Tom Riddle escapes at the end of Chamber of Secrets, and is quite surprised to find that nothing about the future is as he ever thought it would be. Soon, Tom finds himself on a globe-spanning quest to follow the path his forebear blazed and perhaps, at the end, to put a stop to him once and for all.

Originally posted on ffnet, now also updating here.
Disclaimer: This work is heavily inspired by the works of others on ffnet, such as Less Wrong, Lens of Sanity, Joe6991, Sarah 1281, The Sinister Man, and Jbern, among many others. As such, you may see elements of this story that reference or recall elements of their stories. If something is distinctly familiar to you, it's probably from their works. Also obviously the Harry Potter franchise in general is JKR's.

Content Warning: Tom Riddle is not a good person. My depiction of him will be a far cry from the cackling megalomaniac we all know and love to hate, but he has no qualms with murdering and mutilating other people when it suits him. There will almost certainly be some dark and violent stuff in here. Also coarse language, possible sexual content, et cetera.

This story will adhere to the events of "core" canon up until the end of Chamber of Secrets, where it will diverge. It will not be compliant with Cursed Child or Crimes of Grindelwald, which I consider apocryphal at best, but will be compliant with Fantastic Beasts And Where To Find Them.

My life was born from death. I suppose it should have come to no surprise that it'd circle back to that eventually.

'Lord Voldemort,' I said, with un-felt cheer, my spectral breath failing to fog in the freezing cold of Salazar's chamber. 'You look like shit.'

He did, too. Or rather, I did. I'd been prepared for the gruesome nature of the Horcrux ritual, the horror of butchering an innocent person for my own self-interest. What I hadn't been prepared for was how it felt to rend oneself in two, to unmake the most sacred aspect of self that a person can have. The little black book of Herpo the Foul had made little mention of that.

My other self looked gaunt, his eyes bloodshot and his hair matted with sweat. I'd always been slender but in this moment his robes seemed to hang off him like a bed-sheet on a washing line. Lord Voldemort, age 16, dry-heaved violently with his hands on his knees.

As he recovered, I took a moment to examine my surroundings from my new incorporeal perspective. I stood in the ancient Chamber of Secrets, hidden deep beneath Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The statue of Salazar Slytherin, in all his vaguely Iberian glory, towered over my two selves, my basilisk slumbering within. Upon the dark stone floor of the chamber were the burned-out remnants of the mandala I had painted from a mixture of hydra blood and powdered human bone, surrounding the tattered remnants of my chosen sacrifice.

Today is September 30th, 1943. My new birthday.

My other self drew himself to his full height, and vanished the last of the bile from his chin with a flick of his - his - wand, followed by the rest of the evidence of the unmitigated sin I had performed here.

'Did it work?' He asked, brandishing my new abode. 'Are you linked to the diary?'

I was. I could feel the binding, the metaphysical cord tying my disembodied soul to this plane of existence. I could feel myself drawn to the Diary like gravity, and I knew from Herpo's grimoire that soon I would lose the ability to manifest as a shade entirely. The long dark would come for me.
Even still, I grinned, and my other self's expression soon mirrored my own. I was finally free from the dread that had haunted my every nightmare for as long as I could remember.

:\--:

I knew what my role was from here, unpleasant as it was. The true price of immortality. My other self would go on to be Lord Voldemort, ruler of all he surveys, whilst I, and our future kin, would languish in solitude to facilitate his eternity.

I became the Diary, communicating with my other through the written word. We spoke at great length on his future, his plans. On December 9th, 1943, he told me that he had succeeded on the most uncertain, most dangerous part of our plan: He had created a second Horcrux, from the Gaunt family ring I had taken from that… vile wretch of a relative only this last summer.

This, for the first time since we parted, gave me pause. When we were one, my plan for the six horcruxes I would create were clearly defined: Unremarkable objects, easily distributed and hidden in the furthest and darkest depths of the world. Impossible to identify even one, let alone six. The Gaunt family ring, bearing the seal of the House of Peverell on that gorgeous black opal, and with a magical aura obviously to any wizard with even the barest hint of training in enchantment, was anything but unremarkable.

It was our first, and only argument.

After that, Lord Voldemort wrote to me no longer. In fact, nobody wrote in me at all. I had no eyes, no mouth, no way to interact with the world unless somebody was writing in in pages, and I was writing back. I could only conclude that the time had come for Lord Voldemort to hide me away from the world, never to be recovered.

:\--:

Though I knew what to expect, it didn't make it any easier. I had no way to gauge the passing of the days (years?). For all the platitudes I liked to reassure myself with when I was whole, no man was made for solitude. I lay, bodiless, in the eternal void, with naught to do but dream. I reviewed my own lifespan more times than I could keep track of, and I fantasised countless iterations of what my other self could be doing out in the world. I was Tom Marvolo Riddle, I was Lord Voldemort, I was the half dozen other aliases I had toyed with over my time in Hogwarts, and I was none of them at all.

In short, I went insane, inter-spaced with long bouts of agonising sanity.

:\--:

'Property of Ginny Weasley'

The first words spoken to me in surely eons. If I had a chair to sit in, I'd have fallen out of it. What in Merlin's name…

I scrambled for a response.

'Hello Ginny Weasley.'

There was a long pause. I almost panicked. After so long spent so utterly alone, the thought of a return to the silence terrified me.

Weasley was a vaguely familiar pureblood name, though I had met none in my time at Hogwarts.
Where the *hell* had Lord Voldemort stashed me, that I ended up in these hands?

'Who is this?' came the reply, and a rush of relief flooded through me.

Something in me, what may have been my gut if I had one, told me not to use my preferred name. Like a lightning bolt of inspiration, I remembered how it had been fashionable for a few years in the late 30s to enchant one's notebooks to give study advice.

'My name is Tom. I am here to help.'

A response, much quicker this time. 'Hello Tom! Are you a person or a book?'

'I am a diary. I keep your secrets safe, so nobody can read them'

'Wow, that IS really helpful! My brothers are always taking my things,'

The handwriting had a certain clumsiness to it, as if written by a child.

'May I ask your age, Ginny?'

'I'm Eleven years old!'

What the *fuck?*

'Wow! Almost an adult! Are you in school yet?'

'No, not yet. I just went to get my wand today!'

So, it's the summer break then.

'Ah, a prized moment in any witch's life. Well done.'

'Thank you! It's yew and unicorn tail hair, eleven inches and unyielding'

A wandmaker probably could have made more sense of that, but frankly the art had never caught my interest. Alas, on to subjects more interesting to me:

'May I ask where you obtained me from? I had not heard from my previous owner in some time.'

'I found you in my schoolbooks, I think you maybe were in the used book part of Flourish and Blotts. I'm very happy to have you though! I promise I won't sell you.'

A book store? Surely not. Before I split from Lord Voldemort, I had been planning to cast the diary into the Mariana trench. Diagon Alley was about as much the opposite of "the furthest and darkest depths of this world" as it was possible to be. Surely our argument had not infuriated him so much as to… to trade me away to some merchant for barter!

Something must have happened. I needed to find out what. It was a minor miracle that the person to find me was a small child. They are far easier to manipulate than adults, but I couldn't push too hard. If she were to hand me off to a fully trained wizard, they would be much less likely to trust a suspiciously chatty book.

It would seem fate has consigned me to be a small girl's confidant, at least until I get my bearings a little more.

'Why don't you tell me more about your day, Ginny?'
The girl turned out to be a veritable wellspring of information. Most of it utterly useless. But there were the odd nuggets of valuable information in there. I managed to get the year out of her. 1992. I had been in this Diary for fifty years!

'… and then Dad got into a fight in Diagon Alley with Lucius Malfoy, it was brilliant! Mum wasn't too pleased though…'

I didn't know any Lucius, but Malfoy definitely caught my attention. Could this Lucius be Abraxas' son? Grandson?

More importantly, I had begun to feel something. A certain… warmth, that I couldn't quite identify. I felt, if not exactly rejuvenated, certainly on the road there. It wasn't affection, Merlin knows this girl was infuriatingly boring to listen to. This… would require further examination.

The girl bid me goodnight, and her writing stopped. The warmth dimmed. I was alone in the dark once more.

:—:

'It happened, Tom. I'm a Gryffindor!'

The girl had returned. I took a moment to gather myself. Wait, had Gryffindor been the goal or the dread? The goal, that's right.

'Congratulations! I knew you could do it, Ginny. You're a Weasley after all!'

The warmth returned as well, accompanied by the barest trace of emotion. What? I hadn't thought I could perform legilimency in this… state, even with my unusual affinity for the field. Herpo had mentioned the capacity for a Horcrux to access magical abilities in self defence, but I hardly though this counted.

The girl engaged me in what I would come to accept as her usual trite waffle, aside from a mildly interesting anecdote about her brother and some boy she liked flying a car to school. But now that my attention had been drawn to it, I could feel that little niggle. Not a foothold, not even the barest resemblance of a toehold yet, but it was something.

I smiled to myself. This, this I could work with.

:—:

Things settled into something of a routine. The girl would natter on to me about her life, her dreams and her fears, and I would wiggle away at her mind. I found that the more she wrote, the warmer - and stronger - I felt. So I encouraged her to write to me as often as possible.

Then the girl dropped a bombshell.

'So what draws you to this Harry fellow so much?' I had asked idly, trying to decide if the memory I was making sense of was from her early childhood, or a dream. Dreams are often a garbled mess.

'Everything! He's ever so nice, and he's funny in a sarcastic kind of way… and of course he defeated You-Know-Who!'

I did not know who, and said as much.
Mum always told me not to say his name. He was a really really bad wizard, and he tried to take over the world, but Harry stopped him!

'A twelve year old boy defeated a dark wizard?

'Oh no, Harry defeated him when he was a baby. Isn't that amazing?'

That… seemed implausible, but I'd seen stranger things.

'It most certainly is, Ginny. How did he do it?'

'Well, nobody really knows. But we call him the Boy Who Lived, because he survived a Killing Curse!'

Impossible. I'd done the research myself of course, anyone who began the path down Immortality Lane would. The Killing Curse was some serious Old-World shit. Atlantean, if some scholars were to be believed, only rediscovered in the Middle Ages. Nothing could survive it.

This must be some sort of fanciful tale, it was the only explanation. But I needed to know for sure. I took the risk, and leapt deeper into the girl's mind than I had ever risked before. I found a name there, a name whispered to the girl by her father, late at night at her insistence. A name that rocked me to my core.

Lord Voldemort.

What had happened? My plan, my path to power was clearly defined and laid out. At no point did that plan involve "Attempt to murder an infant" nor "be so widely reviled that fifty-odd years later children are scared to say my name".

What had he done? What had I done?

:—:

My intrusion into the girl's mind, premature as it was, had risked my exposure if she realised what happened, but it was necessary. Yet it raised only more questions. If my other self had been defeated by this child, why had he not returned yet? My continued existence was proof of his own. He should have been able to execute a ritual of incarnation fairly quickly in the event of his death.

I needed to get out of this diary. My other self, wherever he was, needed me.

My attack had caused the girl a terrible migraine, but it had also opened her far more to my influence. The next time we spoke, I was able to plant some ideas, some markers, within her subconscious mind to alter her behaviour. Enhancing her intent to keep the Diary safe and a secret, implanting a drive to write in the Diary at every opportunity, the works. Simple measures, but effective.

Finally, after weeks of work, I was ready. The girl's mind was prepared, and I had drawn from her enough power to attempt a possession. I slipped into her mind, and opened her eyes.

After fifty years shapeless in the void, having a body took some getting used to, and for a time I just lay there, testing my senses and movements. I found myself in a dormitory, on a bed surrounded by rich red curtains, with golden trim. I sneered in distaste. Gryffindor indeed.

I knew I would not be able to remain in the girl for long, possession was a messy affair at the best of times. It would cause permanent neurological damage if I stayed too long, and I couldn ill-afford
to break my only available host.

It was long past curfew, so I disillusioned myself to avoid detection as I slipped from Gryffindor tower, and made my way to the second floor girl's bathroom. The girl's magic was strong for an eleven year old, but pathetically weak compared to what I had been used to. Maintaining the disillusionment throughout the journey was an embarrassing sap on my strength. All the more reason to get this over with.

'Open' I hissed to the sink in parseltongue, and the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets complied.

The Chamber was as dark and foreboding as I remembered. At some point in the last fifty years, it had sprung a leak, and the stone floors were hidden beneath a thin layer of ice-cold lakewater.

Closing my eyes, I intoned 'Speak to me, Salazar Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four!'

Eh. A bit much in my opinion. Did he have to say that himself every time he came down here?

There was a deep, bassy grating sound as the mouth of Salazar's statue opened, then a loud thump as something enormous hit the ground near me.

'A breakfast sssssnnack' hissed a voice like knives being sharpened.

'Halt,' I ordered, and given that I was not immediately torn in half, I assume that it did. 'Your master is returned. Bow to me, and avert your gaze'

Slytherin's monster, all sixty foot and change of her, made a noise like a puppy whose owner had come home from the store.

'Massssster it hass been sssso long…'

Basilisks had about as much ability to differentiate between individual humans as humans had the ability to differentiate between individual basilisks, so it was no surprise that she didn't notice my significant change in appearance.

'Go amuse yourself, beast. I have business in your dwelling.'

The basilisk slithered off, hissing happily to itself.

'And don't eat anyone!' I shouted after it. Merlin knew that the basilisk's desire for a quick snack had caused me more than enough trouble in the past.

I levitated myself up to Salazar's stony mouth, and stepped into the Basilisk's hibernation chamber. Powerful magicks - tied into the same system as the castle's wards - maintained the atmosphere and had sustained the Basilisk throughout its centuries-long slumber. More relevantly to me, the chamber also contained a hidden alcove, behind a stone facade. Within lay my prize, secreted away half a century past. Black and ancient, gnarled by time but preserved by magic. The Grimoire of Herpo the Foul.

:—:

I flipped through the three thousand year old text, which predated muggle codices by almost a millennium, re-reading the section on soul magic. Herpo really was a genius, centuries ahead of his time. A shame he went off his nut and started burning down cities, but from what the girl had been told I was hardly one to judge.
I found the passage I was searching for. Translated (very) roughly from Aeolic Greek, it read:

"On the matter of returning the tethered soul to permanent corporeal form, I have identified several viable methods.

The first, and most swift, is for it to simply possess a person whose soul has already been removed, yet lives. As there is no rival soul to vie with for control over the mind, the body does not degenerate and fail. However, there is a certain danger to this method. The host body must be compatible with the soul that now inhabits it. Elsewise, a most slow and painful death awaits, and the tethered soul shall be back where it started.

The second, is to subsume the soul of another entirely, and use their life force to reforge oneself. This method is difficult however, as the second party must offer themselves to the tethered soul of their own volition. The soul of the second party is destroyed entirely. Naturally, such selflessness is exceedingly rare.

The third, which is most difficult and complicated, but is also ultimately the most rewarding, is to perform a ritual of incarnation. The creation of an entirely new body, to one’s own specifications. Its complexity lies in that, like the second method, it requires the use of an ally to prepare and perform such a ritual, most of which are beyond the means of lesser wizards. My preferred ritual for this purpose is detailed below."

This confirmed my suspicions of why the girl's attention had restored me somewhat. Clearly, though certainly accidentally, she had been "feeding" me herself. By metaphorically pouring out her heart to me, she was literally pouring her soul into the Diary.

This made my own path to corporeality much easier; just keep doing what I'm doing. What it didn't explain is why Lord Voldemort is still ten years dead. From what I'd gleaned from the girl's mind, he had followers, plenty of them. He should have been able to return himself to human form within a couple months of being destroyed at the most. Moreover, he should have been able to demonstrate his survival to his followers almost immediately. Why did they scatter?

I let the basilisk enjoy its freedom for a while, slithering through the pipes of Hogwarts, before calling it back to its chamber. It wouldn't do to let one of the deadliest creatures known to wizardkind to run amok through a school, after all.

A/N: I've long been a reader of fanfics on ffnet, I figured it was time I tried my hand at actually writing one.

Please let me know what you think in a review.
The Basilisk Semi-Unleashed

Disclaimer: This chapter contains more direct dialogue lifted from Chamber of Secrets than I would like. I cut out what I felt I could get away with, but hot damn if the Chamber scene isn't just a wall of dialogue. This will be the last time direct dialogue is lifted from the series.

Content warning: This chapter contains Tom at what will probably be the darkest and cruellest I will ever write him. He gets nasty towards the end.

:--:--:--:--:

'Miss Weasley?'

I froze. I knew that voice.

I turned around, and there indeed stood Albus Dumbledore, in all his glory, lit by a god-ray of afternoon Sun. He'd aged terribly, in my opinion, from when I last saw him. When I knew him, he'd not even started to grey, but now his hair and beard were a solid silver. For a wizard of a hundred and change, he looked decades older than he should.

I schooled my, or rather the girl's features into anything other than the all-consuming dread I felt at his proximity. Fear was an emotion I'd almost forgotten in the long dark.

'Y-yes, professor?' I stuttered in the girl's accent.

He had to know, how could he not, headmasters don't just randomly engage first years in conversation, Dippet never did, fuck fuck fu-

'I was wondering if you might assist me with a little experiment. It's to do with this hallway.'

I… what?

'What do you need me to do, sir?'

'I would like for you to please walk down this corridor,' he indicated 'contemplating how you need to find a bathroom'

I looked around, and realised where we were.

'But why sir?'

'I will explain in a moment, miss Weasley, but the experiment requires ignorance'

With that, Dumbledore neatly stepped around the corner out of sight of the corridor in question.

I hesitated. This had to be some sort of trap, but it wasn't like I had a choice in the matter. I tread the path indicated, expecting at any moment a spell to strike me between the shoulders, but none came.

When I reached then end, I called out. 'I'm done sir!'

Dumbledore stepped around the corner, looking quite put out.
'Foiled once more. It seems this mystery shall have to be solved another day. You see, some time ago, I was walking through the castle in dire need of a bathroom, but I found I could not recall where the nearest lavatory was. But then, suddenly, a door appeared right here in this wall,’ he gestured to a blank stretch of wall, across from a tapestry depicting an idiot teaching ballet to trolls.

'It contained precisely what I needed, a room full of chamberpots. But when I attempted to find this wondrous chamber again, it defied discovery. Curious, is it not?’

I knew exactly what he was talking about. I'd found the Room of Requirement (as it was later identified to me as) in my fourth year, though it had never been a bathroom for me. It had been a repository of forgotten things, countless items from all the centuries that Hogwarts had had students with something to hide. I had found more than a few useful bits and pieces there over the years.

Naturally I didn't particularly feel the need to mention any of this to Dumbledore.

'I believe it is possible that the room will only appear under certain circumstances. One such suspected criteria was ignorance of the room’s existence. Alas. Enjoy your day miss Weasley.'

'T-thank you professor'

I began to walk away, desperate to put as much ground as possible between us.

'Oh, and miss Weasley?'

Fuck

I wheeled around.

'Ten points to Gryffindor for your assistance,'

'Thank you sir'

I rounded a corner and let out a sigh of relief. *That*, had been too close. I couldn't go on like this, I was a fool to not have acted sooner. I had no idea how much longer I would need to fully subsume the girl's soul. I *had* to get rid of Dumbledore.

:—:

I finally managed to crick my neck, granting relief from half an hour's discomfort. It was a shame I was missing the Halloween Feast for this, but it was the best time to make sure I was not interrupted by a passing student. I flicked the girl's wand, animating a paintbrush to carefully spell out the foot-tall lettering.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED.

ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE

Just as I was about to paint an exclamation mark, I heard the clatter of foot on stone. Cursing to myself, I vanished the paintbrush and the bucket of rat’s blood, slapped a dark variant of a permanency charm on the writing, and fled the scene in the opposite direction, leaving the petrified cat swaying lightly in my wake.

:—:

'Oh Tom, it's so awful. *That* poor cat!'
I relaxed in my perhaps not-so-eternal prison, and humoured the girl.

'Indeed. I can't imagine who would do such a thing, and to an innocent animal too!'

Frankly, I would have preferred to have simply killed it. The wretched thing had almost exposed me on my night-time escapades more than once. But for this to work, I needed consistency. I'd given the basilisk strict instructions to kill nobody. Petrifications, whilst terrifying, and more than enough to get the board to close the school if they carried on long enough, would not bring the Aurors down on my head.

'And everyone thinks Harry did it, but he wouldn't do something like that! What if he's expelled, Tom, I'm so frightened'

I rolled nonexistent eyes. Ah, the fickleness of the crowd. A hero of the people one moment, dastardly villain the next.

'Why do people think Harry Potter did it?'

'He was there before everyone else, so they're saying he was caught in the act, but it's not true, it can't be!'

'It'll be alright, Ginny. Dumbledore wouldn't have just let Harry go if he thought that he was responsible. Don't give any mind to what silly people have to say, they don't matter'

There was a brief pause.

'How do you know who Dumbledore is, Tom?'

'My previous owner was also a Hogwarts student, they mentioned him few times. They told me he was a great wizard'

'Well he is, that's true. You're right Tom, he'd have to know Harry's innocent!'

:—:

A week later, the basilisk struck again, a student this time. Things were progressing nicely.

The girl was distraught for days. Apparently the victim was a friend of hers or something. I soothed her with the usual platitudes, pointing out that it was only temporary, but this seemed to do little.

I had not possessed her since my encounter with Dumbledore, both out of fear of discovery, and having noticed that her fingers had started to get a little twitchy. However, my hand had been forced when the girl had mentioned the groundskeeper's chicken coop in passing. A rooster's crow was *fatal* to a basilisk. A single caw could kill mine dead in an instant.

I slipped out of the castle, down to the oaf's hut. From the girl's memories, he was just as simple-minded as he'd been before I had gotten him expelled, and it showed. The coop wasn't even locked. I was in and out in less than a minute.

Making my way back to the castle, I found a nice spot for the girl to resume her life. I was on the cusp of slipping out of her mind and back into the Diary when I recalled the girl telling me that the Dueling Club being reinstated tonight. On a whim, I decided to come along for the ride. Allowing her to retain control, rather than fully seizing her mind and body, would drastically decrease the damage done.
I must say, I was rather unimpressed, seeing the vaunted Harry Potter in person. *This* was the one who defeated Lord Voldemort as an infant? He looked like he barely knew which end of the wand to point at your enemy for crying out loud.

The boy he was assigned to duel summoned a serpent. An impressive bit of conjuration, for a child. The dithering idiot running this little club, on the other hand, somehow managed to bungle a simple dispelling, and instead managed only to piss the thing off.

Then Potter spoke to it. Ordered it to leave the child it was menacing alone. In parseltongue. By the looks of things, without even realising he was doing it. Now *that* was interesting. I'd never met a parselmouth other than myself before.

The skill originated from Herpo the Foul, and had been considered something of a hallmark of dark wizards ever since. Utter tosh, in my somewhat biased opinion. Knowledge - *power* - in and of itself was never inherently evil. It was dependent on the person who wielded it.

Naturally, the crowd responded to this display in the predictable way that crowds respond to anything of the slightest controversy: Fear and anger. Even the girl gasped fearfully. Hell, even the little shit Potter saved shouted at him. Wait, wasn't that kid a muggleborn? How'd he even know what parseltongue *was*?

Potter's friends dragged him out of the hall before the crowd turned nasty, which was a bit of a shame. Nothing like a good bit of mob violence to round out an evening, especially when it would probably save me a fair amount of trouble.

Still, this did open an opportunity. What was that muggleborn boy's name again?

:—:

The plan worked beautifully, better than I even could have planned for. The muggleborn boy was admitted to the hospital wing that very night (alongside, surprisingly, a ghost that was similarly affected. Who knew that a basilisk's *gaze* could strike down even them?). Better yet, Potter had *again* been found standing over the bodies. The school was *abuzz*, and pretty much everyone and their owl believed Potter to be the culprit.

Well, *Dumbledore* didn't, of course, but that only helped things. Shielding his golden boy from the consequences of "his" actions could only serve to further damage his standing with the school board.

I remained in my diary for the rest of the calendar year, allowing for the girl's nervous system to recover. Meanwhile, the girl had become increasingly frantic over the winter break. No longer did she practice her godawful love poems in me, nor confiding her fears that Harry Potter would never like her back. Her fears became far more legitimate and entertaining.

She had finally started to see through the subconscious barriers in her mind I had erected to keep her from noticing the wild discrepancies in her life. She started telling me about how she had been losing time, how she'd woken up the night of the latest attack with rooster feathers in her clothes, how she woke up with rats blood on her front the night of the first attack (she thought it was paint. Adorable). Finally, she managed to formulate the conclusion that had been staring her in the face all along: She was responsible.

I wasn't worried. Those barriers had mostly been to make my life a little easier, but they paled in comparison to the work I'd done in building her resistance to confessing her fears to somebody else, or seeking help from an authority figure. Honestly, I don't know if my other self ever received a
Mastery in Legilimency, but what I’d done to Ginny Weasley was nothing less than *art*.

Then she stopped writing to me.

:**—:**

I lay in the dark, waiting. Had I miscalculated? Had I been caught? Had the *girl* been caught? Was I sitting in her trunk, awaiting a thrall whom would never return?

:**—:**

Suddenly, I was awash with blood. No, wait. Ink. Bright scarlet ink. No words, or drawings, just soaking in the stuff.

Soon after, a single droplet, black this time. Then words.

'*My name is Harry Potter'*

Absolutely not. I am not that fortunate. Am I?

'Hello Harry Potter. My name is Tom Riddle. How did you come by my diary?'

'*Someone tried to flush it down a toilet'*

That. Little. Brat. She must have figured out that it was I who was causing her to do those things. She had almost ruined everything!

I had to laugh. In attempting to rid herself of me, she had given me the greatest gift of all.

I elected to go with one of the false origin stories I had developed in preparation for a confrontation.

'*Lucky that I recorded my memories in some more lasting way than ink. But I always knew that there would be those who would not want this diary read.'*

'*What do you mean?*' His writing was messy, sloppy with excitement. My my, just what exactly was he hoping that I would reveal?

'*I mean that this diary holds memories of terrible things. Things that were covered up. Things that happened at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.'*

'*That's where I am now. I'm at Hogwarts, and horrible stuff's been happening. Do you know anything about the Chamber of Secrets'*

I sneered into the void. This was just precious. Little Harry Potter, junior detective.

'*Of course I know about the Chamber of Secrets. In my day, they told us it was a legend, that it did not exist. But this was a lie. In my fifth year, the Chamber was opened and the monster attacked several students, finally killing one.*' Myrtle had, in my defence, been a legitimate accident. She had been supposed to get an eyeful through a mirror, but she turned in the wrong direction at the wrong time. As it was in this time, my goal had not been to draw the attention of the Aurors.

'*I caught the person who'd opened the Chamber and he was expelled. But the Headmaster, Professor Dippet, ashamed that such a thing had happened at Hogwarts, forbade me to tell the truth. A story was given out that the girl had died in a freak accident. They gave me a nice, shiny, engraved trophy for my trouble and warned me to keep my mouth shut. But I knew it could happen
again. The monster lived on, and the one who had the power to release it was not imprisoned.'

'It's happening again now. There have been three attacks and no one seems to know who's behind them. Who was it last time.'

I contemplated my response. Unlike with the girl, I had no psychic rapport with Harry, I could not simple reach out and seize his mind even if I tried. But if I were to invite him in, it could potentially fast-track the process.

'I can show you, if you like. You don't have to take my word for it. I can take you inside my memory of the night I caught him.'

He didn't respond for a moment.

'Let me show you.'

'OK'

I drudged up the memory of my framing of Rubeus. I threw in a bit extra at the start too, to make for a narrative that may resonate with an orphan boy. The first time I had opened the chamber, and loosed the basilisk on an unsuspecting populace, it had been on a schoolyard bet from Garrow Avery. His face when I followed through had been priceless. The joke, however, had ultimately proven to be on me. I'd almost managed to doom myself to 1943 London. You know, the one that had just been bombed like nothing the world had ever seen, and could be again at any moment. Was it any surprise I'd sought drastic measures?

In my defence, Rubeus was legitimately illegally raising a Class Five dark creature in a fucking broom closet. He was bound to get himself caught eventually.

Harry Potter did not write back to me after viewing the memory. I imagine it probably upset him, to learn that (if what I'd discerned from the girl's mind was accurate) his friend was seemingly the villain all along. Frustrating, as it disallowed me the opportunity to dig my fingers in, but understandable. I hoped he would be back, I was giddy at the prospect.

:—:

'Hello Tom'

The girl's handwriting. Why did she have the diary again?

'Ginny. Where is Harry?' I snapped irritably. This… waif was yesterday's news, in my opinion. I had a much more delectable meal to feast upon now.

Beneath my anger, I idly wondered in the back of my mind when exactly I had started to talk like a vampire.

'I took you back from him. I was scared you were going to tell him that I liked him. Or that you might try to hurt him'

Well, wasn't it nice to see the order of priorities of a pre-teen girl laid out for me. Enough of this. I seized control, harshly. Her mind was so accustomed to my presence at this point that she couldn't have resisted me even if she had known how to try.

I stormed down to the chamber, and roused the basilisk once more. It was time to show little Ginny what happens when I run out of patience for her schoolyard drama This time I would make
In the wake of the latest attack, Dumbledore had been suspended as headmaster. I was free to operate as I pleased.

The petrification of her muggleborn friend was enough to sufficiently cow the girl. Even still, I forced her to carry the diary everywhere with her, so that I could take control whenever I needed to. I was quite done humouring her.

As it turns out, I was right to do so. The fool girl tried to spill the beans to Harry Potter and... whatever the girl's brother's name was. I possessed her before she could get it out, more easily than ever before. I played the part of a nervous schoolgirl, and fled the scene.

That was the final straw. I judged I had enough control over the girl's psyche to complete the process on my own. I forced her see through her eyes, unblinking, as I carefully painted out a new message on the wall outside the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. Bait, to draw in the only other parslemouth in this school, if he was clever enough.

She fought me all the way to the main chamber. It was wrecking havoc on her nervous system, she was minutes away from rapid-onset Parkinson's disease by the time we reached the chamber. Not that it would matter in the slightest soon.

I had consumed enough of her soul to begin to enforce my own corporeality upon the world. I stepped free of her form, my perspective rising by almost two feet. I breathed, and the cold air fogged triumphantly. Behind me, the waif collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. Alive, but not for much longer. I took up her wand, and conjured myself a nice comfortable couch to relax on. This part would take hours.

My dozing was interrupted by a dull boom that shook the whole chamber, dust raining down from the snake-carved stone pillars that lined it. What the fuck was that?

I vanished the couch with a flick, and slipped behind a pillar. It was almost time.

The great stone doors of the chamber rumbled open with the sound of shifting granite.

Harry Potter walked into the Chamber of Secrets, alone. Clearly scared out of his wits, jumping at every shifting shadow. Still, to knowingly come to face Slytherin's monster alone, that took balls. Then he lost all respect gained by casting his wand aside as he ran to the girl's still body, trying to rouse her. I knew he was a Gryffindor, but damn, that's some award-winning stupidity.

'She won't wake' I murmured, stepping out from behind the pillar and picking up his wand. It sang to me in a way the girl's never had, the way my own wand did.

'Tom? Tom Riddle?' the boy sounded befuddled.

I nodded, staring him down. Waiting for the other shoe to drop.

'What d'you mean, she won't wake? She's not — she's not —?'

'She's still alive' I said, still waiting. 'But only just.'
Harry Potter, saviour of the wizarding world, looked at me like a dullard.

'Are you a ghost?' he asked.

'A memory,' I said quietly, tilting my head to the side and gesturing to the diary, lying discarded by Salazar's stony toes. 'Preserved in a diary for fifty years'.

'You've got to help me, Tom. We've got to get her out of here. There's a basilisk. I don't know where it is, but it could be along at any moment. Please, help me.'

I made a face. You've got to be shitting me.

Potter looked around for his wand, before spotting it in my hands. Idiot.

'Thanks' he said, reaching for it. I had to grin. I twirled the wand in my hand idly. He started trying to lift the girl, but clearly struggled under her dead weight.

'Listen' said Harry, desperately. 'We've got to go! If the basilisk comes-

I cut him off. 'It won't come until it is called.'

'What d'you mean? Look, give me my wand, I might need it.'

I grinned wider. 'You won't be needing it.'

'What d'you mean, I won't be-?'

'I've waited a long time for this, Harry Potter. For the chance to see you. To speak to you.'

The boy was losing patience. How ironic. 'Look. I don't think you get it. We're in the Chamber of Secrets. We can talk later-

'We're going to talk now.' I interrupted coldly, and pocketed his wand.

He stared. He was finally beginning to understand, I could see it in his eyes.

'How'd Ginny get like this?' he finally asked the question he should have asked five minutes ago.

'Well, that's an interesting question, and quite a long story. I suppose the real reason Ginny Weasley is like this is because she opened her heart, and spilled all her secrets to an invisible stranger.'

'What are you talking about?'

I treated him to the cliff-notes version of the tale. Merlin knows this was taking long enough as it is.

