There was no message, my Lord, just..."

"Out with it, man!"

"The head of Eldred Worple."
"Who?"

"Our negotiator. Not one of us, my Lord, he was a writer. We picked him because he was familiar with vampire culture and easy to control."

"No great loss then. Why did they kill him?"

"At a guess, my lord, they have chosen to break off negotiations."

"Obviously. Any other brilliant insights?"

"They're making it clear that they don't wish to resume them?"

"Yes. You, boy." He gestured to Draco. "Anything to add?"

"Um.. I think that we should retaliate."

"Why?"

"To set an example. Killing our envoy... any envoy, even one like Worple... shows disrespect to our cause. And to you, my Lord!" Draco added hastily.

"Very good. Lucius, have Sanguini's lair found and have him staked. And any other vampires found there."

"I'll arrange for it right away, my Lord."

Voldemort turned back to Draco. "You're learning, boy. But don't get cocky... Crucio!" He held the spell on Draco for five seconds, enjoying his screams. "You got off to a bad start when you failed to kill Dumbledore, you have yet to atone fully for that failure. It is only through your father's plea that I let you live."

Draco struggled to stand. "My Lord, thank you for your forbearance. I will do my utmost to atone."

"See that you do. Leave me, all of you, I must rest before tonight's ceremony."

Diana shaded her eyes and looked along a narrow country road that led to some isolated farms and eventually joined the A31 to Southampton. "I think this is... yes, that's John."

Peering along the road, they saw a large dusty green camper van, covered in swirling patterns of gold stars, picking out the words "Mucous Membrane," followed by a small lorry.

"What does that mean?" asked Ron.

"They were a punk rock group in the seventies," said Hermione, "I think Mister Constantine was their lead singer and guitarist."

"Punk rock?"

"Think the Weird Sisters, but louder and less tuneful."

"Okay..."

They pulled over to the side of the road. Constantine got out of the van, while Chas stayed in the drivers seat of the lorry. "Ullo, Princess. Thought you'd like some transport."
Diana raised an eyebrow. "A little conspicuous, isn't it?"

"Last thing we want to do is look sneaky, that just attracts attention. We've got four hours to get ready, and some of that's just going to be waiting around. This van's air-conditioned, and it has a fridge and a loo. And it's got the best magical screening some very inventive shamans could provide."

"What's in the lorry?" asked Harry.

"My mate Chas, a generator, and all our old technical gear."

"What sort of technical gear?" asked Hermione.

"Let's put it this way," said Constantine, with a wolfish grin. "Ours goes up to eleven."

"My Lord," said Lucius, "There has been another development."

Voldemort looked up from the Daily Prophet. "You've found the vampire?"

"A different development, my Lord." He hesitated for a second, then carried on. "My Lord, more of our Dementors are missing."

"How many more? How many, Lucius?"

"Most of the Dementors deployed in England and Wales. There are still some near Hogwarts and Hogsmead, the others have gone."

"Crucio!" He held the spell for twenty seconds, then waited while Malfoy staggered to his feet again. "Where have the Dementors gone?"

"Nobody knows, my Lord. Early this morning they kissed their handlers and left. It's taken some time for the reports to arrive. Some were sighted heading towards Azkaban, most have simply disappeared.

"Why were the reports delayed?"

"Most of the handlers were incapable of reporting, my Lord, and for some reason owls seem to be delayed today."

"Hmmm... The Dementors are fleeing, the vampires have withdrawn from negotiations, and now the owls are delayed? Do you regard this as coincidental?"

"No, my Lord. I've sent Gibbon to investigate the owl post, and Selwyn is questioning the survivors of the Dementor attacks."

"Good. Now then... I see that there was a small fracas in Diagon Alley yesterday. What I don't see is any evidence that it accomplished much."

"My Lord, I don't quite follow..."

"Has there been any word from Travers?"

"No, my Lord."

"Floo him. I wish to see him before tonight's event."
"Yes, my Lord."

Lucius went to the floo, wondering what Travers was supposed to have done, while Voldemort returned to his paper.

Chas parked the lorry on a Forestry Commission fire road on the other side of the ridge that overlooked Malfoy Manor, and waited while Constantine's friends unloaded the big stack speakers.

"Don't try to help," said Constantine. "Diana's got it covered."

"I can see that, mate. That weighs a couple of hundred pounds, how the hell is she lifting it?" Chas watched incredulously as Diana carried the biggest speaker over the rise, with the teenagers following. Ron and Harry were carrying a smaller speaker between them, with Hermione rolling a cable drum and unreeling it as she walked.

"Clean living, Chas, something neither of us knows much about."

At half past six Severus Snape was in his office dealing with the school's usual paperwork when he felt the Dark Mark on his arm start to throb. For some reason it felt weaker than usual, an ache rather than the usual stabbing pain, and for a moment he wondered if he was imagining it. He rolled up his sleeve and looked at it, sensing the magic in play, and realised that it was a real summons. He also noticed that the mark looked a little paler than usual. Could the Dark Lord's power be waning? He dearly hoped so.

He finished the form he was working on, locked his office, and floo'd to Malfoy Manor. Across the country the top echelon of Death Eaters were following his example.

Chas started the generator, and waited as the engine settled down into a steady low throb. "We need to do a sound check."

Constantine shook his head. "Don't worry about it. This is a bit of a surprise for someone, if it doesn't work it won't be a big problem. Okay, have you all got your stuff out of the van?" He waited until he was sure everyone was happy. "Okay, Chas, what I need you to do now is get the hell out of here. Drive the van to Southampton, we'll meet up at that boozer where you nutted Big Jimmy a couple of years back. If I don't get back by closing time sleep it off then head back to London, I'll catch up with you there."

"What do I do if Big Jimmy's in the boozer?"

"Nut him again, of course."

"What about the truck?"

"It's insured, isn't it?"

"Course it is."

"Wait a few days then notice that someone's nicked it and report it to the police."

"Okay. Right, see you later."

As Chas drove off Diana tensed and said "Something's coming."
"Right," said Constantine, "knew I'd forgotten to mention something." A dark-haired woman in armour appeared, the left half of her face covered by a white mask, the right inhumanly beautiful.

Diana stepped forward, her clothes morphing into armour, her hand on the hilt of her sword, half-drawn from its sheath.

The masked woman said "Vintruszz mee, Consstinteen."

"Right. All of you, this is Mazikeen of the Lilim, General of Lucifer's armies. Maze, can you do something to make it a bit easier for everyone to understand you?"

Mazikeen raised her hands to her face, seemed to concentrate for a moment, then lowered them. "You know I hate this, Conthtantine."

"Sorry, love, we've got about fifteen minutes, there isn't time for misunderstandings."

"What do you want here?" asked Diana.

"Damage control," said Mazikeen. "The fools you fight released a plague of petty demons, and plan to do more. My Lord Lucifer wants an end to it."

"And your intentions toward me and my friends?"

"I have no interest in you. But since we face a common foe, I will do you no harm so long as you do no harm to me."

"That works for me," said Harry.

"Okay," said Ron.

Diana looked at Hermione. "What about you?"

"I'm not happy about it, but I'll agree, so long as you do us no physical or spiritual harm."

Maze smiled on the flesh side of her face. "A Christian, or a rules lawyer, I assume. Relax, you're far too wholesome and innocent to be my prey." She said 'wholesome' and 'innocent' as though they were insults. "I have much bigger fish to flay."

"Don't you mean fry?"

"I know what I mean."

Diana sheathed her sword. "I agree to your terms."

"Excellent. So... what's the plan?"

"The Dark Lord will conquer, and we shall be at his side," said Draco. "It is our natural destiny. History is with us, not the mudbloods and traitors."

"That's a pretty speech," Luna said through the grille of the cell door, "but I'm really not sure you believe it. You don't sound like you do."

"Crucio!"

"Draco, why are you being so cruel to this poor door? What did it ever do to hurt you?"
"Crucio!"

"That was the cell wall, Draco. I really think you need more practice. Maybe you should try opening the door first, it can't be easy casting a spell through that tiny opening."

"You're trying to trick me! Crucio!"

Luna side-stepped, and the spell struck the cell ceiling. "Are we having fun?"

"You fucking bitch! Crucio!" This time the spell was barely a pale flicker at the end of Draco's wand.

"I think you need to take a rest, all of that shouting can't be good for you."

The moon rose just after sunset, most of its disk dark, already in the Earth's shadow. Spaced out along the ridge Hermione, Ron, and Harry were crouched over boxes of quidditch balls, watching tensely as the Death Eaters came out to the terrace and began marking out the pentagram Diana had seen at their rehearsal. Diana and Constantine watched the terrace through omnioculars; Mazikeen waited by their side, a sword in her hands, another long sword sheathed on her back. Dobby stayed in the truck.

"There's Malfoy," whispered Harry. "And... yes, it's Tommy."

"Two minutes to totality," said Constantine. "We'd better start."

"On the count of three," said Hermione, "One, two, three." On 'three' Harry, Ron and Hermione cast triggering spells. The boxes opened, and the Quidditch balls lifted a few feet into the air and flew off towards the mansion. Hermione smiled, and said "Fly, my pretties! Fly! Cry havoc, and let loose the bludgers of war."

TBC

"I move from dreamer to dreamer, from dream to dream, hunting for what I need. Slipping and sliding and flickering through the dreams; and the dreamer will wake, and wonder why this dream seemed different, wonder how real their lives can truly be."

Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman*

Swamp Thing's dream is stolen, with modifications, from John Brunner's novel *Stand on Zanzibar*.

The vampire Cassidy is borrowed from Vertigo's *Preacher*.

In some DC canon Thor was tricked and mind-controlled into serving Hitler during WW2. J.K. Rowling has hinted that Grindlewald was at least partially responsible for Hitler's rise to power, which means that he was probably involved in all of Hitler's supernatural projects.

"Ours goes up to eleven." Obligatory *Spinal Tap* reference.

Mazikeen is based on the comics version in *Lucifer*.

"Fly, my pretties! Fly! Cry havoc, and let loose the bludgers of war." Obligatory *Wizard of Oz* misquote (the Wicked Witch never actually says that) and Shakespeare reference. With a name like Hermione, you have to expect the latter...
"The moon is above the horizon, my Lord," said Lucius Malfoy, "the eclipse will be total in four minutes."

"Travers," said Lord Voldemort, "In tonight's ceremony you will be cup-bearer."

"My Lord?"

"Helga Hufflepuff's Cup. You will be carrying it." He gestured, and a padded tray floated towards Travers, the cup lying in a recess in the padding. "Follow instructions as I give them. Oh, and until I tell you otherwise, handle the tray only, not the cup."

"Yes, my lord."

"You may lead the way to the terrace. Lucius, with me please."

Behind his mask Lucius smiled. He had a feeling that Travers had just drawn a very short straw. "My Lord."