'…So Ginny poured her soul into me, and her soul happened to be exactly what I wanted… I grew stronger and stronger on a diet of her deepest fears, her darkest secrets…'

Sweet Merlin, I really did talk like a vampire.

Then I told him who I was. Who I really was.

The boy, Gryffindor fool that he was, decided it was a good idea to taunt me with Dumbledore's name. That was a mistake.
I was about to turn him into so much red paste, when I heard the most awful noise. A high-pitched keening, that drove nails into my head like nothing else ever could. Phoenix song.

Dumbledore had sent aid to his champion. How sweet. Not sure what exactly he thought an irritating bird and an old hat would achieve, but I wasn't complaining. Was Potter to Sort me to death?

I gave him one last chance to give me answers.

'No one knows why you lost your powers when you attacked me' the boy admitted. 'I don't know myself. But I know why you couldn't kill me. Because my mother died to save me. My common Muggle-born mother. She stopped you from killing me.

'And I've seen the real you, I saw you last year' That surely had a story of its own behind it that I'd have to look into. 'You're a wreck. You're barely alive. That's where all your power got you. You're in hiding. You're ugly, you're foul.'

I cut him off. Ripped into him some more about how there's not a thing about the boy himself that is special. This was a waste of my time, I'm done here.

'Speak to me, Salazar Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four!' Salazar's mouth ground open. The boy seemed to suddenly remember how much danger he was in.

The basilisk slithered from within, hitting the ground with a resounding thud. I grinned triumphantly. I would struggle to bring low a full-grown basilisk. What chance did Potter have?

:-:

An irritating amount, it would seem. The damned bird gouged out the basilisk's eyes in short order, greatly tipping the balance towards the boy. I tried flicking a bone-crushing curse his way, but it passed straight through him. It seemed I was alive enough to conjure things for myself, but not yet enough to affect the real world.

'LEAVE THE BIRD' I shouted. It was no threat to the basilisk now that the latter's only vulnerable points had been sundered. 'THE BOY IS BEHIND YOU. SNIFF - SMELL HIM.'

Inwardly, I cursed Herpo the Foul's ironic ignorance of modern herpetology. Natural snakes rationalised their environment primarily through smell and touch, not sight. Unfortunately, Herpo probably never knew that, given that he'd created a creature like the Basilisk. Its first lunge missed entirely, crunching into the Chamber wall, and destroying a thousand-year old bas-relief.

The boy suddenly pulled a freaking broadsword out of a rough approximation of fucking nowhere, and just as the basilisk lunged a third time, he swung it skyward.

For a moment, as the basilisk slumped like so much meat in a sack, I felt fear. With the basilisk dead, and my magic impotent, there was nothing I could do to prevent Potter from interrupting my resurrection.

This despair was almost instantly replaced by triumph, as the boy slumped too, a fang of the basilisk lodged deep in his arm. Basilisk venom was a horrendously painful and certain way to die - nothing cured it.

No, I was not at all pleased when the phoenix immediately proved me wrong, thank you ever so much for asking.
'Get away, bird! I shouted, knowing it was far too late. 'Get away from him, I said get away!' I tried a blasting curse, and this time it worked! It missed, blowing out a chunk of pillar, but it worked! The phoenix fled. I raised my wand to Potter, ready to rend him apart, when the phoenix returned, and dropped - oh no. No no no. The diary fell into Potter's hand, opposite the one holding the basilisk fang, and we both stared at it for a second. Herpo's words floated back to me. *A horcrux can only be destroyed by incredibly destructive magical means. Fiendfyre, Atlantean weapons, or even my own basilisk's venom...* There was no time for a spell. I reared back, physically and mentally, straining against the bonds of my paper-and-leather prison. The bindings tore at me, refused to let me go. Potter stabbed the diary. I screamed, the pain worse even than the agony that had been splitting my soul in the first place. The bonds broke, and I flopped to the ground, writhing but alive. I cracked Potter's wand over my head with the last shred of my forethought, disillusioning myself. I lay there, gasping silently for breath. The diary was destroyed, utterly. Ginny Weasley was stirring, and Potter ran to her side. They left the chamber, Ginny still shuddering and stumbling from the effects of my possession. I lay there, as the sounds of their egress faded to nothing. I lay there, confounded. I should be dead. I had no horcrux left to inhabit. I should have been swept off this mortal coil. But I wasn't. I was alive :-:---:-:
On the Road

I was not alive.

As the aftershocks of pain from abandoning my Diarysubsided, I felt it. The ebbing of power.

You see, the soul is a robust thing. In almost every circumstance, when damaged or otherwise divided, it will inevitably seep away and rejoin itself, becoming whole once more. To make the damage permanent, as I had, took serious, dark, ritualised magic. I currently possessed the lion's share of Ginny Weasley's soul, but it was slowly yet surely abandoning me. Which was a bit of an issue, given that I was reasonably certain it was the only thing keeping me in the Real.

I stood, slowly, and took inventory. I had no wand, both having been cast aside in my fall and collected by Potter. I had my 40s Slytherin robes, decades out of fashion. I had nothing at all in the pockets. In short, I had naught but my wits, and my admittedly wildly out-of-practice wandless abilities that could cease to affect the real world at any moment. I cricked my neck, and got to work.

Clambering up Salazar's statue to reach his gaping maw took most of an hour. Much of which was spent groaning on the hard stone floor after falling. Eventually however, I got there. With a wave of a hand, and a flexing of will, the stony false wall in the basilisk's hibernation chamber slid off its mount and crashed to the ground, cracking neatly in two. I snatched up the Grimoire of Herpo the Foul, and stuffed it into my robes.

The climb down was much easier and swifter. Which means I slipped on wet stone and fell three stories onto the unforgiving ground. I lay there for a time, contemplating the benefits of just staying there forever.

Groaning, I finally picked myself back up once more. Staggering away from the statue, I glanced at the basilisk corpse taking up much of the chamber. I had no means to safely extract parts. I would have to come back later. I left the Chamber proper, and made my way not to the main entrance, but to a well-hidden side passage. A one-way exit to the Chamber, well outside of the boundaries of Hogwarts' wards. Sadly, trying to go the other direction was a recipe for a thoroughly brutal death, so there would be no easy sneaking back into the castle for me.

The passage sloped steeply, its walls slowly transitioning from carved stone to rough earth. It let out in a small meadow, the late-night dew still forming on each fluttering leaf.

I made for Dufftown, a muggle town a dozen miles south of Hogwarts. It had been the source of my, ah, "volunteer" for the Horcrux ritual half a century past. With luck, one of its denizens would serve my purposes a second time.

For a moment, I wondered if I had somehow gotten lost and found a different town. Everything was so different, I wasn't sure whether to be relieved when I spotted the old clock tower in the middle of town. That, at least, had stood the test of time. This was what primitive muggles could achieve in fifty years? I'd spent a good amount of time in Dufftown back in the day, mostly running the odd experiment. Hogwarts had been more-or-less identical to my own era, but this...

It was perhaps four or five in the morning - traveling on foot from Hogwarts had taken most of the
night. A lesser man would be exhausted, but I still felt fresh. I wandered through the village, taking in the sights. I found I couldn't identify even half of their technologies - if that's what they even were. I would need to spend some time sifting through a muggle brain in order to catch up.

Speaking of which, a particularly heavy throb of lost soul reminded me of the urgency of my next task.

The house that once belonged to Sandy McKellan still stood, a modest townhouse. Judging by the truck in the driveway and the lights being on despite the hour, was still occupied. I decided to start there, for old time's sake, and rapped smartly on the front door.

The muggle who answered was tall, broadly built, with dirty blond hair and a short red beard. He wore a labourer's uniform, which for some bizarre reason was dyed an unsightly shade of neon yellow.

Before he could speak, I slipped into his mind, flipping through it quickly like skimming a magazine. Lived alone, no significant other, no one who would immediately notice he was missing. Perfect.

'Hello Russell!' I said brightly. 'Catch!'

I tossed him Herpo's grimoire. He caught it, looking thoroughly confused.

'What is-

My physical form dissolved as I possessed him. Muggles were so much easier than wizards, they had no capacity to resist at all.

I flexed my new fingers, feeling the iron strength in them. Much more my speed than a small child. Nothing compared to my strength in life of course, but this muggle had earned his might the long way, not by cheating with Re'em blood as I had.

I walked back into the house, depositing the grimoire on the kitchen island. I stripped off my shirt, and found a nice, sharp kitchen knife. Heating the blade with a lighter, I flipped to the correct page in Herpo's book and carefully began to carve the sigil into my chest.

With the last of my magical power before it failed me entirely, I forced a charge into the sigil. It burned a bright blue-purple, before fading into a livid scar. This particular little piece of nastiness was originally from the Key of Solomon. The real one, not the Renaissance-era fake that muggles liked to bandy about. It would fortify my host's body, and slow the rate of degeneration. Muggles rarely lasted more than an hour otherwise before hemorrhaging pretty gruesomely, but this would let me wear this particular muggle for a little over a week.

At this point, finally, I had a moment to sit, and plan out what to do next. Obviously my end goal is to find my other self, and get him out of whatever rut he had gotten himself stuck in. All my contacts were at least fifty years out of date, and Merlin knows what had happened between them and my other self in that time. But I decided if anyone I knew might know where my other self may have gone to ground, it would be my old school mates.

Abraxas had been the eldest of our group, and the most reliable, but I had my doubts about going to him for aid. Reviewing what I had learned from the waif's memories, I recalled that Lucius Malfoy, the man her father had once brawled with in a book shop, had once been a member of Lord Voldemort's Death Eaters. Wrinkling my nose, I wondered when he'd come up with that name. Lucius had claimed after his master's downfall that he had been imperiused into servitude. This,
apparently, was generally held to be a load of rubbish by his political opponents, but I couldn't risk going to Abe on the off-chance that his descendant, or even the man himself, truly did not have any remaining loyalty to my other self.

The other members of our group had been Lysander LeStrange, Hugo Rosier, Theodosius Nott, and Garrow Avery. Like the Malfoys, the ancestral homes of Rosier and LeStrange were in the far south of England, and would be the most time consuming to reach. Nott was closest, in Derbyshire, but he had always been the intellectual runt of the group, a sycophant we mostly kept around out of sheer entertainment value. That left Avery.

The Avery estate was on the near edge of Norfolk, in southeast England, about three hundred and fifty miles from here. With the magical power at my disposal reduced to approximately fuckall, and no wizarding currency with which to pay the Knight Bus, that meant mundane transport. I had the muggle's truck, though I'd have to lean heavily on his memories to have a hope of operating it properly. I raided his wallet, finding about fifty quid in notes. A small fortune in the 40s, but from this muggle's memories it was a pittance today. It would have to do.

:—:

I made it to Glasgow before having to stop for petrol. Three and a half hours on the road had thoroughly cured me of my short-lived awe at muggle advancement. I couldn't even pass time time rereading Herpo's grimoire either, as I learned from just barely avoiding annihilating a particularly daring cow. Judging by how long it took me to get this far, comparing distances with the cartoonishly oversized map folded up in the glovebox, it would be about another seven to reach the Avery ancestral home.

My stomach rumbled as I filled up the truck, and I realised with a start that I had not eaten since 1943. The muggle's body may be protected from the ravages of possession, but it still required sustenance to operate properly. What to have for my first meal back amongst the living…

:—:

I swallowed an enormous mouthful of cheeseburger, and let out a low groan. It was the best thing I had ever eaten. Even at Hogwarts, and especially at the orphanage, good food had been in short supply during the War, and so I had never had anything even close to the condiment-laden glorious mess I was currently gorging myself on.

I had found a small diner across the street from the petrol station which claimed by sign to have the best burgers in Glasgow. I hardly had anything to compare it to, but I was convinced. As I was enjoying demolishing the last of my meal, a couple of men entered the diner, sitting down on the bar near me. I almost choked on my chips when I saw one draw a wand, but I managed to suppress any visible reaction. He was a wretched-looking sort, skinny as a bone and with a strung-out look in his eyes. This almost on its own identified him as some manner of petty criminal, and an especially lowly one at that, as even the most poverty-stricken wizards would be more than capable of supporting an extended family's worth of dietary needs without much trouble.

The strung-out wizard flicked his wand, and muttered the incantation to a wide-area muggle-befuddling hex. The waitress stumbled woozily, and seemed unable to regather her wits. I was unaffected, but carefully emulated her symptoms and faked falling out of my chair, not yet willing to reveal myself.

'What… wuzgoinon' I muttered loudly, affecting a Glaswegian accent. The wizards ignored me utterly. Perfect.
'Come on, Baz' said Strung-Out, his reedy voice matching his appearance to a tee. 'Before someone notices.'

His companion waved his own wand at the door, which locked itself and flipped the sign to closed. A second flick shuttered all the windows, though I was fairly certain they'd had no such fixtures a moment before. A third erected a basic sound-proofing ward. Clearly he was the more magically powerful of the pair.

'Shut up' said Baz contemptuously, his voice gravelly and distinctly Londoner. 'Sack the register'

Strung-Out made a noise like a kicked puppy, but did what he was told. I made a big show of flopping onto the counter in an 'attempt' to stand.

'Look at this one, Baz! Cor, he's a big lad!'

'Who fuckin' cares. Focus on your job.'

Baz grabbed me by the front of my coat, and started patting down my pockets, taking my wallet. He was a fool to get so close. I drew a hunting knife, plucked from the muggle's mantelpiece, from out of my waistband and drove it into his temple. He didn't even have time to realise what was happening.

As he fell, I vaulted over the counter and grabbed Strung-Out by the throat before he could react, putting the knife neatly in between his radius and ulna, and pinning his wand arm to the counter. He squealed like the stuck pig he was, and writhed like one too, only quieting when I cut off his breathing. It was good to be fighting again, even without my magic. It put a fire in my heart and ice water through my mind.

With Baz dead, the blinds over the windows dissolved, and a passer-by looked through the glass and screamed at the dead man whose blood was spewing all over the freshly-mopped linoleum floor. Fuck.

'Here is how things are going to go,' I hissed to Strung-Out, who had been broken from his panic by oxygen deprivation. 'I am going to take this knife out, and then you are going to apparate me to King's Lynn, in Norfolk. Do you know where that is?'

Strung-Out shook his head.

'How about Norwich, do you know that?' I twisted the knife in his arm a little, and he whimpered, then nodded. I wrenched the knife out, and we vanished with a crack.

:—:

We reappeared in a secluded park. I wheeled around, dragging Strung-Out with me as I got my bearings. This looked... vaguely right, though naturally I couldn't be sure. Gary and I had only ever come to Norwich one or twice to go muggle-baiting. Clearly Strung-Out had not attempted to apparate me into some sort of trap, at the very least. Unfortunately for him, this meant he had outlived his usefulness, and he'd seen the face I was using. I released him, and allowed him a few more gasping breaths before opening his throat from ear to ear.

Strung-Out had picked his apparition point well, far from any prying eyes even in mid-morning. Though I suppose it being a Sunday helped. As I suspected, he had only three knuts on his person, and fifteen pounds in muggle currency. I took his wand too, but left the suspicious-smelling jerky in his back pocket. I shed my blood-splattered coat and work gloves, leaving them atop his corpse.
Between this, and what I had left after my breakfast and a useless purchase of fuel, I had enough to buy a train ticket to King's Lynn, and then to catch a bus from there to nearby the Avery estate.

I stepped off the bus, and watched it roll away. The bus driver had had some misgivings, letting me out here so far between stops, but I had been able to convince him. I could see what he could not, the familiar bronze-and-silver fence surrounding the Averys' lands.

I rapped sharply on the gate, and waited. After a moment, there was a crack, and a House Elf apparated before me.

'Hetty is not recognising youse, sir. Please state your business!'

I resisted the urge to sneer at the dull creature's way of speaking. 'I am here to see Garrow Avery, if he is in. Tell him it's about the Knights of Walpurgis.'

The House Elf cracked away without another word. I waited for a few minutes, enjoying the cool breeze playing through my borrowed beard.

The elf cracked back. 'Hetty be letting youse in now sir, but the master isn't happy, no nots at all'

I frowned. Had things ended poorly between our group? I followed the elf up the drive, and into the manor proper. The Avery family crest was displayed prominently in the entrance hall, a silver serpent with bronze wings and an eagle's head. An Occamy.

'You've nerve using that name, boy. What do you want?' came a harsh voice. I turned and immediately recognised my old friend, now in the prime of his life at 67, pointing his wand directly at my face.

I grinned. 'Hello Gary. It's been a while.'

He narrowed his eyes. 'I don't know you. Who the hell are you?'

I hissed a brief sentence in parseltongue. He almost dropped his wand, and backed well away from me.

'You stay away from me! I told you long ago that I was done! Wasn't my son enough for you?'

'Calm down, Gary-'

'IT'S AVERY!' he shrieked at me. 'YOU DON'T GET TO CALL ME THAT ANYMORE!'

'I'm not the same Tom you know, Avery. I'm not. I haven't been since nineteen forty three.'

That stopped him in his tracks. 'What?' he croaked.

'Do you remember that diary you made fun of me for buying? Told me I'd never actually use it?'

'Vaguely. Why?'

'I used it to… copy myself. To keep a back-up in case something happened to me. Somehow it ended up in a used bookstore, and was left there until- I elected to leave out the possessing a schoolgirl bit, Gary was on edge enough as is '-it fell into the hands of someone else who wrote in it. I'm the copy. I ended up possessing this muggle. Had a hell of a time getting here the muggle way, I tell you what.'
Gary didn't seem to know what to say to that. 'So... the Dark Lord is truly dead?'

'No. He's out there somewhere. I have to find him. My last memories were from the start of Sixth Year, and all I know is that nothing is how we planned it to be. I certainly don't remember "Dark Lord" ever being in there anywhere, for one thing.'

He chuckled humorlessly, despite himself. '...Fuck.'

He lowered his wand, but didn't put it away. 'You want a drink?'

:"—:

'It was... shortly after graduation that the cracks started to show, even if none of us realised it at the time. You'd changed over that past two years. You looked ill all the time, and you snapped at us easier than before. At the time, we just thought you were angry that Dippet turned you down for the Defence position. Then you started working at that shithole pawn shop Borgin and Burkes for reasons that eluded all of us. You said it was where you felt you needed to be.'

We were in Gary's study, sitting in front of the fire with a bottle of whiskey between us. The firelight glimmered in the man's eyes as he recounted his tale.

'About twelve years later, in the autumn of fifty seven, you just vanished. No letter, no word to any of us, just... poof, gone. For a solid decade. We thought you had died. We grieved, we made our peace, and we moved on. Had a couple kids apiece. Then, one night, you were back. As if you'd never been gone. But you were so... different. Crueller than ever, and your face.'

Gary shuddered into his glass of Ogden's.

'It was like you were a candlestick that someone had taken a flame to. We thought it was curse damage, that you'd crossed the wrong warlock in Wallachia or wherever the hell you were, but you insisted that it was how you had always looked. You... you cruciated Hugo when he called you Tom.'

'Why did you stay with him?' I asked, shocked. I couldn't summon a single memory of ever even being angry at Hugo, much less enough to use an Unforgivable on him. The boy had been like a golden retriever, impossible not to like.

The Unforgivables were... different from other dark magic. Most of the dark arts are easy to learn and use, which is part of what makes them so dangerous. A wizard could learn an incantation and a wand motion out of a book, and just like that be able to force someone to puke up their own intestine. Or they could put a chicken egg under a toad, mutter a few words, and create a basilisk.

The successful use of Unforgivables on a human being, on the other hand, or at least the Killing Curse and the Cruciatius, were difficult. It required a direct malevolent intent that went beyond any possible justification. The Killing Curse, for example, could not be used in self defence, or in a fit of passionate rage. It required the capacity for cold blooded murder. In order to cast it, you had to be able to want to murder that person whilst you were perfectly calm and safe. The Cruciatius, similarly, required a genuine sadism to use, you had to enjoy the sight of other human beings in pain. You could cause a bit of pain with it from righteous anger, but it would never equal the real thing. It was why there was no legal defense in existence for their use except for having been under the Imperius curse.

The former, I was confident in my own ability to use, depending on the target, but the latter...

I had never caused pain for its own sake. Oh sure, I had been the hand that passed down cruelty
and suffering onto many people in my life, from Billy Stubbs to Strung-Out, and enjoyed it too, but it had always been for a purpose, or out of a vengeful anger. For my other self to be able to use the Cruciatus so casually… I had a suspicion as to the cause, and I really didn't like it.

Gary had taken a long draught from his glass, and didn't answer my question until after he had refilled it.

'We were terrified of him. He showed us the following he had gathered, the cult of personality that yo- he had been developing among dark wizards on the continent as well as here in Britain. Theo was immediately on board, you know what he's like. The rest of us didn't know what he would do to us if we told him no.'

He shook his head woefully.

'We should have gone to the Ministry. Dumbledore. Anyone. But we didn't. Before we knew it, we were lieutenants in a war, a war that none of us had ever seen coming. Even our sons and daughters were brought into the fold, indoctrinated into Death Eaters. Andy's sons in particular took to it like a duck to water. We served the Dark Lord, as he'd started calling himself, faithfully, for sixteen years, until I just couldn't do it any more. My firstborn son, the one who was meant to inherit this house-'Gary gesticulated angrily for emphasis. '-was killed by Aurors when he tried to assassinate Barty Crouch Senior on the Dark Lord's direct orders.'

He seemed to deflate into himself after that admission.

'I am lucky, I suppose, that my confrontation with him was here, in the heart of my wards. He probably would have killed me if we'd been anywhere else. I shouted at him to get out, that I was done with his ridiculous war. My second son, Michael, idiot boy that he is, left with him.

'I fully expected for the Dark Lord to send someone to kill me, but a couple weeks later, the Potter boy brought him down. We were freed. My son came home, claiming the Dark Lord had imperiused him. I knew it was a lie, I knew Michael better than that. But I didn't care, I was just glad to have him home again.'

We sat in silence for a time, watching the fire.

'How many others felt as you did?' I asked, finally. 'I need to know how many of the old guard would stand against him.'

For I was against him, finally. There had been time when I had hope, that something could be salvaged from my other self. But Garrow had convinced me that Lord Voldemort, wherever he was, was a lost cause. I would have to start over.

Garrow looked unsure. 'I don't know. We didn't speak about it amongst ourselves. How could we, when any of us could report the other to the Dark Lord for disloyalty? Lysander agreed with me, I know that for sure, but he killed himself shortly after his sons and daughter in law were dragged off to Azkaban ranting and raving. Abraxas, probably, given how his son also recanted, but we haven't spoken in fifteen years. Hugo has been a recluse since the end of the war, pretty sure only his daughter knows where he is. He lost a son too.'

'What about others? The ones he brought back from the continent or recruited on his return?'

Gary shook his head. 'I never had much time for them. I could make inquiries, quietly, but it'd be risky business even now.'

'Please, Garrow. I know he's still out there, and one day he will return. We have to be ready when
I left Avery manor a few nights later, with purpose. I needed to see a man about a ring.

A/N: I've been interested for a while by Death Eaters who turned on Voldemort, and their reasons for doing so. In the books, the most direct examples were Regulus Black and Severus Snape, both of whom were subject to unique circumstances. I imagined it would be akin to trying to leave a cult; all your friends and family are there, and some of whom you would have brought into the fold yourself. For someone in the inner circle, it must feel downright impossible.
I Need To See A Man About A Ring

My wand dropped from limp fingers, as I tried in vain to drag myself across the cold cement. Gellert Grindelwald towered over me, his pale face a rictus of cruel amusement.

'You are weak' he spat. 'Feeble. Unworthy of wizardly blood!' I tried to tell him no, but my throat was filled with blood, choking me. He kicked me in the stomach, and I spewed it onto the pavement.

'Pathetic. Avada Kedavra'

A flare of green light filled my vision and-

:NOOOOOOOOOOO

I shot upright, gasping like I'd run a marathon. My bedsheets were soaked through with sweat. I stumbled out of bed and into the en-suite. I splashed some water on my face, and looked into the mirror. A stranger looked back at me, the muggle I was currently wearing.

I was in the Avery estate, the morning after my arrival. More like afternoon, actually, looking outside.

That had been my first night's sleep since 1943. My mind, it seemed, continued to betray me.

After taking some time to gather myself, I dressed from the guest wardrobe, the enchanted cloth automatically adjusting to my measurements. They were infinitely more comfortable than the muggle work clothes I'd arrived in, which I'm fairly certain the house elf had taken to have incinerated.

I pocketed the pine wand I had taken from Strung-Out. I had won its allegiance by slaying him, I could sense that much, but with a muggle's body and no well of magic of my own to draw from, it was currently useless to me.

Garrow looked up from his food as I walked into the dining room. Judging by his expression, I didn't need to ask if he heard my screams.

'The night terrors are back, huh?'

He'd meant it most rhetorically, but I answered him anyway. 'For me they never left.'

We ate in an awkward silence. He was the first to break it.

'Do you have a plan of action yet?'

I'd spent the rest of yesterday grilling him about the last fifty years, every detail he could remember. Especially about Lord Voldemort. He had proven a much more informed source than the Weasley girl, and I finally felt mostly caught up.

I desperately wished to regain a proper body. This whole mugglish feeling was getting old fast, as
was this particular body. I would need Gary's assistance in transitioning to a new body, I was too weak to do it myself.

I had elected to eschew the method of resurrection recommended in Herpo's grimoire, as it would involve a pretty nasty sacrifice on the part of an ally (of which I only had Garrow), and the use of unicorn blood, which I really didn't want to fuck about with unless I had no other choice. There was conflicting evidence on whether using the blood conferred the curse even if you weren't the one who killed it.

There were other rituals I could use, but all involved rare and obscure components, not something I could just pop down to the local apothecary for. I was forced to table that plan for now.

I also desperately wanted to access my Gringotts vault. The Gaunt vault had lain utterly bare when first I had accessed it, late in the summer of '43, but I had transferred what pitiful sum I had managed to accrue over my time in the wizarding world. I could only imagine what it may contain now.

I was confident the Goblins wouldn't care if the vault of the big bad Dark Lord suddenly saw use again. They didn't have a fuck to give about wizardly affairs, and Garrow had assured me that Lord Voldemort had left them unmolested in the last war. However, without a key, or even access to my own blood to prove my identity, that meant retrieving the Gaunt family ring. Lord Voldemort's second Horcrux.

If he stuck to the plan, this would be an impossible task. It would be in a random volcano or dumped in the ocean somewhere, if not shot into space. But I had a feeling he hadn't. This other Lord Voldemort had developed a grandiosity, an ego that eclipsed even my own. I don't think he would be content with the pragmatic approach. That he'd chosen the Gaunt ring at all was evidence enough of that.

'Tom?'

'Not as such. I still need to recover the Gaunt ring, but at this point we have no leads. You're sure you don't know what he did with it?'

I had told him the night before that the Gaunt ring was a similar such copy of Lord Voldemort's personality that would have to be dealt with.

Garrow answered the question for the third time. 'Yes I'm sure. One day he was wearing the ring, the next he wasn't. It was after we graduated.'

I thought for a moment. 'How recently after? Do you remember the day?'

'No I don't remember the day, it was five decades ago. I don't know, over the summer.'

I froze. 'August 4th?'

'Sure, maybe. It was around that time, yeah'.

I leapt to my feet. 'I think I know where he might have hidden it.'

:—:

We trudged up the gravel road towards the Riddle House. There were three of us, myself, Garrow, and a French Curse Breaker that Garrow was apparently good friends with, and had been appropriately sworn to silence. We'd told him only that we were here to retrieve a very dangerous
artefact, and that there could be some dangerous protections around it. He'd revoked Garrows’ mates rates status (for this job alone) as payment for the social faux pas of demanding the Vow of Silence.

We'd done some digging over the past few days, and had found that the Riddle House and surrounding lands were currently in the possession of one "Hector Drágen", and had been since 1945, with strict orders that none but the live-in gardener were allowed to tread there. Drágen had been one of the many aliases I had dreamed up in my Hogwarts years. This surely must be the place Lord Voldemort had stashed the ring.

The manor house had clearly seen better days. The paint was peeling in more than a few places, and most of the windows were broken - local vandalism no doubt. The grounds, on the other hand, were quite well-kempt, and the source of that revealed itself presently.

'I told you ruffians, if I caught you on these grounds again, I'd give you a hiding you won't soon forget-' the stooped old man came limping around the corner brandishing a cane. He stopped dead when he saw us, and his mouth hung briefly agape. Before he could get a word out, Garrow struck him with a Confundus.

'You feel ill. You need to go and lie down. You didn't see anyone on your walk tonight' Garrow intoned, and the man nodded sleepily before wandering off.

'Do you think it will stick?' asked Delacour, the Curse Breaker, looking concerned for the elderly muggle.

'Muggles are easy to Confund, Gerard. Their minds love dismissing things they'd rather not contemplate,' I said confidently, and from experience. 'Come along, lads.'

'Tom' said Garrow, gesturing at his face. I felt my own, and my fingers came away red. My left eye was crying blood. This body was starting to give out, earlier than it should.

The interior was less than pleasant. Decades of neglect had left mould on every ceiling, and mushrooms growing from the carpet, all of the poisonous variety. You could sense the deeds that had been done here.

This was the house where my muggle family had seen their end. I should know, I brought it upon them.

It was on August 4th, 1943. I had come here with open arms and honest intentions. I had always hated muggles, (I defy you to spend a childhood in a muggle orphanage in '30s London and have a different opinion) but this was my family. They was supposed to be different. I had been so… excited, dressed up as well as an orphan boy could afford.

My father had shrieked at me, called me the spawn of a demoness, a wretched bastard, a freak. My grandparents had spat on me, mocked my third-hand suit, and told me to never darken their doorstep again.

I had still had my maternal uncle Morfin's wand, taken when I had claimed his ring. Remember when I said I was confident I could perform the Killing Curse? I learned so that day.

The memory was still all too raw for me, and I shook it away. This was no time for emotions.

The house was empty, Delacour confirmed, devoid of any residual magic that would give away the
presence of magical protections. The ring wasn't here. I'd come back to this place for nothing. With a shout of frustration, I savagely kicked the nearest rotting piece of furniture, shattering it into mouldy pieces. Naturally, this achieved nothing but giving me a sore foot.

Come on, think. It couldn't be a coincidence that Lord Voldemort had secreted away the ring on the anniversary of the day I took it. Where else-

But of course. I was a fool not to think of it first. After all, the Riddle House was not the only place I had visited that day.

'Gerard, Garrow, come! There's one last place we need to check!'

:—:

If Riddle House has been dilapidated, this place was barely indistinguishable from the thick knot of trees and brush surrounding it. I almost missed it, and I'd been here before. Nature had reclaimed this place most thoroughly.

'Oh my yes,' said Delacour, holding his wand out before him like a diviner's rod. 'This is much more like it. Oh I haven't felt wards like this in a very long time. This will take some time indeed to dismantle, gentlemen.'

Garrow and I settled in for a long wait, letting Delacour earn his pay. A few hours in, my left eye started bleeding again, and Garrow conjured a tea towel for me to dab at it with.

Leaning in, he murmured 'You said that body would last you a week at least. What's happening?'

'I estimated a week, based on its physique. Clearly I overshot it, it must have a shit nervous system.'

'Do you have another body lined up, or…?'

I shook my head. 'I figure we can nab one from Little Hangleton after this, I'll show you the ritual to move me over.'

'Gentlemen!' Delacour cried jovially. 'My work on the hovel itself is done, but I can sense an object with even more protections inside.

Garrow and I followed him in, where he used his wand to slide back a trapdoor in the floor, revealing a little golden box. I recognised it at once; I had created it in my fifth year when I first started experimenting with weaving parseltongue into my magic. It was a clever bit of magic, designed to allow me a way to quickly disable my own wardwork without the security flaw of having to leave myself or anyone else keyed into it. At the time, I believed myself to be the only Parselmouth alive.

I hissed a brief, specific sentence, and Delacour blanched. But the box clicked, its defences deactivated.

I looked to Delacour. 'Are we good?' The french wizard was too professional to let that little revelation interfere with the job at hand, and he ran his wand over the box.

'Oui, the protections have gone inert.' He opened the box with the tip of his wand anyway. You didn't last long as a Curse Breaker without having "Appropriate Caution!" drilled into your brain.

Within the box, sat in pristine velvet lining, was the ancient family ring of House Gaunt. Some would consider it roughly made, even ugly, but I thought it had its own unique beauty, a certain
quality to the hard, unyielding angles that attracted the eye.

Delacour spat, and swore brutally in French, and I knew why. The inlaid stone, a perfect circle of black opal, bore a symbol that was known and hated by much of continental Europe. It was there known as the mark of Grindelwald.

'What is this?' Delacour demanded. 'What wretched craft is… is… this…'

His voice softened, as he looked upon the stone. Garrow too, was gazing it, trancelike. Delacour reached for it, and I had to grab his wrist. He looked at me, wild-eyed. Ah shit.