"Should anything happen to Travers," Voldemort murmured, "you will take his place to complete the ceremony."

"Oh bugger," thought Lucius, saying "Yes, my Lord."

"Did it seem to you that some were slow to arrive?"

"A little, my Lord. Especially since they were warned to expect a summons tonight."

"Hmm... We shall discuss this later."

They walked out to the terrace, where another ten masked Death Eaters stood around the pentacle, the innermost circle of the movement. Another thirteen watched from the edges of the terrace, including Severus Snape. Beyond the terrace all was dark, in contrast to the lights of the ceremony.

Lucius checked his pocket watch. "Two minutes, my Lord."

"Excellent." Voldemort walked forward and inspected the pentacle. As he did so, unknown to him, watchers a few hundred yards away released three boxes of Quidditch balls.

"My loyal followers," said Voldemort, raising his wand. "Shortly we will begin a ritual to initiate a new dawn for our movement, a better world where our power will be unopposed. As the Moon darkens, let us join together in..." He was interrupted by a loud bang, and a flare of flame. "What was that?"

"The wards, my Lord," said Lucius, "probably just..." There were another two bangs, then several more along a wide stretch of the perimeter "...a flock of birds." There were more bursts of flame, and the noise became a roar.

As the balls left the box, the first spell that triggered was the Doubling Curse that was cast on all of them. One set was incomplete, so three quaffles, six bludgers and two snitches left the boxes; the bludgers were enchanted to take the most direct path, but still took twenty seconds to reach the wards, doubling every two seconds. More than six thousand bludgers, fifty-four tons of iron, hit nearly simultaneously. The insane rate of duplication meant that most were already crumbling to rust,
burning up in the flames, when the wards collapsed under more than two hundred tons of iron a few
seconds later. Forty-one made it through as the curse finally died. As did thirty-seven quaffles, more
than half of them on fire, and more than a hundred snitches.

Dobby heard the impacts and the roar of flames, pressed "Play" on the eight-track recorder in the
truck, and apparated to his next task. The speakers crackled for a few seconds, as Voldemort said
"Birds?" incredulously, watching blobs of fire fly toward him, and realised that he was hearing an
extraordinarily loud guitar.

"Back in black" sang a deafeningly loud voice, amplified electronically and by Sonorus charms on
each speaker,
"I hit the sack
I've been too long I'm glad to be back"

"BIRDS?!" Voldemort shouted over the din.

A bludger whizzed toward him, hit the anti-bullet spell around him, and reversed course abruptly.
That sent it toward Snape, who dodged hastily; it flew on into the darkness, curving back toward the
terrace once it was outside the area Hermione had defined as the Quidditch pitch. More flew at other
Death Eaters, targeted at their common feature, the masks they all wore. Two smashed into Avery's
head with a sickening crunch, killing him instantly, while Bellatrix LeStrange hastily transfigured
one of her daggers into a beater's bat to send another bludger hurtling towards the Manor. It smashed
in through a second-floor window, ricocheted around one of the guest bedrooms and destroyed an
antique mirror and a wardrobe, then went out through another window and back toward the terrace.
Meanwhile Bellatrix grinned maniacally, and looked for another target.

"IT'S POTTER!" screamed Voldemort, trying to target the bludgers without hitting too many of his
supporters, and paying little attention to the slower quaffles, which were flying much higher. A
snitch whizzed past him then began to orbit his head, followed by another. Moments later another
half-dozen had joined them, spiralling in close but never hitting him.

"Forget the hearse 'cause I never die
I got nine lives..."

Voldemort began to cast a silent fire rope spell, but something impeded his wand movement. He
glanced down and saw a mass of snitches stuck to his wand, their wings beating and pulling the
wand in random directions. They couldn't hit him, his defences prevented that, but the spell didn't
account for Voldemort's own movements. He'd moved his wand and it touched them, sticking
charsms had done the rest.

Overhead one of the quaffles disintegrated, scraps of flaming leather showering down onto the
crowd below. Travers screamed as his hair caught fire, and dropped the tray, Hufflepuff's Cup rolled
toward the centre of the pentacle.

"Avada Kedavira!" Voldemort overcame the snitches to cast his favourite spell, and Travers fell
bonelessly. "Accio Cup!" The cup rolled on, indifferent to the summoning spell, and Voldemort
realised that its anti-theft protection was still active. He wordlessly summoned Nagini to recover it,
the huge snake dodging between the feet of the Death Eaters as it raced toward the pentacle.

Overhead smoke spread out from the burning quaffles, obscuring the fast-disappearing moon. One
by one the remaining quaffles burst into flames, adding more smoke and pungent fumes. In the
confusion few of the Death Eaters noticed, those that did were too busy dodging bludgers to pay
much attention. Voldemort tried an overpowered Finite spell, which achieved nothing, then
concentrated on blasting them.
Above the smoke, unseen, three brooms streaked toward the manor.

Voldemort wandlessly summoned a mesh of fiendfyre, burning within inches of his body, hands, and wand, and burned away most of the snitches. "Now where is the brat," he muttered, "why can't I feel him?"

In the tree line Constantine saw Voldemort destroy the snitches, and decided to up the pressure. He switched on his wireless microphone, cutting off the music abruptly, and said "Hello Tommy. You've been a naughty boy."

"Show yourself!" screamed Voldemort. The voice was too distorted to be sure, but it didn't sound much like Potter. As he spoke more snitches attached themselves to his wand. Constantine couldn't hear him over the noise from the terrace, but guessed he had his attention.

"Tom Marvolo Riddle. Really, Tommy? You took your name and made an anagram? 'I am Lord Voldemort?' What a load of bollocks. You're not a Lord, and that isn't your name." He switched the microphone off, and the music resumed: "...look at me now
I'm just makin' my play
Don't try to push your luck...

By now several windows were broken; Harry pointed to one and flew towards it, closely followed by Hermione and Ron. The intruder charm on the window was already blaring, unheard in the din from the terrace. More by luck than judgement, it led onto one of the main corridors, leading to the stairs.

Voldemort felt for the Taboo Spell that should have activated when his name was used. It was there but inactive, as though nothing had been said. Around him the smarter Death Eaters were ditching their masks; some bludgers repeatedly struck the masks on the ground, others pursued the slower-witted.

Lucius blasted another two bludgers out of the air, narrowly missing Snape, as another ricocheted off a mask on the ground and hit him in the stomach. The spells on his robes protected him from serious harm, but he was winded and dropped his wand. Antonin Dolohov was less fortunate; a ball hit him in the back of the head, just missing his robe, and fractured his skull. In the confusion nobody noticed in time to save his life.

As Nagini reached the cup a woman in archaic bronze armour seemed to fall from the sky, and decapitated the snake with a single blow, blood oozing towards the lines of the pentacle. Voldemort screamed "Aveda Kedavra!" and cast the killing curse; she swatted it out of the air with the blade of her sword, batting it toward one of the greenhouses which exploded violently a moment later. She stared at him for a moment, then walked forward, crossing the lines of the pentacle effortlessly.

Another woman in steel plate, wearing a half mask, appeared behind her, half-crouched, sword and shield in hand, and used her shield to deflect a blasting hex across the terrace, narrowly missing Amycus Carrow. The conditioning protecting Snape's memories failed as he saw them, and remembered who Diana was.

"Yes, I'm in a bang
With a gang
They've got to catch me if they want me to hang"

Peter Pettigrew tried to apparate away, hoping that nobody would notice; the anti-apparation wards were still up and Bellatrix saw what he was doing. "Traitor! Avada Kedavra!" Pettigrew dropped and fled in rat form as the spell struck Thorfinn Rowle's back.
Inside the mansion Narcissa Malfoy was trying to find Draco, and wincing every time she heard something smash.

"Stupefy!" Narcissa collapsed, stunned from behind by Hermione and Ron. Harry took her wand while Hermione cut off a lock of her hair, added it to a vial of Polyjuice Potion, cast the activation spell and waited for it to transform, then swallowed it. "Eww. Sprouts mixed with petrol." She changed shape to Narcissa's form, transfigured her clothes to more or less match Narcissa's elegant gown, hid her own wand in her sleeve and took Narcissa's for show.

"Dobby!"

Dobby popped in. "Dobby is here for you, Harry Potter."

"Get her out of here. Grimmauld Place, tell Kreacher to keep her safe but don't let her leave."

"At once!" Dobby took her arm and vanished.

"Come on," hissed Ron, who was wearing a latex Frankenstein mask Hermione had found in a Paris shop. "I think the Bludgers must be running down, I haven't heard anything smash for a while. We need to get a move on." As if to answer him, there was a loud explosion outside. "Or maybe not."

Dobby reappeared alone. "Bad Master's wife is safe, Harry Potter."

"Dobby, can you find Draco?"

Dobby sniffed the air for a moment. "He is in cellars, Harry Potter."

"Lead us there, please."

"At once, Harry Potter."

Outside the music stopped as Constantine used the radio microphone again. "As I was saying, Tommy, Lord Voldemort isn't your real name. Come to that, neither is Tom Marvolo Riddle. Everyone called you that, but it was never true."

Voldemort screamed with rage, and tried an area effect spell on the armoured women. There was a deafening explosion, and a powerful shockwave sent some of the Death Eaters flying and destroyed most of the remaining snitches, but both women were unscathed.

"Oooh, temper temper. I'll let you into a little secret, Tommy-boy, I took the trouble to check your birth certificate. Know what I found? Your name isn't Tom, it never has been. Your mum wanted you to be a Thomas. And that means that everything you've done with your name since then, as Tom Riddle or Lord Voldemort, isn't magically binding. Not any more."

"Confringo!" screamed Bellatrix, casting the blasting hex at the ground ahead of Diana. The explosion threw her into the air, but she simply somersaulted forward and resumed her advance. Voldemort backed away again.

"Run, coward," said Mazikeen. "I am Mazikeen, General of the armies of Hell. My master Lord Lucifer finds you in default of your contract."

"Kill them!" screamed Voldemort, backing away. His mind raced, looking for a way out.

The unmasked part of her face grinned. "It will be my pleasure."

On the ridge Constantine switched back to the tape. By now Back to Black was over, but the guitars
and drums of an instrumental version of Black Sabbath's *Iron Man* seemed quite appropriate to the occasion.

"Avada Kedavra!" Voldemort cast again, and learned an important lesson in wand safety. The snitch stuck to the end of his wand exploded, splintering the last two inches of the wand, and the spell fizzled out. He screamed with rage, threw the remains of the Elder Wand at Mazikeen, missing by several feet, and drew his old wand from his sleeve. Mazikeen casually threw knives at the Death Eaters, seemingly bored by him, as Diana used shield and sword to bat away spells that might hit either of them, and maneuvered to one side, intending to lasso Voldemort.