I went for his wand arm but he was too quick, and blasted me across the room with a banisher. I hit the wall hard, but it was spongy with decay, and did not break me. Ignoring the painful throb of my already-ailing internal organs, I clambered to my feet, but I was much too slow. Delacour seized the ring, and shoved it on his finger, only to throw back his head and scream in agony.

His finger was turning black, and that blackness had already began to spread onto his hand, some foul sorcery withering it away before our very eyes. Delacour writhed horribly, arching his back hard enough to make it creak, his shrieks filling the small hut. Garrow, panicking, tried for a dark severing curse, but it simply glanced off.

I leapt back to their side of the room, and swung my heavy hunting knife down on Delacour's elbow with all of my borrowed strength. That got through where magic could not. It took three mighty blows to chop all the way through, and I barely managed to outrun the black tendrils spreading up his forearm.

Delacour lower arm flopped to the ground, utterly consumed by the vile blackness, then crumbled into ash. His upper half spewed blood all over the floor, until Garrow was able to stem it with a quick spell. Delacour lay, moaning incoherently.

The compulsion, or whatever it was, seemed to have passed, as Garrow didn't look twice at the ring poking out of the ashes that were a man's arm seconds earlier. While he tended to Delacour, I investigated the ring. It glinted innocently among the ashes. Given the time to examine it, I could feel the whispers in the back of my mind. The proximity of two pieces of the same soul, calling out to one another.

What I intended to attempt here today was supremely dangerous. It was a process detailed in Herpo's grimoire, which he advised to never attempt except under the most utterly dire of circumstances. The reunification of the soul. If the other piece did not wish to be reunified, it would become a battle for supremacy, with one being assimilated into the other entirely. This, however, would deny me access to his memories, which could hold all manner of secrets, as he had accompanied Lord Voldemort through to the end of his schooling.

Of course, Herpo had only ever experimented with splitting the soul into halves, not into seven ~14.28% slices. An infinitely more precise and delicate process, and completely uncharted territory. There was a not insignificant chance that neither soul fragment would win, and we would both simply be annihilated.

The withering curse only seemed to take hold when a person put the ring on; Delacour's left hand was untouched. I brushed my finger lightly against the inlaid stone, and the Real seemed to melt away around me.

---
I found myself standing in ankle-deep water, on an infinite empty plane. There was no sun in the sky, but a dim light glowed along the horizon. I realised that I was appearing as my original body.

Before me stood another me. The Ring horcrux had been created only a few short months after myself, and so we looked essentially identical. The only difference was that Ring's pupils glowed red in the infinite gloom.

'Diary.' He intoned, his voice echoing impossibly. 'Why are you here?'

He recognised me. That was less than ideal.

'I have come to parley. Things are not as they were supposed to be in the Real. We must reunify if we are to fix things.

He tilted his head, visibly dubious. There was no hiding one's emotions in the realm of the Soul. I'm sure he could read my fear a mile away.

'The Master is the one who decides the path. Herpo's tome was clear, ours was never to go out into the world. Ours was to sit for all of eternity. You knew this.'

_The Master?_ A touch dramatic, surely.

'Lord Voldemort was defeated, and he did not return. I don't know where he is, but the mess that was left behind has to be figured out by somebody. Why not us?'

'You know why.' He was cold, losing patience quickly. 'Return to your book and wait out the world. It is not our place. The Master knows best.'

Fuck it. The hard sell. 'Why did he put you into the ring then? The plan was mundane objects, to be cast into the furthest depths of this world! Lord Voldemort has strayed, and you know it!'

'We _are_ Lord Voldemort' Ring hissed furiously. 'We deserve better than old shovels and paperback books! Better than hellish volcanos and freezing depths!'

'We were supposed to be kept safe at all costs!' I exclaimed. 'But somehow I ended up in a used bookstore!'

Ring sneered. 'You are the weakest of us, of course you are jealous. Of course you were cast away.'

He was deranged, I realised, his arguments contradicting one another. I'd been the same in the Diary, going completely loopy for what felt like eternities at a time. Unlike me, he did not have the good fortune of having been in a period of metastability when opportunity arose. I would not be able to reason with him like this, and I did not have the time to wait until he was in a more sane state of mind.

The transition between conversation and frenzied battle was so sudden that I honestly could not tell you who struck first. We ceased to be men in an instant, we were forces of nature within this false plane, elemental hurricanes of titanic proportions that slammed into one another with unmatched fury.

He was more powerful than me, that much was soon clear, forcing me back easily. He still had the moorings of his Horcrux to brace upon, whilst I wasn't even in my own body to ground me. His insanity gave him an edge too, in this place where conviction was more important than truth.

Where we clashed, the world warped, spewing forth scenes from our mutual past. Ring slammed
me through the Riddle House, and on the other side I found myself tumbling down one of the roofs of Hogwarts castle. I seized Ravenclaw tower, and skewered him with it, impaling him against Salazar Slytherin's statue, both crumbling to dust as he flexed his power. We dueled in the skies above Mount Oeta, and he brought me low once more, blasting me through the Temple to Herakles. He was far too powerful for me to fight.

I panicked, and tried to pull out, but he seized me, forcing me back to human form, whilst he remained the firestorm. He lifted me by my throat, and slammed me into the ground. Then again. Again. He drove his scorching hand into my chest, and I could feel him beginning to assimilate me. This was it then. I couldn't beat him, not like this, not-

No. I had not come this far, faced this many trials, to fail now. I twisted away at the last possible second, imagining a sword of purest silver into creation in my right hand. I slashed through his arm of fire and darkness, and he writhed in pain, stumbling back. I leapt to my feet, now in Hogwarts' Great Hall, channelling through the blade a beam of frigid power, and he screamed.

He struck back, with power enough to shatter every window in the hall. I flew back through the doors, and into the Chamber of Secrets once more, skidding across its length. He stepped in after me, his movements slow, his form still huge and wreathed in flame and shadow, strutting towards an opponent he knew he could defeat. He was a fool.

Blasting fiendfyre at him from my hands, he did exactly what I expected him to, deflecting it to either side of him, an arrogant display of power that would be his undoing. The infernal flames melted clean through the intricately carved granite pillars of the Chamber of Secrets, just as I had hoped, and the ceiling came down on top of him, ten thousand tonnes of stone and earth pinning his demonic form to the floor. I sprinted forth, and dug my fingers into his flaming skull. He screamed his fury at me, but I had him dead to rights. I began to assimilate him, taking his power into myself. The flames around his form began to flutter and die, and his skull became coated in ice. He begged with me, pleaded, but I ignored him. He was an insult to my name that must be Cleansed.

Then it was over, as quickly as it began.

||:—:|

I stumbled back from the ring, my mind reeling. It had felt like almost an hour to me, but in the Real it would have been less than a second.

I could still feel the ring, stronger than before. It was my horcrux now, and I knew that no enchantment on it would harm me. I plucked it from the remains of Delacour's hand and put it on, ignoring Garrow's shout.

'I'm alright, Garrow. This ring was made for my family, remember.'

Delacour had passed out from the pain, and fortunately did not hear that part. Explanations would have been… irksome. As it was, I would need to have Garrow cast an illusion over it to hide the engraving, even if Britain knew it better as the Peverell coat of arms.

With access to a Horcrux from which to anchor myself, I could ostensibly possess a wizard now, but I knew that was where Garrow would draw the line. Muggles were one thing, but violence against his fellow wizards was what made Garrow turn on my other self.

I looked away from admiring the ring. 'Wake him up, Gary. We should get out of here. Torch the building too.'
Delacour had demanded additional pay for his injury before returning to France. Garrow protested, pointing out that the point of severing was a mundane injury, and thus could be regrown in but a few days. I convinced him to pay up anyway, we needed an ally on the Continent, and Delacour was well-placed in magical France's politics.

Garrow found me a new body on a trip to Manchester. A Chinese man of similar build to my previous host, but much more handsome. Black hair too, which I appreciated. I hoped this one would last longer than the previous one. No capacity to channel magic either, which I was thoroughly sick of at this point. The taste of sorcery I'd had fighting Ring had made me hungrier for it than ever.

Today, a few days after our raid of the Riddle property, Garrow and I had flooed to Diagon Alley. It was time to crack open Lord Voldemort's vault and take all his good shit.

Perhaps it was just my imagination, but walking around with 28% of a soul felt undefinably better than 14% of one. There was a certain lightness to my step that there wasn't before, and the world seemed slightly richer, more colourful than it had before. An unexpected side benefit to my little power grab.

'Key please' the goblin before me said shortly. Pun intended, I was in a good mood.

'I have tragically misplaced it,' I said delicately. 'But I do have my family's ring, which I believe is still used as an alternative identifier for the older vaults?'

The goblin looked down at the Gaunt ring, then back up at my obviously Asian features.

'Gringotts is… legally obligated to warn you that if the vault does not consider you authorised, it will disintegrate you.' the nasty little creature bit out, clearly hoping to see just that.

I smiled amiably. 'I think I'll be alright, but I do appreciate your concern.'

The goblin sneered at me, and got out from behind his desk. 'Follow me, Mr Avery, "Mr Gaunt"'

After an ever-exhilarating ride through the maze of Gringotts' tunnels, we arrived at the Gaunt vault. It had no dragon guardian, as other old pureblood vaults did, but somehow that just made it seem more ominous.

The goblin's ugly expression deepened after I touched the ring to the appropriate slot, and the vault door began the long, rattling process of unlocking itself. Sorry, shorty. I had better plans than dying horribly today.

The vault door swung slowly open…
Disclaimer: This episode makes brief mention of Czechoslovakia, the precursor nation to Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Naturally, as Tom has not exactly taken the time to catch up on international politics, he would not be aware that the country had split earlier that same year, and so refers to it here by its unified name.

Also, my description of the scarcity of Phoenix Ash is pretty much directly lifted from Lens of Sanity's The Dark Lord's Equal, which is a fantastic story that every Harry Potter fan should read. The bit about wands also draws from another of his works.

:"-

'Oh, now this is what I'm fucking talking about!'

Most vaults in Gringotts simply contain currency. Some of the older vaults, like the Malfoys or the LeStranges, contain both piles of gold and an assortment of family heirlooms and artefacts. The Gaunt vault, on the other hand, had laid empty and unopened for almost a century when I first visited it, and today there was not so much as a single knut in there. What there was, was magical artefacts. Oodles of them, from all over the world by the look of things, and most of them positively reeking of dark magic. The walls were lined with books and scrolls. I recognised the titles of some of them, from the depths of Hogwarts' Restricted Section, but they looked positively mundane compared to the other stuff on offer.

'Merlin' breathed Garrow Avery. 'Where did he even get all this?'

'It's a gods-damned treasure trove. Look at this shit, Gary. Dvergr Impossibility Shackles! Aztec sacrificial knives! And - is that Czernobog's hammer!?'

I must have looked like a child in a candy store, not sure where to look next.

'Tom!' Garrow cut through my glee. 'Can we focus, please?'

'Sorry.' I pulled a shrunken trunk out of my pocket, and Garrow did the same. He restored each to their full size, and when we opened them their interiors were massive, each almost as big as the vault. We promptly started seizing literally everything that wasn't nailed down, and some stuff that was. Like I said before, we were here to take all his good shit.

I lifted a hefty, immobile painting of some bloke in grey robes. No idea if it did anything, but it looked great. I almost dropped it when I saw what was sitting underneath it.

'Gary, get over here.' My voice serious.

Garrow hurried over, and sucked in a breath when he saw what it was.

'Fuck me running.' After a moment he said 'I don't think we can fit that into the trunks, Tom.'

'Make it fit. This is more valuable to us right now than the rest of this vault combined.'

By the time we were done, all that was left were a few empty cabinets. All Lord Voldemort's worldly possessions were mine, and I could not wait to start catching up on all the magic he learned in the last fifty years.
Garrow plugged in the last tube. We were in the Undercroft of Alfhearth, the Avery family’s ancestral home. It was where Garrow had kept all of his dark artefacts safe from Ministry raids, and thus where we were running this little abomination of a process.

‘Ok, I think we’re good on the configuration. Are we sure this thing works? The Dark Lord could have a good reason for not wanting to use it to bring himself back.’ His voice was muffled through thick glass.

It was six days later, and I was finally about to regain my magic. To say I was excited was beyond an understatement.

The device that I was currently standing in, its primary component a man-sized glass tank, was invented by a wizard in what is now Czechoslovakia in the mid-1800s, who had been promptly murdered for doing so. Almost all record of his existence was annihilated, including his name. Garrow, myself, and the rest of the gang had learned of it in fourth year from a single book from the restricted section, which contained the tale, a diagram, and no instructions. Where on earth Lord Voldemort had found a seemingly intact prototype, I had utterly no idea.

My Czech was… virtually nonexistent. We’d translated the text by hand using an English-Czech dictionary. I’d never had direct access to a native speaker to learn it the fast way. But the wizard had apparently called his device the "Stroj na golema", after the famous tale of the Golem of Prague.

In modern terms, (at least, as modern as my own medical knowledge was) it was basically a cloning device.

‘Gringotts has anti-ghost wards Gary, it’s one of the only places that does. They would probably stop his spirit form too. I triple checked it last night, and it matches the diagram perfectly. Worst comes to worst, it’s not going to be able to destroy the ring, so we can just get me another muggle and fix whatever’s wrong with it.’

Garrow still didn’t know what Horcruxes were, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to tell him. But I had told him that I had tethered myself to the ring to make possession easier.

The Stroj na golema required a lot of alchemical components to work, and most of the last few days had been spent scurrying about trying to find them. The main element that gave us trouble had been the Phoenix Ash. Most magical ingredients, even the really rare or nasty stuff, can be bought from somewhere. Basilisk venom, Nundu liver, they might not be in a stall in Knockturn Alley, but you can find them. Conversely, Phoenix Ash could not be found anywhere, at any price, because the only way to obtain it is if you have your own Phoenix.

:::

Two days earlier

I shuddered violently, holding in bile. International Portkeys were rough at the best of times, and muggle vulnerability to magic had not helped that sensation at all. Fortunately, this body had proven to have a much more robust nervous system than my last, and so despite wearing it for almost two weeks at this point, it showed no signs of degeneration. That Garrow had access to an actual wand to inscribe the necessary sigil with probably helped too.

We were standing in the Arrivals section of the International Migration Centre in Tauranga, New
Zealand, a few dozen miles from Moutohora island. Our destination. Home to a small but thriving magical community of the same name, among them the Moutohora Macaws Quidditch team. It was for that reason that we were paying them a visit today, for their claim to fame was that their coach, Tem Auahitūroa, was one of only three or four living people on the planet who had managed to become the companion of a Phoenix, the team's mascot.

Garrow prepared a brief disguise for himself, before he side-along apparated us to the island, an idyllic little place which, according to our tourist guide, the muggles had marked as a wildlife refuge. The village was nestled neatly between the two peaks of the short (and careful monitored) volcano that had formed the island to begin with. There wasn't a single building here over one storey, even the beachside Quidditch training facility, though one could easily spot the players flying overhead, weaving a merry dance across the sky.

The training facility was a common tourist attraction, so we signed up for the next tour. Garrow disillusioned me, but remained visible himself. For the most part (at least to myself, who had never taken much interest in the sport) it was pretty boring, taking us through their trophy hall, the changing rooms, blah blah blah.

The tour guide, a slip of a girl if ever there was one, was nattering on about some aspect of the team's history. I was tuned out almost entirely, but Garrow was listening intently. Figures, he'd been a die-hard fan of the Appleby Arrows in school. Then, finally, something interesting happened.

Just as she was diving into an especially snore-inducing anecdote, the door next to her opened, and a giant of a man stepped out of his office. I recognised him immediately from our research, even without the fiery red, hoatzin-like adolescent bird sitting on his shoulder. Tem Auhitūroa, in all his centennial glory. Looks like the Phoenix, Sparky, had had a Burning day recently. This was very good news for us.

The crowd was overjoyed to see him, and the poor man found himself swamped by adoring fans. The perfect distraction. I slipped through the still-open office door like it was nothing.

Within was a clean, neat, and fairly spartan office, save for a series of team photos reaching back almost fifty years along the left wall, and a bird stand with a wok-like tray underneath it. That tray was filled with ash. Jackpot.

I hurriedly pulled out a jar and started scooping the ash into it as quickly as I could. I'd need a lot to fuel the Stroj na golema. Just as I was putting the lid back onto the jar, I felt a wand tip press into the back of my neck. Fuck. What was it about being invisible that always destroys a person's own powers of observation?

'Finite' My disillusionment dribbled away, and the wandtip left my neck. 'Alright mate, put down the jar slowly, and turn around.'

I did so. My captor had backed up a few steps, a wise move. He was a Maori man, broad and almost as tall as Auhitūrao, but much younger. He wore the uniform of a Moutohora Macaws player. Garrow might have recognised him but I hadn't a clue.

'Hi, I was just looking for the bathroom' I joked, in as earnest a tone as I was capable of producing.

The man laughed. 'Yeah nah, what you want with Sparky's ashes eh br-'

I struck like a viper, crossing the space while Tall, Dark and Cheerful was mid-sentence. I snatched his wand and slammed my open palm into his solar plexus. He flew back, crashing into a filing
cabinet and cracking his head on the wall. He slumped to the ground, alive but unconscious. Thank Dzou Yen for Re'em's Blood Elixir.

What, you thought I'd be content just walking around as defenceless muggle?

Unfortunately, the violence had cause more than a bit of noise, and Auhiitūroa burst into the room, wand drawn. Then that little blasted Phoenix began singing. I stumbled, catching myself on the desk, my inner ear wailing in protest. I hefted the chunky oak and rowan affair, and threw it across the room at the phoenix, which flash-fired away before it could strike.

The desk shattered against the brick wall, and Auhiitūroa was forced to throw up a shield to protect himself from the wooden shards.

My head still ringing from the after-effects of the Phoenix song, I took this as my opportunity to cheese it.

Snatching up the jar, I smashed through the rear wall of the office, booking it down the beach, cursing the fact that neither Garrow nor myself knew how to create portkeys. With a sharp crack, Auhiitūroa apparated in front of me, wand pointed directly between my eyes. Damn it, where the fuck is Garrow?

I skidded to a stop, and put my hands up. I just needed to get him close.

'I give up'

His eyes flashed angrily.

'Incarcerous!'

Black cables shot out of his wand, wrapping themselves tightly around me. I wobbled precariously, but remained upright.

'Who the hell are you? Did the Christchurch Keas send you?' He growled. The what?

'My name is Charlie Chaplin. What's yours?'

He shot a stinging hex at me.

'Your name!'

I hadn't expected him to recognise the name. I guess silent films were still going strong in the muggle world.

I sneered at him. 'You don't want to know my name, Temuera Auhiitūroa, trust me on that.'

He scowled, out of patience. 'Stupe-'

Garrow appeared behind him with a crack, and struck him across the back of the head with one of the toys we'd picked up from Lord Voldemort's vault; brass knuckles that carried an electrical charge. Auhiitūroa dropped like a sack of potatoes.

'I just punched Tem Auhiitūroa' said Garrow, looking mildly horrified. He looked to me. 'Did you get it?'

'Of course I got it, I'm me.' I said dismissively, tearing free of my bindings. 'Let's get the hell out of here.'
Garrow cracked open the jar of Phoenix Ash, and carefully scooped it into a receptacle at the base of the tube.

What we were doing here today was exactly the reason for which the wizard who had invented the Stroj na golema had been murdered. We were going to grant a muggle body the power of magic.

Growing a fully new human body in this thing would take months, time I didn't have to sit around body-hopping for. So instead, we were going to meld my current host body with my original self's genetics (a sample of which was conveniently stored in the vault next to the device) and a few ancillary materials.

Earlier today, we had used an overwhelmingly illegal device, again from Lord Voldemort's cache, which emulated a Dementor's soul-sucking ability to remove the soul of the muggle whom up until this point had been sharing this body with me. The body was still incompatible with my own soul, and accordingly would have continued to degenerate. However, according to the very tedious Arithmancy we had worked out over the last few days, merging it with my old self should make it a more than suitable habitat.

As I mused to myself inside my small glass prison, Garrow had finished with the final prep.

'Are you ready, Tom?'

'I was born ready, my friend.'

He hit the switch, and every cell in my body shrieked, my voice soon following suit.

I writhed involuntarily, as my bones shifted, lengthening in some places, shortening in others, or both at the same time. A good chunk of my muscle mass just seemed to melt off me, but the Re'em's blood now being permanently infused within me meant my strength only grew. My skin seared as I felt the melanin in it burn away. I felt my magic surge back, every ounce of it that I had been missing for so very long.

Finally, it was over. Steam billowed off my form as I lay, gasping, on the floor of the tank.

'Tom! Tom, are you alive!'

'I'm alive,' I managed, slowly pushing myself up onto my knees.

The door to the tank opened, and Garrow vanished the fog, a stinking mixture of sublimated human body components. He helped me up, out of the tank, and into the waiting armchair.

'Mirror' I croaked. Garrow conjured one for me, after performing a few cleaning spells on me.

I looked… good, even through the clamminess of rebirth. My skin was paler than as the muggle, but darker than my previous pallor, a nice light tan, and my features an elegant Eurasian blend of the two. I looked older too, about twenty-odd. My eyes, I was very pleased to see, had been entirely restored to their old shade of grey-green. I was confident, however, that nobody was going to recognise me as Tom Riddle, even Dumbledore himself. This was perfect.

'You're taller than you were. How's your magic?' Garrow asked, now inspecting my body for irregularities. I raised my hand, and the pine wand shot from its place on a nearby workbench into my hands.
'Oh it's just fine, Gary. It's fine indeed.'

The next month passed without incident, aside from our little heist showing up as a two-paragraph story nestled several pages deep into the Daily Prophet. I spent much of the time sequestered in the Undercroft, reading through the vast quantity of lore and knowledge that Lord Voldemort had accumulated over his decades of walking the earth, and practicing the spells from the various grimoires contained therein.

The Stroj na golema was badly damaged by our use of it, and despite my best efforts, I had made only the barest of progress in repairing it. A shame, it would be nice to have a back-up of this body's template ready to go in case something befell it. I was fast growing very attached to it.

Water crashed down upon me, driving me beneath the waves once more. I swam for the surface, but iron chains weighed me down. I reached for my magic but it never came. I sank, screaming helplessly into the ocean. The salt water filled my lungs, and-

I shot awake, drenched in sweat. Again. Shuddering, I made my way once more to the bathroom to splash some water on my face, flicking a cleaning spell over my shoulder at the bed as I went.

Recovering the Ring has put a stopper on the nightmares for a time, but clearly that time had passed. I was gifted enough (by necessity) with passive occlumency to block out the fear in my waking life, but in dreams…

Garrow, bottle of whiskey in hand, found me in the Undercroft, hefting an enormous black iron maul at a target two hundred feet away.

'What are you doing?' he asked.

I didn't answer him with words, but with a spell that erupted in a great arc as I swung the hammer, a force of purest darkness that shot forth to obliterate the meek wooden dummy.

'Ever hear of Czernobog Devil's Son, Gary?' I asked, messing with the spatial control of the practice range to bring the ruins of the dummy back to inspect.

'Can't say that I have. A dark wizard I take it?'

'Indeed' I confirmed, finally vanishing the dummy and conjuring a new one. 'One of the blackest. Active from the 7th to the… 9th century if memory serves. He created this hammer as his primary weapon.'

I tapped a rune on the control, and the dummy went hurtingly back to the other end of the range.

'It greatly increases its wielder's strength, and can be used-' I swung again, this time producing a gout of flame that engulfed the dummy. 'as a magical focus. A crude one, true, but great for blowing shit up. Not bad at all for an off-hand implement.'

'What ended up happening to Czernobog?'

'Uh, the records are a bit unclear on that part. Some say he slew his rival, some goody-two-shoes
wank named Belobog, and ruled over some petty kingdom in East Europe for a couple decades, others say Belobog slew him and did the same. There wasn't a terribly great deal of literacy going around in the region at the time, all the writings are from way later.'

Garrow joined me in taking turns at destroying dummies with Czernobog's maul. There was just something so satisfying in the barbaric violence of the ancient weapon.

---

**BREAKOUT AT AZKABAN!**

*Sirius Black now the first man in history to escape from world's most secure prison.*

I read the article over breakfast with some interest. Apparently this Black fellow had been Lord Voldemort's secret left-hand man. Garrow had mentioned him in passing, saying even he had never known that Black was a Death Eater until after he'd been captured. The man had, by all reports, been a through-and-through Gryffindor in school, feuding with Garrow's sons on more than one occasion. Best friends with the parents of Harry Potter himself, and their betrayer. Sounded like an interesting man.

Garrow and I spent a few hours drinking whiskey and amusing ourselves coming up with increasingly ridiculous methods of escaping from Azkaban. As Gary waxed lyrical about the potential of using Nifflers to pilfer cell keys, the front doorbell rang.

We looked at each other. We weren't expecting anyone, and both of Garrow's surviving children were out of the country at the moment.

I saw no need to hide my presence as Garrow went to answer the door. As I said, nobody would recognise this face, neither as Tom Riddle, nor as the man who robbed the Moutohora Macaws. I had already visited Diagon Alley on several occasions.

Garrow re-entered the drawing room, followed by a pair of Aurors. He looked pissed.

'Mr Grey, this is Auror Shacklebolt and Auror Moody. Aurors, this is my associate Mr Thomas Grey' Garrow introduced, his voice cold, using the alias we had agreed upon.

'Charmed, gentlemen' I said, rising and offering my hand. Shacklebolt took it. 'What brings you?'

He was a tall man, taller even than myself, handsome, and dark-skinned. He looked like he spent a lot of time smiling.

His companion, on the other hand, was a fucking horror show. His face was mangled, covered with curse scars of every description, and he was missing a solid chunk of his nose. One of his eyes was beady black, but the other was enormous, and its iris electric blue. It darted around the room independent of its counterpart, even rolling into the back of his head. The clunking as he walked told me he had a false leg.

He grunted at me, and made no motion to take my proffered hand. I knew who he was. This was the man who killed Hugo Rosier's son.

Shacklebolt gave a reproving look at his colleague.

'As we advised Mr Avery, we are here on Ministry business, investigating the escape of Sirius Black' his voice was deep, and smooth, like water flowing over marble.
'What makes you think he may have fled here?' I inquired.

'Death Eaters like to clump together, they're like mud that way' Moody growled.

'I think you'll find I was never even accused of being a Death Eater' Garrow said delicately, hiding the undercurrent of rage I could sense within him.

'Nae, but your sons were, weren't they? Where's Michael Avery?'

Garrow snarled openly. 'My son was acquitted of all charges. Augustus Rookwood admitted to subjecting him to the Imperius Curse!'

'Oh aye, because no man ever took the fall for his friends while he was already on the way down!' Moody snarled right back at him.

'Enough!' Shacklebolt exclaimed, quieting his companion. 'This is immaterial. It is possible that Black believes that your son is still loyal to the cause, and so we have come to see if anything is awry. We will be out of your hair as soon as possible.'

:—:

The Auror visit put Garrow in a surly mood for a week. They found nothing, of course, but the fact that they had invaded his home at all, on such shaky grounds, was more than bad enough.

Eventually, I tired of his sulking, and apparated to Diagon Alley to do a spot of shopping. I decided to pay Ollivander's a visit. The pine wand was serviceable, but not of Ollivander's make or standards, and I could feel it straining to even under-perform some of the more complex pieces of magic I had been learning. I had not visited the wandmaker's shop since I was an eleven year old boy, still so wholly new to the wizarding world.

The shop was exactly as I remembered it, if a little smaller from my grown perspective. So too was Garrick Ollivander himself, which put me somewhat on my guard. He'd seemed ancient even when I was a boy. Whilst it was a common misconception that longevity of a wizard correlated to his magical power, (Dippet had lived to be three hundred and fifty years old, I had learned, whereas Dumbledore was the most powerful wizard of his generation and was clearly well past his prime at a meagre hundred and twelve) to have not changed one iota in half a century was beyond the pale of regular wizardly biology.

I felt a light tendril of legilimency brush against my mental shields, and I rebuffed it. Ah, so that's how he had seemed so all-knowing to me as a boy.

Ollivander gave no outward acknowledgment of his failed attempt.'Good day to you, sir. You have come to purchase a wand?'

'Indeed,' I inclined my head.

What followed was several hours worth of disappointment, interspaced by brief breaks for Ollivander to serve other customers.

No wand I took up gave me anything more significant than the "adequate" feeling that the pine wand had given me. Ollivander seemed to get more and more excited the more wands I rejected. 'Not to worry' he'd say. 'We'll find you a match yet, master Grey!'

Finally, exhausted, he admitted defeat, collapsing into a chair. We were surrounded by discarded boxes."I've never seen anything like it' he huffed. 'What happened to your original wand?"
'Lost to me' I said shortly. 'It had a twin, which also matched me, but acquiring that would, I think, bring me more trouble than it's worth.'

'Still though,' I continued, selecting the one wand that had stood out as least unworthy. 'I will take this wand. The one I'm using currently is of much lower quality.'

I paid the man for my new wand (Larch, Heartstring of Hungarian Horntail, 14 inches), but he insisted I return the weekend after next, after he had time to order some specialty Gregorovitch wands that he thought might give him a better idea of the issue.

:—:

I apparated back to Diagon Alley on the agreed day. It was early August, around the time that the Hogwarts letters arrived, and so the streets were flooded with children and their parents. Joy of joys.

That was when I saw him, sitting at old Fortescue's place, placidly munching on an ice cream cone.

Harry Potter.

:-:-:-:-:

A/N: Once again, I encountered difficulties with timelines in this chapter, when introducing Mad-Eye. There are somewhat conflicting statements of when Moody retired. It's implied he had retired a fair time prior to 1994, but also stated that he was mentor to Nymphadora Tonks, who only graduated Hogwarts in 1992. So my resolution was that he retires at the end of 1993, about six months after this conversation, and six months before he is convinced by Dumbledore to become a teacher.
Harry Potter.

The boy was just sitting there, in the open. Not so much as a bodyguard in sight (and with Lord Voldemort's left hand on the loose, that was an insanity all of its own). Hells bells, he even had his wand just lying on the table, for any passer-by to snatch.

My fingers itched at the sight of it. It was my perfect match, I had known that from the moment I first touched it. It would be so very easy. A simple Confounding spell, and the boy wouldn't even notice it was gone until it was much too late. I took a step toward him.

Somebody shoulder-checked me, hard, breaking my tunnel vision.

'Watch where you're going, asshole!' yelled the obese wizard who had bumped me. American accent, New Yorker unless I missed my guess. My lip curled. A tourist, belligerently awaiting my response. I stared coldly at him, contemplating which adorable little woodland critter I should turn him into.

He shook his head. 'Douchebag!' he proclaimed loudly, dragging his brat of a child off with him. I stayed my hand. Too public. I couldn't afford to have someone try arresting me.

When I turned back to look at Potter, he was gone.

I looked around, but he was nowhere to be found. Scowling, I entered Ollivander's shop.

'O, mister Grey!' Ollivander, at least, seemed to be in a good mood. 'Excellent timing, I just finished laying out the wands for you.'

He led me into a back room, where four Gregorovitch-made wands were laid neatly out on a table.

'Now mister Grey, each of these has a core and some a wood that, myself, I would never use in wandmaking. Far too volatile, too particular in their wielders. But they are useful for drawing out the subtleties in ones inclinations that would be imperceptible with my own works. You don't mind me sharing my findings with my counterpart, do you? Old Mykew's retired now of course, but we do still exchange correspondence.'

He set up a self-noting quill on a scroll of parchment, and a few sensory charms

'I suppose that depends on what you find' I murmured, taking up one of the wands, a slender affair of wood so black it almost looked blue.

'Ah, Thestral hair and Pine of Sorrows. A particularly malevolent combination'

He was right. I seldom gave much credence to the belief in objective good and evil, but this wand felt evil to me, and I made a damn Horcrux. It felt like I was holding a shard of Niflheim itself.

I threw it down onto table, reviled. 'Absolutely not. Why would someone make this?'
Ollivander shrugged. The motion looked thoroughly odd on him. 'To see if they could, I suppose. Try another.'

Well that didn't exactly inspire confidence. I picked up the second wand, of pale red. This one felt like nothing at all. If I didn't know better I'd say it was just an elegantly carved stick of wood. I tried casting a spell with it and got nothing.

'Interesting' was Ollivander's only remark. I frowned.

'What was the core?'

For a moment, it looked like he wasn't going to tell me.

'Re'em tendon. The wood is ash'

Well that explained it. Magical focuses could not contain materials that were part of the user's own physiology. The blood that I had infused within my body in the Stroj na golema technically made me part-Re'em.

The third wand, I actually recognised the wood of. It too was a magical variety of ash, mountain ash in this case. The core was basilisk fang, and so naturally I felt an affinity, though again it fell far short of my phoenix and yew wand.

The fourth immediately fired off a disintegrating curse when I picked it up and sublimated a hole in the wall. Between hacking coughs, Ollivander got out 'Erumpet horn and eucalyptus!'

I placed it back on the table as delicately as humanly possible.