Unseen, Death kneeled to touch the remains of the Elder Wand. The spirit of a wood nymph appeared; they talked for a moment, then Death embraced her and there was the sound of beating wings. Simultaneously more instances of Death were collecting Nagini, the remnant of the horcrux in her head, Thorfinn Rowle, Antonin Dolohov and another ninety or so people and countless animals every minute around the world.

Rabastan Lestrange fell, his heart pierced by one of Mazikeen's knives, another missed Peter Pettigrew, literally by a whisker. He squeaked and leapt back, then scuttled on toward safety.

In the dungeon Luna stood near the cell door, and said "Honestly Draco, everyone has performance issues sometimes, it's nothing to be ashamed of. I'm sure that there are lots of people that have trouble casting that spell."

"Crucio!"

"Draco, Draco, Draco, you'll damage the door if you go on like that. Well, if you can make it work a little better."

Draco kicked the door petulantly, and a voice behind him said "Draco? What on earth are you doing?"

"Punishing Lovegood, mother."

"Ineffectively, it seems. Do I have to do everything? Open the door, Draco, I'll see to it."

Draco sulkily said "Yes mother," and turned to open the door.

"Stupefy."

Ron dragged Draco out of the way, while Harry worked on the lock.

"Hello Hermione," said Luna.

"How did you know it was me?"

"Your wand movements are more fluid than Narcissa's. Is that Harry with you?"

"Just a sec," said Harry, as Dobby vanished with Draco. He fiddled with the lock again, and it clicked open. The prisoners started to emerge, blinking in the brighter light of the main cellar.

"I think that dress quite suits Narcissa," said Luna, "but it will look a little odd on you. May I borrow Narcissa's wand a moment?"

There was another loud explosion from outside, and the building shook slightly.

Hermione handed the wand to Luna. "Be careful, I don't know that it's a good match to you."
"It'll be good enough, I think. Now, let me see...." She looked around and said "That wall will do nicely. She flourished the wand in a complex pattern: "Gingiberi Panem!" A river of reddish-brown sparks struck a blank wall for a few moments, then stopped.

"Was that supposed to do something?" asked Ron.

"I should think so, but it will take a few minutes. Shall we go?" The area of the wall hit by the spell was turning brown, and the brown patch was spreading outwards.

Ollivander looked distinctly uneasy. "I think that wall is load-bearing."

Hermione took the lead as they headed for the stairs, still disguised as Narcissa, with Luna and Harry behind her.

Harry took a closer look at the wall as they passed it, then touched it and sniffed his fingers. "You're turning the wall into gingerbread?"

"Not the wall, silly, the house. That's what the spell is for, though usually you start off with something a little smaller, to make Christmas decorations. You can't eat it, of course, unless you start off with something edible, like a house made of toast."

"You can turn a whole house into gingerbread? A big mansion like this?"

"It's a spell to make a gingerbread house," Luna said with a shrug, "nobody wants a gingerbread wall on its own, so it has to turn the whole house into gingerbread. But gingerbread isn't really very strong, I think it might not stay up very well."

"Harry," said Hermione, "we just made a couple of hundred tons of bludgers out of nothing, why are you surprised?"

"Well, if you put it that way... let's get the hell out of here before it collapses!"

Outside three more Death Eaters were dead, two killed by deflected spells and one by another knife, and Voldemort seemed to be slowing slightly, panting harder as he tried to keep up his rain of spells. Most of the flag-stones were cracked and cratered, and the lines of the pentacle were broken. The last bludgers, four of the six that Hermione had started out with, were still bouncing off discarded masks and circling round to hit them. Only Bellatrix still wore her mask.

"Thomas Marvolo Riddle," said Mazikeen, her voice clear despite the music and the noise of the spells, "In 1954 you negotiated with Hell under false pretences. You used a false name on the contract, and by dividing your soul you have ensured that the payment will be damaged goods. The power you purchased is forfeit." A glow appeared around Voldemort then faded into nothingness.

"Kill them!" screamed Voldemort, firing a Killing Curse that ricocheted from Diana's shield to kill Mulciber. "Attack them, cowards!"

As he spoke Diana's lasso lashed out and wrapped around him. "Tell them to surrender, Tom."

Voldemort struggled, tried to wave his wand again, but got nowhere. "Sssuuu... No sssuurrrrender!"

The music segued into the introduction to Motörhead's Ace of Spades, and the surviving Death Eaters redoubled their fire. Diana batted another Killing Curse aside, most of her attention on Voldemort, but Mazikeen intercepted it with her own shield and sent it back to its source. Walden McNair died instantly.
"Where are the Horcruxes, Tom? Where did you put them?"

Bellatrix ran forward screaming, and was caught by a Crucio spell from Lucius Malfoy. She screamed and fell as Gibbon shouted "Traitor! Confringo!" and blasted Malfoy in the back, severing his spine. Lurking toward the rear, Snape cast "Sectumsempera!", supposedly at Diana but deliberately sending it off-target to sever Crabbe's wand hand.

"Where are they, Tom?"

"My diary... Hufflepuff's cup... Ravenclaw's..." He seemed to be about to collapse, and Diana made the mistake of reducing the pressure for a moment. Voldemort gasped, screamed "Yolcam Akrasiel!" and twisted, somehow disapparating out of the lasso. Belltrix guessed that the wards were down, and found the strength to stagger to her feet and apparate out. The Carrows took her departure as a cue to escape the same way. The rest of the Death Eaters were too caught up in the fight, or too badly injured, to follow.

Snape abandoned his pretense of fighting for Voldemort, and began to pick off some of the remaining Death Eaters with precision spellfire, while Diana and Mazikeen made short work of the rest, until only Snape was standing. He dropped his wand and raised his hands. Before Diana could say anything Mazikeen threw her last dagger at him, the blade severing his carotid arteries.

"He was on our side!" screamed Diana.

"He was a traitor," Mazikeen said coldly. "Now he will betray no more." She looked out into the darkness, somehow saw Constantine in the gloom, made a throat-cutting gesture, and gestured for him to come to them. A moment later the music stopped, and his amplified voice said "All over?"

"Yes!"

In Scotland Minerva McGonagall sensed a shift in the castle magics, knew that she was acting Headmistress again, and guessed that Snape was dead. She sent house elves to check that the Carrows had left the building, began disciplinary procedures to suspend their teaching posts, which would bar them from the castle and grounds until the governors formally reinstated them, and called an immediate staff meeting. She had a feeling that the next few days would be challenging.

As Constantine was crossing the last stretch of lawn before the terrace, Harry and the others cautiously emerged from a side door. "I think it's all over," said Hermione.

Something rustled, and Harry spotted a familiar-looking rat scuttling away. "Stupefy!" He cautiously picked it up by the tail, checked its paws, grinned, and said "Now it's over."

"Almost," said Diana. "The fight's over, but Severus is dead and Riddle and a couple of others escaped. He's badly weakened. I think they're going after the horcruxes."

For some reason Harry found it hard to care much about Snape. "Are there any left?"

"We still have to destroy Hufflepuff's Cup, and Riddle said something about Ravenclaw before he escaped, but he didn't finish."

"That's easy," said Luna. "It'll be Ravenclaw's Diadem. There's a statue of her that shows what it's like in our Tower." Behind them there was a loud creak, and a rumbling noise as part of the dungeon wall collapsed, and the ground floor of the manor began to sag into it. The Malfoys' remaining house elves apparated out, looking lost.

"Oi!" shouted Constantine. "I thought you said it was over!"
They turned to see him standing in front of the remains of the pentacle, which were suddenly
glowing dull red. A cloud of black smoke was forming in the central pentagon over Hufflepuff's
Cup, which seemed to be melting.

"I thought you realised," Mazikeen said calmly, "the last thing Riddle shouted was a summons. I'm
really not too sure what we're going to get, he did it all wrong. This ought to be interesting."

The smoke was rapidly solidifying into a humanoid form.

**TBC**

**Notes:**

The Doubling Curse really does work like this, and Hermione knows how to cast it in canon. It can
be combined with other spells that carry over to the copies - a heating spell in *Deathly Hallows* - but
the copies are generally inferior; for my purposes they corrode and fall apart easily, and the spell
stops working when they do. If anything I've made this spell LESS effective and slower than canon;
see the bank vault scene in *Deathly Hallows*, and try not to think about conservation of mass and
energy. For those of a mathematical bent, I assumed a doubling every two seconds, and a small
bludger weighing about 20lb - *Quidditch Through the Ages* describes them as solid iron balls 10” in
diameter, which would weigh about 150lb, but this isn't borne out by the damage they do, or their
appearance in the films. If they did weigh 150lb more than 418 tons of balls would have hit the
wards at about 60 MPH, with the energy of a train crash. The exact numbers are easy to calculate, I
leave it as an exercise for the bored... See
for an analysis of Bludger speed.
If the launch paragraph reads a little like a David Weber missile launch scene it isn't *entirely*
unintentional.

*Back in Black* by AC/DC is a candidate for "Loudest rock song ever," as are the other songs
mentioned.

The Gingerbread spell is not canon; I think I may have seen the idea used in a short story in a fantasy
anthology, but I can't now remember the author or where it appeared.

Riddle's summons is in (sort of) Enochian as found on various web sites, and probably not even
slightly authentic.
Smoke swirled above the melted remains of Hufflepuff's Cup, slowly solidifying into a humanoid form. Harry tried casting a blasting spell at it, but it winked out as it crossed the lines of the pentacle. None of the other spells they tried did any better.

"Won't work," said Constantine, "you've got an open portal there, anything you throw at it ends up diverted to Hell."

"Can anyone make a Portkey?" Harry shouted.

"If I can find a wand I can use," said Ollivander, who was gathering wands from the unconscious and dead bodies. "Where do you want to go?"

"Not for me - to get you and the other prisoners out of here. Think of somewhere safe, where you can go to ground for a few days. Hopefully it'll be over by then, if not just concentrate on running."

"And the house-elves," said Hermione, "get them out too, maybe they can help you all hide. But do it quickly!"

"Very well. I'll need a length of rope, or something long enough for all of us to touch."

Ron ran over to one of the dead Death Eaters and pulled off a cummerbund the body was wearing. "Will this do?"

"Just the job." He flourished one of the wands he had found, and it spurted a foot-long jet of flames. "Fourteen inch oak, quite whippy, with a unicorn hair core. This should do nicely. Portus! Everyone grab hold!"

"Quick," shouted Harry, "all of you get hold of that scarf thing."

The prisoners moved to get hold of it, some of them helped by the Malfoy elves. None of the latter seemed to be too sad about the death of their master. Harry absently noticed that smoke was coming out of some of the upper floor windows of the mansion, and guessed that burning quaffles had found their way inside.

"And three... two... one... GO!" As Ollivander said "GO!" a dozen prisoners and elves vanished.

Harry turned back to the pentacle, and realised that he was looking at Luna. "Oi, you were supposed to leave too."

"You need all the help you can get. I've got Narcissa's wand, I'll be okay."

"Okay, but stay back until we know what we're up against." A stray bludger whipped past his head, heading for one of the discarded masks, and he shouted "Mischief managed!" in Parseltongue. The remaining bludgers, quaffles and snitches floated down to the ground and rolled to a standstill. One of the burning quaffles set fire to Lucius' clothes.

The form in the pentacle finally solidified, the figure of a tall man in wizards robes, standing with his back to them. He turned slowly until he was in profile.

"What the...?" Ron said incredulously.

"Hello Ron," said Dumbledore. "Harry, Hermione. Thank you for bringing me back, but I seem to
"It isn't Dumbledore," said Constantine. "It's trying to trick you."

"I don't know you, but I do feel that's rather rude," said the figure. "Now, where's my wand? Accio Elder Wand!" The remains of the Elder Wand flew to him, but stopped at the pentacle, floating in the air. "Hm... useless, the core's burned out. What a nuisance. I'll just have to do without." He floated into the air, rotating to face them. Harry gasped as he turned, revealing that only the right side of his face was Dumbledore's; the left was the noseless face of Voldemort.

"You might want to watch that," Constantine said calmly, "Mouldy Voldy's still alive, he'll sue you for trademark infringement."

"Is that..?" began Hermione.

"Not Voldemort, that soul fragment went phut when the cup melted. Eclipso? Buggered if I know for sure, but the face is a bit of a give-away."

"You're very rude," said Luna. "Your friend has another side to her face, it doesn't make her a bad person."

"I'm a demon," said Mazikeen, "don't insult me by calling me a person. Or good, for that matter."

"Sorry. By the way, whoever or whatever this is, he isn't actually confined to the pentacle. The hem of his robe has gone over the lines twice now."

"What a perceptive child," said the creature, "I think that you'll do very nicely." It raised a hand in apparent salute, then something dark flew at Luna. There was no time for anyone to react. She fell, a shard of dark crystal in her chest, piercing her heart, as Diana and Mazikeen rushed toward the pentacle, and the figure inside it collapsed in a cloud of billowing dust. Ron caught Luna as she fell.

"Don't touch the crystal!" shouted Constantine, running toward them. "I think that's the real Eclipso." He gestured, and a glowing pattern of lines and Enochian letters appeared in the air. "Shit! It's in her now. Don't try to pull it out, it'll probably keep her alive if you don't interfere."

Luna's eyes snapped open; one silver grey, the other swirling green. "He's right." She put a hand to the crystal. "Now I think I'm supposed to become an unstoppable monster and kill you all, unless you kill me first. That really won't do, I like you all too much. I..." She suddenly pushed the crystal the rest of the way into her heart, convulsed, and fell back. Blood trickled out around the wound for a moment then stopped.

"No!" shouted Ron. "Luna!"

"She's still alive," said Constantine, "but it's not just Luna or Eclipso. Something else is in there... apart from the girl, I mean."

"Another demon? Voldemort?"

"If I kill her will I destroy it?" asked Mazikeen.

"Doubt it. Give me a moment." He stared at the shifting lines and patterns.

Mazikeen peered over his shoulder and said "She's quite healthy considering there's a crystal in her heart."
"I noticed. Not sure if it's Eclipso keeping her alive or whatever the other thing is."

Luna's eyes snapped open. Her green eye was glowing slightly. "I think it's more of a group effort, but things should be... uh... YOU WILL ALL BURN... no, bad demon, no gingerbread for you... should be working properly soon."

"Why did you push it in?" asked Ron.

"To make sure it didn't hurt anyone else, silly. Don't worry, it's stopped hurting already."

"Who are you?" Diana demanded.

"Call me Del."

"Can we talk to Luna?"

"You are, silly."

"And Eclipso?"

"He's here too, but we're keeping him busy. I don't think I've ever met crystalline life on Earth before, he's really interesting. Though that isn't really what he is."

"What is he, then?" asked Constantine. "A demon?"

There were a series of loud crashes as the near side of the mansion, half masonry and half gingerbread, collapsed back into the ruins, followed by parts of the upper floors and roof.

Luna watched, giggling slightly. "Oops. Well, not exactly a demon. He's more like one of those ideas that you get in your head and you can never get rid of and it goes round and around and around in circles and you see it everywhere you look and it's in the mirror and down the plughole and on license plates and you hear it on records when you play them backwards and in the crossword if you do it in runes and..." Constantine raised a finger to his lips, and she stopped.

"μιμεμαι?" asked Diana, "A meme?"

"Yes, one of those. People got the idea that there was a demon that caused eclipses, so when enough people believed it there was one, except that he isn't a fallen angel and God didn't make him, and once there was a demon of eclipses there had to be horrible things that happened at eclipses, so..."

"And Del?" asked Constantine.

"...it had to be more and more horrible. Me? I'm Luna's friend, and maybe one day we'll be me properly. I don't think she's had many friends before, and most of mine are much harder to talk to, so it's really nice and I think that we shall have cake and tea and maybe some little fish or eggs with toast cut in the shape of tiny little soldiers and snorkacks and platypussies and..."

"Del, would your full name happen to be Delirium?"

"...golden snidgets and doggies. You guessed it already? That's very clever!" She waved her hand, and a shower of small cupcakes fell around her.

Ron reached for one, and Hermione said "Better not, remember Gamp's Laws. Never eat conjured food."

"I'd be more worried about the hallucinogens," murmured Diana. Ron looked confused but didn't
"Thanks, love," said Constantine. "Everybody, this is Delirium of the Endless. I think you said you've met her sister. And Luna and Eclipso, of course."

"Ooh," said Luna, "I haven't met her yet, and Del says she's really funny."

"She's pretty cool," said Harry, realising that Luna meant Death. "Helped me a lot."

"Del, Luna, can you keep Eclipso under control?"

One side of Luna's face seemed to darken. "WHY DON'T YOU ASK ME, MORTAL? Oh, sorry about that, he's a little YOU DARE TRY TO CONTROL now that's quite enough of that." Her face lightened again. "He isn't mister cooperative yet, but we're getting there. It's not like Del's going to let him out, neither am I, so he might as well make the best of it."

Diana moved closer to Constantine and murmured "What do you think?"

"Delirium's got enough power to take down any demon if she can stay focussed. Once the total eclipse ends he.. it.. whatever.. loses a lot of power... until the next one anyway."

"How long is that now?"

Constantine checked his watch. "'Bout thirty-five minutes."

"You're a little rude whispering about me," said Luna.

Diana kneeled and held Luna's hand, feeling her pulse. "I think that you and Del have probably saved our lives here, but maybe you ought to rest for a little while. You're going through a big change. Hermione, can you and Ron stay with her for bit, while Harry and John and I question the Death Eaters? We still need to find out where else they're keeping prisoners."

"Boring," said Mazikeen, "I already know all that. What did you think I've been doing since I got here on Saturday?"

"I really don't know," said Diana. "Like I didn't know that Voldemort had sold his soul to Lucifer. That would have been useful information."

"Seriously? You think that *Lucifer* handles petty crap like that? Get real. I didn't know until I got close, then I could feel the contract. Some demonic low-life that didn't know it was being cheated must have given him a power boost, I didn't even recognise the magical signature so it wasn't anyone important. I clawed it back anyway, why are you complaining?"

"Ladies," said Constantine, lighting a cigarette, "We're probably working against the clock here, so how about we try not to have a big confrontation? Okay, some idiot gave Voldemort a little extra power, he was pretty strong without it so I doubt it made a huge difference. Maze, if you have any locations for prisoners please tell Diana, she wants to rescue them. Harry, I know you want to get after Tommy, but we might get that done faster if we have more information. Diana, if we aren't questioning these morons we need to get rid of them. Okay?"

"It's a simple enough request," Tonguetongs said in Gobbledegook, "If he's prepared to cooperate we can get this done tonight, otherwise I'll have to clear it with head office, and that could take days."
"All right," said Diana, "I'll ask him. I'll call you back." She snapped her mobile phone closed. "Harry, the Goblins are willing to take the prisoners, but you have to be part of it. They want to make a deal."

"What sort of deal?"

"Once the war is over you get interviewed in the Daily Prophet and appear on a Gringrott's poster, saying how much the goblins have helped you. In return they'll keep the prisoners secure. If you agree to appear in four advertisements over the next two years and another poster they'll also guard any additional prisoners we capture except Voldemort himself; they won't accept responsibility for him."

"Seriously? Why me?"

"Oh come on," said Ron, still cradling Luna, who was softly singing a song about puffskeins, pumpkins and potions, "who else would they want?"

"Stubby Boardman," said Luna. "Or Merlin, of course. Puffskeins and potions and pumpkins and..." Her voice tapered off incoherently.

"You're famous, Harry," said Hermione, "might as well get some benefit."

"Think of it this way," said Diana. "If you agree they'll pay for everything out of their advertising budget. The alternative is we pay for it ourselves, and I'm not sure I have that much gold at present."

"Okay," said Harry. "But start off by saying only one advertisement, if you don't haggle they won't take us seriously."

"Good point."

Fifteen minutes later a team of goblin guards were apparating out with the last prisoners and bodies, while Diana, Harry, and Hermione read through the papers that Tonguetongs wanted him to sign, and Ron looked after Luna.

"Clause eight has to go," said Hermione. "We can't guarantee that the adverts will have all of the effects you want. Harry will cooperate, but it's up to you to write them and do the PR work to get these results."

"Hmmph," said Tonguetongs, "you drive a hard bargain. One interview, not with Rita Skeeter, one poster, and three advertisements. Is that it, or do you want the clothes from my back too?"

"The rest of it looks okay to me. Harry?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Diana?"

"In clause twelve, the photography sessions, change it from 'to be scheduled by Gringrotts' to 'to be scheduled by mutual agreement between Mister Potter and Gringrotts.' That way Harry won't incur a penalty if you asked him at an hours notice or something. Apart from that I think it's all right."

"A very hard bargain. Very well." He amended the contract, then made three copies by the limited version of the Gemino spell. "Sign here and here on each contract and we're in business."

Harry waited until Diana and Hermione nodded, then signed. Tonguetongs added his own signature,
Diana and Hermione witnessed them.

"Thank you," said Tonguetongs, "I think this will be the basis for a mutually profitable association. If you will excuse me, we must prepare for more prisoners, call us when you have them. Good luck in your own endeavors." He apparated out.

"Mercenary buggers aren't they," said Constantine.

"Tonguetongs really wanted to do it," said Diana, "or he would have never made the offer. But he had to show a way of profiting from it, or his masters would not allow it at all. It's a matter of goblin honour."

Mazikeen looked bemused. "Something wrong?" asked Constantine.