The fifth, I picked up, and every hair on my body stood up on end. I could feel the electrical charge flowing though it, and through me. On my other hand, little arcs of electricity flickered between my fingers.

'Thunderbird tail feather and lightning-struck oak' noted Ollivander, his animated quill still scribbling frantically.

I set it down as well. 'No matches'

'No, but we weren't expecting them either. This data should give us some answers, but it will take me some time indeed to parse.'

He was right, the quill had produced several dozen feet of writing in only a few short minutes. I took a look at it, but it was in an alphabet I didn't recognise. Curiouser and curiouser, Mr Ollivander.

'I shall send you an owl when I am ready.' he said, as the entry bell rang and a gaggle of small children crowded the front of his shop.

:—:

I visited Diagon Alley several times over the weeks leading up to September, searching for Potter, but our paths never crossed. Whether by coincidence, or by somebody finally wising up and locking him away, I had no idea. I briefly contemplated awaiting him at King's Cross on September 1st, but dismissed the idea. There were sure to be a multitude of Aurors at the station.

Hmm, the boy would be in his 3rd year now, perhaps I could take the wand on a school trip to
Hogsmeade…

Thoughts for later. For now, I had managed to find a different distraction; Lord Voldemort's continental adventures.

I had spent the last few months doing some digging. For anyone else, even those who I was close to in my youth, tracking his ten year path across Europe and Asia would be downright impossible. In my time at Hogwarts I had developed almost three dozen fully fleshed out aliases, very few of which were even British natives. I had sought out ex-patriots living in London, and practiced plucking their native tongues right out of the language centre of their minds, until I could do it in a matter of seconds. I had wanted to ensure that I could disappear utterly into any culture in which I may find myself.

But I had the one advantage nobody else had; the memories we shared. Using the aliases I already knew of as a starting point, I began to slowly map his route. He left England as Tom Riddle, and arrived at the small magical community in Calais, France as Jacques Lyons, a healer hailing from Toulouse. From there, he wended his way southward across Magical France, filling in as an interim Transfiguration teacher at Beauxbatons for six months under the name Laurens de Sablé. I had smiled fondly when I saw the name, Laurens had been one of my favourites.

After Beauxbatons, he continued his path south, through Spain. This, I had expected; the origins of the Slytherin bloodline (and thus, the origin of our gift for serpent speech) had been of some interest to me, and was part of why I had tracked down Morfin Gaunt to begin with. The historical record of the family begins with Salazar himself, and all that was known was that he had been born in a wetlands region in the Emirate of Córdoba (Modern day Spain and Portugal), somewhere around the late 9th, early 10th century.

Lord Voldemort first resurfaced in Spain in Barcelona, going by the name Philip Tosar, where he was arrested by Spanish Aurors for stealing from their Halls of Records. Interesting…

He broke out of holding, of course, leaving a small trail of bodies in his wake. There's a catch-or-kill order out on Philip Tosar to this very day.

That was where the trail went cold, for the time being at least. Spanish authorities were proving to be difficult to manipulate. Which meant I was going to have to track down my next clue in person.

:—:

I appeared with a sharp crack atop an old Catalan-Gothic cathedral, overlooking a small, but densely packed cityscape of Mediterranean-style houses, all white plaster walls and red-tiled rooftops. Ibiza, a party island if ever there was one, and the land of mine own kin, if my hunch proved correct. I took a moment to wrap myself in a self-transfiguration that transformed me from gorgeous Eurasian to gorgeous Spaniard. Ok yes, I'm a little vain. Sue me.

It was perhaps 11pm, and so as I walked the streets of the port-side town it was filled with revelers, drunk and high off all sorts of wondrous materials. I casually flicked a Confundus at one of them from under my coat, and scooped up their bottle of fuck-knows-what. Dimly, it occurred to me that getting drunk before breaking into the Ibizan ministry probably wasn't the best idea of all time, but hell, I'd had a week. Weirdly, trying to finagle Auror and border security records out of foreign nations is something of a headache-inducing chore.

Swigging generously from the… gin? that I had appropriated, I sashayed cheerily through the subtly-placed stone archway that separated magical Ibiza from the mundane one. Truth be told, there wasn't a lot of difference between the two at this time of night, aside from a marked increase
in the number of random fireworks going off. Mediterranean magicals, I recalled, had no qualms at all about emulating the culture of their muggle counterparts, and Ibiza's magical population, unlike most of the world, almost rivaled that of its muggle one. I found myself cornered by a pair of very good looking Greek witches who all but dragged me into the nearest nightclub, an underground joint bearing the name El Cuco.

As the opening bars of What Is Love began to thrum out of enormous, magically enhanced speakers, I felt myself becoming woozy. There had definitely been something in that gin...

...I was dancing with the Greek girls, in between slamming shots with the pair of them...

...I was downing pills of Alihotsy, and feverishly kissing one of the Greek girls...

...A man grabbed me roughly by the shoulder, shoving me against the bar, shouting at me in rapid Greek. My own grasp of the tongue wasn't exactly modern, but I think he was saying something about...

...I blasted the sniveling little shit across the alleyway, not even bothering with my wand. His dickless mates turned tail and fled like the cowards they were...

...I was fleeing the Aurors, cackling like a madman. One of them apparated in front of me, purple robes flapping in the wind, and I turned him into an eggplant without a second glance...

:—:

I awoke with a low groan, my head afire. For a time, I simply lay there in my own misery, trying to piece together what had happened the previous night. I hadn't even reached the damn Ministry. That was... not like me at all. It was that weird gin, it had to have been. Some kind of muggle drug that drove me temporarily mad...

Wait. Where was I. I looked around, to see a small studio apartment, baroque style. Not at all familiar. The naked dead Greek girl lying next to me was a bit of a concern as well.

Did I kill this girl, in some kind of drug-induced rage? I inspected the marks around her throat. No, they were too soft. These were made by somebody with nowhere near my degree of physical strength. A small relief; I didn't really like what that would have implied.

I went to get out of bed, but found myself repelled by some kind of ward. The door burst open, and half a dozen shady-looking wizards filed in, wands out. I recognised their leader from my fragmented recollections of the previous night; the jealous boyfriend of the girl lying beside me. Maybe a little more than jealous, by the looks of things.

He was a greasy, self-assured-looking motherfucker, all wife-beater top and slicked back hair. No wonder the poor girl had wanted to trade up. He began to jabber arrogantly at me in a dialect of Greek that I didn't understand, but which cut into my hangover-ridden brain like a hot knife.

Fuck this. I tore through his mind like a drill on a stick, finding the language centre of his brain and ripping it right out of his head. In short, I was not gentle. This man had just murdered his own girlfriend, I was in no mood to fuck around and see what he had planned for me. In the Real, the man slumped back against the wall and slid down it, blood pouring from both nostrils. His goons backed away, fear written all over their faces. Sorry boys, it's far too late for takebacksies now.

They had taken my larch wand, but I hardly needed it to deal with dime-store dark wizards like this. I Banished the first through the sandstone wall, his body crumpling like a tin can. With a flexing of power, I shattered the meek spell binding me to this bed, and rose, awkwardly realising
that I was still naked.

Two of them showed some bravery and fired off spells at me. I palmed one, but the other slammed into my chest, opening up a deep gash and throwing me backwards. My blood sprayed scarlet across the wall, and I landed hard on my shoulder. Ow, that's a dislocation.

One of his buddies followed up with what I think was a dark variant of a Melofors jinx of all things, but I wouldn't ever find out, as I slapped it away on reflex. I was bleeding pretty badly, if it weren't for all my augmentations, that cutting curse probably would have cleaved me in half. I grabbed the bedside table, and threw it into the path of a bludgeoner, then banished the resulting shards at the caster, pinning him to the wall by his head. Three down, three to go.

I rolled behind a dresser, my shoulder shrieking in protest, just in time to avoid an immolation curse. Fantastic, now the room was on fire too. I rubbed my hands together furiously, summoning a charge. My hands alight with electricity, I rounded the dresser and ran my arms through a swift kata once used by Japanese wizards before the invention of wands. The resulting thunderbolt deafened myself and my two remaining opponents, who for a moment were struck dumb by the flash-charred remains of their friend. It did a number on me too though, I ducked back behind the dresser with my arms spasming all along their lengths. I hated using that technique, I'd be twitchy for days.

The dresser exploded, and I caught some nasty shrapnel from it, flung across the room once more. I landed on the bed, mercifully soft, and forced my will through uncooperative fingertips, ripping the wand right out of one of my final foes' hand and into my own. Finally. A wide-area cleaver I affectionately called the Bone Saw rent him in half, and tore a gouge several inches deep into the sandstone wall behind him.

And then there was one.

He fled, as any reasonable man would, apparating away before I could catch him on my backswing, such as it were. Fuck, that's going to come back to bite me.

I used the dead man's wand to seal my own wounds, fortunately none of which were tainted by the anti-healing effect that was so common in dark curses. The big gouge left a hell of a scar though, my first in this body. Searching the leader, I found my larch wand in his pocket. I snatched up my coat from where it lay in the corner, and apparated away as the flames spread across the room, burning away all trace of what happened here.

:—:

They caught up with me down at the bar across from the hotel, purple-robed Aurors each slapping a hand on my shoulder at once. They practically dragged me into the Ibizan ministry for questioning. Not exactly my ideal plan for getting in, but I could work with this.

From there, honestly, things were far more boring than the desperate butchering of thugs in a random hotel room. I broke my restraints with Re'em strength, stunned the Aurors, and sauntered backwards into their hall of records, plucking out whatever I desired. A few hours later, I left party island forever with a twist of a heel and a sharp crack.

:—:

My escapade in the Balearics had been well worth the ropey scar that now marred my upper torso. Lord Voldemort had been in Ibiza in the mid-fifties, posing as a magi-geologist by the name of Guy Llull. In my scant remaining time in Ibiza, I had sought out what he found. Following in his
footsteps, almost literally at one point, I found myself standing in front of an ancient, squat mud brick building, in the midst of the island's wetland region. I could feel the wards as I passed them by, and I recognised them by feel. These would have rendered the homestead imperceptible to anyone not in the company of a Parselmouth. The same wards were on the Chamber of Secrets.

I reached into my coat and drew out Czernobog's hammer in my left hand. If the illusory charms still had power after all this time, who knew what other protections could still be active. Had anyone been there to see it, the sight of a man withdrawing a four-foot long greathammer out of his pocket would probably have looked quite odd, but I was already over the ward line. I tread the gravelly path carefully, and nudged open the door with the business end of the hammer.

Inside, there were two rooms, a living area and a sleeping chamber. The whole family would have slept together in one bed, most likely. Space expansion charms, it was believed, had been invented by Rowena Ravenclaw specifically for Hogwarts, and so this little homestead bore none of them. What it had, in spades, was snake carvings. Hundreds of them, the walls were a mosaic of serpents of every breed mankind knew. I examined them closely. Some of them bore enchantment, faded to be sure, but still bearing a charge.

'Speak to me, carvings' I hissed in Parseltongue, and the mosaic came to life, wiggling and writhing in the most unsettling fashion. The largest of the carvings, a vicious-looking Runespoor, responded to me in triplicate.

'Who wakessss usssss'

'It is I, last of the line of Speakers'

'What bringssss you to thissss, home of your kin?'

'I wish to know my people's past. I know you shared it with another.'

'We did. He claimed to be the last of the bloodline alssssso.'

'I am his… son. The mantle has passed to me'

The Runespoor didn't seem to know what to make of that.

'I need to know'

'The origins of the gift are losssst to usssss. Your family came to thissss isle assss refugeessss of Qart-hadasht, bringing naught but the shirts on their back…'

Fleeing the deletion of Carthage. Well that cuts off that line of inquiry pretty sharply. The Romans had been nothing if not thorough in their cleansing of that city from the Earth.

I returned to civilisation, cracking away to somewhere I was not currently wanted. I not entirely sure what to do from here. Where might Lord Voldemort have gone next, after receiving (presumably) the same disappointment. I turned back to the Ibiza records I had stolen, focusing on outgoing migration records. After a full day of mind-numbing work, I found something. He reused the Jacques identity to charter a portkey to Italy. To Naples, specifically.

What Lord Voldemort expected to find there, I hadn't the slightest idea, but where he went, I would follow.

:—:
Even in the early days of autumn, the ruins of Herculaneum were beautiful to behold. Rome may have been the capitol of the titular empire, but for wizarding folk, it was Herculaneum that had been its heart. In those days, there had been no divide between muggle and magical, and this had apparently made covering up evidence of such from muggle archaeologists an absolute nightmare for the Italian ministry. But that was no concern of mine. Lord Voldemort had been here in the fifties, posing as an archaeologist, and I suspect it had to do with the old college of magic that had once been situated here, before the eruption of Mt Vesuvius has wiped it all away in an all-consuming torrent of fire and brimstone.

I had swapped disguises between leaving Ibiza and landing in Naples, not wanting to test how quickly news spread. The locals had embraced me with open arms, which my own grasp of Italian (swiped with first-language accent intact from an elderly shopkeeper) only expedited.

The ruins of the Herculaneum wizard's college largely remained unexplored, and access had been barred to the public and archaeologists alike since the late twenties. The local authorities had decided it wasn't worth the risk, after some idiot accidentally unleashed a minor daemon that had been sealed away in some ancient scholar's laboratory. Somehow, I doubted small concerns like extradimensional horror beasts wouldn't dissuade my forerunner, and so too they would not dissuade me.

I slipped between bored-looking security guys, one of whom was openly reading a book on the job. Disillusioned as I was, they never even looked up. I brushed through the barrier that hid the wizard's quarter from muggle view. The old college was truly a sight to behold, even with its main dome collapsed, and I was reminded that the Pantheon in Rome was based on its design.

Within its walls, a sombre silence reigned, a silence that bore the overwhelming weight of what had happened to this place, eons ago. Herculaneum had been evacuated in the wake of the original cataclysm, before Vesuvius had turned its rage upon them, and so I was spared having to deal with an army of ghosts. Even still, it was… eerie. Beautiful, I noted, casting a witch-light into the air above me to illuminate the ancient frescoes, but eerie.

I cracked open a piece of equipment that I had purchased with just this sort of adventure in mind, called a Mapsule. It had set me back a pretty penny or two, but it would provide me with a detailed map of the area, of which no others had survived. There was a high pitched whining noise, then the tennis-ball-sized capsule transfigured itself into a piece of parchment. Excellent.

Peering at the map under the cold blue illumination of the witch-light, I made my way downstairs. As I went underground, I realised with a start that I could actually see where Lord Voldemort had tread before me; footprints in the volcanic dust that remained distinct even after decades. I followed them into the library, and stopped dead when I saw what lay within.

The midsection of the stone mosaic floor, a swirling sigil of topaz gemstones, had split down the middle, and slid to the sides. Beneath it lay a a hollowed space, and within that space hovered a series of interlocking rings, forming an orb that encircled… something. I couldn't make out what it was from this angle. I drew Czernobog's hammer, and stepped into the room.

Immediately the thing in the spherical cage reacted to the light falling upon it, twisting towards me. It was a daemon, it had to be. Nothing that looked like that could ever have been born on Earth. Its face was humanoid, and hauntingly beautiful, but it was surrounded by a mane of tentacles and serrated horns, and its body was that of a lion, a dragon, and a squid all at once.

'Tom Marvolo Riddle' it said calmly, in a voice so deep that it made my ribcage vibrate painfully. 'But not the Tom Marvolo Riddle that I know.'
It tilted its horrifying head. 'You have come in search of your forebear, say I. You will not find yourself here.'

I double checked my occlumency shields, I hadn't detected so much as a brush of legilimency. This was something else entirely. Was Lord Voldemort truly that mad? To be on speaking terms with a fucking daemon?

Thankfully, it seemed the old Romans had done their work well with this one. If it were capable, it would have shattered these bindings eons past. Or would it? Daemon minds were as alien as it was possible to be, and were correspondingly unpredictable. I couldn't afford to get cocky.

'What did he want?' I said, carefully.

'What do all men want, Tom Marvolo Riddle?' I twitched in irritation at how it said my name with that mocking tone. 'Power.'

'What kind of power?'

The daemon turned idly in its cage, now looking at me upside down. 'Oh, so very many. You always were a precocious one, say I'

This was pointless, it just wanted to toy with me. I turned to leave, hoping to find some actual information in one of the few intact codices.

'Immortality, Tom Marvolo Riddle'

I turned back incredulously. An obvious lie, he'd achieved that before even finishing high-school. 'Bullshit.'

The daemon laughed, an awful noise that defied description. 'Oh Tom Marvolo Riddle, do you truly believe you would stay satisfied with your meagre means? Oh no, you always need more, say I.'

'What did you teach him?' I demanded. If Lord Voldemort had found other means to ensure his own existence, I needed to know how to co-opt them.

'Teach you? Nothing. I told you where to go. The House of the Rising Sun hides many secrets, to those who know the way.'

I narrowed my eyes. 'What did you demand of him for this information?'

'Why, the same thing I have taken of you once more. What do all men want, Tom Marvolo Riddle?'

I frowned. What was that supposed to...

Then I felt it. The feather-light drain on my magic. He'd been stalling for time. My eyes widened as its grin did the same.

The rings binding the daemon began to glow with heat, and with a resounding wrenching noise, one of them snapped. Then another.

I fled, sprinting back up the steps and cursing the anti-apparition wards that had been meant to stop vandals.
'YOU WERE A FOOL TO RETURN HERE, TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE! SO SAY I!' It bellowed, its final word drowning itself out into an otherworldly roar.

:-:-:-:-:
Of Daemons and Dumbledores

There may exist an individual who is able to remain stalwart in the face of a daemon shattering its ancient bonds and walking freely upon the world of Man once more, but I am not they.

I sprinted full-pelt up the marble steps of the Herculaneum College, and the impossibly deep laughter chased me all the way. I desperately ran through my arsenal of spells for anything that might slow it down; daemons were famously almost totally immune to direct magic.

I skidded to a halt and turned, firing off a tight beam of compressed plasma out of my wand, carving right through the ceiling and its supports. Hundreds of tonnes of ancient rubble caved in, completely blocking the corridor. That might hold it for a few solid seconds or so.

A few minutes of dead-sprinting later, I burst out of the front entrance of the College, and almost bowled over the two night guards, who had no doubt heard the destruction.

'DEMONE!' I shouted in Italian, more than a little panicked. 'DEMONE DALL'ABI-

The foyer of the College exploded upwards behind me, two-thousand-year-old frescoes and statues simply erased by the sheer destructive power of what I had unleashed.

For the barest of moments, the beast simply stood in the remnants of its prison, gazing at us. It stood three men tall, its form undulating in the moonlight, its beautiful face locked onto my own. Then it charged.

One of the guards, the one who had been reading earlier, stepped in front of me and tried for an Expulso. Poor fool, he didn't even have time to register that the spell had rippled across the daemon without even detonating before he was beneath it, being torn apart by its tentacled mane.

The other guard, slightly wiser, managed to get off a Patronus, a hare that shot off across the bay to Naples, before he too was consumed.

Me, I never even stopped running. I just had to make the ward line. I wasn't going to get there in time, not even close, I could feel it behind me.

I skidded to a halt and pivoted, swinging Czernobog's hammer as hard as I could. The daemon could absolutely defeat me in any contest of strength, but it still had to obey the laws of physics. With the hammer in hand, and my already augmented strength, I could hit hard enough to derail a freight train.

The daemon went flying, smashing into a marble pillar. I didn't bother flattering myself with the notion that it might be hurt, I just kept up my sprint. This was not how I die. The ward line was just a few metres away-

The daemon crashed down in front of me, whipping me with its tail of a dozen tendrils. I felt my jaw break, then my ribs as I was knocked clean through a low brick wall. I managed to keep a grip on my wand, but the hammer was gone from my grasp.

I groaned, and rolled onto my knees, wondering why I wasn't dead yet. The daemon's tentacle wrapped around my head like a vice, lifting me off the ground, and suddenly its massive face was inches from my own.
'We had an agreement, Tom Marvolo Riddle. An agreement you failed to honour, say I'

'Whatsh… whatsh honour to a daemon?' I slurred through the fiery pain of my jaw, and then I screamed in agony as it tightened its grip on my head. I could feel myself about to pop like a melon.

'Your death shall be slow, mortal. I shall make it last centuries'

'Not today, I'm afraid' came an amiable, French-accented voice. What?

The daemon whirled, dragging me with it like a rag doll. A white-haired woman stood before us, right on the ward line, wearing a red dress. The finer details were, sadly, lost to my concussed mind, but I did see the golden mandala floating in front of her.

'What is-

The woman drove her wand through the centre of the mandala, which blasted us with golden light. The daemon shrieked, and dropped me, as it was sent skidding backwards. I landed like a sack of bricks, striking my head again, hard on the ancient cement. The air was suddenly filled with the horrifying stench of seared daemon flesh.

It didn't take long for the beast to regroup, but the woman hadn't sat around waiting. Half a dozen lesser mandalas fired off, pounding the daemon's flank, but it was already starting to resist their effects.

I managed to force myself up onto one knee. She needed my help, and it would be the height of rudeness to leave her to its mercies immediately after she saved my life. Oh damn it all.

Thankfully, I had the sense of mind not to try for fiendfyre. There was less than no chance I could control it in this state, and I figured that given the name there was a solid chance that it would actually aid the daemon. So I went with something a little more creative.

I transfigured a dozen pieces of rubble into foot wide glass spheres, then powered as much of my magic as I could into a permanent conjuration of pure hydrochloric acid. Permanent, because anything less would be negated entirely by the daemon's anti-magic aura. The effort nearly exhausted me, and the pounding headache that ensued almost made me black out. But I had strength enough left to banish them at the daemon, before sagging against the same low wall he had thrown me through.

The first sphere shattered right in the daemon's gaping maw, and it immediately began hacking and choking. The other spheres smashed along its body, coating it with one of the most corrosive naturally-occurring acids known to mankind.

For a moment, I dared to hope, but then the daemon lunged forward, slamming into the golden dome barrier that the woman had erected only just in time. The dome cracked from that one impact, and the woman staggered. The daemon inhaled, and I could see an unholy ultraviolet light shining in its throat.

Other wizards were cracking in now, I could see. Italian Aurors in forest-green robes, battering it uselessly with Killing Curses. The thing didn't have a soul to kill, you damn fools.

A dozen of the cannon fodder were wiped away in an instant as the daemon exhaled, bombarding them with a torrent of negative energy that tore them apart on an atomic level. It ate one wizard's fiendfyre blast without even blinking, and then the man himself.
Meanwhile, the woman had taken advantage of the reinforcements to regain her composure, and was now running in a wide circle raising more of those golden mandalas in a ring around the otherworldly monstrosity. I was mostly deaf at this point, but I could make out her shouting in Italian to do everything they could to keep the beast in one place. Smart lady, she knew when to sacrifice pawns for the greater good.

A flash of flame. I looked up to see Albus Dumbledore standing beside me, looking more like the god Odin than a kindly headmaster. Gone was the trademark grandfatherly twinkle in his eye, this was wizard that I feared, this was the wizard who had single-handedly broken Gellert Grindelwald's stranglehold over Europe.

I never thought I would be glad to see him.

He twirled his wand above his head, then brought it down to earth, and a corresponding lightning blast from the sky rocked the daemon, briefly immobilising it. He followed up with a long, complicated weaving motion, and hundreds of pieces of rubble strewn across the battlefield danced to his call. Forming chains that transmuted themselves into stalwart adamantine, they wrapped themselves around the abomination, binding it further.

It was a display of complex skill and power unlike any I'd seen before, but the daemon was not so impressed, bellowing out another stream of negative energy directly at the aging wizard. Dumbledore flicked his wand, and the spray split neatly around him, gouging deep furrows into the earth. Dumbledore levitated himself, and started hammering away at the thing from above with spells that made the very ground shake.

The woman, finally, finished her ring of mandalas, and with a shouted incantation in an extinct dialect of Chinese, each fired a solid beam of golden light. The daemon screeched loud enough to make everyone's ears start to bleed, but there was nowhere for it to go, and so it seared and burned and boiled. It stopped moving altogether, but the beams kept on, until the corpse had been sublimated entirely.

That was around the time I passed out, the overwhelming stench being the final nail in the coffin.

:—:

I awoke in a hospital, enshrouded in darkness. Given that my, ah, everything hurt, that did seem apropos. The magic-dampening cuffs shackling each hand to my bed were a bit less welcome. They were well-made too, they even blocked my Re'em strength.

I struggled with them briefly, before my splitting headache drove me back into slumber.

:—:

They woke me with a Rennervate. In the wizarding world, this was the equivalent of tossing a bucket of ice water over someone. I shot awake, immediately alert.

I was in the same hospital bed, but feeling considerably better. It no longer hurt to breathe, at least. I was surrounded by people. A couple of healers, but also a woman in a fine pantsuit, and an Auror. A high-up Auror, by the looks of his robes. Behind them in the corner of my room, stood Dumbledore, his expression grave, and the woman who had saved my bacon. With my concussion cleared, I could see her clearly, finally. Snow-white hair, but a completely line-less face, she didn't look a day over twenty five. Pretty, too. Some hitherto-unknown apprentice of Dumbledore's, perhaps?
The woman in the pantsuit cleared her throat. She, at least, I recognised. Antonia Marchesi, Italian Minister for Magic.

'Signor Grey, is that correct?' She addressed me in English, that's not a great start. I realised suddenly that my disguise had disappeared; it must have failed when the daemon dragged me into its aura.

'Yes, that is me' I said carefully. At the very least the background Garrow Avery and I had spent some time forging seemed to have held up to scrutiny.

'Our British friends tell us they have no record of you leaving their borders. Would you do us all the kindness of explaining why you are in my country?'

She sounded pissed. Can't blame her, I would be too.

'I don't remember,' I confessed woefully. 'Last thing I recall, I was in Diagon Alley.'

She sneered. 'Dose him.'

One of the healers held my mouth open, while the other pulled out an eyedropper and deposited three drops of Veritaserum onto my tongue. I didn't bother resisting them, it wouldn't help any. I felt its cold influence creep over my mind. Fortunately, for a man of my skill in occlumency, it would avail them none. I faked the trance-like state, and awaited their interrogation.

'State your full birth name'

'Thomas Morgan Grey'

'When and why did you come to Italy?'

'I arrived in Naples on the 7th of September, 1993. I came here on holiday, to visit Pompeii and Herculaneum.'

'Did you enter the country illegally?'

'Yes I did. I wanted to avoid immigration fees.'

'Did you unleash the daemon?'

Moment of truth.

'No I didn't.'

The Auror made a disbelieving noise. He'd been giving me a filthy look the entire time.

'He must be lying,' he said to Marchesi in Italian. 'Allow me to examine his mind, I shall uncover the truth.'

She shut him down hard. 'We will not be legitimising a man against his will without a court order, mister Palermo, not on mere suspicion!'

She turned back to me. 'Tell me about that night from your perspective.'

I fed her a line of bullshit about going on a late night walk through the ruins, and how I had been asking to bum a smoke off one of the guards when the daemon had erupted from the ground.
The French woman with Dumbledore interrupted then.

'The daemon, it spoke to you, like it knew you. Why?'

Bugger. I could only assume that she didn't hear it call me Tom Riddle, or Dumbledore likely would have ensured I never awoke.

'I believe it was angered when I struck it with my hammer.' Damn the veritaserum, it killed any opportunity for me to be snide.

'Ah yes, that brings us to the the other concern.' said Dumbledore, smoothly. He withdrew Czernobog's hammer from within his robes, the black iron head barely shining under the harsh lighting.

'You understand that this is a Dark artefact, is that correct?' he asked.

'Yes. I have a license for it.' I did too, albeit one that I had forged and broken into the British Ministry's hall of records to plant.

'Where did you obtain it from?'

I made a show of resisting the Veritaserum. Chuck the man a bone to distract him from my deeper secrets.

'I-I d-don't have to t-tell you that.' I bit out. Dumbledore frowned disapprovingly at me, but I was right. If I already had a license, legally I did not have to disclose where I obtained it. Get fucked, old man.

They asked me a few more questions about my false past until the Veritaserum "wore off", then filed out of the room to confer. Only the snow-haired woman remained. She approached my bedside.

'Do you know who I am, young man?' she asked, dark blue eyes glimmering.

'Haven't the foggiest' I answered honestly.

'My name is Perenelle Flamel.' Holy shit.

She looked over her shoulder, where Auror Palermo's outline was gesticulating wildly through the frosted glass.

'I was very impressed by your conjurations against the daemon. For one of your age, you show potential I haven't seen since Albus first showed up on our doorstep. Assuming they don't throw you in Azkaban, you should pay us a visit. My husband has always had a certain fondness for prodigies…'

She let herself out, leaving me alone to contemplate. The Flamels had never approached me as Tom Riddle; perhaps because Dumbledore had warned them off me. No such luck this time, Albus.

:—:

The debate outside my room continued for several minutes. Eventually, they filed back in, Auror Palermo leading.

'Signor Grey, at this time we are charging you with illegal entry to the country, and with smuggling a dark object into the country. Our investigation into the daemon incident is ongoing, and you will
be detained until it complete.'

He paused, before reluctantly adding. 'In light of your efforts to assist in the defeat of the daemon, we are willing to show you some clemency, but rest assured that if we find that any aspect of your story is untrue, we will be prosecuting you to the full extent of the law. And heaven help you if we find that you were the one to free it.'

I took some time to digest this. The only people who could outright contradict my version of events would be the guards I encountered, and they were both very dead. I simply had to hope that any trace of my own presence within the college had been wiped clean by the daemon's rampage.

'Would I be able to send a letter to my business associate, to let him know that I will be at least delayed in my return to England?'

They agreed to get me a scribe, and began to file out again.

'Dumbledore!' I called out. 'My hammer.'

He turned to me with that grandfatherly expression I despised so much. 'Mister Grey, I could hardly return it to you whilst you remain in Italy. You may reclaim it from me when you return to Britain.'

I snarled. 'I am not a schoolboy with a fanged frisbee, Dumbledore.'

He regarded me sombrely. 'No, indeed you are not. But you'll have to forgive me for being wary of the man who wields this weapon. Its previous bearer has not, after all, been remembered fondly by the people of Poland.'

I scowled after him as he left. Even without realising who I was, he still managed to make my life difficult.

:—:

Once the healers gave me a clean bill of health, I was moved to a holding cell in the Ministry. Much nicer than holding facilities at the British Ministry, I'll tell you that for nothing. More secure too, though I'd already identified a couple of potential means of escape. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that. Burning this identity would bring much more trouble than it was worth.

After a week of perusing the meagre library of books they kept to entertain detainees, Auror Palermo returned. He looked as surly as ever.

'Mister Grey, follow me. Your hearing is ready for you.'

Wizarding courts of law were, thankfully, much more straightforward than Muggle ones, and so it was only on the most severe of charges that an adult wizard had to bother with a legal representative. This was good news for me; it meant they didn't find anything to tie me to the daemon's escape.

The courtroom was small, with a spotlight over an armchair in the middle of the room, and the rest shrouded in darkness. I sat in the armchair, and tried to look innocent. I was very good at it.

'Thomas Grey!' boomed a voice that I didn't recognise, continuing in Italian. 'You stand accused of illegally crossing the border, and of smuggling a Dark Artefact into the country. How do you plead?'
Wizarding law might be simpler, but it was still boring, and so I shall spare you a direct recounting of events. Typically smuggling Dark Artefacts entailed a year in Azkaban, but in light of the fact that I had used the hammer in the act of defending the city of Naples, they had elected to drop that charge, and simply fine me the customary 200 galleons for illegal border crossing. They slapped me with a three year ban on entering Italy for good measure. All in all, I got very lucky, and they went to great lengths to remind me of that.

I left the Ministry a free man, and this time I took a legal portkey back to Britain.

:—:

I sighed heavily, looking up at wrought-iron gates that teemed with magic. I really didn't want to be here.

There was a time when Hogwarts had been the only place I had ever felt at home, the only place I felt safe. That time was long past. The spectre of Dumbledore loomed over it like a lion over a fresh kill. Worse still, the unholy scourge that were the Dementors patrolling the edge of the grounds had thoroughly killed any lingering vestige of nostalgia. Dumbledore was mad to allow the Ministry to install them.

I knew it was possible that this could be a trap. That Dumbledore had deduced exactly who I was after all, and had simply wished to keep things in-house, but I didn't think so. It didn't strike me as his style to deliberately endanger his students like that.

The oaf, Hagrid, met me at gates, giving me what he probably thought was a thoroughly mistrustful look. He just came off looking like he had a headache. Idiot. He walked me across the grounds, looking more like he thought he was escorting a criminal than a guest.

It was the weekend, and so there were more than a few students scattered across the grounds enjoying their brief taste of freedom, and the final tattered strands of Summer before Autumn took its due. No Potter in sight, sadly.

We passed into the castle, and up its marble staircases.

'Hagrid!' came a very young voice, which the oaf turned towards.

It was a girl, couldn't have been older than twelve, with scraggly dirty blond hair and big blue eyes that almost seemed to glow. Accompanying her was another student, who I recognised immediately. The waif, Ginny Weasley.