"Now I know why my Lord Lucifer does not trade in souls. Compared to the goblins, the contracts demons make are amateur's work."

"I'd better check on the Malfoys," said Harry, "Dobby!"

Dobby appeared with a soft pop. "Dobby is here, Harry Potter."

"Is everything okay at Grimauld Place?"

"Kreacher has put bad master's wife and son in Black dungeons," he said happily, "they will not be leaving without wands."

"Do they have beds and food and stuff?"

"Of course, Harry Potter."

"Great. Now I need you to go to Hogwarts, Dobby. Just a second." He scribbled a quick note. "Okay, I think that Professor McGonagall must be the acting head now, get this to her. It's a warning that trouble might be headed there. If you can't get in, get it to... Oh, Hagrid if he's outside the wards, or Professor Sprout, or Flitwick, or Ginny or Neville if you can't find a teacher. But not the Carrows or any other Death Eater."

"Dobby understands." Dobby took the note and vanished.

Harry looked at the smouldering ruins of the manor thoughtfully, feeling hungry as he smelled the burning gingerbread. "Hermione, are there still anti-muggle wards up?"

Hermione ran a quick diagnostic spell. "It looks like it; I think there's a secondary set of ward stones for that, further out from the manor."

"Probably why nobody turned up to complain about the noise," said Ron.

"Good thing too. Luna, what happens to the manor when the gingerbread spell is complete?"

Luna's eyes focused. "Back to bricks and stone, I think. I never tried it with anything bigger than a dollhouse before, that lasted about a week. Oooh, gulping plimpies!" A school of twenty or so globular yellow fish with legs appeared in the air, swimming in a lazy orbit around her in defiance of gravity and their need for water, and her eyes lost their focus again.

"Luna... Luna, about the house. Will it be repaired when the spell ends?"

The fish vanished again. "I don't think so. My dollhouse wasn't."
Constantine looked up at the dim red moon, and checked his watch again. "Ten more minutes, after that it's a partial eclipse until about half past nine."

Harry moved closer and murmured "When can we be sure there's no risk from Eclipso?"

"He's a lot less powerful once the eclipse ends, but there's still danger until dawn tomorrow."

"Merlin, we can't wait that long. Could we stun Luna, would that stop him?"

"More likely give him a free hand if she's not conscious to oppose him."

"What happens if she falls asleep?"

"Same thing, I think."

"Okay." Harry knelt in front of Luna. "Luna, we've got a bit of a problem here. We've got a lot to do before dawn, and we can't leave you here. I know you must be pretty tired, but if you can help us things might go a lot better. We haven't got any invigoration draught, but would you mind drinking a double dose of pepper-up? That ought to help you stay awake."

Luna looked at him, cross-eyed and humming a tune Harry didn't recognize, but didn't answer. Harry put the potion bottle into her hand, and she stopped singing, stared at it, then knocked it back in a long swallow. Luna's eyes widened and seemed to be more focused, and she shook her head, burped loudly and said "Now that's more like it!" She struggled back to her feet with Ron's help, as steam began to puff out of her ears.

"If that doesn't work I'm pretty sure there's a couple of old six-packs of Jolt Cola in the sound truck," said Constantine. "Might be a bit flat though. Very useful when you're doing a really long ritual."

"Urgh," said Hermione. "That stuff's packed with caffeine and sugar. Think of your blood pressure. Think of your teeth!"

Suddenly Luna was paying a lot more attention. "Was it created by the Rotfang Conspiracy? Does it contain Wrackspurts?"

"Maybe you should investigate," said Diana. "Would you mind, John?"

Constantine murmured an incantation, conjured up a glowing portal about a foot across, reached in, and pulled out a garish cardboard pack, then another, and closed it again. "Okay, Diana and Maze can probably do without. If you four carry three cans each that ought to keep you going."

"What about you?" asked Harry.

"Sleep is for the weak, I'm used to doing without."

"What is this stuff?" asked Ron.

Hermione grimaced. "Think of each can as ten or twelve cups of black coffee with extra sugar, but fizzy. It's incredibly bad for you, but it'll keep you awake."

"Cool!" Ron fumbled at the can, but couldn't figure out how the ring-pull worked.

"Don't try to open them until you need one, they can't be re-sealed. And don't shake them too much, or you'll get covered in froth when you open them."

"Are you sure this isn't one of Fred and George's jokes?"
"No joke," said Harry, "but she's right, we've got a lot to do and we need to make this stuff last all night. Are we all..." There was another prolonged crash as the rest of the manor finally collapsed, filling the cellars and piling up as a mound of burning gingerbread.

"Now that's something you don't see every day," said Constantine. "Nice work, kid."

Luna giggled but didn't answer.

"The Muggleworthy Excuses people are going to have an interesting time explaining this one," said Hermione.

"As I was saying," said Harry, "are we all ready to leave?"

"Where to?" asked Ron.

"Mazikeen, you said that they were keeping most of the prisoners in an old power station, can you take us there?"

"I'm not a taxi."

"Please?"

"Still not a taxi."

"We'll probably have a big fight on our hands when we get there."

"I don't need you for that."

"How about me, love?" said Constantine. "Want to show me the way? Then I can bring this lot along and you won't need to lift a finger."

"You're going to try to follow me?" Mazikeen said incredulously. "This I've got to see."

"All right. Maze, if you can lead the way, we'll follow as close behind as we can."

"I'll leave the door open, you do the rest." She made an quick gesture with her hand, and a glowing red disk appeared in the air, and there was a slight smell of burning sulphur. She walked into it and vanished.

"Everyone follow me and stay close, this isn't going to be fun."

Constantine stepped into the circle and disappeared.

"Come on," said Diana, "Ron, I'll carry Luna, all of you have your wands ready." She picked up Luna effortlessly and held her half-covered by her shield, her sword in her other hand. Luna giggled and more steam puffed from her ears.

"Let's go."

__TBC__

__Notes:__

Eclipso has so many different origins that I thought it would be fun add another for story purposes. This is REALLY not canon!
The word 'Meme' originated with Richard Dawkins' 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, but the idea is much older. The word ultimately derives from the ancient Greek word μιμήμα, pronounced mîmēma, "imitated thing".

"Puffskeins and potions and pumpkins and..." is sung to the tune of *My Favourite Things*, of course.

In the end notes for the previous chapter I forgot to say that one of the inspirations for the bludgers was the Doctor Who episode The Sound of Drums, especially this scene: https://youtu.be/4h8NmjpiY1M
The other side of the portal was a desert of hot sand, sulfurous clouds and howling searingly-hot winds, fine airborne dust as abrasive as pumice, and yellow clouds blowing across a dark red sky. Hermione took one sniff then cast the bubble-head charm on herself, then on Luna and Diana, while Harry took care of himself and Ron. Constantine was a few yards ahead of them, crouched and looking ahead through a small pair of binoculars. "Come on, Maze isn't waiting for us, we've got to catch up." He didn't seem to be too bothered by the conditions, but didn't protest when Harry cast the spell on him.

"What is this place?" shouted Harry.

"Hell, of course. Come on, before something notices we're here." Constantine stood, and set out across the sand. "And don't use more magic than you have to, it attracts attention."

Harry thought he saw ruins in the distance, and something moving beyond them, but it was too dark to be sure. It wasn't the direction they were headed in, he decided to ignore it for the moment. "Okay."

Harry thought he heard a sourceless voice say "Ah, yes. Harry Potter. Our new... celebrity." as Hermione heard "You'll be next, Mudbloods!" and Ron "Weasley cannot save a thing, He cannot block a single ring..."

Constantine shook his head. "Something about this place stirs up memories, if you're hearing anything it's probably that."

"Probably?" asked Diana, as she heard Ares say "Look at this world. Mankind did this, not me."

"That or we've been noticed, and something's doing it deliberately. For Christ's sake keep moving, we don't have a lot of time."

Luna roared "FOOLS! YOU REALLY FEEL YOU WILL BE ALLOWED now stop that, just because we're in Hell there's no need to be rude. Sorry, he's being silly, he doesn't want to be TRAPPED HERE any more than we do."

"Why would a demon be trapped here?" asked Ron.

Constantine glanced back at them. "He can't leave unless someone summons him, or a human vessel like Luna leaves with him on board. Remember, he's just a bit of crystal on his own. Now for fuck's sake move it!"

"What happens if we leave Luna here?" asked Hermione, sounding alarmed. "If she's possessed by a demon..."

"I'll exorcise it later," said Constantine, "We're not leaving anyone behind. Now come on!" He stepped up his pace, and the others hurried after him.

"Hermione," said Diana. "I know that the demon is a threat, but leaving Luna will not end it, and abandoning her would imperil your own soul."

"Why would you even suggest that?" said Ron.

"It's this place," screamed Hermione. "Every second we're here..."
Harry pulled a vial of Calming Draught from one of his pockets and handed it to her. "Drink it!"

Hermione looked at it for a moment, then pinched her nose and swallowed it, grimaced, and said "Sorry. Ever since I heard about magic I think I've worried about my soul a little..." She stopped, looking embarrassed. "We can talk about it later."

There were things moving off to the left and right, skittering between boulders and piles of debris. It was impossible to see them clearly, but to Harry they looked like a cross between house elves, gargoyles, and trolls, stooped and moving on legs and long spindly arms, their features half-concealed by the mist and dust. Some sort of imp, he guessed. He hoped not to get a better look.

Constantine held up something that looked like a lump of stone on a string, let it dangle for a moment, then shouted "that way" and altered course slightly to the left.

"Are you sure?" shouted Diana.

"Sure as I can be without using active magic. Maze is an evil bitch but she plays by the rules, she wouldn't lead us here if there wasn't a way out."

"And if you're wrong?"

"Then the kids wheel out their mojo, and you get to show us how good you really are with that sword."

"Very well. Come on, all of you, follow Constantine!"

Abruptly Harry felt a familiar chill, and saw a moving patch of darkness to his right. "Dementors! Expecto Patronum!" His stag-like Patronus seemed to form reluctantly, and flew toward the Dementors at a fraction of its normal speed. Ron's terrier and Hermione's otter followed, equally slowly. Then Luna waved Narcissa's wand, but instead of her usual hare produced an anthropomorphic giant rabbit wearing plate mail and carrying a huge sword, that chased after the main group of dementors enthusiastically and soon had them retreating.

"Is it just me," Harry murmured to Hermione, as his patronus scattered another group, "or was that Bugs Bunny?"

"It's working, don't knock it." Hermione grinned tiredly as her otter teamed up with Ron's terrier to drive off the last stragglers. "Cover me for a second." She rummaged in a pocket and found one of the Jolt Cola cans, drank some, and handed the rest of the can to Ron. "Might as well drink the rest of this, it's pointless wasting it."

"Okay." Ron chugged some down, sputtered and spat some of it down again, then finished the can. "Muggles drink this stuff?"