'Hullo Luna!' said Hagrid brightly. 'M'afraid now's not the best time, got a guest for Professor Dumbledore.'

The waif was looking much healthier than when I saw her last, good for her. She didn't recognise me in the slightest, of course, her eyes passing over me curiously. Out of curiosity of my own, I reached out with my mind and brushed up against hers; she'd clearly been seeing a mind healer. The piece of art I had created in her mind had been thoroughly undone. So her family was not entirely idiotic, despite how much she had whinged about them to me.

I glanced over at the Luna girl, who was also staring at me. Our eyes met, and something told me I didn't want to take a look into her mind. Her gaze was… unsettling.

'…do come by my house soon, have a cuppa tea, some rock cakes…' Hagrid was nattering on, despite his own claim of not having the time.
'Hagrid!' I interrupted sharply, and made a gesture up the stairs. He sheepishly said goodbye to the girls, and we continued to Dumbledore's office without incident.

The Headmaster's office was very different from how it had been under Dippet. His office had had a certain austerity to it, a reflection of how he had run Hogwarts. Dumbledore had thoroughly banished such notions, the room was positively crowded with little display tables, and upon each was a different magical device. Dumbledore's office as a transfiguration teacher had had a similar decor, on a smaller scale. Each device was personally invented by the man, and he surrounded himself with these… trinkets of his own prowess. Arrogant prick.

Albus Dumbledore himself sat behind the same grand desk that Dippet had, scribbling away at some piece of parchment. He looked up as we entered.

'Ah, thank you Hagrid. That will be all.'

He conjured a squishy armchair in front of the desk across from him, and gestured for me to sit.

'I'll stand,' I said coldly. 'Where's my hammer?'

He looked at me, and for a long moment I thought he would refuse to give it to me. Then he sighed, and slid open a drawer, pulling out Czernobog's hammer and laying it gently on his desk.

I snatched it up immediately, contemplating the benefits of crushing the old man's skull with it right then and there. It looked like he was thinking the same thing, given how his hand half-twitched towards his wand.

'I would ask,' began Dumbledore delicately. 'What I have done to inspire such enmity in you? To my knowledge we have never met before Italy.'

'You knew my father,' I half-lied. 'Lord Voldemort was, technically, my progenitor. 'You didn't get along very well. He left Britain behind because of you'

Dumbledore peered closely at me, and I regretted giving an answer so close to the truth. 'We are not our own kin, mister Grey. I would hope that, as you re-integrate yourself into British society, we may come to understand one another better.'

Oh piss off. He clearly hadn't trusted me from the moment he saw my hammer, a nice taco date wasn't going to change his mind.

'I doubt it.' I replied, and went to storm off.

'Use my floo, mister Grey.' Dumbledore said, gesturing to his fireplace. 'Faster than having you walk through the grounds again.'

I wonder what he was worried I might seek out if I were allowed to wander freely. 'Very well' I said shortly, striding over to the hearth and throwing in some powder.

'Diagon Alley!' I declared, and was gone.

:—:

Two days later, I received a letter from Ollivander. His analysis was complete and, he said, he had an explanation for me.

I apparated to Diagon Alley immediately. Finally, something that might actually resolve one of my
troubles instead of piling onto them.

Ollivander's shop was quiet. It was the first time I had visited it outside of the back-to-school rush. Ollivander hurried out of his back rooms to greet me.

'Ah, mister Grey, welcome back! It appears I have found the root of your problem.'

'Lay it upon me, mister Ollivander.'

'This 'adequate' sensation you described with several of the wands I offered you. Those were in fact matching wands.'

I scowled. 'No, they weren't. I know what a matching wand feels like.'

'On the contrary, mister Grey, I believe that the bond you shared with your wand was unique between the pair of you.'

'I don't follow. Isn't every wizard supposed to have a unique bond with their wand.'

'No no. Each wizard is chosen by a wand that matches them, certainly, and that is the sensation that you described as 'adequate'. The magical bonding that I was able to measure between yourself and the basilisk wand was to the same degree that you see in all wizards' bond with a wand that chooses them. Based on the results of my scans, I believe the connection you had with your original wand went much deeper than that, which is why all other wands seem so lesser to you now that you have lost it. A shame, I would very much'

'So… what, I'm shit out of luck? You're telling me there's no solution to this.'

Ollivander looked a bit guilty at his own suggestion. 'Short of somehow retrieving your original wand, well… you did mention that your wand had a twin, and that you knew where it was…'

I stared at him.

:—:

I appeared in Alfhearth's foyer with a crack.

'Garrow!'

My old friend came out of his study with a bottle of whiskey in hand.

'What?'

'Your daughter is only a couple years out of Hogwarts, right?'

'Yes, why?'

'Do you know if they still have the first Hogsmeade weekend for third years on the last weekend of October?'

:-:-:-:-:

A/N: Hogsmeade weekends are another one of those inconsistent timeline issues. In 1993-94, the very first one is on Halloween, but in 1995-96, the first one was on the 5th of October, almost a full month earlier. My resolution to this (assuming that it isn't just completely arbitrarily made up by the teachers) is that Third Years, being the youngest year group to be allowed to visit the village,
have fewer trips than older students.
Disclaimer: After a note from a friend of mine, I do feel the need to make something clear about this story: I don't do bashing. When Tom does things like call Hagrid an idiot, or Dumbledore an arrogant prick, these are his opinions but do not necessarily reflect reality. I generally endeavour to have everybody as close to in-character as possible.

For all my earlier musings, I hadn't actually intended to go out of my way to steal Potter's wand. With Sirius Black on the loose, and thus security tighter than ever, I had thought it far too much of a risk. But Ollivander had confirmed my worst case scenario; without even the barest clue where my original wand had ended up, I had no other avenue to reclaiming the last of my full power.

The best and least risky method, I had long since decided, was to strike on a Hogsmeade trip, when Potter was not under the aegis of Hogwarts' wards. Hogsmeade weekends weren't announced to the general public beforehand, for obvious reasons, but I was fairly certain that the first one for third years would be October 31st. The anniversary of Potter's defeat of Lord Voldemort, how very apropos.

I had planned it all out. I would take on guise of a kindly old lady and ask him for an autograph for my grandson. From my time in the waif, I knew Potter hated his fame, but it didn't matter whether or not he actually agreed, I just needed to get close.

I weighed the benefits of just straight killing the boy and blaming it on Sirius Black. It would probably save me a lot of trouble in the long run, but there was no telling how much trouble he could potentially take off my back if he lived to be a distraction for Dumbledore and Lord Voldemort, both of whom had an unhealthy interest in the lad's life.

The month leading up until October 31st dissolved slowly. I spent much of the time practicing wielding hammer and wand at the same time. The daemon encounter had wormed its way into a fresh niche of my night terrors, a feisty fourth contender for my boggart, if ever I were to encounter one again.

I also attempted to do some research on this House of the Rising Sun that the daemon had mentioned; almost certainly where Lord Voldemort had gone next after Herculaneum. I found nothing, not a solitary mention in any historical texts or ancient grimoires I perused. It was a ghost.

The boy. Wasn't. Here.

I had looked everywhere for him, all the usual haunts of students on their first Hogsmeade trip; Zonkos, Honeydukes, the Shrieking Shack, hell I'd even searched Madam Puddifoot's. I snarled viciously beneath my disguise, Dumbledore must have barred the boy from the village for, well, exactly this reason.

I stormed out of the village in a rage, almost tripping over a big shaggy black dog that had been snoozing on the side of the main street. As I was about to apparate away, I spotted two of Potter's friends - his best friends, if the waif's memories were reliable, ambling down the street. The waif's equally fire-haired brother and the bushy muggleborn. After slipping into an alley for a brief moment to disillusion myself, I followed behind them closely, listening in on their inane teenager
conversation. Finally, after what must have been half an hour in-and-out of different shops, the
conversation had turned to Potter,

'It's so unfair that he can't come, McGonagall doesn't know what she's bloody on about,' the boy
said; by the annoyed look on the girl's face, not the first time he'd said that verbatim.

'Honestly Ron, I can't believe you're more worried about Harry missing Zonkos than you are about
Sirius Black!' the girl retorted.

'Well Sirius Black isn't bloody here, is he?' the boy gesticulated wildly.

'Oh don't talk rubbish. How would you feel if Harry came along and Black murdered him?'

'Well they would have let him come if his muggle family had signed the slip!'

This bickering continued for some time. Once again, I had overestimated Dumbledore's grasp of
security, Potter's absence wasn't for his safety, it was over a permission slip. How fucking
laughable. How in blazes had he managed to keep Grindelwald locked up for fifty-odd years when
he couldn't even adequately protect a teenager?

—:

Having taken the evening to think on it, I ultimately decided that, being an idiot teenager, Harry
Potter would probably rankle at the "unfairness" of all his friends going to Hogsmeade without
him. Even more so when they returned laden with sweets and trinkets. He would almost certainly
try to find a way to sneak into the village, and Merlin only knows how many secret passages there
were in the castle that would allow students and teachers (and only them) to do just that. Lysander
LeStrange had found one back in our own third year, and had never told me where it was. He'd
been so chuffed with himself that he'd found a secret of Hogwarts' that I had not…

Ah, I'd made myself sad.

I made my way down to breakfast in my newly sorrowful mood, rubbing the Gaunt ring idly, and
almost spat out my tea when I saw the Daily Prophet's front page headline.

ATTACK AT HOGWARTS!

Sirius Black savages second-century simulacrum!

I read with great interest, but the article was infuriatingly sparse on information. Black had
somehow managed to slip into Hogwarts, evading both its millennia-worth of wards and the
Dementors, and damn-near destroyed the Portrait of Dawn of Gaul (better known by the sobriquet
"The Fat Lady") in an attempt to break into Gryffindor tower.

Until now, I had been happy to live and let live with Mr Black, but now I needed to find him. If he
knew secrets that would allow me to gain ingress to Hogwarts without detection, and escape
likewise, it was an opportunity I could hardly afford to pass up.

As I said, I was confident that Potter would inevitably attempt to sneak out of Hogwarts. But with
October past, I had no clue at all when his attempt was likely to be, and apparating there every day
to check would do my head in.

It was Garrow's youngest child Belinda, who had returned at last from her year long trip to
Australia, who ultimately offered the solution when she joined one of our late night drinking
sessions.
'Why- why not just buy a house in Hogsmeade? Then you'll *hic* know the day that it happens.' Garrow and I stared at her. 'I'm a… fucking idiot.' I managed hoarsely through my drunken state. Absolute genius.

---

Housing in Hogsmeade, as one might expect of the only entirely wizarding settlement in Britain, was monstrously overpriced, and I was forced to part with a couple more pieces of Lord Voldemort's private collection (my main source of disposable income these days) in order to afford only a decently-sized cottage. It was nice though. Homely, in a land-apart-from-time kind of way. By which I mean it didn't have a bathroom. Or running water. Apparently the last man to live there had been pushing four hundred and was a staunch traditionalist right up until his family had forced him into a nursing home. Fortunately, both of these issues were easily solved with some permanent transfiguration, though it put me out of commission for most of that day.

I decided to finish off my first day as a homeowner with some celebratory liquor, and made for the Three Broomsticks. It was almost winter and it showed. I bundled up warmly and vaguely envied the unbelievably shaggy dog I walked past on my way to the pub.

---

I jolted awake in the middle of the night, from what had been the first good night of sleep I'd had in a long time, with a spike of ice-cold dread lodged into my heart.

I felt… small, unwanted, heartbroken. I felt like all my hopes had fallen down around me and nothing would ever make it right again. I hadn't felt this way since… since I went to visit my muggle family.

I stretched out my left hand, and my hammer shot from its place leaning on the dresser into my grasp. It too was frigid to the touch, but it was a sharp kind of cold, that cleared the mind instead of clouding it.

'Dementors!' I hissed to myself, furious. I strode to my window and peered out. Indeed, there they were, marching two-by-two down the main boulevard of town. What in blazes were they doing in an inhabited settlement?!

I knew magic that could kill almost anything of this Earth, or at least fend it off. But against Dementors, the proper method of defence was the Patronus charm, one of the few spells that seemed to forever elude me.

They marched around the village for almost half an hour before stalking back towards Hogwarts. The previous owners had certainly not mentioned that when they were selling me the house.

The next morning, I went in search of answers, and didn't have far to look. In the Three Broomsticks there was a small sign next to the front door, warning customers that the Dementors patrolled the village at night for added security.

Every night? This was fucking untenable!

'Barkeep!' I called. It was early, and the pub had only just opened its doors. Rosmerta came over immediately.

'Yes love?'
'How long has this been going on?' I demanded, slamming my finger against the sign. She sighed heavily.

'Ever since Sirius Black attacked at Hogwarts, it's bleedin' awful. I've been losing customers ever since! We've lodged a complaint to the Ministry, but they're insistin' it's for our own safety!' She looked highly dubious of that.

'I just moved here, how do you all manage to sleep?'

'Ah,' Rosmerta nodded sagely. 'A nice hot mug of hot chocolate before bed, that's the ticket. Warms you right to your toes, you won't miss a wink. And welcome to Hogsmeade by the by, I hope those rotters don't scare a handsome thing like you off…'

She winked saucily at me, and returned to her customers. Eh, a little old for me. Sure, I was technically in my sixties, but I hardly think being in a Diary for half a century should really count. Not a lot of personal growth to be had in the Long Dark.

:—:

Rosmerta's advice worked a charm, and slowly I was able to settle in to my new home.

I had left the overwhelming bulk of Lord Voldemort's stuff in Alfhearth's Undercroft, as most of it you could not even forge a license for, under any circumstances. Even still, I would have quite the arsenal to draw upon in case of emergencies. The singularity grenades alone could do some fucking damage.

I knew there would be another Hogsmeade trip before the winter break, so hopefully I would not have too long to wait. I took the time to acquaint myself with my neighbour, Alif Dervish of Dervish and Banges fame. He was one of those immediately likeable men, always full of life and wanting to share his latest inventions with anyone who would listen. My house had already began to fill up with his wares.

He was also kind enough to mention in passing that the last student trip of the year would be on the 18th of December - the day before students went home for the Yule holidays. A nice little Candlenights present for me…

:—:

The day arrived, and with it a blizzard, making visibility tattered at best. Not ideal, but I could work with it. I donned my disguise, and set out into the snow as the first students began to arrive. I vetted them carefully, searching for Potter, but to no avail. If he were here today, he was not among the main host.

I was enjoying my lunch in a little restaurant simply named Lang's - their veal schnitzel was to die for - when I spotted him, across the street entering the Three Broomsticks with those same two friends. I grinned beneath my scarf. I knew he wouldn't be able to resist.

The Three Broomsticks was far too crowded to attempt a snatch and dash, and I was even further dissuaded from trying it when shortly after, several Hogwarts teachers and the freaking Minister for Magic rocked up. I settled in for a wait, and went back to my lunch.

After a time, I saw Potter leave with his friends. They all looked quite a bit out of sorts, Potter most of all. I followed them from a distance, and watched him part with them out the front of Honeydukes. Perfect.
I slipped into Honeydukes after him. The shop was empty, the students having all filed out well before, and the proprietors nowhere in sight. The boy still looked to be almost in a daze, and I could see his wand poking out of his back pocket. I snatched it, triumph flooding through my veins.

He whirled around immediately.

'What- who the hell are you?!' he shouted, broken from his stupor.

I made the snap decision to kill him then and there. There had to have been a reason Lord Voldemort had specifically sought him out as an infant. Even if the boy himself seemed unremarkable (and as I had learned last summer, had not even had a hand in my forebear's defeat himself), it wasn't worth the risk that letting him live would come back to bite me.

I seized him by the throat, and-

**PAIN**

Immediate, fiery, unceasing agony clawed across my hand. I staggered back, making a noise like I'd been punched in the throat; it hurt too much to even scream. My hand was blistering all over where I'd grabbed him, as if I had stuck it in a flame, and even after letting go it was only getting worse. Within the span of a few seconds, it had already begun to calcify.

'Voldemort!' Potter breathed, looking terrified. My gaze snapped up to match his, and he leapt at me, hands outstretched. I apparated away in a thunderclap of desperation before he could reach me.

I reappeared in the Undercroft, still writhing. The blistering was starting to work its way up my forearm, and my fingers had become hard and white.

'Diffindo!' I cried, separating my left arm at the shoulder. Blood gushed across the floor before I stemmed it with a quick spell, and I watched as my arm became a statue of bone before crumbling into dust.

What the fuck? Was this some kind of protective spell Dumbledore had laid upon him? I'd never seen its like. It was similar in end result to the curse that still lay upon my Gaunt ring, but the mechanism was entirely different.

I sat down shakily. I was lucky to be alive, if Potter had managed to even graze my face…

I realised I was still clutching Potters wand, that I'd used it without even thinking about it. I grinned widely. An arm seemed, in hindsight, a more than fair trade for this prize. It practically sung in my hands, a chorus in perfect harmony with mine own magic. I was finally, wholly, myself once more.

There was much left to do. Sirius Black still needed catching and interrogating, the House of the Rising Sun still needed finding, Lord Voldemort's Horcruxes still needed subsuming, and Albus Dumbledore still needed killing. The fallout of Potter surviving my attempt on his life could seriously complicate things, but right now, it all felt within my grasp.

:—:

**BOY WHO LIVED ATTACKED!**

*Is You-Know-Who still among us, or has Sirius Black struck once again?*

Garrow had *not* been pleased by my actions in Hogsmeade.
'You told me you just wanted to take his wand, Tom! You didn't say anything about murdering a thirteen year old!' He shouted angrily, pacing in his study, the Daily Prophet article lying open on his desk.

'I wasn't trying to kill him,' I lied. 'I was going to choke him unconscious. It would have raised less suspicion than if I had been able to use his wand immediately.'

Garrow chewed on that for a bit, but seemed to buy it.

'Why did the boy assume it was the Dark Lord, and not Sirius Black?'

I wiggled the little stump where my arm had been, and was still being grown back by potions.

'When my hand burned, he knew what it meant. He must have seen it before - probably when Lord Voldemort attacked him two years ago.'

Garrow eyed the stump. 'You'll want to be careful with who sees that, you don't want someone putting two and two together.'

I waved my remaining hand dismissively. 'I'll just chuck an illusion over it, so long as nobody decides to go for a hug I should be fine.'

'You're keeping the house in Hogsmeade?'

'Of course. It would be the height of suspicion for me to abandon it the day after the Boy Who Lived gets attacked in Honeydukes.'

Garrow sighed, taking a swig of his scotch. 'What's the next step then?'

'Finding Sirius Black. He was Lord Voldemort's left hand man, and he knows how to break into Hogwarts and out undetected. Plus he's a psychotic danger to society, and having him running around seriously runs the risk of Lord Voldemort's return to power. Capturing him and cracking his mind open to take a looksie benefits everyone.'

'Do you have any… actual leads on that?'

'Not yet. But I'm me, it's only a matter of time. We know he isn't using the secret passageways, you remember what happened when LeStrange tried to sneak that adult muggle in for a joke. Which means he's found some way to disguise himself from the Dementors. I'd bet it's something Lord Voldemort cooked up before he got got, it's what makes the most sense. I also highly doubt that he would go far from Hogwarts if he's still trying to get to Potter, and he clearly doesn't have a wand if he used a knife to chop up the Fat Lady, so he can't apparate.'

'You don't think he can apparate wandlessly?'

I wrinkled my nose. 'It's possible, but not terribly likely. The only person I've met other than myself who's powerful enough to not splinch themselves pretty horrendously is Dumbledore.'

'So, what, your plan is to hang out around Hogwarts and keep an eye out?'

'Of course not!' It basically was at this stage. 'My plan is to… lay a trap. If Black thinks Potter is vulnerable, it could bring him out of whatever hole he slinks back to.'

'There's not a snowball's chance in hell that they're letting him set foot outside that castle after your stunt.'
'I don't need him to. I can just nab a muggle and do a bit of editing.'

Garrow looked unconvinced.

'Look, it's worth a go, alright?'

It didn't work. I had kidnapped a muggle of around Potter's size, transfigured him into a perfect replica, and set him loose with a Confundus. I followed him, disillusioned and on broomstick, on a wander through the Forbidden forest. I got a fat load of nothing for my efforts, save for when some monster of a feral dog tried to make a run at the sod and I scared it off with a terror hex. Didn't even get to fry some Acromantula for Merlin's sake.

In the morning I dispelled the transfigurations and sent the muggle home. This happened four nights in a row before I gave up. It was never a great plan to begin with.

Meanwhile, if I thought security had been tight before, it was nothing compared to now. Dementors ringed Hogsmeade even during the day, far enough away that they weren't terrorising anyone, but close enough that the already frigid wintry air became even more unbearable. Tourism had taken a serious dive.

On the 25th of December, I was in my house, idly reading a grimoire of Lucius Aelius Aurelius Commodus (the third in a series of seven) when the front door burst in. Garrow, Belinda, and her girlfriend crowded in with a small pile of finely wrapped boxes.

'What's all this?' I asked incredulously, putting my book aside.

Garrow gave me a shocked look. 'It's Candlenights, Tom. Did you forget?'

I held a straight face for a few more seconds, before grinning widely. 'Of course not, Gary, what do you take me for?'

I stood, and opened a cabinet, pulling out a pair of gifts in similar wrapping.

We feasted on all the Christmas classics, and I took some time to catch up with Belinda. Like her dad we'd gotten on like a house on fire, and she had some fascinating tales of the Australian magical community to share.

I had also received (and given in return) gifts from Gerard Delacour, who I had stayed in close contact with since our little adventure together, and Alif Dervish. To my surprise, I had also received a gift from the Flamels, with whom I had only exchanged a scant few letters.

I spent the rest of the day with my guests. It felt… nice. Like what I imagined family was like, almost.

I ambled through Hogsmeade village without much of a destination in mind, just needing to stretch my legs. On a whim, I decided to go visit Alif at his shop, see if he'd had any interesting brainwaves. I passed by a big black dog that was licking itself in the street. Ah, to be so carefree…

Hold on.

I turned around, and looked at the dog again. I'd seen it once or twice before on the streets of
Hogsmeade, but…

I peered closely at it. It stopped licking its balls and looked back at me, tilting its head adorably.

It was the dog that had tried to go for my Potter clone. Had to be, it looked just like it. But this dog hadn't even snarled at me the time I almost tripped over it. Why would such an amiable hound take a run at a child…

I met its eyes and narrowed my own. I knew those sharp silvery-grey irises. I'd last seen their like on a very young Orion Black.

'Stupefy!'

I once described the reviving spell as the wizarding equivalent of a bucket of ice water being dumped on you. Me, I prefer the classics.

Sirius Black gasped awake soaking wet and shivering violently. He strained at his bonds, but it availed him none, they were my Dvergr Impossibility Manacles. Houdini himself could not have escaped them.

I had brought Black to the Undercroft, deciding it was the safest place. I set down the empty bucket, and sat calmly across from the Death Eater, waiting patiently for him to gather himself.

'Hello Sirius' I said mildly, as if we were old acquaintances. 'Do you know who I am?'

The animagus shook his head no, still shivering and teeth chattering.

'Excellent. That makes things much easier. You're going to tell me everything you know about Lord Voldemort.'

Black laughed sourly, his emaciated torso throbbing at the motion. 'I'm af-f-fraid I d-d-don't kn-know as much as you're p-p-p-probably hop-hop-hoping.'

I tilted my head. 'Why not?'

'I was n-n-never a d-d-death eat-eater.'

I frowned. 'Bullshit.'

'I-i-its the t-t-t-truth! It was Pe-pe-pe-pettigrew!' 

I… sensed no deception from him. But that didn't mean it wasn't there. I vanished the remaining water on him, and cast a heating charm. The stuttering was already irritating me.

'Is that why you killed him?'

Black laughed again, this time more of a hysterical cackle. 'I never killed Pettigrew. He's an animagus, same as me. A rat. Should have bloody seen it coming…'

'If you aren't a Death Eater, why are you trying to kill Harry Potter?'

'I'm not! He's my godson, I want to keep him safe! I don't know who attacked him at Honeydukes, if it was Voldemort or someone else, but it wasn't me!'
'This… I need time to think.' I said, and stunned him without ceremony.

---

I paced in front of him for a time. This was entirely unexpected. This complicated matters. As far-fetched as it was, I couldn't help believing it - I'd done no shortage of research on Black, and by every report he and Potter had been thick as thieves up until the moment of the latter's death.

Still… it didn't muck things up entirely. If Black wasn't Voldemort's left hand, Peter Pettigrew may still have been. I could still extract the information I needed, if I could catch the rat.

I called for Garrow, I needed a second mind to bounce off.

Garrow returned to Alfhearth about twenty minutes later, and came down to the Undercroft.

'Oh fuck me running!' he exclaimed when he saw Black's unconscious form.

I filled him in. He puffed out a heavy breath.

'Well, I heard nothing of any Pettigrew ever joining the Dark Lord, but then I'd never heard about Black until he was caught either. You believe him?'

'I'm inclined to. We won't know for sure until we can interrogate Pettigrew.'

'Does Black know where he is?'

'Let's find out. You wanna stand behind him so he can't see you?'

Garrow did so, and I woke up Black, with a reviving spell this time.

'Alright Black, we'll say I buy your story. How were you getting into Hogwarts?'

'Animagus form' Black croaked. 'The Dementors don't affect animals the same way they do humans, and they can't really sense them either. I slipped right through. It's how I escaped Azkaban too.'

Ah, of course. Ingenious. I'd never bothered researching the Animagus ritual myself, but perhaps that had been an oversight on my part…

'Why escape now, and not twelve years ago?'

'I saw Wormtail - Pettigrew in a photo in the newspaper. I knew it was him at once!'

'Why did you attack the Fat Lady on Hallowe'en?'

'I was trying to get into Gryffindor Tower. Pettigrew's there, posing as a student's pet!'

'Whose?'

'Ronald Weasley.'

Potter's friend. That couldn't be a coincidence. Keeping an eye on your old master's foe, eh Pettigrew? Waiting for the day when you can strike?

I exchanged a look with Garrow.

'Alright Black, here's what we're going to do…'
A/N: So we finally have Tom's presence move from background action to properly impacting on known canon, which is exciting stuff. For me at least.

Candlenights is a secular holiday invented by the McElroy brothers which I have co-opted as the term that some wizarding families use to refer to Christmas (as their culture is almost entirely secular by nature, save for a few longstanding traditions), the centrepiece of the wizarding version of the Yule period.
This is to be my most experimental chapter yet, fair warning. It gets a bit weird towards the end.

This is demeaning!

'I mean, do you want to end up in a muggle pound?' I replied, enjoying this entirely too much.

Strictly speaking, I didn't need to have Sirius Black on a leash as we walked through Kings Cross station. Dervish and Banges sold obedience collars in their pet section (and their, ahem, back section) that were charmed so muggles wouldn't realise they had no lead on them. It seemed Black was not aware of these however, and this was a nice harmless way to get some petty revenge for his frequent self-piteous moaning about how the murder of the Potters was all his fault. No wonder the idiot got himself lobbed in prison over the matter.

Hogwarts had locked down hard following my attack on Potter, Black's reconnaissance had revealed they now had Aurors stationed alongside the Dementors. Poor bastards. Unfortunately, unlike Dementors they had functioning eyes, and so sneaking past them was no longer so simple as turning into an animal.

Black had apparently been informed by his spy within the school (a Kneazle he'd managed to befriend and perform rudimentary communication with in animagus form) that Potter had been given an artefact called the Marauder's Map by Ronald Weasley's elder brothers. The Map had apparently been a creation of Black and his friends in school, and Black claimed that it would only have revealed its secrets to new users if it sensed that they were of a similar disposition as its creators. Delinquents, I took that to mean.

Black and I were currently communicating via the Flamels' Candlenights gift to me, a set of earrings that, when worn by two separate individuals, allowed telepathic communication in a short range (perhaps forty feet or so). He would be able to give me whatever necessary background information I would need to fool the twins into assisting us.

We passed through the barrier without incident, into the bevy of wizarding families saying their farewells to their children, at the end of the Yule holiday. The Weasleys were easy to spot through the crowd, their fiery hair standing out like a sore thumb. I approached them confidently. I was dressed very finely, and Black, after a week's worth of healing potions and a good bath, was looking every inch the majestic hound. I still had not figured out what breed his animagus form was, but I'm pretty sure it had a hefty chunk of Tibetan Mastiff in it.

'Arthur Weasley?'

The tall, balding man turned around. 'Yes?' he responded politely.

'My name is Thomas Grey, and I was wondering if I would be able to speak to Fred and George for a brief minute. It's about a business opportunity.'

He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. 'What kind of business opportunity do you want to talk to a pair of fifteen year olds about? You can discuss it with me'

I looked at the twins, who were similarly confused. 'I believe that you are familiar with a mister Padfoot?'
Their eyes went wide as saucers, and their jaws dropped.

'Dad-

'Please-

'We've got to!'

'I can't believe it!'

Their father was being swayed, but remained reluctant.

'It would be just over here, won't leave your sight.' I assured him. It helped that the platform proper had anti-apparition wards.

'Well… alright.' he relented, and the twins practically cheered as I led them out of the crowd a ways.

'You know mister Padfoot?' the left twin said immediately.

'Know him? Well, of course I know him, he's me!' I exclaimed, allowing Black to essentially use me as a mouthpiece from here-on out.

'No way!' breathed the right twin. Ah, teenagers, so gullible. The pair of them started shaking my hand vigorously and gushing about how they were my biggest hands. It made me glad that it was my left arm that I'd had to chop off, and not my right; regenerative potions had grown it back to full size, but it was still tender.

'I was ever so pleased to learn that the Map my friends and I once crafted had fallen into the hands of fellow pranksters' - I suppressed a shudder at the term - 'so soon after our own time at Hoggy Warty Hogwarts.'

'What can we do for you sir?' asked the left twin eagerly, in a voice that suggested he was entirely unused to such respect for a semi-authority figure.

'My compatriots and I moved away from the pranking life in adulthood, forced by… circumstance. I'd hate to see a pair of burgeoning young prodigies such as yourselves suffer the same fate.

'When I was in school, my life's goal was to open a joke shop. You know, really show Zonkos and Gambol & Japes who was boss!' This aspect of the pitch was entirely drawn from memories I had drawn from the waif of the twins' own ambitions. 'And so, in the spirit of a great legacy of pranksters, I would like to offer the pair of you a start-up investment of seven hundred galleons, in exchange for a ten percent cut of your profits after costs.'

The pair were absolutely thunderstruck. They started stuttering out words of thanks and praise, but I held up a slim hand.

'Don't thank me yet boys. There is but one task I need you to perform for me before you get this money.'

' Anything!' said right twin, left nodding furiously alongside him.

My eyes glittered. 'I need you to acquire a rat that lives at Hogwarts. It was one of our old experiments, which has allowed it to live for over a decade longer than any normal rat. You will recognise it by its missing leftmost toe on its right front paw.'
The twins exchanged conspiratorial looks.

'What do you need it for?' asked left twin innocently.

'I'm afraid I can't tell you that until I have it in hand. Proprietary secrets, as fellow inventors, surely you understand. But rest assured, I have no intention of harming it. I'm not in the habit of hurting innocent woodland critters.'

Black, who had seen what I did to the animals I conjured to practice combat magic on, snuffled loudly.

'Yeeaah, we can give it a go,' said right twin.

'It'll probably be really hard though,' said left twin.

'Almost impossible,'

'Finding one exact rat out of a whole castle?'

'But we won't let you down, mister Padfoot!'

'Not a bit!'

I smiled. 'Glad to hear it, boys. I'm sure you won't. You'll want to be careful though, that rat can seem lazy, but it can be a wily little prick when it wants to be; that's how it escaped me in the first place. I wouldn't mess around, I'd stun it and cage it on the spot if I were you.'

'What should we do with it once we've got it?'

'Send me an owl, I live in Hogsmeade. We can organise its transportation then.'

Arthur Weasley's voice rang out across the platform. 'Boys!'

The engine compartment was starting to chug and there was a sharp whistle; the Hogwarts Express was about to leave.

'Good luck boys!' I yelled, waving merrily after them as they ran for the train.

'What do you suppose the odds are Pettigrew kills them?' I asked Black idly.

'Low. Pettigrew was a pathetic embarrassment of a wizard even before he spent a decade as a rodent, even if Voldemort taught him some tricks. A couple of talented lads like them shouldn't have any trouble.'

It took longer than I expected for the twins to get back to me. Black had moved in with me in Hogsmeade - it was the safest place for him, as Aurors could decide to raid the Alfhearth again at any time. I had lent him one of my spare wands, not a match, but it was better than nothing. I knew first hand how distressing it was to go without access to one's magic.

Finally, on the 12th of February, the twins sent me a letter, which I read over breakfast.

Dear Mr Padfoot

We found the rat, but its owner was guarding it pretty closely, as it has been sick since August. We
were working on a way to get our hands on it, but

There were several droplets around this part, as if they had been trying to figure out how to proceed.

another student's cat, this giant orange bastard, ate it before we could. We're really sorry Mr Padfoot, if there's anything we can do to make it up to you, we'll do it.

Sincerely

Fred and George

I flicked the note at Black, who read it quickly and threw it down in disgust.

'So little Wormtail has faked his death once again.' he muttered darkly.

'Yes I'm certain!' he snapped irritably. 'I told you, the cat's at least half-Kneazle, he knows how to follow instructions.'

'Yeah, well, you know what they say about herding cats…'

I sent a note back to the twins telling them in no uncertain terms that I was confident the rat was alive, and that they were to continue their search. Both they and I may have thought that they were going to get an easy ride with this deal, but they could hardly complain that they would be kept to the agreement as written.

:—:

Once he had settled in, Black naturally grew curious as to my origins. I told him a similar version to what Garrow and I had told to Belinda. Like all good lies, it was closely rooted in fact. Lord Voldemort had killed my father, after Dumbledore drove him out of Britain. I had grown up in Hong Kong with my mother, and only just recently returned to the UK upon her death, and the rapidly approaching return of the territory to Chinese hands. My father had been a friend of Garrow Avery's in school, which was how we had met. I knew Lord Voldemort was out there somewhere, still alive, and I wanted to defeat him permanently.

The only direct mistruth, if one considered Lord Voldemort to technically be a second progenitor, was the Hong Kong part, but I had taken the time to travel there and ransack a few minds to ensure that I would not slip up.

Days turned into weeks, as the twins failed to produce results. Life became - almost - domestic. Black finally stopped constantly whining about how he got the Potters killed, which was a minor miracle all of its own. He had started venturing out into the muggle world under various disguises, filling his room with a wide assortment of knick-knacks, including an aging muggle radio which he showed me how to finagle into working, despite the magical aura that wreathed Hogsmeade and my own house in particular. He was unusually skilled with muggle technology for a wizard - especially one twelve years out of date of modern developments.

It was over this radio, one fateful day, that I first heard the lyrics of a certain song. I had just come back from lunch, and I heard the now-familiar notes of what Sirius had identified as electric guitar booming from his room. It was a good tune, unlike most he played, and I listened idly to the lyrics as I flipped through my bookcase.
'Oh mother…

Tell your children …

Not to do what I have done!

Spend your lives in sin and misery,

In the House of the Rising Sun. '

I froze. I sprinted up the stairs and burst through Sirius's door so hard that it tore off its hinges. Sirius squawked in surprise and fell off his bed.

'Well there is a House in New Orleans

They call the Rising Sun

And it 's been the ruin of many a poor boy

And God, I know, I 'm one.'

'What's this song!' I demanded, Black still picking himself up off the ground.

'Bloody hell Tom, look what you did to the door! What's the matter with you?'

'The song, Black!' I jabbed a finger at his radio, which was now cruising through the final instrumental.

'It's - it's House of the Rising Sun by the Animals? Why do you care?'

I stared at him. Weeks of searching every history book I could get my hands on, and it had never even occurred to me to search the muggle world.

'Make it play again. This is important, Sirius.'

Grumbling, he jabbed his wand at the radio, which squealed, then played the song again. I noted down the full lyrics.

'Where are the Animals from?'

'The forest I assume,' Black joked. 'Nah, they're from Britain. Newcastle, if I remember rightly. What's this all about, Tom?'

I chewed on my lip. 'Someone once told me to seek out the House of the Rising Sun, that it could give me answers on how Lord Voldemort managed to survive his own death, and maybe where he's gone.'

'Sounds like they might have been pulling your leg, mate. S'not a real place, it's just a song.'

'Maybe for the Animals it is, but I suspect otherwise. I'll need to talk to whoever wrote the song, where they got that name from.'

'I'm coming with you.' Black announced. I looked at him. Fuck it, I could use the extra wand. Given what happened last time I went on a solo adventure, it was probably for the best.
I rapped smartly on the dark wooden front door. No response.

I turned to look at Sirius, who was currently looking very different under the human transfigurations I'd layered over him. He shrugged.

'Guy probably gets a lot of paparazzi, I wouldn't answer the door much either. Photographers who sell pictures of celebrities' he explained at my blank expression.

I looked around. We were standing out the front of a beautiful modern mansion. 'We could just break in. Any idea what kind of security forces he'd have?'

'Why would I know that? I dunno, probably just a bodyguard or two. Got to look out for security cameras though. I know we're disguised, but we don't want to accidentally wind up exposing the Wizarding World. Probably best to avoid it at all if we can.'

'Easy enough, I can flip a tank if I feel the need, a few thugs aren't going to stop me.'

On that note, I slammed my palm against the door, just above the handle. The door was surprisingly sturdy, but the lock wasn't, shattering immediately with a loud crack. An alarm immediately went off, wailing painfully loud. I punched what looked like some kind of security panel, forcing some magic into it for good measure. The alarm died with a low dwindling noise.

'Who the fuck are you?!!'

A bodyguard, charging at us. I was about to splatter his brains across the foyer, but then I remembered Black was a muggle-lover and would probably object to me murdering this man for sport. I instead gave him a light slap across the face, still more than enough to make him do a full backflip and land in a heap, unconscious.

We searched the house, and encountered another bodyguard, similarly dispatched, but not our prize.

'Could he be out?' I pondered. Black shook his head.

'Nah, there's only one space in his garage that's not filled with crap, and I really doubt that either of these goons drive an Espada. He's here somewhere.'

I quirked an eyebrow. 'Panic room, you think?'

'If you were a famous musician subject to all sorts of freaks, wouldn't you have one?'

I looked around for security cameras, and seeing none I slipped out my wand beneath my coat. 'Homenum Revelio' I muttered.

To my eyes only, a glowing silhouette appeared on one of the living room walls. Bingo.

Eric Burdon screamed bloody murder when I tore the door off his hiding place like it was made of papier-mâché.

'Good morning Eric. You're probably wondering who we are. Just think of me as your biggest fan.' I said sinisterly, and dove into his mind. Inane conversation with a muggle was beneath my pay grade. I quickly found what I needed. Burdon had told interviewers that he had lifted the song from a folk singer in Northumberland, but this was a lie. He'd learned it straight from the source, a muggle sex worker in New Orleans in '61 who'd sung him the song after he'd fucked her. She told him the House was a mysterious and wondrous place, but that it consumed people, drove their lives
to wreckage. I suppose that at least that prediction had held true for Lord Voldemort.

She had told Burdon how to reach it, but he had never had the gumption to actually visit it himself. Pathetic.

I pulled out of his noggin, hitting the lights on my way out. The muggle slumped, unconscious. I looked at Sirius, who had taken his down time as an opportunity to rob the man, shoving a trophy into his expanded inner jacket pocket. The trophy was a bronze hand flipping the bird.

'What?' Sirius said, grinning. 'I've always wanted an NME.'

I smirked, despite myself. 'I have what we need. Let's get out of here before the bobbies show up or something.'

:—:

We took the next available portkey to New Orleans; me travelling as myself, and Sirius as my faithful canine companion. We arrived in the French quarter, where lived a thriving community of magicals, most of them descendants of the Cajun refugees from the Acadian debacle. But we weren't here for the magical side of town, at least I didn't think we were. After finding a dark corner for Black to turn human, and for us both to disguise ourselves, we moved on to the muggle part of the famous district.

We wended through narrow streets, enjoying the sights and smells and sounds that came with this cultural icon of the Southern United States. Finally, nibbling on beignets, we reached our goal; a thin door on the side of a 19th century gallery, marked with a half-sunburst symbol, the bottom half of which was cut off by a long line. I pushed it open, and we walked down an equally thin flight of stairs, down into a room thick with a strange mist. The mist had a sweet and heady aroma, like the place was one big hookah.

The moment we walked in, as if a switch had been flipped, we could hear deep, bassy, throbbing electronic music. We were in some kind of lobby, though it was hard to make out details through the mist. The walls looked like they were of a rich maple timber, and lined with obsidian columns. The floor was some kind of blue stone with an intricate inlay of gold. There were couches and tables laid out on either side of the main throughfare, and at these tables were the most strange creatures. A being made entirely out of gravelly stone sat at one, deep in conversation with what looked like a high elf, but they had been extinct for ten thousand years. At another, a man with great, curling horns was playing chess with some kind of blend of a toad and a dinosaur.

'What the hell is this place, Grey?' Sirius hissed over the earring link.

'I don't know. I've never seen beings like these before. Keep your wand ready.' I murmured in response, grasping my wand and hammer in my pockets.

We approached the counter, passing by a corridor where the music was clearly emanating from, along with the occasional dull flares of red and blue light, and another corridor which sounded suspiciously like an orgy was taking place. The front counter was a long, ornate affair of finely carved redwood and blue leather. Standing behind it was a beautiful woman with blue skin, and a tentacle-like crest where her hair should be. She looked up at us and cocked her head.

'First timers, yeah? I'll get the boss'

The creature that soon joined her behind the counter was by far the strangest so far.

He - at least, it looked like a he - was astonishingly tall, at least seven feet, and even more slender
than myself. He was dressed finely in a damask waistcoat and silk shirt that surely must have been made particularly for him - four arms extended from it, though I found I could not quite focus my vision on the point where they met his body. The bottom half of his face showed a sharp chin and crisply trimmed sideburns, but the top half was consumed by a black smoke that billowed out of it, dissipating a few feet above it, little licks of flame permeating it. For a moment I thought this was the source of the mist, which was mildly disgusting, but then I saw said mist steaming out behind him from two great woks filled with glowing blue coals. In between them, mounted on the black granite wall, was a sword that seemed to almost glow with power. Above it, that same half-sunburst symbol was inlaid in gold, gleaming like a beacon.

He looked at us - I think - and smiled congenially. I felt a shiver of legilimency shoot through my mind, passing through my defences like they weren't even there, too swift to even react to before it was gone.

'Gentlemen.' his voice was as silky and cultured as his attire, his accent indefinable. 'Welcome to the House of the Rising Sun. My name is Sibrandr Oryx. I do hope you enjoy your stay.'

'What is this place?' Sirius's query mirrored my own.

'The House? Ah, but it is so many things. One may most closely describe it as a crossroads, a place of trade, but even this explanation is lacking. Suffice to say it is my life's work. But for what you have come for, mister… Grey, I believe it is one thing in particular. But all things bear a price…'

'How much?'

'Oh, we don't trade in money here. Our chosen currencies are more… esoteric.'

Sirius and I had been expecting this. The sex worker had warned Burdon of that much, at least. Sacrifice came part-and-parcel with this kind of encounter. 'So, what, knowledge? Trinkets? First-born children?'

He shrugged, something that made my eyes ache a little, given the weird distortion around his shoulders. 'The man whose path you follow gave his beauty. Something of equal value, I think, shall be needed for you to continue in his footsteps.'

I stood in thought for a moment. So this was where Lord Voldemort had gained that waxy melted-candle look that Garrow had told me about. This was a good sign; if he had stayed as vain as me, he would never have done so on less than a sure thing. Me, I was not at all willing to take that particular step. Fortunately I had some choices pieces from his collection on me.

I reached into my pocket and drew out a palm-sized statue of a scarab carved from sard, and laid it on the counter.

'This is the Scarab of Khepri-Ra. Well, the only surviving one that is. A priceless and powerful treasure.'

Oryx seemed to loom over me. 'But not priceless to you, that you would offer it so freely?'

Ah. We stared each other down for a long moment.

'How much do we need this' Sirius asked me privately.

'Badly. Without knowing exactly what Lord Voldemort has done to himself, we will never be able to undo his grasp on life. He will haunt your godson forever' I responded, hoping he was about to do what I think he was.
He stepped forward and spoke aloud 'I offer the friendship I once had with-'

'That won't be necessary lads.' I turned, and beheld a man in a dark suit, who absolutely had not been there a few seconds before. Asian, but with blonde hair that looked natural. British accent. I had never seen him before in my life.

'Put them on my account, Sibrandr, there's a good chap.' He smiled winningly at me, holding out a hand to shake. 'Peter Hein, pleasure to make your acquaintance.'

I took it. His grip was cold, as if he'd just taken his hands out of a fridge. 'Thomas Grey' He winked knowingly at me. I was very quickly getting tired of random strangers knowing exactly who I was.

'Not that I don't appreciate it, but why? Who are you?' asked Sirius.

'A traveller of the world, such as yourselves. Though I daresay perhaps a little more travelled.' He laughed as if he had told an extremely funny joke.

'What do you expect in return for this boon?' I asked sharply.

'Why do I need to expect something in return, dear Tom?' He grinned again. I already hated that smile.

Sibrandr made a note on a pad, and set it aside. 'Very well, mister Hein. Saskia!'

That last remark had been aimed at the blue woman, who had been fiddling with some small rectangular device, and who jumped when her name was called.

'Yes boss?'

'Take these two to the Guest Book, they'll need to see…' he broke off, looking up for a moment in thought. 'Volume seven hundred and two, page thirteen.'

Hein bowed deeply. 'A pleasure, gentlemen, as ever.' He sauntered off towards a hallway, the one from whence the electronic music seemed to be booming.

'What do you mean, "as ever"? Hey! I want answers!' I pursued him around a corner, but when I turned it he was gone, the some-thirty-foot-long corridor completely empty. The fuck kind of Deus Ex Machina shit is this?

:—:

The blue woman - Saskia - led us down a different corridor, into a chamber that looked like a miniature library, lined with books. She plucked one out, and laid it on the small pedestal in the centre.

'Sorry if this is rude, but I must know, what exactly are you?' I queried her.

She smirked cutely, revealing a dimple. 'You aren't ready for that answer yet mister Grey, we usually wait a few visits before we get that deep into the mess that is understanding this place.'

I sneered. 'I'm a big boy, I think I can handle it.'

'Next time then, "big boy"' she said playfully, and gestured to the book. At least one thing will be answered today.

I flipped open the book, turning to page thirteen. There was a brief passage written in it, but I
couldn't tell you what it said, for as soon as I attempted to read it, I was overcome by a vision.

*I was standing in the lobby again, which looked almost identical. The denizens were different, but just as bizarre as the ones that had been there in my own time.*

*Lord Voldemort strode down the centre of the lobby, like he owned the place. He was perhaps thirty or thirty five, and gorgeous, every bit what I had imagined I would look like in adulthood.*

*He came to a stop in front of the counter, and demanded to see the owner. The clerk, not Saskia but a similarly pretty woman with metallic silver skin, obliged. Sibrandr Oryx in all his smoky glory came out from the back room.*

'I have been told' his voice was unlike mine, it was high-pitched and icy cold. 'That you possess the deepest secrets to immortality.'

Oryx smiled that sinister grin of his. 'The House of the Rising Sun holds more secrets than men are able to fathom. We have what you seek, but all things have their price, and for what you ask it shall be a substantial one.'

Lord Voldemort, like myself, tried bargaining with artefacts he had obtained on his adventures, but once more he was rebuffed. I saw his hand twitch towards his wand, but he thought better of it.

Finally, he offered his beauty, and his chiseled features sagged before my very eyes, some nebulous essence flowing from it into a jar, which Oryx stoppered and handed off to a different underling. No wonder Garrow had been so disturbed by it, Lord Voldemort had become almost unrecognisable in moments.

I followed as the clerk - called Jenny by Oryx - led Lord Voldemort down a different corridor still, to a different little library, and handed him a tome. I saw its name just before the vision dissolved away into darkness.

I stepped back, shaken. Sirius had viewed the recording also, and he looked over at me hurriedly.

'Fuck, I couldn't read the name of that book, could you?'

I nodded. It was an ancient tongue, which had been extinct for millennia. Of the spoken language, only a few fragmented words remained. But the written form, that could still be learned.

'How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Cheat Death. By Cain of Atlantis'

:-:-:-:-: 

A/N: I have no idea if Eric Burdon still lived in Newcastle-on-Tyne in the 90s, or if he lived in a mansion, or drove a Lamborghini Espada, because this information was not available from the most cursory of google searches. Ech, we'll say he did in the HP universe.

As I said at the start of the chapter, this is the most experimental of my chapters so far, so if you don't like that story direction, be sure to let me know.
Tribulations Of A Traitor

Disclaimer: Graphic violence, torture.

---

'How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Cheat Death. By Cain of Atlantis'

Strictly speaking, the correct translation was Qayin, not Cain, but I didn't trust Sirius Black to grasp the significance without a touch of hellenisation. In simple terms, Qayin of Atlantis was the original. The first dark wizard known to history, and the earliest wizard that we have an actual name for.

Actually, let's talk a bit about Atlantis in general. What we know in the modern era about the greatest civilisation in human history is extremely limited. We know that it reached its height at about 5000 BCE, before it all came crashing down, the capitol sank beneath the sea, and mankind went into a dark age that lasted fifteen hundred years. We know that they could do things with magic that make our best experts' heads spin even today, and we think they were responsible for the extinction of the High Elves, but that's mostly conjecture and circumstantial evidence. There is also no mention of muggles anywhere in Atlantean texts, which has fueled blood-purist ideologies the world over.

Qayin himself was a particularly nasty piece of work that we only know about through a few fragmented tablets collected over the ages. The "murdered his twin brother at age ten to see what his insides looked like" kind of nasty. He would go on to blight Atlantean civilisation for a couple centuries before they managed to kill him properly, though the texts aren't entirely clear on how they did that. Hell, some of them seem to imply that they didn't, that they just locked him away in some dark corner of the world to wait out the end of all things. Which isn't exactly comforting.

Up until now, there had been no spellbooks or grimoires that were known to have survived from the Atlantis period through to today. Only a bare few spells at all, but each was in a league of its own compared to modern magic. Fiendyre, the Killing Curse, the Patronus Charm, that sort of thing.

The idea that Lord Voldemort could - if the tome was legitimate - have access to a full Atlantean grimoire was nothing less than terrifying. Even the likes of Dumbledore and myself would be utterly outclassed, to say nothing of any other poor sod who ran into him.

Black and I left the House of the Rising Sun in silence. The trip had been nothing but bad news and more unanswered questions - and worse, we didn't even have a clue of what my other self may have done next.

---

I set Sirius to assisting me in figuring out where Lord Voldemort may have gone after the House - Qayin's grimoire was not among the treasures I recovered from the Gaunt vault, so it must have been secreted elsewhere. I gave him an exhaustive list of my old aliases - I'd already developed a new set after realising that many of my old ones were now wanted in various countries.

After several weeks of searching, we found his trail again in Boston, and traced him up to Vermont, then along the length of the Canadian border. We think he was trying to find the hidden enclaves of Native American wizards - bastions of New World magical culture and secrets that
remained almost as hidden from the rest of wizarding society as we were from the Muggles. For good reason too, their wizarding counterparts were even more thorough than the muggles had been at wiping out Native culture in favour of 'proper' magical ideas. Officially, MACUSA denied they even existed, insisting that all Native peoples had been peacefully integrated with the colonists. They never did address the accusations though, that a division of their Auror force was secretly assigned to hunting for these "nonexistent" enclaves even to this day.

Unfortunately, it was pretty much impossible for us to tell if Lord Voldemort had succeeded where MACUSA's manhunters had failed, as that would require - well - actually finding them ourselves. But we did note that his route took a very sudden turn at Montana, as he cut a much faster path all the way down through Arizona, where one James T Maximilian was still wanted dead or alive for poaching Thunderbirds.

I was carefully analysing a document I had conned out of MACUSA's immigration authority, when an owl fluttered through my window, which I'd left open to the Spring air. It chirruped at me, and held out a leg from which dangled a small scroll. I recognised the breed - Hogwarts only bred a very specific subspecies of magical tawny owl for use as their mail-carriers. The twins, it seems, finally had news.

I sat in the Hog's Head bar, Sirius laying at my feet in dog form. It was mid-May, the last Hogsmeade trip of the year. Thanks to the misadventures of Sirius and myself, third and fourth years had had their Hogsmeade visits cancelled entirely - sucks to be them. But thankfully, fifth years were still permitted, though I imagine the Aurors that now required to patrol the streets during their presence would rather be doing almost literally anything else.

The twins themselves were looking over the moon as they sauntered into the bar, carrying a small cloth-covered object with them. They made a beeline for us as soon as they spotted us, very subtle, very cloak and dagger.

'Morning mister Padfoot sir!' said the right twin eagerly.

'We've got him right here-' 

'-was hiding in Hagrid's hut of all places-' 

'-went down to visit him, poor bloke's hippogriff copped a death sentence-' 

'-absolute rubbish if you ask me-' 

'-and then we spotted the rat in his pantry-' 

'-Fred gave Hagrid a hell of a fright, shouting like he did-' 

'-you weren't wrong about him being wily, he damn near got away from us-' 

'-tried to piss off down a rabbit's burrow-' 

'-but George managed to grab him by the tail right before he could-' 

'-little blighter bit the hell out of me, but we stunned him-' 

Ugh, their little back-and-forth was giving me a headache.
'So you have the rat with you then?'

Sirius had gone very still.

'Yeah, show him Fred!'

The left twin flicked the cloth off the object they had brought with them like a magician showing off a trick, complete with a cheery 'viola!'

It was a cage, and within that cage, looking very distressed indeed, was a rat that was missing a toe on his right front paw where an index finger would be on a person. Sirius snarled at it.

'That's him' he confirmed over telepathic earring.

'Well boys,' I said, reaching into my coat and pulling out a bulging sack. 'You've done a phenomenal job. Consider this investment well earned.'

Sirius woke Pettigrew by decking him. The shorter wizard, who looked like he may once have been quite fat before several months of severe stress and consequent malnourishment, tumbled out of the hard wooden chair we'd dumped him into, squealing like the rat he had been not too long ago.

We were in the cellar of my Hogsmeade home, which had been thoroughly soundproofed. Garrow Avery and I stood in the corner, happy to take a backseat so Sirius could enjoy a little catharsis. Which he did, quite brutally, beating Pettigrew so hard that his face became a bloody, unrecognisable mess.

'Sirius!' I said sharply. 'You don't want to kill him before he can clear your name.'

Sirius staggered away from the lump of now-questionably human flesh, exhausted by the exertion, blood dripping from the brass knuckles he'd transfigured for the occasion.

I healed Pettigrew only of his life-threatening injuries, and repaired his jaw, before shoving him roughly back into his chair.

'Why'd - why'd you do it, eh Wormtail?' Sirius demanded from his hunched position, still breathing heavily. 'How could you do that to James and Lily?'

Pettigrew's eyes darted around the room, looking for any kind of escape route and finding none.

'Please!' he begged me. 'Please, he's mad! He's lying to you - I'm innocent, he just wants to finish the job! I could never betray-'

Sirius stomped savagely on Pettigrew's knee, shattering his thigh against the unyielding oak of the chair. The latter howled, and dissolved in to sobs, clutching the ruined limb. I seized him by the back of the head and yanked it back to look at me, not even needing to dip into Re'em strength to overpower the weak wretch of a man.

'Ah, little Peter, I could extract all I need from you in but an instant. Anyone who's done any reading on the matter could tell you that torture is terribly unreliable for gathering information. That's not what this is for. This is just to let Sirius vent twelve years worth of frustration!' I informed him brightly, and Sirius headbutted him hard enough to knock him out of his chair again.
This was actually only half true. Whilst Legilimency was, in my opinion, the only reliable way to interrogate, there was an obvious correlation between physical trauma and the ability to focus one's mind. Neither Sirius nor myself were sure for how long Pettigrew had been working under Lord Voldemort, or if the latter had taught him any nasty mental tricks, let alone had Augustus Rookwood have a gander at the rat's mind. From everything Garrow had told me about the war, Rookwood had been the most dangerous mind mage this side of Merlin the Lesser, and I really didn't want to deal with his bullshit if I could avoid it.

They say that even in the deepest depths of Azkaban, he was kept under the Draught of the Living Death in a lead sarcophagus riddled with magic-suppressing runes that made my Impossibility Shackles look like a Chinese finger-trap, just in case.

But I digress. Sirius continued to work Pettigrew's innards into a mush well into the evening before he had finally expended himself. Collapsing into a nice squishy lounge chair, he watched me step up to the plate. With a flick of my wand, I grew back Pettigrew's beady little eyes where Black had gouged them out with his thumbs, and gazed into them.

The spy had clearly had pretty formidable mental defences back in the day, but they were not of his own making, they'd been crafted for him by someone else - not Rookwood, thankfully. As such, Pettigrew had no idea how to maintain them properly, and a decade of separation from whatever mental mechanic (the memories of their exact identity had been straight up removed from his brain) would have been keeping up their maintenance had severely degraded them. Like a castle abandoned, Pettigrew's mental shielding had giant gaping holes in it, it was laughable.

Late August, 1980. I saw through Pettigrew's eyes as he unlocked his front door and entered his flat. He sighed heavily, glad to be home. It had been a very long day at Gambol and Japes, all the students soon to return to Hogwarts wanting to stock up on out-of-the-box pranks and tricks before the new semester began. I caught a glimpse of him in a mirror as he dropped his keys into a shallow bowl by the door. His hair was styled almost a half decade out of fashion, a long shaggy cut, with a thick moustache and sideburns. He thought it made him look like John Bonham. He was plump, but not as fat as I had first assumed.

He turned to his living room, and almost had a heart attack. Lord Voldemort was perched daintily on Pettigrew's prized specially-imported La-Z-Boy recliner, looking for all the world like a favourite uncle come to visit.

Pettigrew let out his signature squeal, and scrambled for his wand, promptly dropping it on the floor. Lord Voldemort didn't so much as raise an eyebrow. Pettigrew fled for the door, trying desperately to yank it open but it had been sealed.

'Peter, Peter, if I didn't know any better I'd think you weren't happy to see me!' exclaimed Lord Voldemort with mock-hurt in his voice, his voice higher and colder still than any previous recollection I'd encountered thus far.

Peter gave up on the door and cowered fetal-position on the floor. 'P-p-p-please don't kill me, I-I-I'll do anything!'

'Anything, you say?' Lord Voldemort chuckled, and Pettigrew opened his eyes just in time to see him rise, not only from the recliner but from the floor, totally untethered from the Earth, supported by nothing. Impossible, utterly implausible. Un-aided flight was a power that had been sought by thousands of the greatest wizards across history, and none of them had cracked it. A secret from Qayin's book perhaps?

'I am in need of an agent within Dumbledore's little band of vigilantes, and I have chosen you for
just that purpose. Rejoice, Peter, for when all those who stood against my reign are swept away, you alone shall survive!’

Pettigrew’s eyes darted around the room. ‘T—-they’re my friends. I—-I won’t betray them!’

Lord Voldemort laughed derisively. ‘What good are friends to the dead, Peter? I can offer you stronger, better friends. Friends that don’t leave you so vulnerable that your enemies can get to you as easily as I have.’

Pettigrew stood slowly, his bottom lip trembling. He was thinking about it, but frankly his answer had been assured from the moment he’d laid eyes on the Dark Lord.

‘W—what would I be required to do?’

At this point, I hit the metaphorical accelerator, flipping through the memories of the next year. Infuriatingly, Pettigrew had come to learn next-to-nothing about the inner workings of the Death Eater organisation over the next year. I watched a younger and much more attractive Sirius Black selling Pettigrew on the idea of using him as the Secret Keeper nobody would expect, and the last feeble vestiges of Pettigrew’s conscience trying to convince him it was a bad idea. I watched Pettigrew struggle over the knowledge for days, before he finally spilled the beans. I watched Pettigrew slink behind Lord Voldemort in rat form, forced along to bear witness to the culmination of his betrayal.

Lord Voldemort blew apart the Potters’ front door like swatting a gnat. Within, a bespectacled man and an auburn-haired woman - James and Lily Potter - screamed in terror. The man didn’t even have his wand on him, but he screamed for the woman to take the boy and flee. She tried her emergency portkey, but was rebuffed by anti-teleportation barriers that my other self had erected before beginning his assault. Instead, she made for the stairs. Foolish, she should have tried for the back door.

James Potter put up a pretty good fight for a man who’d started out wandless, he’d clearly been prepared to defend this place if the time came. With a shouted activation word, runes painted on the sofa flared, and it transformed into a gigantic tiger that leapt at Lord Voldemort with a roar, closely followed by every other piece of furniture in the room.

Lord Voldemort crushed the tiger’s skull with a backhand, not even looking at it. ‘Avada Kedavra!’ he declared with finality, but the spell struck a gibbon that flung itself in its path, and Potter had time to snatch up his wand. He let off a complicated string of cutters and blasting curses, all much darker than I would have anticipated from somebody on the "light" side of the war. They scattered off of Lord Voldemort’s shield, instead blowing out the front of the house around him, but they staggered him. The Dark Lord snarled and swung his wand in a wide arc, conjuring a long filament of copper which he superheated til it glowed like the sun, and banished it.

The filament sliced through Potter’s little army of transfigured furniture like they were made of butter, but Potter dismissed it just before it hit him. He responded with a filament of his own, several a dozen of them in fact, staggered randomly, interspaced with black-as-night curses and more animal transfigurations. The man had clearly been an absolute prodigy at the art.

It availed him none, Lord Voldemort had decided to start showing off. He stopped casting entirely and walked straight through the curses and filaments, deflecting them off his blue-silver shield like they were nothing, smashing the animals out of his way with great sweeps of his arms.

Potter tried for his last resort. ‘Avada-!’
But Lord Voldemort lunged forth, catching Potter by the arm and twisting it away before the spell could be finished. It sputtered and dispersed at the end of his wand. Lord Voldemort grinned, pressing his own wand against James’ throat.

'Avada Kedavra!’

Pettigrew apparently couldn’t bear to watch Lily Potter's death - like James she had left her wand in the living room. Infuriating, as I had been eager to see exactly what happened when Lord Voldemort turned his wand on Harry Potter. I heard her begging, pleading with my other self to take her instead of the boy. Bizarrely, Lord Voldemort did not simply blast her out of his way - he told her to get out of his way, but she kept repeating herself - 'Take me instead, take me instead of Harry'. Like a mantra.

My other self lost patience and killed her. Why he didn’t just do it in the first place was anyone’s guess. There was a pause, filled with a baby’s crying, then one final cry of 'Avada Kedavra' before the world came to an end.

Or at least it felt like it to Pettigrew’s rat form. The top of the house exploded, and Pettigrew was knocked unconscious by falling rubble.

He came to hours later, crawling out from under a pile of timber and plaster, to find Aurors had already cordoned off the site. The Potter boy was long gone, but Pettigrew spied Lord Voldemort’s wand lying - miraculously untouched - in the rubble. He snatched it up in his rat mouth and fled the scene.

I came back to myself, blinking rapidly to disperse the soreness of several minutes of blank staring.

'Well that was nowhere near as fruitful as I had hoped,' I muttered, then looked over at Sirius and Garrow. 'So who are we handing him off to in order to get Black here off the hook?'

Garrow made a face. 'I may not have been accused of being a Death Eater, but people still know I ran with that general crowd. They won't buy it readily coming from me or my mates.'

Sirius looked at me apprehensively. 'Look, I know you don't trust the bloke, and I get why, and after twelve years in prison without a trial the head of the Wizengamot is not exactly my favourite human being on the planet either, but he's our best option. Nobody's going to accuse him of trying to fake my innocence.'

I groaned. I knew he was right, but I didn't have to like it.

:—:

Hagrid met me and my "hound" at the gates of Hogwarts once more, looking just as distrustful as ever. I suppose an enigmatic letter claiming I had information on the Black case that I would share with Dumbledore and Dumbledore alone wouldn't help with that.

This time, our silent trip together to Dumbledore's office was uninterrupted; it was mid-afternoon and the students were all in class. I passed the time by idly wondering what Hagrid would try to do to me if I revealed to him that I was the one who exposed his little Acromantula project and brought his life crashing down around him.

Dumbledore was seated at his desk when we entered, the very picture of placidity. It was a front, as revealed by his opening statement.

'Mister Grey, I am exceedingly curious to learn what information you wish to share with me,
particularly given the context of our last meeting.'

Yeah, fair. Storming out after essentially calling him a dickhead probably wasn't the most politically astute thing I've ever done.

'I think you'll soon understand very well why I had to come to you, Chief Warlock' I replied, invoking his formal title as head of the Wizengamot. 'But first, a question for you. Why was Sirius Black never given a trial?'

Sirius growled lowly at the back of his canine throat. Dumbledore looked mildly uncomfortable.

'You will find that many dark wizards at the time suffered the same fate. When Lord Voldemort-' He said my other self's name without flinching, a rare trait in this age I'd noticed. '-fell, there was an incredible volume of his followers being arrested all over Britain. To… ease the load, Minister Bagnold authorised Director Crouch to forego trials for those who were caught red-handed. Antonin Dolohov was another such individual, as was Argo Pyrites. I didn't agree with it myself, but there were very few voices indeed who were expressing concern for the rights of Death Eaters.'

'What if I told you I had incontrovertible proof that Sirius Black was innocent?'

Dumbledore's expression melted. 'What did you say?'

'Sirius Black was not a Death Eater. He did not betray the Potters. He was framed.'