"Sometimes. Not what you were expecting?"

"It's horrible. We've got to get the twins to try this stuff, best prank ever! Feels like my teeth are melting! Yess!" Ron speeded up, Harry and Hermione stepped up their pace to keep up with him.

"I think it's working," said Harry.

"I hope so. So long as it isn't one of those things that works differently on muggle-born and pure-bloods. It'd be a shame if it messed up his magic or something."

"Is that likely?" Harry asked, alarmed.
"Not really. He's had cola drinks before, just not anything like this strong."

The sky on their left was darkening. For a second Harry expected more dementors, then got a better view. Dozens of flying creatures, vaguely humanoid, with scaly reptilian skin and batlike wings, headed to intercept them. Most of them seemed to have spears or tridents in their hands.

"Ron," said Diana, "Look after Luna for a moment." She lowered Luna to the ground and Ron put her arm over his shoulder to support her. Diana yelled something, an ululating war cry, ran forward a few paces, and leaped into the air, flying toward the creatures.

"I didn't know she could do that," said Harry. "Did you?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, and you would have thought it might have come up in conversation. 'Oh by the way, as well as being a demigoddess I can fly without a broom.' No, I had no bloody idea. It might have been nice to know."

Diana flew into the swarm and over the wind they heard metallic clangs as spears, tridents, and an occasional scaly arm rained down onto the desert.

"Stop gawking and get a move on," said Constantine. "Okay, maybe it isn't something you see every day, but we haven't got time for sightseeing, and Xena's taking care of things. Keep your eyes open, there might be more trouble coming."

"Xena?" asked Ron.

"Muggle TV programme," said Hermione. "Don't worry about it."

Ron shrugged, and Luna took her arm from his shoulder and said "I think she flies very well. I think I'd like to try walking by myself, I don't feel so wobbly now." Small puffs of steam from her ears punctuated her words.

"I'll stay close until we're sure you're okay," said Ron, aiming his wand at a group of the flying creatures which seemed to be ignoring Diana and heading for the rest of them. He picked off their leader with a cutting curse, while Harry threw another patronus into the group to disrupt the attack.

Voldemort apparated to his inner circle's emergency rendezvous, a lock-up garage in Cambridge, and began to heal his wounds as first Bellatrix then the Carrows appeared. "Where are the others?" he snarled.

"Those bitches killed most of them," said Bellatrix. "Rodolphus is gone... oh, and Malfoy." She didn't seem to be too bothered by the death of her husband.

"My Lord, I think Snape betrayed us," said Amycus. "He tried to make it look like he was aiming at the women and missing, but he hit Scabior with a cutting curse and took off his arm, that's not an accidental injury."

"Sire," said Alecto Carrow, kneeling before him. "If Snape betrayed us, we can't stay here."

"Crucio!" He held both of the Carrows under the spell for ten seconds, leaving them whimpering. "Whom did Snape leave in charge of the school?"

"McGonegall," said Amycus.

"And neither of you queried it? One of Dumbledore's... cronies?"
Alecto shrugged. "She's the deputy Headmistress, and the Governors haven't dismissed her. To be honest, my Lord, I thought that you might have had plans that needed her there. It was not my place to ask." She braced herself, but Voldemort didn't curse her.

"Hmm... Amycus, apparate to the school and check the situation there, then come straight back."

"Yes, My Lord." He apparated out.

"Now, did either of you recognize the voice that we heard?"

"A common-sounding man," said Bellatrix, "with a Liverpool accent. But I didn't recognize it."

"Whoever it was," said Alecto, "he was working with a demon. Two, perhaps, if that's what those women were."

"Yesss... Ah, I have it," he said venomously. "Constantine!"

"My Lord?" said Bellatrix.

"John Constantine. A demonologist," he said with disdain, "wandless, little more than a squib, but allegedly dangerous. He was active in London in the seventies, but to the best of my knowledge never came to the Ministry's attention."

Amycus reappeared. "My Lord, the school wards are up, and barred me from entry."

"Then Severus is showing his true colours at last. We need to regroup... we shall apparate to... to... damn!"

"My Lord?"

"Constantine wasn't bluffing. I was about to name a place protected by a Fidelius Charm, but the memory is missing. Somehow he has dissociated my name from the spell, so I am no longer the Secret Keeper, without ending it."

"Does anyone else know?" asked Bellatrix.

"Malfoy knew, but he's dead. Bellatrix, my dear, you must think of a suitable location. Somewhere off the beaten track, where we can assemble in safety."

"Hmm... there's a hill a few miles north of Hogwarts, overlooking the Forbidden Forest. The hilltop is clear, there should be ample room for a large gathering."

"Think of the location, please. *Legilimens*. Yes, that will do nicely." He used the spell to force the location into the Carrows' minds. "Bellatrix, with me, wands drawn. Amycus, Alecto, wait thirty seconds then follow, be prepared to fight if necessary."

"Yes, My Lord."

Voldemort and Bellatrix apparated out.

"Fuck!" said Amycus. "If his name isn't working..."

"The Dark Mark's fading, and his curses are weaker."

"He's definitely losing it. Who summons demons?"
"We could try to run."

"He'd find us. Five seconds..."

They apparated out on schedule.

Draco Malfoy groaned and opened his eyes. He'd been punishing Luna then... why would his mother stun him?

He was in a small plain room... no, a cell... about six by ten feet, lying on the lower level of an uncomfortable bunk bed. The only other furniture was a wooden cupboard. There was a metal door with a small grille at eye level, and a slot near floor level which he suspected was for putting trays of food under the door. A hand dangled down from the upper bunk; he recognized the sleeve as the dress his mother had been wearing.

He stood, shakily, and checked that it really was his mother in the upper bunk, still asleep, then moved to the door and tried to open it. When that didn't work he tried kicking it, and hurt his foot.

There was a soft pop, his arms snapped to his sides in a full body bind, and he fell over backwards.

A house elf leaned over him and stared at his face. "Kreacher was told to keep Malfoys safe. You are safe. Kreacher was not told to keep Malfoys comfortable. Master will deal with you later, once false Lord Voldemort is dead." He giggled and vanished with another pop, leaving Draco helpless on the floor.

**TBC**

Apologies for the delay between chapters, the last few weeks have been a bit busy.

*Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* both first aired in 1995. Both could be seen on satellite TV in the UK from 1996 onward.
Professor Minerva McGonagall looked out over the Great Hall, waited for the last students to sit and the noise to die down, and cast a silent *Sonorus* spell.

"Students! My apologies for disturbing your evening, especially those of you who were studying the eclipse. Pay attention please. I have several very important announcements to make."

"First, I regret to inform you that our Headmaster, Professor Snape, died earlier this evening. This did not take place at the school, and the full circumstances of his death are currently unclear." She waited for the murmurs to die down, then continued. "In the light of his death I have taken his place as acting Headmistress, pending a meeting of the full board of governors and appointment of a new Head Teacher, and I will be activating the school's emergency plan for staff organization. Professor Sinistra will be acting Deputy Headmistress." She paused again. "Due to certain... irregularities, I have no alternative but to suspend both Professors Carrow from the school staff, and they will not be allowed onto the school grounds until there has been a full review of their actions since the beginning of term." Some of the students began to cheer; others, most notably the prefects, looked angry.

"Quiet, please, there are several more notices... thank you. Professor Slughorn will continue as Head of Slytherin, Professor Sprout as Head of Hufflepuff, and Professor Flitwick as Head of Ravenclaw. Professor Vector will be acting Head of Gryffindor, again pending a permanent appointment by the governors. Unfortunately Muggle Studies classes must be suspended pending the appointment of a full-time instructor, since none of the remaining faculty are qualified to teach it. Students timetabled for it will be given study time, I would strongly advise you to read ahead."

"Moving on to other matters, discipline will again be enforced by the loss of points, lines, and detentions only. Corporal punishment and the use of curses will not be tolerated. Bullying of any kind will not be tolerated. To avoid certain abuses of the past, I am imposing caps on the total number of house points teachers and prefects can deduct from individual students and houses as a whole, or award to them, in the course of a term." More cheers, especially from Gryffindor. "I am rescinding the recent rule that students must be regimented between lessons, and march from class to class as a group; there seems no good reason for this, and it has been used as an excuse for bullying. Having said that, lateness to lessons and absenteeism will be punished by loss of house points and in extreme cases detentions."

"As some of you will know, all prefects this year were appointed by the late headmaster, not by the Heads of House, on what I can only describe as political grounds. I have discussed this with the Heads, and we have decided to scrap all of the prefect appointments this year, and start again from scratch. Heads of House will meet with you in your common rooms tonight and appoint house prefects, a head boy and girl will be appointed once I have the all of the prefects' names. This does not necessarily mean that all current prefects are losing their position, it is entirely possible that some will be retained. And of course all of you who have been prefects will have it recorded on your records, which is always a useful item on your resume, even if you are not re-appointed." She waved her wand again, and the existing prefect's badges disappeared. There were more cheers, though most of the former prefects looked angry.

"Finally, as of tomorrow we shall resume the teaching of Defence Against the Dark Arts, and *not* the Dark Arts themselves, as is required by the Examination Board. To cause a minimum of disruption to the timetable Madame Hooch will cover years one to three, Professor Vector years four and five, and Professor Flitwick the upper classes, again pending the appointment of a full-time Defence Professor."
"When the Dark Lord hears about this," shouted Crabbe, "he'll..." A silent Silencing Spell from Professor Flitwick put an end to the interruption.

"As I was saying, we will revert to the Ministry's mandated curriculum. Should the relevant authorities decide otherwise things may change, of course, but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Now, it's nearly nine, and pending the appointment of prefects I am declaring an early curfew. A reminder to all of you that there is a full moon tonight, and there have been reports of werewolves active in the area. Please stay in your houses, and under no circumstances attempt to leave the castle. You will trigger the alarm wards, and will not like the consequences."

Once the last students filed out Minerva turned to Professor Sinistra. "I think we can expect some trouble, especially from the more... ah... indoctrinated members of Slytherin in the next day or two. Any thoughts?"

"Ten sickles says Crabbe and Goyle start it. Malfoy was just as bad, but he had enough intelligence to bide his time. It's really a good thing this is happening so early in the academic year, a few months more and there would be a lot more trouble."

"Just as well Malfoy didn't come back this year. All right, ten sickles if it's them. I'll put ten on Parkinson, for much the same reason."

"Done."

"Now then, we'd better get on. We need to round up any strays, then take care of the paperwork for your appointment."

"Oh joy."

"Well, Aurora, if you don't want the pay rise that goes with it..."

"Good point, though if the message Potter sent is wrong and our current... ruler... makes a comeback that's going to be hazard pay, I doubt that he'll be happy."

"Those scummers come back over my dead body, and if that happens you can blame me, say I forced you to sign."

"Don't be daft, we'd all be dead anyway, why would I bother lying about it? Fuck them all anyway, we've got a school to run. Right, broom cupboards first?"

"For the strays? Naturally."

"What are we going to do with them?" asked Griphook.

"The prisoners and the bodies?" asked Tonguetongs. "Well, that depends on the outcome of Mister Potter's adventure. The Princess seems to think that Potter and his friends have a good chance. She may be overlooking their frailty, of course, that must be an easy mistake in her position. If they succeed, we keep the prisoners stunned and the bodies in stasis until the Princess and Potter are ready for them, they can hand them over to the authorities and come up with their own explanations."

"And if they fail?"

"If they fail, we never heard of any prisoners or had anything to do with any bodies. We Obliviate the survivors and dispose of the bodies, as discreetly as possible. A few fatal accidents, say, possibly an attack that went wrong, or an encounter with a rogue dementor or two. Nothing to do with
Gringrotts, of course."

"Potter or one of his friends might give it away."

"We have a binding magical contract with Potter, and that would be covered by the confidentiality clauses. I really doubt that even the Dark Lord can do much to hurt the Princess. As for the others... well, all of them have accounts, but there really isn't much in their vaults."

"How sad. Well, I suppose that they're expendable, if we can get to them before they crack."

"As a last resort. Purely as a last resort. After all, it wouldn't do to get a reputation for killing our clients. Obliviation might be an option, of course."

Griphook grinned, showing sharpened teeth, and poured two glasses of firewhisky. "We'll leave murder for the dwarves... and we can always hire a few if we need them. Out of interest, why did you decide to take Potter's side in this? There's a little money there, I suppose, but nothing compared to the Malfoy family."

"The princess, of course. Power and old money... and so much of it. Once it became clear whose side she was on the choice was obvious."

"And if she'd supported the other side?"

Tonguetongs shrugged. "Fortunately that wasn't an issue. If she had... well, governments and dark lords come and go, but everyone needs money. and we know better than to oppose a demigoddess. We could have weathered the storm, kept our heads down until someone toppled the bastard, or at worse evacuated. On the whole I'm happier with the way things are going, but we could have coped. Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

Voldemort looked around the hilltop, raised a small telescope, and glared across the forest toward Hogwarts. Even though the sun had set and the moon was still eclipsed, there was still enough light to make out the castle. There were lights in the Great Hall and a few other windows, otherwise it looked quiet. He snapped the telescope closed and turned to his followers. "Amicus, your arm."

Amicus bared his arm, revealing the Dark Mark. Voldemort stabbed his wand into it, hissing something none of them could understand, as Amicus grunted and stifled a scream.

"My Lord," said Bellatrix. "I think there may be a problem."

"Yes?"

"Something's wrong. I could barely feel your summons."

Voldemort hissed again. "That meddling ape! He must have guessed the spells of the Mark are tied to my name!"

"I'm sorry, My Lord, I didn't understand that."

"Constantine's meddling has weakened the spell that links the Mark to my will. But it still works well enough for my purposes, if I change things a little. Bellatrix, your arm." He jabbed the point of his wand into her Dark Mark and said "Crucio!", holding her upright as she screamed and writhed in pain.
Both of the Carrows winced and put a hand to their own Mark, and Voldemort smiled.

Narcissa Malfoy groaned and opened her eyes. Wherever she was, this wasn't the manor. She knew that she'd been stupefied, beyond that... Why was the ceiling so low? Cautiously, she sat up and looked around, realising that she was lying in the upper bunk of a cell. Draco was on the floor, his arms and legs locked rigid. She climbed down, checked that he was breathing easily, and said "Stay calm, Draco, this should wear off soon, if not I'll call for help." She checked the room's sole cupboard, and found a chamber pot and sink. The china of both was marked with the same insignia - a skull, a mailed fist with a sword, and three black birds, with the motto 'Toujours Pur' underneath - the heraldry of the Black family. That meant that the cell probably had vicious wards to prevent escape.

She shouted "Kreacher!" but there was no reply.

Draco writhed on the floor, moaning and twitching in pain, his left hand twitching as he tried to touch the Dark Mark.

"Kreacher! Summon a healer!"

There was a soft pop. "Kreacher is busy," said Dobby. "Is bad master's son hurting?"

"You have to help him!"

"Have? Dobby is a free elf, there is no have! You is forgetting your magic words."

Narcissa tried to think of a useful wandless spell, but she had never been proficient in that side of magic. "What words? What am I forgetting?"

"Please and thank you."

"Please! Please, Dobby, help Draco."

"Nasty Dark Lord is summoning bad master's son, is he?" Dobby clicked two fingers, and Draco was stunned. "Wait here. When good master Harry has beaten Dark Lord, he will see to you. Much safer here than outside."

"Where's Lucius?"

"Bad master is dead."

Narcissa collapsed to her knees and started to cry, and Dobby popped out, appearing in the kitchen where Kreacher was preparing a tray of food. "Bad master's son is stunned, bad master's wife is crying. Maybe Dobby shouldn't have told her bad master is dead. Maybe you puts some calming potion in the food?"

"Mistress Narcissa was a Black, no need for mollycoddling."

"Malfoys is dangerous," said Dobby. "They start to ask for things, you be careful. They twist thing until you be the one in the cell, they be taking the house over."

"Kreacher was not hatched yesterday. All Blacks are like that, Kreacher can handle it. They give me problems, Kreacher gets out the chains."

Dobby grinned. "Sometimes elves must be cruel to be kind. Dobby must go now, more errands to run." He disappeared with a soft pop.
Kreacher spat at the floor where Dobby had been standing. "Freak calls himself a free elf, is against nature. But Kreacher will show master Harry true elf service." He vanished the spit, and went back to preparing the tray.

"Confringo!" Hermione blasted two of the hell-hounds that were coming at them, as Harry cast "Sectumsempra!" at another and cut it in half. The front half dragged itself towards Harry by its front claws, snarling and dribbling fiery venom, and Harry cast the spell again to decapitate it. Diana dropped down from the sky, leaving the flying demons to flee, and chopped off another's head, while Constantine threw a strange pattern of glowing lines at another, wrapping it in a rapidly-shrinking ball of force. Behind them Ron and Luna were guarding their rear and taking out outliers from the pack, Ron with Confringo and Luna with Tarantallegra, forcing the confused beasts to dance away until the spell wore off.

Suddenly it went very quiet, and the hell-hounds fled in terror. "Don't like the look of this," said Constantine, lighting a cigarette, "if those bastards are running something really bad must be coming."

The clouds above them began to glow with white light, and parted as two glowing white-robed figures descended towards them, their wings beating slowly as they approached.

"Oh bugger," said Constantine. "Fucking angels!"

TBC

Many apologies to readers who saw this in the first day or so after it was posted - for some reason I got it into my head that the house system was suspended when Snape became headmaster, and part of Minerva's speech was a restoration of the system. I think this must have come from a story I read, I'm not sure which one. Apologies for letting this creep in, and many thanks to kaekae on Twisting the Hellmouth for pointing this out.

Some notes on staff appointments:

I gave Professor Sinistra the Deputy Head job because she mostly teaches at night, and presumably has more free time than other staff during the day, which tends to be when a Deputy Head is needed.

I've left the Muggle Studies post vacant since there appears to be nobody even marginally qualified to teach it.

The Harry Potter wiki lists Madame Hooch as support staff but states that she "was able to cast an exceptionally powerful Impediment Jinx and was also able to examine a broom for curses and other unfriendly spells." which implies at least an OWL, probably a NEWT, in Defence Against the Dark Arts, sufficient to teach the subject at a lower level. There is no canon reason why Professor Vector should or should not teach the subject. Professor Flitwick is a duelling champion and very experienced in this field.

Most of the Hogwarts staff, other than Heads of House, have no canon house affiliation. Professor Vector is often assumed to be Ravenclaw, and Sinistra Slytherin, but there is nothing in the books to support this.

Nearly everything that appears in fanfic about Harry Potter's wealth, noble status, vaults etc. is fanon, not canon. There is no good reason to think that the Potters were especially wealthy or had any form of noble status, or that Harry had any inheritance apart from the vault described in the first book. For the purposes of this story they were the equivalent of a well-to-do middle class couple.
Dobby and Kreacher fought violently when they met in canon, but it seems plausible that there would be a small amount of reconciliation with time.

And Sandman fans should have a pretty good idea who we'll be meeting in the next chapter...
"Ah... Mister Constantine, Princess Diana," said one of the angels. "Our new... celebrities."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at the white-robed angel. It didn't look like Snape, and none of them could readily imagine Snape ending up as an angel, but the intonation was identical. The other angel hovered silently, studying a book, and seemingly paying them little attention.

"We're only passing through this realm," said Diana. "If we are not impeded, we will leave without further violence. Might we know who we are addressing?"

"I am Remiel, Angel of Hope. My colleague is Duma, Angel of Silence."

"They're the two that got lumbered with running Hell when Lucifer quit," said Constantine. "You must have really been on God's shit list."

"We are honoured by God's trust in us," said Remiel, "and committed to maintaining proper ethical and moral standards in reforming our guests."

"Translation, they're torturing the damned, and making it worse by saying that it's for their own good."

"I'm sure that you know all about being damned. The only reason that you are not here already is that your death will trigger a war between rival demon lords."

"You say that like I'm a bad person. I beat the system, mate, I made things so difficult for evil that they had to let me go. What have you done to upset the forces of darkness lately?"

"Our jobs. Why have you brought children here?"

"We were following a demon," said Hermione, "she led us here."

"Did you summon it?"

"What? No, of course not!"

"Then why follow it?"

"We're fighting Voldemort, he's..."

Remiel sneered. "We know of Voldemort. That is no reason to traffic with demons."

"She turned up on her own," said Harry, "She seems to be against Voldemort, she said he sold his soul then cheated on the deal."

"A Dark Lord who traffics with demons. How original... Princess Diana, you and the children may leave. Constantine, there must be further inquiries."

"No," said Harry. "We can't leave without John, and we've still got a demon running loose in our world, and a chance that Eclipso will break free, without him we don't have a hope of handling them."

"Why do you argue against God, boy?"
"I don't see God here. You're supposed to be stopping evil, so far as I can see you're just playing safe."

"We must follow God's plan."

"What about free will?"

"God gave you free will. It is largely the capacity to make mistakes. We do not suffer from that weakness."

"Everyone I've ever met with a plan has ended up screwing me over," said Harry. "What makes you so different?"

"Have a care, boy, or..."

"Don't take the piss," said Constantine. "We all know you're going to let us go. It's all part of God's will, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I've got good eyesight, and I can read Enochian. I know what book your pal is reading, and that tells me you're going to let us go." Everyone looked at the book, a leather-bound volume with Enochian characters on the cover. They meant nothing to the others. "Read ahead, and tell me I'm wrong."