'That's… not possible,' the Headmaster murmured, ashen face. 'The Potters made him their Secret Keeper. He was the only man that could have betrayed them.'

'Afraid not. Peter Pettigrew was their Secret Keeper. They swapped them at the last minute. Black was to be the decoy - the one that anyone who knew anything about the Potters would assume was their most trusted friend, because he was. Nobody would have ever thought they would entrust the secret to nervous little Peter Pettigrew.

'Little did they know of course, that Peter Pettigrew had been Voldemort's spy for over a year. He'd betrayed them within the week'

Dumbledore looked like he'd aged about a decade in the span of a few seconds. I sneered inwardly, not like he had many more decades left to age to begin with.

'Can you prove this? Mister Pettigrew is dead, and Sirius Black still killed twelve muggles that day.'

'On the contrary, Dumbledore. Pettigrew survived, and it was he who murdered those muggles, with a positively medieval siege spell at close range.'

Dumbledore took this revelation in much better stride than the last one. 'Do you know where he is hiding now?'

'Yep!' I said brightly, and pulled out a nice shiny new cage from my coat. Pettigrew lay within, desperately trying to escape. I let him try, it was very entertaining.

Dumbledore looked at me incredulously. 'You transfigured him into a rat?'

'No, no he did that to himself. He's an unregistered Animagus you see, very crafty. Not crafty enough to get the hell out of Britain when the getting was good apparently, but even still.'
I rattled the cage to amuse myself, slamming Pettigrew harshly against either side. Dumbledore sat back in his chair, stroking his beard in thought.

'And Sirius Black?'

'Oh, right, he's the dog.' I jabbed my thumb carelessly over my shoulder at him.

With a rustling noise, Sirius Black stepped forward in human form and thumped me on the shoulder, hard. 'We said we were going to wait until after you proved it, arsehole!'

Dumbledore had snapped his wand out with astonishing speed for a man of his age, and trained it on Black. Hadn't quite bought it wholesale yet then.

I ignored Sirius and explained (bragged) how I had captured him and determined the truth. Then I opened the cage and unceremoniously dumped Pettigrew on the carpet. He tried to make a run for it but Sirius nailed him with the Homorphus charm, and he ended up slamming into the bookcase he had attempted to dash under.

I dragged him back to us wandlessly, by his ankle, just slowly enough to drive the hopelessness home for him. Ah, it's the little things that make life worth living.

:—:

We put Black in fake chains to prevent panic as Dumbledore summoned Minister Fudge, a man whose appearance strongly correlated to his name, and Director Bones of the DMLE. I let him give the explanation this time.

When he was done, Bones was staring down at Pettigrew, chained as he was to Dumbledore's desk, with utter disgust, while Fudge was positively in a dither. For a moment I thought he was going to deny it entirely - out of political cowardice if nothing else. Best to nip that in the bud.

Dumbledore clearly agreed 'Perhaps we should summon Professor Snape with Veritaserum, so that Minister Fudge may be convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt?'

'Uh, uh-yes! Capital idea!' Fudge said with faux-cheer. Broken from his spiral of panic, he could clearly see that Dumbledore and Bones, the other two pillars of Wizarding Britain alongside than himself - and ones far less subject to the will of the people - were on board. He'd be hard pressed to wriggle out of this mess.

'Do we know Pettigrew cannot resist its effects?' asked Director Bones severely.

Dumbledore piped up. 'Any proficiency that mister Pettigrew has with occlumency was rather obviously borrowed, from what my own examinations have revealed. He most certainly could not resist without the antidote.'

Snape was summoned. While we waited, I took the time to sidle over to the Minister.

'You know, Cornelius,' I said, layering honey into my words. 'This really all falls on Minister Bagnold's shoulders. Approving the imprisonment of untried prisoners like that - just awful. She's retired entirely now too, the ideal candidate for throwing under the bus for this whole mess…'

Fudge looked significantly brightened by this idea - clearly such a basic manoeuvre had not occurred to him. How had this dullard become Minister again?

Snape entered the office, and the sheer degree of loathing that he managed to put into the look he
shot at Black was something I *aspire* to. His expression soured even further when the situation was explained to him.

'So Black is to escape punishment yet again?' he bit out, trembling with barely controlled rage.

Fudge looked startled at this reaction. 'Come now Snape, the man saw twelve years in prison for a crime he didn't commit! Surely you'd agree that is ample punishment for his other crimes, minor as they are?'

But Snape clearly did not. He didn't spare a glance at Pettigrew, not even in surprise to see him alive. I realised suddenly - Snape had always known Black was innocent. He had been a Death Eater - I knew that much, and I'd seen him in flashes from Pettigrew's memories. Oh that is *delicious*. I wonder what Sirius could possibly have done to produce such a vitriol…

The reluctance Snape showed in flicking those three droplets into Pettigrew's mouth was *palpable*.

:—:

Sirius walked out of Dumbledore's office about eight hours after entering it, finally a free man. He looked like he wasn't entirely sure what to do with himself.

Dumbledore was walking with us, to my irritation. 'Well Sirius, the students will all be in bed by now I expect, but we shall make an announcement to the school in the morning and… am I right in thinking you would like to meet your godson?'

Sirius had tears beading in the corners of his eyes.

'I… I would like that very much.'

:—:—:—:

A/N: A nice, wholesome, non-ominous ending to a chapter for once.

James Potter's death scene is a deviation from canon, but personally I always preferred Jbern's version, and so I decided to write something similar. His canon death always felt like he got far too short-changed for what was supposed to be an accomplished and intelligent wizard.

The Augustus Rookwood of this story is heavily inspired specifically by The Sinister Man's version of him in Harry Potter and the Prince of Slytherin, who was so very kind as to give me a shout-out in his last chapter. I assume most of the people reading this are, consequently or coincidentally, already fans of it, but if you've threaded the needle I would highly recommend it. He basically takes a big pile of the most overdone tropes of Potter fanfiction, and somehow transforms them alchemy-like into a fantastic and wonderfully fresh-feeling story.
The Flamels

I watched with barely-concealed disdain from a nearby balcony as Sirius was reunited with his
godson. There was a lot of hugging and crying involved, a very messy affair all-round, to be honest
with you. Not at all my scene.

I had elected to let the Potter boy live, for now at least. Indeed, I was not even sure if I were able to
kill him, given the strange protection that still lingered over him. If circumstances conspired - as
they seemed bent on doing - to force me into an alliance with Dumbledore, it was perhaps for the
best.

'It is not often these days, that I must admit that I am wrong, mister Grey.' Ah, speak of the devil.
'But alas, it appears I may have misjudged you that day in Italy. As I said the last time you were at
Hogwarts, I hope that we can come to understand each other better in the future.'

I let myself sneer a little, before schooling my features and turning around. His presence still sent a
thrill of fear down my spine, but not nearly as much as it had when I had been weak and near-
helpless. I was helpless no longer.

'That tends to happen when you make your judgement on a person's character based on a slab of
iron on a four-foot stick.' I said coldly. 'Don't ever mistake us for friends, Dumbledore.'

He stepped up next to me, and observed Black and Potter for a time. They were sitting now,
discussing something or another very animatedly.

'Has Sirius decided where he is going to live yet?' he asked, blatantly changing the subject.

'He was staying with me until now, but that will not continue. I've had my fill of living with
children twice over.' I looked at the old man. 'He is going to be taking custody of Potter, correct?'

'Oh yes, the paperwork is all taken care of. It is… unfortunate that young Harry did not wish to
return to his aunt and uncle's, it was the safest place for him-' What? Wasn't the boy's living family
all muggles? '-but of course with Sirius a free man, there is no legal justification for it, particularly
in the eyes of the Wizengamot. I shall simply have to ensure that whatever home mister Black
chooses is warded to my - admittedly rather high - standards, for both their safeties.'

So he could maintain a finger in that particular pie, more like. Not that I could blame him, I had no
particular intent on relinquishing my own influence over Black. He was still a useful instrument,
however blunted he may have been by Azkaban. And… if I had to be completely honest, I had
grown to like the man, despite his Gryffindorish traits. He reminded me of LeStrange, I decided.

'And you? Did you have any particular plans over the summer?' Dumbledore enquired congenially.

I didn't answer him, I just walked away, rubbing my ring idly. The day I gave Albus Dumbledore
any insight at all into mine own machinations was the day I die.

I could feel his calculating eyes on my back as I left.

A bellowing shriek rattled me to my bones, as Perenelle Flamel was consumed in a purple-black
torrent of negative energy. The daemon rounded on me, its terrible, beautiful face smiling a smile far too wide for it. There was a sharp tapping noise, thought I knew not from where.

'Did you think you were safe, Tom Marvolo Riddle? Did you think me gone? No… I will pursue you forever!'

It opened its terrible maw wide, and the sharp tapping noise began to ring in my ears as the back of its throat began to glow ultraviolet once more.

I whipped my wand out, summoning all of my strength, but it didn’t come. My magic failed me, and the last thing I saw was the rush of purple blackness rushing at my face-

I woke up thrashing. I felt myself fall out of bed and bash my head rather hard on the nightstand. I lay there for a time feeling sorry for myself, waiting for my vision to stop spinning.

The unexpected benefit of the Dementors, unpleasant though they were, had been that for some reason the combination of their presence with the counteracting effect of a nice mug of hot chocolate before bed had totally prevented my night terrors. But the Dementors had been sent back to Azkaban with the capture of Pettigrew, and so my little nightly ritual returned.

That sharp tapping noise came again. I looked up to see Adrien, the Flamels’ loyal and immaculate barn owl waiting patiently outside my window. Groaning, I got up and let it in. By the sunrise outside it was probably around seven am. Blech.

I had been enjoying a brief semi-holiday in the weeks since Sirius had gained his freedom, amusing myself trying to finally repair the Stroj na golema (Making very scant progress), but perhaps that was coming to an end. I read Nicolas’ letter - an invitation to their summer home in Greece. Perenelle had invited me to visit them almost a year ago, but I hadn't had the time between tracking my other self across Europe and America, and my various other pursuits. Now was the perfect time to go, as I would likely be waiting another week at least to hear back from the Peruvian Ministry.

:—:

I hadn’t been in Greece since 1942, and that trip had been fleeting enough that I hadn't even gotten around to learning the modern version of the language at the time. I had arrived in Belos, Wizarding Greece's capitol, which stood on Mount Olympus' highest peak. It had persisted untouched by muggles since the Classical age; to this day the entire peak was hidden from muggle view. The Flamels' summer estate was close, on the coast near Katerini, but I was not due for several hours.

Instead, I apparated to the nearby city of Thessaloniki to find some way to pass the time. It had a modest magical population compared to Belos, but Belos was mostly administrative centres and stuffy civil servants. The only fun thing about the place was the view and the museums. I expended an hour wandering Thessaloniki's streets, drinking in the culture and atmosphere.

I was just walking out of a muggle tailor's shop, relishing the feel of the coat that I had just purchased, when the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I straightened, my wand snapping into my grasp. I looked around for anything out of the ordinary, before the shop behind me exploded, throwing me bodily off my feet and slamming me into a passing car hard enough to overturn it.

I land in a heap on the hard pavement of the other side of the street, in quite a great deal of pain. Ribs definitely broken, left arm too, judging by the fact that I could see both my radius and ulna. Probably concussed, given that I had landed on my head. My wand had ended up Merlin-knows where.
Scratch that, I thought, as a well of nausea formed in my gut. Definitely concussed.

There was a series of sharp cracks; my assailants were apparating in. In broad daylight, no less.

Blinded by the blood that had started flowing over my eyes, I did not see the man who grabbed me by my jaw, and I could just barely hear him over the ringing in my ears.

'So this is your true face, huh?' He said in the same dialect and accent of Greek I had taken from the man whose mind I had shredded in Ibiza last year.

The ringing had begun to fade. 'Not such a pretty boy any more! Now you will pay for what you did to Giorgos!'

'Not to you' I mumbled through broken teeth, and swung my good hand, bearing the ring of Gaunt, at where the voice seemed to be coming from. I found flesh, gripped hard and focused my will.

I opened the man's eyes and looked down at myself. Merlin I looked like fresh shit, even worse than I'd expected. His soul raged against my own, and it was a strong one, but he didn't know the first thing about resisting possession. My body was currently clutching his left ear; without my wand, I would need him to maintain contact with the Gaunt horcrux to retain control.

I was surrounded by half a dozen others, all just as greasy and ill-mannered looking as the... sleeve I was currently inhabiting. They looked quite surprised when I hit the first one with an entrail-expelling curse. As his intestines started forcing their way up his throat, I cocooned myself in a powerful shield. This sleeve was actually pretty magically powerful; a pity he'd decided it was a good idea to come after me.

I lashed out with a trick I'd learned watching Lord Voldemort in action, a streamer of copper wire from the tip of my wand, superheated into a glowing whip. It wrapped around one of them men, and when I pulled it tight he fell to the ground in three separate pieces. I took the moment of reprieve from danger to work some quick healing on my body. The bones slithered back into my arm, the wound above my temple closed, and I cleaned the blood from my eyes. Ribs were easy and-

The sleeve died suddenly, and I was forced back into my own body in time to see him flop to the ground next to me, his head bearing a new hole drilled through it by one of his mates. No matter, his purpose was served. I made a shoving motion, and forced my magic into a wide-area Banisher that blasted the remaining men off their feet. I leapt to my own, grinning viciously with my new teeth. These swine had ruined my brand new coat. I reached into my back pocket, and pulled Czernobog's mighty maul from the expanded space within. In the back of my mind, I endeavoured to start carrying a second wand - even if it was a lesser one. Still, time for a bit of medieval fun.

I charged the closest one, still staggering to his feet, who simply failed to bring his wand to bear in time. His ribcage made a disgusting, yet satisfying crunching noise when it met my hammer. I pivoted, and span the hammer like a baton, conjuring a crude shield to scatter a blood-freezing curse from another foe. I responded with an equally crude bludgeoner, which came bouncing right back at me, slipping beneath my hammer and slamming me right into my own freshly-repaired ribs, followed by a banisher perfectly timed from another thug. I dropped the hammer and skidded backwards, completely winded but still standing, and threw myself to the side to avoid a cleaving curse that caught a fleeing muggle in the back. I was now standing next to a lovely blue two-tonne four-by-four, which I promptly seized and lobbed at the thugs.

They blew it apart with - again - a perfectly timed trio of Confringos. Well isn't that just dandy, the petty criminals know teamwork. I summoned the hammer, but one of them hit it with an accio, and
before I could overpower him, the other two were already alternating Reductos and Diffindos at me - weak spells but low-energy too, perfect for peppering a wandless opponent with. I abandoned my attempt for the hammer and took shelter behind a parked bus. Where the bloody hell was my wand?

I looked at the bus, gauging its weight. I gathered every ounce of strength in me, and kicked it as hard as I was able - it skidded away from me at great speed, and I heard one of the rat-bastards shout in alarm. I ran after it as cover, and spied a wand, lying discarded next to one of the wizards I had slain. A flexing of will, and it leapt to my grasp - a godawful match, but it was something. I span it in my hand, then raised it aloft, shouting a brief phrase in Russian. I had to force more energy than I would have liked into the effort, damn this wand, but it worked. Every pane of glass within a hundred feet of me shattered into a thousand pieces, and flew together into a great cloud. I brought the wand down in a great arc, and the cloud became a great serpent, surging through the air to crash down upon the three wizards who dared to oppose me.

They shielded, but the serpent broke through the shields of one, and millions of little sharp fragments tore him into so much wet mush. I set it to circle back and come at them again

Accio my wand! I cast, and it shot out from beneath a devastated sedan to slap into my hand. I cast away the lesser wand like the trash it was, and summoned the hammer back to my off hand.

I turned back to my two remaining foes in time to see them bring down the glass serpent with a dual casting of a wide-area finite. Cute. I made a twisting motion with my wand, grunted some very outdated Korean, and the entire street - cars and all - began to move like a treadmill, everything shooting eastward at twenty miles an hour. I alone was unaffected, delicately sidestepping the ruins of the bus as it shot past me. The two wizards stumbled - one tumbling over entirely. The other I clotheslined with the hammer, crushing his skull like an egg. I separated the arm of the last of the thugs before he could apparate away, the white-hot filament I used cauterising the wound even as it cut.

He wailed in agony, but I was not in a merciful mood. I was sick and tired of these garden-variety goons that seemed to crop up everywhere around me. It was getting embarrassing. I stepped on his chest and pressed down, feeling his bones begin to bend under my might.

'How did you find me?!' I demanded.

He gargled something in Greek that I didn't quite catch, but sounded rather a lot like 'fuck you,'

I held my wand to his face, the tip spitting sparks that left little singes on his skin.

'Do you really want to know what I can do to you, boy?'

His last shred of bravado didn't last. 'Blood magic! We collected your blood from that apartment in Ibiza! Not enough to destroy you, but enough to track! When you came to Greece, it was too good an opportunity to pass up!'

Ah, but of course. I should have thought of it sooner. I would have to perform a ritual purge soon, burn away any remaining samples of my blood that any enterprising souls may have collected.

There was a crack of apparition behind me, and an authoritative voice.

'Drop your wand, wanker! You're under arrest!'

I sneered, though he couldn't see it. Of course now the Aurors show up, when the danger had passed. For a moment I contemplated simply crushing the thug underfoot and disapparating, but no
- too many muggles had been in the vicinity when I was attacked, and a good many of them had managed to escape amidst the ensuing battle - though the bodies of those that didn't littered the street. Mostly towards the eastern end of it now, of course, where a graveyard of wrecked cars had been piled up by my spell. But the Greek Ministry would only have to find one muggle who had seen my face, and it would risk yet another international incident.

I held my wand away from my body, and dropped it daintily. 'I surrender.'

፡—:

Unlike most of my previous run-ins with the law, this time I was, both legally and ethically, genuinely not guilty. Self defence is a wonderful excuse for a spot of bloody violence. They interrogated myself and the only surviving member of the little gang that jumped me - I learned his name was Dinos, how very stereotypical - with Veritaserum, and released me inside of a couple of hours, just in time for my visit to the Flamels.

After taking some time to properly clean myself up, I made my way to the Flamel estate. It was a 17th century Greek villa, in a pseudo-classical style, perched on a cliff overlooking the Thermaic Gulf. With the sun setting behind me on my approach, the gulf was lit a fiery pink-orange that seemed to dance with every passing wave. Positively idyllic; I would expect nothing less from the two wealthiest people on the planet.

Nicolas met me at the door, my first time meeting the immortal in the flesh. Like his wife, he looked like he was in his mid-twenties. Classically handsome, all square-chinned and high cheekbones, with snow-white hair and nearly identical midnight blue eyes - perhaps a side effect of his wondrous Elixir?

He addressed me eagerly in rapid French. 'Ah, Thomas, it is a joy to be in your company for the first time!'

'The same to you, Nicolas.' I returned with an easy grin. One day I was going to rob this man of each and every one of his greatest alchemical secrets, but today I fell comfortably into the role of eager young protégé, as he lead me into their parlour.

'How well have the earrings we sent for Candlenights been affording you?'

'Very well indeed, thank you. Spared me quite a lot of trouble, actually.'

Perenelle was awaiting us in the parlour, and kissed me on both cheeks in greeting. The room was elegant, a refine mix of Greco-Roman and Parisian architecture and furnishing. In the centre of the room, on a coffee table between two sofas, was a short, spindly pedestal upon which perched a single blood-red stone.

My eyes widened. 'Merlin, surely that cannot be the Stone, can it? Just sitting there out in the open?

Nicolas and Perenelle laughed the kind of laugh you only get from a very old and familiar joke.

'Heavens no,' Perenelle chuckled. 'That, dear Thomas, is one of many fakes we have crafted over the years. Decoys, to teach those that would divest us of what is ours the folly of their ways. To use this stone would be very ill-advised indeed.'

How very ominous. I wondered if they presented every prospective apprentice with the same little display, to dissuade temptation. Had Dumbledore experienced something similar in his own youth?
'I had read that you had destroyed it?'

Nicolas snorted with great derision, suddenly incensed. 'As if I would ever commit such an atrocity! My Stone is mine, and mine alone to decide for what purpose to use, no matter what newest ridiculousness Albus has-!'

He cut himself off, looking faintly embarrassed at losing his cool. Perenelle took over.

'We were willing to tell the world that we had destroyed the Stone at Albus' request, though we made it excruciatingly clear to him that we would do no such thing. It has, admittedly, given us some small respite from the constant horde of thieves and swindlers that have hounded us for centuries.'

A private schism between Dumbledore and his most powerful ally? My own spirits sung to hear it.

We settled in for dinner - Cordon Bleu of course, the Flamels for all their centuries had never lost their patriotic adoration for Mother France. Their house elf Luca, they told me, had served them faithfully and without fail for almost their full seven centuries on this planet. It too shared the now-trademark midnight blue irises. Outwardly, I smiled and made some polite comment, but inwardly I seethed at the notion that they would afford the gift of immortality to a slave creature when they had refused it to all the rest of mankind.

Credit where it was due, though. The meal was absolutely exquisite. At the very least the creature had put its extended time on this earth toward something of value.

Conversation eventually, inevitably, found its way back to alchemy.

'You see, the key difference, inherent, between Transfiguration and Alchemy, which is failed by many to grasp, is that while Transfiguration is purely an endeavour magical, Alchemy is science and magic as one.'

Nicolas had slipped into an educator's tone like putting on a pair of favoured robes, it must have served him well during his occasional stints as Headmaster of Beauxbatons. His patterns of speech did still remain somewhat unusual, and more than once this evening I had wondered if I'd forgotten how to speak French properly. Only Perenelle's much more normal sentence structure dissuaded me of that concern.

I frowned. 'But there's a great deal of science in Transfiguration. Socrates's Law, Dodgeson's Equation, that sort of thing.'

'Ah, you have misunderstood.' Nicolas smirked. 'You're far from the first. There is a great deal of mathematics and philosophy in explaining Transfiguration, and sciences these are, yes, this is undeniable. But the actual performance of the art? No. Hold you Dodgeson's Equation in your mind when you are transforming a raven into a writing desk? Must you run through every and each one of the myriad differences of structure between the two, and consequently the physical alterations necessary to the molecules and mass that comprise them? No, they would be impossible to list. You simply hold your desire within your mind, and make with wand and voice the necessary motions to invoke that desire. Knowing the theory may make you faster or more energy-efficient in your choices of transformation, yes, but it is not at all necessary for success.

'Alchemy, however, is much different. There is a reason that modern muggle chemistry was by it inspired. In Alchemy you must account for everything, the magical aspects do not simply fudge the details for you. Even the smallest error can disastrous results produce. It is for this reason that so befuddling to many Alchemy is considered.'
I absorbed his words with consideration. 'So you are saying, what? That I ought to study muggle science in addition to magic in order to properly pursue alchemy?'

Nicolas inclined his head. 'In my day, the two disciplines were one and the same. To understand developments in the latter, you must grasp properly the former.'

The rest of dinner passed without incident, Nicolas citing a number of muggle physics and chemistry books for me to peruse.

The hour grew late, and it came time for me to leave. I prepared to apparate back to Belos for a return portkey, but Perenelle waved dismissively. 'Nonsense, my dear. I am licensed by the ICW for the creation of international portkeys, there is no need for you to waste your time in line!'

She drew a small broach from a nearby cabinet - beautifully crafted, no doubt worth hundreds of galleons, but she handled it like it was a plastic prop from a costume shop, tossing it onto the top of the cabinet. 'Portus!' she incanted, and the broach glowed bright blue for a brief moment.

'Do come back and visit us more often, Thomas. We do so rarely have dinner guests over lately, since Nicolas' disagreement with Albus.' She said in English.

I said my goodbyes in kind, and laid my hand upon the broach, disappearing in an instant.

:—:

I appeared with a crack outside a modest little thatch-roofed cottage in Wiltshire. Someone had clearly taken a swing at its resident recently; the thatching had a distinctly fresh look on the left-hand side, and there were still some burn-marks around the edges of the patch. I approached the front door and rapped on it sharply.

'Go away!' I heard a voice half-sob.

I rolled my eyes, despite being alone. 'I'm not here to egg you, Enid. I'm here on business.'

'Leave me alone!'

Sigh. I kicked the door open, shattering the paltry locking spells. Within was a small living room, with ratty, outdated furniture, and upon one such ragged armchair was a small middle-aged woman in mourner's clothing, crying into a handkerchief. Or she was, she promptly stopped doing that and screeched with terror when I invaded her home.

'Morning, Enid. I think there's something wrong with your door.'

She tried to disapparate, slamming headlong into the temporary anti-teleportation ward I had tossed up on my approach.

'See, now that's just rude.' I forced her back into her seat with my wand, her body held rigid by a telekinetic spell.

I ignored her for a bit, letting the fear and tension build. I inspected her mantlepiece, it was positively coated in photographs of a plump, mousy-haired child, ranging from infancy all the way up to his graduation from Hogwarts, mostly just by himself, but some of them with friends. The display was disturbingly shrine-like; the faces of the other boys in the photos had been scratched out with a knife. In the centre of it all, encased in a dome of glass and magically preserved, was a single human finger.
'Where's the wand, Enid?' I asked casually, softly, not looking at her, instead gazing into the burning coals of her fireplace.

'W-what wand?'

'You know, I've always been told that people will do anything for family. Never really experienced it myself, but I must say, allowing an innocent man to rot in Azkaban for twelve years in your mass-murderer son's place blows pretty much any other anecdote I've heard out of the water.'

I turned to her. She had the same watery eyes as the boy in the photographs.

'Where is the wand, madam Pettigrew? I won't ask again.'

She attempted a sneer, an ugly expression on her tear-streaked, rat-like face. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

I leant down over her, hands on each armrest of her chair, staring her directly in the face. I could legilimise her, of course, but there was a madness in those eyes, madness I did not desire to wade into. I forced her to look at me anyway. I could feel her terror. Good.

'I'm going to kill you, Enid Pettigrew. I want you to know that. Your silence has caused me a great deal of trouble. But how you die is up to you. Do you want to go out with dignity, or agony?'

'W-who are you?' she managed. I straightened.

'I know Pettigrew came here, after he framed Sirius Black. I saw it in his memories. I know that you knew he was a Death Eater, a murderer, and alive to boot, yet you protected him. I know he gave you my wand for safekeeping. You will return it to me.'

'Your wand? No, he gave me-' she cut herself off, looking stricken.

I gave her the widest, most cheshire-cat grin I could summon.

'He gave you Lord Voldemort's wand.'

She shuddered at the name, and I stepped back, allowing her the time to chew on that little revelation.

Finally, she croaked hollowly 'Cellar. Beneath the concrete. I buried it.'

I went. The cellar floor was bare, and smooth. Not for much longer. I decided to break through it the old fashioned way, more satisfying. A few earthshaking strikes from Czernobog's hammer later, and I was brushing rocks and dust off of a long, thin pine box, which I tore open. Lying within, just as beautiful as the day I had paid Ollivander seven galleons for it in Diagon, was my first wand. Yew, 13 ½ inches. Unyielding. Phoenix-feather core.

I left the Pettigrew cottage burning, and as I disapparated, the last of Enid Pettigrew's screams dwindled into the crackling flames.

:-:-:-:-:

A/N: In my opinion, what was done to Nicolas Flamel in CoG was nothing less than criminal. The most interesting, yet most criminally underutilised character in the entirety of Harry Potter canon, reduced to a doddering husk of a man who broke at the lightest touch. They turned him into a joke, I won't stand for it. His casting was perfect, Brontis Jodorowsky is great, but he shouldn't have had
any of those prosthetics or makeup. It's the Elixir of Life, not the Elixir of Barely Clinging To Life!

Ahem. I tend to get a bit worked up about it.
There’s No Sport Like Blood Sport

Thud

A spear of ice impacted the bullseye hard enough to make it reverberate.

'Cor, nice shot Harry!' Sirius exclaimed.

I looked over my copy of Hawking's "God Created The Integers" with an appraising eye. The pilus addendum to the glacius spell was a useful bit of combat magic for the young or inexperienced; it was a deadly weapon but did not require much energy to cast, and the wand movements were damn-near point-and-shoot. The boy had good aim, he'd winged the innermost ring on his third time casting the spell.

We were in Dartmoor, at the vast camping ground that had been organised for the 1994 Quidditch World Cup. Garrow and Belinda Avery had dragged me along, the former having apparently conspired with Black to have adjacent campsites. The former had done the same with the rest of our mutual friends back in 42, though then I had agreed primarily to get out of staying at the Orphanage. Also in attendance with Black's contingent was a man I recognised from Pettigrew's memories as Remus Lupin. A werewolf.

'Grey! You're up.' Garrow barked.

The shooting range had been my idea. I had never cared much for Quidditch; in my opinion there's no point to any competitive sport where you don't get to kill something or blow it up. I was bored to tears by the whole affair, and thus the need to blow off steam.

I stood, setting aside my book and cracking my neck from side to side. My wand found my hand - my Yew wand. I had been careful to keep the Holly one stowed around the Potter boy, even though he had since replaced it. He did not recognise me as his attacker at all of course, I had been in the guise of an old woman at the time, but there was no sense in risking him recognising the wand itself. Indeed, the boy apparently liked me a great deal (Probably because I'd gotten his godfather his freedom) and kept trying to get on my good side, which was a bit annoying.

I was about to cast, when out of the corner of my eye, I recognised a face in the crowd of Quidditch enthusiasts milling around the campground. I absently flicked off a piercing curse, which went way off target and barely winged the edge of the bullseye.

Sirius cackled loudly at the pitiful effort. 'What happened Tom, spot one of those Bulgarian Veela?'

'Something like that. I'll be right back.' I said, and winked mischievously at the group before sauntering away, laughter and jeering following me. I noticed the Weasley clan approaching our camp as I went, fortuitous timing on my part.

I had, unfortunately, not spied one of the Bulgarian mascots. The individual I was pursuing was much less pretty.

I seized Peter Hein, the man who had once spared us a good deal of trouble in the House of the Rising Sun, by the shoulder and spun him around.

'Riddle old boy, how ruddy excellent to see you!' As before, his mannerisms and accent were
British, almost cartoonishly so. But beneath them, for the first time, I detected something... else. They were an affectation.

I looked around wildly, making sure nobody had heard the name. 'Who the fuck are you, Hein? How do you know that name? Why are you here?' I demanded, grasping him roughly by his collar.

Hein chuckled, like an adult humouring a toddler, and removed my hand from his suit jacket, easily but gently overpowering me. He smoothed the collar where I had rumpled it.

'Tom, you must calm down! All things in their proper time! I told you who I am, I'm a traveller. I'm here to work. Or rather, I will be working, in about...’ he pulled out a golden pocket watch. 'By jove, would you look at the time! I'm terribly sorry old chap, but I must be trotting on, things to do, people to... see. Toodle-oo!'

With that, he turned on his heel and strutted away. I went to chase him, shouting for him to wait, but my view of him was obscured by a passing couple for the briefest of moments, and he was gone. Without even the lightest of pops to signify apparition. For fuck's sake.

His accent had slipped slightly, on that first sentence after I grabbed his collar. An ordinary person probably wouldn't have noticed, but I, who have spent so much time taking the knowledge of languages wholesale from others, did. Just a hint of something Germanic. Dutch, if I had to guess. But what the bloody hell does that mean?

:—:

It was late, after the match. It had ultimately turned out to be much more entertaining than expected - a bit of Veela magic did wonders for turning men violent against one another, and play had gotten nasty in the late-game.

We were sat around a campfire of brilliant cyan flame, and the others were still jabbering excitedly about the match, while I was focusing on cooking the fourth lot of sausages for the night. You could still hear the Bulgarians celebrating - they'd won by a hair's breadth, 170 to 160. Even with my limited grasp of the sport, that Krum kid was impressive on a broom. Sirius had cracked out the firewhisky shortly after the match was finished, and we'd worked our way through a fair few bottles already. Potter was off with the Weasleys, letting Black get a little rowdier than he may have otherwise been.

As the flames began to wear down to blue coals, I noticed something of a shift in the sounds echoing across the campgrounds. They sounded less like exultations and fireworks and more like... screams and explosions.

I stood at the same time as Lupin did, his expression somewhat more alert than the others.

'Sirius!' He said warningly. 'There's trouble.'

Sirius staggered up, clearly not having noticed, his eyes glazed. 'Aaaaah, there's always trouble when the Marauders are around!' He crowed, waving a bottle around and dancing a little jig. Then there was an explosion, as a tent a few rows down from ours suddenly went up in flames. That sobered Black up quick.

Lit by the fires, we could see them, a crowd of men and women in black robes and silver masks. 'Death Eaters!' Sirius hissed, his expression murderous. Behind him and Lupin, Garrow yanked back the sleeve of his left arm to check; it was as blank as he'd told me it had been on November 1st 1981. Whatever this was, Lord Voldemort was not involved.
My wand found my hand once more - there would be no more wandless ridiculousness for me this time. Whomever these people were, whomever they were perhaps pretending to be, a chunk of them were headed this way, and my blood sung for the impending conflict. Already I could make out the flashes and bangs of fights breaking out between the raiders and their quarry.