"What does it say?" asked Hermione.

"Tell you later. Okay, Remiel, let's cut the crap. We've got that idiot Riddle to fight, and a couple of demons to stop, we can't do that here. We need to keep going another half mile or so, open up the portal I can feel there, and kick demon arse. If you stop us, if we don't do this, evil wins and it's at least partly your fault. Your choice, no pressure." Constantine looked at his watch ostentatiously. "But time's bloody flying, so make your choice soon."

Remiel looked at Duma, who held the book so that Remiel could look at the page. He turned forward a couple of pages, then back again, looking increasingly frustrated and a little sulky.

"Very well. You may continue in safety, as is foretold. No harm will befall you before you leave Hell."

Both angels rose into the sky, and vanished into the clouds.

"Come on," said Constantine. "Let's get the fuck out of here before he changes his mind." He started walking again, and the others followed.

"So what's so special about the book?" asked Hermione.

"You remember we were talking about free will?"

"What about it?" asked Harry.

"Might not be as free as we want to think it is. The title was 'Harry Potter and the Half-God Prince.'"

"We really need to do something about the swamp," said Fred Weasley.

George shrugged. "I think it adds character."
"We've already had to pull three kids out, and the neighbors are starting to complain."

"I don't think our spell is keeping it there. We've tried to cancel it enough times, it just stays there and bubbles occasionally."

"Maybe it's the swamp monster keeping it there."

"That's... disturbingly plausible, actually. What do we do about it?"

"Bribe it to go away?"

"What do swamp monsters like? Gold?"

"What would it use gold for? Maybe it wants feeding?"

"It's sort of made of plants, what do plants eat?"

Together, both said "Fertilizer!"

George picked up a box of dung bombs. "Maybe a few of these."

"Right idea, but I think it would have to be raw dung."

"We've got a few pounds of dragon dung left in the potions store, I think, want to give it a try?"

Fred looked out through a gap in the blinds. "Yeah. Better do it now, while things are quiet. Don't seem to be any Death Eaters around at all tonight, they must be busy somewhere."

"Okay, but let's be careful, he might not like it."

"The monster? How do you know it isn't a she?"

George scratched his remaining ear. "Good question. Maybe you should ask it if it wants to go on a date."

"Riiiight. Okay, let's do this carefully. Dragon-hide gloves and coats, shield cloaks and hats, and don't let it pull us in."

"Okay."

A few minutes later Fred cautiously opened the door. George waited a moment, then said "Hello, if you're still there in the swamp, do you want some fertilizer?" The swamp bubbled and released a bubble of pungent gas.

"I think it might be interested." Fred lobbed in a small bag of dragon dung, tied with a red and gold ribbon. It sank into the swamp. "We've got some more if you want it, but we really need to move the swamp out of the way, it's blocking the alley."

A huge grey-green hand rose from the swamp and made a beckoning gesture. George shrugged, got a second, larger bag, and prepared to throw it. "This is all we have left now, I hope it's enough for you." He tossed it toward the hand, which snatched it from the air and pulled it down into the swamp. There was a brief pause then more bubbles rose, followed by a loud belching noise, and the swamp slowly shrank, leaving dry cobbles where it had been, until there was nothing left.

"That went well," said Fred.
"Indubitably. Let's lock up, with the swamp gone we might get more customers tomorrow."

"COME...." said a deep voice behind them. They turned, and the creature from the swamp was standing in another patch of swamp that now occupied a large chunk of the shop floor. "YOU ARE NEEDED...."

Fred and George backed away. "Needed where?" asked George.

"HOGWARTS...."

"We can't go there," said Fred, "the wards won't let anyone onto the grounds, and it's being run by Death Eaters."

"I WILL TAKE YOU...."

"Who needs us?"

"HOGWARTS... YOUR SISTER... HARRY POTTER...."

"Let us lock the shop and get some supplies," said Fred, "and we're right with you."

"HURRY...."

"Is this the last load?" asked the goblin in charge of the mine cart train, newly arrived on shift.

"Last for now," said one of the goblin guards loading five unconscious Death Eaters into the middle three carts of five. "Might be more later."

"Where to?"

"The dungeons, of course. But it might get a bit busy later on, if we get many more we'll have to start to use some of the vaults."

"Just my luck, I was looking forward to a quiet night."

"Right, that's the lot," said the talkative guard. He and the others climbed into the front and rear carts, the driver released the brakes, and the cart lurched into motion, running down the tracks at its usual breakneck speed.

"So what's the betting?" asked the driver.

"Even odds right now. Potter's got the Princess on his side, but the Death Eaters still have a lot of fire-power."

"Put me down for a galleon on Potter's side, he did pretty well in that tournament a couple of years ago."

"But since then he's lost Black, Dumbledore, and Moody, and... hang on, this isn't the way we came last time!"

"It's the usual route to the lower levels," said the driver, "what's the problem?"

Before the talkative guard could answer the reason became obvious, as the carts went under the Thief's Downfall: the potion showered down into the carts, and the prisoners began to revive as the spells on them were cancelled. Within moments a furious fight had begun, as the reviving Death
Eaters tried to break free of their bonds and use wandless magic against the guards, and the guards retaliated with clubs and swords. By the time the carts braked at the dungeons the last prisoners were subdued.

"And that's why you don't use that route with prisoners," said the talkative guard. "Everyone all right?"

"No," said another guard, "I think this one's dead."

The talkative guard checked. "Do you know how much paperwork we'll have to do? How much money the bank stands to lose, if there's family that wants compensation."

"We could always say it was combat injuries before we got hold of them," said the driver.

"Works for me. Then we can blame it on Potter, he won't know the difference."

"Who is it anyway, anyone important?"

"I don't know, humans all look alike to me." The talkative guard checked the manifest. "Corban something."

"Never heard of him. Right, put him to one side, we'll get the prisoners tucked away, this one can go down to the morgue."

As the last residues of Corban Yaxley's magic dispersed several Imperius spells he had cast began to fail. In his official residence, a country mansion near Bath, the Minister for Magic, Pius Thicknesse, felt a sudden blinding headache and began to realize what he had done.

Constantine held the portal open as the others came out, then shut it before anyone or anything else came out of Hell. The moon was still eclipsed, a reddish disc lit by light refracted through the Earth's atmosphere.

"Where are we?" asked Harry, "and where are they keeping the prisoners?" He looked out across an industrial area and couldn't see any obvious signs of the Death Eaters, but there was the cold dead feeling that meant that there were dementors around. "And what the hell was the book thing about?"

"Better not to ask," said Constantine. "I'm pretty sure the book was writing itself while we were talking, so it's not like everything's set in stone."

Harry was still thinking about that when Mazikeen walked out of the shadows. "What kept you?"

"Fucking angels," said Constantine. "Remiel and Duma, ever met them?"

"Remiel turns up at the club once in a while to whine at Lucifer. You'd think he'd be honoured that God trusts him with Hell, but no..."

"Over there," said Ron, pointing at a huge building about half a mile away. "The shadows around the chimneys are moving, has to be Dementors."

"Looks like a power station," whispered Hermione, "Won't be easy to get in."

"We're going to have to improvise," said Harry. "We could fly over, crash in through the windows, but I don't fancy our chances if they spot us coming."

"I can create a diversion," said Diana. "Hermione, give me the mechanism, please."
Hermione groped in her beaded handbag, her arm in it up to the shoulder, and produced Diana's Antikythera mechanism.

Diana set the dials, waited as it transformed into an owl in her hand, then spoke to it rapid Greek none of the others could follow. The metal seemed to darken and it flexed its wings then flew off toward the factory. "It shouldn't be affected by the dementors."

"What did you tell it to do?" asked Harry

"Wait for my signal then start to break things."

"Things?"

"Windows, lights, anything that looks fragile. It should be a useful distraction."

Constantine smiled grimly as he picked the lock of a parked dump truck. "Maze, Diana, do you want to take care of the dementors while we deal with the Death idiots?" The cab door opened, and Constantine climbed in and started working on the ignition.

The side of Mazikeen's face that wasn't covered by her mask grinned. "Why else am I here?"

"Let's have the brooms," said Harry, "This lot shouldn't be their best fighters. Always assuming Tommy-boy isn't hiding out here, of course. We'll go in hard and fast, cause as much chaos as we can, and take the bastards out before they get their act together."

The truck started, and Constantine cracked his knuckles. "Right then, chaos it is. Any time you're ready."

"I'll ride with John," said Luna, climbing in on the passenger side. "It's where I'm needed."

"Okay," said Constantine, "but strap yourself in like this..." he fastened his seat belt "...or you're likely to end up with a broken neck, this is going to be a bumpy ride." Luna moved her wand in a looping motion, and her seat belt fastened itself.

"Okay, that works too."

"Take care of her," said Ron, "or I'll hex your bollocks off."

"All right," said Diana. "Mazikeen and I will keep the dementors away from you, the rest of you concentrate on capturing the Death Eaters and rescuing the prisoners. Are we agreed?"

"Sounds like a plan," said Constantine. "Wagons roll!" He slammed the door and put the truck into gear, as the others took to the air.

"How do I toot the horn?" Luna asked excitedly.

"Wait until we're closer, love, and I'll show you." He changed up to second gear and the truck picked up speed. Diana cupped her hands to her mouth and imitated an owl call then took to the air, followed by Mazikeen. Ahead they heard the noise of breaking glass.

Bellatrix entered the black silk tent she had conjured for Voldemort. "My Lord, I think most of our forces are here now, assuming that nobody else got away from Malfoy Manor."

Voldemort scowled. "So many of our best lost... well, we shall avenge them tenfold. Starting with Potter, Constantine and their hell-bitches. The giants and trolls?"
"They stand ready at your command."

"And the werewolves?"

"Greyback's wolves won't be much use before the total eclipse ends. Without true moonlight they can't change."

"And the other packs?"

Bellatrix shrugged. "The same problem, and we have them in the south, ready to deal with any uprising in London. Transporting them here might be possible, I suppose, if you feel that it's worthwhile."

"Hmmm.... no, I think not. They're little more than mindless brutes, and we may end up needing them where they are." He cast a non-verbal spell, and a small scroll appeared in his hand. "Let's see... The full eclipse ends at eight-seventeen, but the moon won't be back to normal until nearly nine-thirty. If we set out for Hogwarts then, we should arrive well before ten."

"My lord, that may be too late." Both of them stared as Severus Snape appeared in the tent.

"You're...."

"A ghost. Yes, I'd noticed."

**TBC**

**Notes:** The Harry Potter Wiki says that the prisoners were kept in a disused nuclear power plant, but the exterior shown in the film is the cooling towers of a coal-burning power plant, which makes more sense - disused nuclear reactors are not left unoccupied or unguarded.

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