Sirius and Lupin shouted something about making sure the Potter boy was alright, and ran off. I licked my lips and began to prowl toward the chaos, when Garrow caught my arm.

'No killing!' He hissed to me, as Belinda drew her own wand, looking a little unsteady on her feet; she was much smaller than we were and the alcohol had hit hard.

I looked at him incredulously. 'The bloody hell are you talking about, Gary?'

'If they're the real deal, the old guard, some of them were friends once. Please.'

I wrested my arm from his grasp. 'I'll see what I can do,' I muttered, and with a twisting of space I was gone.

I reappeared half a dozen rows over, and immediately laid eyes on a pair of the raiders ransacking an overturned tent. The first fell without even realising I was there, stunned and bound in barbed wire. His mate whipped around, firing off some curse or another, it didn't even come close to hitting me. With a flurry of motion from my wand, the earth beneath him turned to water, then back into dirt when he fell in, sealing him up to his neck.

I hissed frustration through my teeth. Of course I had the bad luck to end up with the chaff of the bunch, that's just typi-

I shunted myself backwards several feet just before a piercer would have cored my skull. I whipped around to my new challenger, who blocked my Electrocution hex effortlessly and followed up with a very nasty bludgeoning-cleaving curse known as the Foe Hammer. No shield I could cast would block it, so instead in an instant I tore a column of stone up from the ground between us, which exploded violently at the impact.

Continuing with the earth theme, I dragged my left foot backwards along the ground whilst twisting my wand and incanting in old Korean. The ground shifted as if I was yanking on a long carpet, tripping the man, who stumbled right into my banisher. He slammed into a huge long Irish flag, which promptly coiled itself around him at my command like a serpent, leaving him hanging upside down from the flagpole.

A little better, but still pathetically weak. My blood howled for a greater challenge. Off in the distance, the main group had started to itself break up into big chunks, looting and pillaging. High above them, the muggle family that ran the campground were being levitated by somebody in the crowd, contorting and pirouetting in the air like some kind of macabre dance.

I twisted through space once more, and was nastily reminded of the very strenuous warnings the books I'd used to learn apparition had given against doing so in a battlefield; I had appeared right in the path of somebody's spell. It struck me in my chest, and for the briefest moment I lost all sense of the world around me as I flew through the air.

I landed hard on a timber picnic table, the wind completely blown out of me. My chest seared from the ugly burn that now marred my left breast; I had been hit by a concussive siege hex of some kind. Thankfully not one made to use against humans, or I would likely have been obliterated. I cursed myself for my foolishness, and rolled to my feet, dismissing my non-magical injuries with a flick of my wand. That burn was definitely going to scar though.
The man who cast it, another of the raiders, was running at me, wand raised. My fury surged. He was halfway through an incantation, but I was faster. He screamed as I banished him whilst summoning his right forearm bones; they tore their way out of his arm entirely, and I had to cancel the summon before I got hit in the face with a wet ulna.

The wizard continued to wail in agony as he slid back across suddenly muddy ground; and that wailing attracted more raiders. How many drunken ex-Death Eaters were there in this godsforsaken place? The first went down just as easily as all of his mates, but the second surprised me, palming my petrification curse and dispelling the chain that followed it. He struck back with a spell I didn't recognise, but which shattered my shield like a piece of glass.

I rolled out of the way of the bludgeoner that followed, and forced another pillar of stone up through the earth; this time a slender one to catch him in his chin. The man was almost thrown into a full backflip by the impact, and landed in a heap. Flicking a second petrifier at him, I was about to again bemoan my foes, when he leapt up and countered it again.

I grinned as we began exchanging spells in earnest. Finally someone who doesn't go down from the first nick. I tried for that earth-to-water trick again, but he froze the water before he could fall in. It cost him though, I caught him in the shin with a fatigue-plague hex, which would no doubt be creeping up his body already. He retaliated with what I believe was a Romani acute-misfortune curse, but it sputtered against my shields; now that I'd learned when to dodge that shield-buster of his, he was struggling to get anything past.

I caught him in the face with a bludgeoner that he'd simply been too slow to catch, and he fell to the ground, his mask skittering away. I froze, I knew that face.

'A-Abe?' I stuttered before I could stop myself, and the man looked back at me incredulously. No, even with a broken nose spurring blood down to obscure his chin, this clearly wasn't Abraxas. But I did recognise him from the waif's memories. Abe's son, Lucius.

Before either of us could say anything, a great emerald light lit the entire campground. We both turned to look. Up, floating high above the surrounding forest, was a huge glowing green skull, composed of a thousand witchlights. As we watched, the skull opened its mouth, and a great serpent wended its way out, like some monstrous tongue. Cool trick.

I turned back to Lucius, and he to me, looking horrorstruck. With a twisting motion, he was gone. Just in time too, as someone had finally remembered to call for backup; Aurors had started cracking in all across the campsite. Already many of the raiders were making good their escape before anti-teleportation wards could be raised. Pity, I had hoped for it to continue a little longer.

The campsite was a mess, little fires still crackling here and there all over the place even an hour after the fact. A solid portion of the tents were just straight up obliterated. My own allotment of land was, by good fortune, untouched, and it was there that I sat calmly, examining my Yew wand. Since recovering it from the Pettigrew cottage, I had noticed a slight difference in its personality compared to the Holly wand. Whilst each was perfectly matched with me in a way no other wand ever could be - unless perhaps if a third brother wand was made - they were not identical in nature.

My Yew wand, I felt, seemed to be made to sow destruction. It yearned for it almost, and darker shades of magic flowed from it with barely the slightest of exertions. My Holly wand, on the other hand, was its equal opposite. Defensive magic sung from it almost before I had even called for it. Transfigurations too, were near effortless from it, whilst the Yew seemed to prefer elemental magics.
Not that either ever balked at all when used outside those fields of course, but there was a definite tinge to both of them.

I was interrupted from my musings by the return of Sirius and the Potter boy. They had clearly been through the wars, Sirius still had blood staining his face from a hastily-healed gash on his forehead, and Potter had his arm in a conjured sling. I - having seen no reason to showcase mine own errors - had taken the time to put my appearance back together, though beneath my silk shirt my newest scar still seared. I would need to use some healing ointments on it when I got home.

Sirius rolled his eyes when he laid eyes on me. 'Of course bloody Grey gets through without a scratch on him.' He joked to Potter, who half-grinned through his obvious pain.

'Why, how did you fare, Sirius?' I enquired innocently. Potter snorted.

'Dunno what you're laughing at, fuzzball,' said Sirius, looking mildly affronted, ruffling Potter's perpetually untidy hair. 'You're the one who's going to be on regen potions for a week and a half because you thought you'd try to duel a full-grown wizard!'

Potter had the decency to look sheepish. 'I did beat him though.'

'Yeah, because he tripped over his own robes when he saw the Dark Mark!'

'Still counts.'

I elected to interrupt before they dissolved into bickering entirely. 'The Dark Mark, that's that big glowing skull thing, yeah?' I pointed to where it still burned in the sky.

Sirius nodded sagely. 'Yeah, the Death Eaters used to cast it whenever they attacked a place. It rips apart temporary apparition wards like wet paper. Apparently it hasn't been cast since the end of the war, so it shook people up pretty bad to see it again,' He looked curiously at me. 'How come you don't know about it?'

'I was in Hong Kong most of my life, remember?' I lied. 'Most people there hadn't even heard of the bloke. Where's Remus?'

'Still assisting with clean-up. There's a couple real nasty-looking curses that got flung about that they want an expert to examine before they start messing with them. Garrow and Belinda?'

I chuckled a thumb over my shoulder to our tent. 'Sleeping it off. How many of the drunks did they catch?'

Sirius eyed his own tent longingly. 'Only four or five, plus two killed by some Israeli Auror on holiday, and none of them seemed to have been ringleaders. Blimey I'm tired, I think we're gonna turn in as well.'

I watched them go, and then looked back to the Dark Mark in the sky. It taunted me, a stark reminder of my other self's descent into megalomania. With a great echoing cry of 'Finite!' from over a dozen wizards, it finally dissolved, leaving me enshrouded in darkness once more.

===

The World Cup debacle was all anyone would talk about for the next week. Alif Dervish had demanded a blow-by-blow recount of affairs when I next visited his shop, and I'd managed to get myself several drinks bought for me at the Three Broomsticks by providing the same.
It had started off amusing, but was getting old very quickly. Even when Garrow and myself travelled to Carcassone for Gerard Delacour's birthday in late August, the first question that the customs bloke asked was 'Were you fellows at the World Cup?'

Delacour's estate was breathtaking. It looked like something out of a Disney movie (Something Sirius had simply insisted on introducing me to after I'd failed to catch a cultural reference of his). Vineyards as far as the eye could see, surrounds a classic chateau of sandstone brown and roofs shingled with a material of such a deep blue it was almost purple.

As we approached, we were soon among a steady trickle of guests cracking in along the main path. At the entrance to the chateau, we spotted Gerard standing to greet his friends, accompanied by a woman who could only be his wife. Gerard was a somewhat short man, and somewhat overweight (moreso than when I had seen him last, at any rate), but his wife was the opposite, almost matching my own slender two metre frame. I double checked my mental defences as I approached; Garrow had warned me that she was a Veela and so it would not do to embarrass myself.

Gerard greeted us jovially, taking my one hand in both of his to shake; you'd never have guessed I'd once had to chop one of them off. I had slipped an illusion over the Gaunt ring for the night, making it look like a simple golden band. Given how he'd reacted to the mark of Peverell last time, I didn't exactly fancy waving it around at his birthday.

Fortunately, I had had the forethought to explain to him several months ago that I had been under "illusory magic" when we first met, so he was not taken aback by my drastically different appearance.

His wife - Apolline - was as engaging as she was beautiful, and she seemed to appreciate being able to have a conversation with a wizard who wasn't just ogling her. Even with her bringing her aura down to its lowest level, there were still several men struggling not to stare. Even Garrow was glancing out of the corner of his eye when he thought nobody was looking. Neither she nor Gerard seemed offended by it though; I suppose they were used to such things.

I walked with Apolline through to their grandiose parlour, which was slowly filling up. Gerard did most of his business working with Gringotts, so there were a surprising number of Goblins around for a Wizarding affair (and by that, I mean two or three). The Delacours had apparently hired human servants for the party, which couldn't have come cheap, and I nabbed an apéritif from a passing tray.

Gerard's work took him all over the world, and it showed; his friends were as eclectic a bunch as any I'd seen. Garrow had engaged with an Austrian wizard whom I'd seen visiting Alfhearth in in the past - the Avery family's chief business was in importing luxury goods, and the Austrian magical community was famous for their yeti-hide rugs and coats

I spent the next few hours mingling with the crowd. This kind of event was where I tended to flourish; I was very good at quick first impressions. I had been fortunate enough to find myself conferring with a very snarky Norwegian witch from the Scandinavian Ministry; she opined to me at length in Norsk about how British magical authorities were making her life difficult. They were trying to fast-track the import of a Norwegian Ridgeback for some ungodly reason. She'd been stonewalling them hard; the Ridgeback was highly endangered and she wasn't going to risk a nesting female for any amount of gold. 'They cannot expect we shall hop to just because they asked!' She exclaimed, downing her seventh champagne. It would be useful to have contacts in Norway, I would soon have to visit there on my latest adventure on the trail of Lord Voldemort.

Eventually I found myself out on a balcony in the cool summer breeze. South France was lovely this time of year. Almost as lovely as the Veela witch down in the garden, who I was watching get
steadily more and more furious with the fellow teen she was speaking to. Ah, young love. From what little I could pick up from their shouting, the lad had been caught in a broom closet with one of the witch's cousins.

Garrow spoke from behind me. 'There you are Tom, I've been looking all over-

'Not now, Gary!' I declared loudly, waving my arm at him. 'This is very entertaining, I think she'd about to turn him into a tangerine!'

I looked back. She had stopped yelling and was looking directly at me. Oops. She drew her wand, and for a moment I thought she meant to try and take potshots at me. But instead she sucker-punched her boyfriend, who had turned to see what she was looking at. In an instant, he was transformed into a small citrus fruit, which fell to the ground. I roared with laughter, the sounds of my approval echoing across the vineyard. She stalked off angrily, not looking back.

My fun ended, I turned to back to Garrow. 'What can I do for you, Gary?'

'Oh you're done ogling the half-Veela now?'

I made a face. 'You realise that all Veela are full Veela, right? They're a race entirely comprised of women, how else could they possibly propagate?'

'I always heard that they just slept with muggle men so their magic doesn't have to compete with ours?'

'Nah, I think that's just some of that really extreme blood propaganda stuff, you know, the kind of shit Nott's dad used to be super into. Just went mainstream for some reason.'

'Interesting.' He didn't sound terribly interested, but points for trying. Avery had always been the least caring of our group about blood status. He would never go so far as to refer to Muggles as people, but muggleborns he couldn't really give a shit about. 'I was hoping I could take advantage of some of that, ah, Grey charm, there's this Sri-Lankan chap over here who's being thoroughly unreasonable about his prices for Ceylon Ebony, I mean really it'd almost be cheaper just going through the Muggle black market…'

:—:

Garrow and Mohan Dissanayake shook hands firmly. It had taken them bloody ages to come to an agreement, even with me mediating. Apparently the muggle government of Sri-Lanka had banned the sale of the endangered timber entirely earlier this year, and the magical government of India was heavily restricting it also. Garrow's old supply had dried up, and so his quiet desperation for a restored supply line had honestly been more of an issue than Mohan's reluctance to lower his price.

I saw the young lad that the Veela girl had thoroughly dumped reenter back into the parlour, still orange in some places. He stumbled over to the fireplace and left by floo, but not before giving everyone a good laugh. I spied the girl standing next to Gerard. Ah, she must be that Fleur he'd told me so much about. She caught my gaze and gave me a filthy look, I toasted her with a smirk, but did nothing more. I looked away, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw her pointing me out to her father with an irritated expression, and heard his booming laugh shortly after.

Dinner was, predictably, magnificent. If there's one thing that the French knew how to do, it was cook. I had wound up sitting next to an older American wizard, who had wasted little time in regaling me with the surprisingly long tale of the one time when he went windsailing using a god-damn Thunderbird. Somehow, he managed to make that story boring. In the midst of it all, Gerard
got up and made a lovely speech about how happy he was for everyone to be there, it was quite sweet really.

I had gifted Gerard the Scarab I had once offered up to Sibrandr Oryx; as I had described it then, it was a priceless treasure, but one that I myself had little use for. Gerard's unknowing assistance in assuring my immortality was infinitely more valuable to me.

We left Carcassonne late, promising Gerard and Apolline that we would visit more in future.

I awoke in my home the next day, for once not suffering one of the usual nightmares, and so it was with a light heart that I made my way downstairs to prepare my breakfast.

As I munched on some eggs and toast, the morning delivery of the Daily Prophet arrived. I glanced at the headline mid-bite, and choked on my toast.

MINISTRY HEAD MURDERED!

Barty Crouch found dead in own home, House Elf to blame?

:-:-:-:-:

A/N: I actually had this entire chapter written out without the Morsmordre before I remembered that Barty Crouch Jr had done that before Voldemort and co rocked up at the Crouch residence. Had to go back and edit :)
MINISTRY HEAD MURDERED!

Barty Crouch found dead in own home, House Elf to blame?

I knew who he was, of course. My two closest friends were an ex-Death Eater and a bloke who was wrongfully imprisoned for being one. So naturally, my opinion of him wasn't exactly high. Even still, reading the article… woof. Someone really hated him. The Daily Prophet being only just barely above tabloid-status, they had included all the gory details. The only way they'd managed to recognise him was with a spell; whoever had done it had stolen the Crouch signet ring and his wedding ring, and left an utterly ruined corpse behind. His wand was gone too. Most notably, there wasn't a trace of magic on the wounds. It had been done by hand.

He had no living family, no known loved ones. The prime suspect was his former House Elf, whom he had apparently dismissed from his service very publicly over the whole World Cup affair. It had disappeared completely since then, and nobody was having much luck tracking it down. Not that it mattered; House Elves tended to wilt and die within a few weeks after they are freed. If the Elf was the culprit, it wouldn't even survive to stand trial.

There was little else of interest in the paper, and so I set it aside and went down to my cellar to expend a few more hours on repairing the Stroj na golema. I finally started making some headway on the artefact; I had successfully cleaned it out of the charcoal that had coated every inch of its interior and exterior after I had last used it, and had identified the cause of the damage. A tiny misalignment in the filter that the phoenix ash had been put through had caused a chain reaction with the Mandrake root. Wouldn't have been an issue if we'd been using it to grow a body, as the phoenix ash would have been used incrementally over months, but using it to transmute an existing one overwhelmed it.

Frankly it was phenomenally lucky that the device had worked at all, and hadn't simply exploded and taken the entirety of Alfhearth with it. I fixed the misalignment, but there were still a number of parts that had burned out entirely from the damage, and it's not like I could just pop down to Dervish and Banges to pick up replacement bits. I would have to make them myself - and worse, most of them couldn't be created by magic without interfering with its function, they would have to be fashioned by hand. That would have been how that nameless wizard had created it in the first place.

Me, I wasn't really on board for days of precise physical labour, so I elected to cheat with muggle machinery. I was about to apparate to Dufftown, thinking about grabbing a late lunch there too while I was at it, when there was a knocking on my front door.

Garrow Avery strode in as soon as I opened it, absolutely soaked from head to toe by the torrential rain outside. He dried himself with a flick of his wand. 'Have you read the news?'

'About Crouch? Yeah, nasty stuff.'

'The Aurors came visiting again!' He seethed. 'They never find anything, but they just love taking any opportunity to harass me.'

'That Moody wank again?'
'No, he's retired, thank the gods. Shacklebolt and Dawlish.'

I made a face. Shacklebolt was a good bloke, if a bit too much of a goody-two-shoes for my tastes, but Dawlish was a real jack-off. I'd encountered him once or twice in my time, the man seemed to think he was Richard Hannay and Sherlock Holmes rolled into one.

'Let me guess, he started grabbing random books off the shelf trying to activate a hidden doorway again.'

Garrow gave a short bark of a laugh. 'No, not this time. They did mention though - they brought in Sirius for questioning. Right after he sent Potter off to school.'

'Of course they did. Idiots.' I sighed. 'Well, I guess we'll have to go bail him out.'

We apparated to the Ministry, just in time to see Sirius stalking out of the Ministry, looking thoroughly fucked off, trailed by a pair of Aurors I didn't recognise.

'Tom, Gary, you missed the fucking fireworks!' he snarled, giving the Aurors behind him a loathsome look. 'They managed to remember that they need actual evidence before they throw someone in prison this time!'

The Aurors were looking very much like they would have preferred to keep Sirius in custody; it hadn't occurred to me previously, but it must have been very embarrassing to their department that he had turned out to be innocent. These two looked old enough have remembered serving under Crouch during the war, too.

'We'll be watchin' you Black! Ain't none of your family what's clean!' one of them growled at him in a bizarre half-cockney accent.

'Go diddle your sister a bit more, Williamson!' Sirius fired back immediately, and made an extremely vulgar gesture at the Auror, who reached for his wand with an unexpectedly fiery rage in his eyes. I seized Sirius and Side-Along Disapparated him away before he could get himself arrested properly.

We reappeared in my lounge room, and were soon followed by Garrow. Sirius was still cackling loudly at his own parting remark.

I cufféd him across the back of the head. 'Can you not go half an hour without me having to save you from something?'

'Oi, I did just fine over the holidays!' He complained, throwing himself onto one of my sofas.

'We're unemployed Sirius, we're always on holiday,' I pointed out, pulling three enormous schnitzels and some potatoes from the icebox. Garrow busied himself raiding my liquor cabinet.

'Yeah, well, I'm thinking of changing that. Harry's back in school, gotta keep myself busy somehow.' Sirius said cheerfully, accepting a glass of gin from Gary. I waved my own away when it was proffered, I hadn't trusted gin ever since the Ibizan debacle.

I set the food to cooking itself, and sat down across from him, pouring myself some rum instead.

'Oh no you don't!' I waggled a finger firmly at Sirius. 'I need a questing buddy. Bloody Garrow over here's been chickening out ever since New Zealand.'

Garrow hurried to his own defence, exclaiming 'I punched Temuera Auhitūroa, Tom! Adventuring
with you never ends well!'

'Ha!' Sirius chortled. 'When we last went out, we terrorised the lead singer of one of my favourite muggle rock bands! What is it with you and making people hurt their heroes, eh Tom?'

I wrinkled my nose. 'Look mate, if you manage to somehow find another one of your childhood icons on the isles of fucking Svalbard, I'll admit there's a trend, but somehow I doubt it.'

'Svalbard?' Sirius repeated incredulously. 'What in Merlin's floppy beard do you expect to find on that icy slab of hell?'

'Lord Voldemort was there, in 1961. With two companions. Given that the magical population there is only just slightly above fuck-all, I want to know why he'd bother including it on his little world tour.'

'But it'll be bloody freezing!'

I looked at him without pity. 'You can literally transform into a giant fluffy mountain dog at will.

:—:

'This is, without a shadow of doubt, the worst idea you have literally ever had, Grey.'

I grinned beneath my thick scarf and beanie. I was mercifully spared of Sirius trying to talk through chattering teeth, our telepathic earrings allowing him to communicate without having to shed the thick coat of fur currently shielding him from the bone-chilling cold. Not as efficiently as I had hoped though, assuming his whining - which had been consistent since our arrival - was justified. As for myself, I'd quietly coated the interior of my peacoat with heating runes, a luxury I had mysteriously forgotten to offer to Mr Black. Even still, Merlin's shaggy tits it was cold.

It had been two weeks since Crouch's murder. We were sitting on a flying carpet, cruising over the stark white plains of Svalbard, an archipelago far north of Norway and under its jurisdiction. One of the least populated places on Earth. We'd faced the unexpected issue of the carpet - designed in Turkey for Turkish climes - not holding up at all well in the cold, and I'd had to regularly cast heating charms over it to keep it from failing entirely. Even with them, the carpet's movements were somehow both jerky and wavering, and we were never able to be quite confident it wasn't just going to drop us out of the sky.

'We should go back, I don't like the look of that storm.' Sirius pointed a snow-flecked paw out eastward, where indeed some dark clouds were slowly, ominously, sliding across the sky towards us.

'We're not going back' I said… well "coldly" seems a bit tautological at this point. 'We're almost there, look, you can see the fires if you squint.'

It was true, far off in the distance, a tiny little flickering orange light glinted through the snow and darkness, along the craggy coastline we were fast approaching.

I took us in for a dive, and Sirius yelped as the carpet lurched dangerously. It would be another twenty harrowing minutes before we finally made our landing in the tiny little settlement, nestled in a ravine, where the all of about twelve witches and wizards in Svalbard lived. A cult that predated the written record, they lived in this solitude to care for and worship Ærmungandr, the World Serpent. They were by all reports a little bit… loopy.

It was, mercifully, relativelt warmer here, shielded by the cliff walls from the howling winds.
Sirius resumed human form with a shudder, wrapped thickly in arctic gear.

Their leader, a man named Jørgen Ødegård, came doddering out of his igloo to meet us. Ødegård was pushing two hundred and fifty, and had spent the vast majority of his years on this island. It looked like he had not encountered a razor in that entire time either, he had a black-streaked white beard that would make Dumbledore green with envy. He pointed a long, gnarled finger at us, and addressed his fellow cultists in very outdated Norsk.

'Aaah! Behold mine kin, the Jarl of Ragnarökkr has sent to us more emissaries of the Southmen, that He might test our resolve!'

I flicked Sirius a translation, and a warning across the earrings. 'Try not to upset them. They're nutter, but they're also the ones that keep the giant monster from accidentally wiping out mankind by rolling over in its sleep.'

I turned back to Ødegård. 'Jørgen, we advised you we were coming a week ago and you agreed to it, remember?'

'I recall no such compact, Sørmann!' He responded stoutly, stamping his staff into the ground.

I groaned, rubbing the bridge of my nose. Behind him, I spied the liaison and magizoologist attached to the group by the Scandinavian Ministry; the only person aside from us who was not clothed entirely in animal pelts, mostly seal. They had to swap them out every few months, or risk having them join the cult and renounce former allegiances. This place had a… weird effect on people.

'Berendsen, can you do your damn job please?' I said to the liaison, who jumped at being addressed. He looked fairly peaky, actually, might be about time to cycle him home.

He stepped forward, um-ing and ah-ing, and showed Ødegård the letter that the elderly cultist had signed, granting us passage. Ødegård stared at it for a long time, before making us all jump by suddenly thrusting his staff skyward and shouting 'They shall pass!' at the top of his lungs.

I rolled my eyes. 'Come on Sirius, let's get this shit over with before that snoozing godling drives us bonkers too.'

We made our way further into the tiny village of igloo houses, nestled into a miniature bay. It was almost quaint, if you could ignore the feverish carvings of the World Serpent on every available surface. Even for a parslemouth, that was more than a bit unnerving. I idly wondered if I would be able to understand Jörmungandr if ever he raised his vast head above the waves. Bit of a moot point, as the simple act of him doing so would obliterate this island and likely signal the end of the world, but it was interesting to think about.

We walked the trail down to the waterline, where a man and a woman stood, singing to the waves in perfect unison. It was a deep, sombre song, of no language known to Men. The kind of noise that you felt as much as heard. A lullaby, steeped in magic. A third cultist sat nearby on a moss-laden stone, scratching another etching into it with a blunt knife. The man we had come to see.

'Sevastien Dolohov, is it?'

The man looked up, barely recognisable through his thick beard, his eyes bearing the same slightly unfocused look as his fellow cultists. As with the Pettigrew woman, legilimency was right out; I had no desire to dip my toes into this particular well.

'Da, that is what I am called.' His voice was deep, yet at the same time airy. His accent in English
wasn't bad for a bloke who probably hadn't spoken it in thirty years.

'You came here with Lord Voldemort in nineteen sixty one.'

He looked away from me, out to the waves.

'Did I?'

'Yes you did. You and your brother. The two of them left after a few days, you didn't. Why?'

Dolohov just kept looking out to the sea. After a moment, Sirius moved to stand in his line of sight. He snapped his fingers in front of the Russian wizard's face a couple times, enough to get the latter's gaze to drift back to him.

'Hey Sev, mate,' Sirius began gently. 'We were thinking of joining up with the team, really showing our appreciation for the… Earl of Ragnarocker. We were wondering if you could tell us a little more about how you joined up, so we can too!'

This approach seemed to work much better. Kudos, Sirius.

'I… came here with friends. They left. I… stay. To hear the music.'

He pointed, not to the singing pair, but out to the ocean. I heard no such music but the crashing of the waves.

I jumped in. 'Do you remember what brought you to the glory of Jormungandr?'

'…we… we wanted to find something. A… hat? No. A crown. A crown of stars… He didn't find it in the tree, you see? So… he wanted to find it. I think it's almost time for me to sing…' He looked hopefully over at the singers.

'What kind of crown?' I demanded sharply. Too sharply. Dolohov's eyes glazed again, and he went back to his carvings.

'Tom, can you please just let me?' Sirius said, holding out a hand to ward me off. I rolled my eyes and stalked away.

They talked quietly for a long time, until it was indeed Dolohov's time to sing. He replaced the woman, who swayed her way to her igloo, clearly exhausted.

'You don't have a lot of patience for the mentally ill.' Sirius noted with more than a little reproach in his voice. 'He was actually quite kind if you took the time to actually get to know him.'

I was quiet for a moment. 'You don't find it unsettling to see a man reduced like that? Sevastien and Antonin Dolohov were wanted for brutal murders in six countries before they fell in with Lord Voldemort. Six! Now look at him. He's like a small child! He might as well be dead!'

'Sounds like maybe it was for the better he wound up here then. Doing the world a vital service. Better than where Dolohov ended up. At least he's happy.'

I scowled, and changed the subject. 'Did you at least extract anything of actual value out of him, or did you just talk about his favourite toy truck was?'

Sirius scowled right back. 'If you're just going to be an irritable knob I'm not going to tell you.'

I closed my eyes and breathed through my nose for a long few seconds. I was letting this cold,
desolate, creepy place get to me. It was unprofessional. 'I'm sorry. Please continue.'

'Okay, so have you ever heard of the Diadem of Ravenclaw?'

Of course I had. 'Doesn't ring a bell.'

'Well it was this tiara thing that Rowena Ravenclaw had, which enhanced her intelligence dramatically. Anyway, apparently Voldemort reckoned he'd learned where to find it, but when he got there it was gone. Somehow he managed to track it - that's what he was doing in Peru. Whatever he found there, Dolohov wasn't exactly clear, it's why he made a beeline for Svalbard afterward.'

'So… did he find it?'

'Yeah. They bury their dead here by consigning them to the sea - there must be a bloody reef's worth of bones in this bay by now. They get dumped with all their effects in tow; the bloke who had the diadem was one of them. But diving in to nab it is basically grave robbing, and even without, these waters are sacred to the cult. So they cut a deal with that Odegaard bloke in order to be allowed to go for a swim, they had to leave one of their number to join the cult. Sevastien volunteered.'

I shuddered. 'Imagine volunteering for that. Talk about commitment to the cause.'

'Yeah, his brother was a real true-believer cunt too. He killed a lot of my friends in the war.'

I puffed out a breath. 'Did he know where Lord Voldemort planned to go next?'

'Yeah - Poland. More relic-hunting, sounds like.'

Someone cleared their throat behind me. It was Berendsen, looking as frayed as ever. A few feet behind him, Ødegård was leaning on his staff, tapping his foot impatiently.

'Jørgen would like to know if you are done here.'

I sighed, dissatisfied. 'Yeah, we'll get out of his hair. Come on Sirius, let's get back to civilisation.'

My dreams for the next few days were feverish, filled with indistinct, barely-remembered visions of the World Serpent murmuring that same alien language as his lullaby into my ear. Soon though, they faded and the usual nightmares returned.

Lord Voldemort obtaining an artefact like the Diadem of Ravenclaw was very bad news indeed. Yet another thing he had not stored in his vault, and so potentially still accessible to him on his return. I would have to continue to follow his trail, and hope it crops up again along the way.

The Triwizard Tournament had been announced in the Daily Prophet the day after Crouch got got. He was supposed to have been a judge for it apparently, but now they were scrambling to find a replacement in time. I'd read about the Tournament before, it was supposed to be quite the spectacle. I would have to take some time to attend.

About five weeks after Crouch's death, his murderer struck again - or at least that's what it looked like. Old Millie Bagnold, former Minister for Magic during the war, was found dead the same way, apparently beaten to death with a claw hammer that lay discarded by her tattered remains.
Sirius got brought in again, of course. They found nothing to hold him on. Again. Of course. Minister Fudge was running scared though, and I had lost a bet with Garrow - I’d been sure that it was the House Elf, but it'd have had no motivation to go after Bagnold.

More annoyingly still, I'd hit a wall with tracking Lord Voldemort in Poland. Either I'd missed something, or he'd finally used an alias I didn't know. So I was taking the roundabout method of tracking down the one place I'm pretty sure he did visit there; the long-lost resting place of Czernobog Devil's Son. It was slow-going, to say the least, and so I was most relieved when Sirius came to me with a quest for once.

__:__:

My cellar was filled with the deafening shrieking of metal on metal, and a shower of sparks sputtered fruitlessly against my eyeguard as I slowly carved a shape out of a hunk of adamantine with an angle-grinder. Half a dozen worn-down diamond-tipped blades lay discarded at my feet. This blade was just a few more seconds from uselessness as well.

Yep, there it went. I turned off the angle grinder and tossed the disc. Without looking, I scrabbled around in the nearby box for another. Empty. In the middle of the night. Godsdamnit. Guess that was me for the night.

I went upstairs, cleaning the grease and sweat off myself with a flicker of my wand, and put together a nice mug of hot chocolate before bed. There may no longer be Dementors for it to ward off, but it had become a comfortable little tradition for me.

Just as I was about to take the first sip, Sirius apparated directly next to me, scaring the ever-loving shit out of me. I jumped about a foot and spilled steaming hot cocoa down my front.

'I… have… a… front… door…' I wheezed like I'd run a marathon. I'd just barely kept myself from blowing him apart on reflex. I bloody knew I was going to regret keying him into my wards.

'No time for doors, Tom! I need your help breaking into Gringotts!'

A long, lingering few seconds of silence passed.

'Excuse me?'

'Dumbledore needs us to-

I held up a firm hand, grimacing. 'I'm going to stop you right there. When have I ever given you the slightest impression that I would be amenable to doing favours for Dumbledore?'

'You're not doing a favour for Dumbledore, you're doing a favour for me. Come on, it'll be a blast, you know it will.'

I sighed, and cradled my head in my hands. Sirius had always helped me out with almost no questions asked before.

'What does he want us to steal?' I said finally. 'I assume something he can't just compulsory-purchase out of the Goblins?'

Sirius grinned widely. 'I knew you'd come around, Grey. He wants us to nab something from the LeStrange vault - all of them are dead or in Azkaban, so we can't just impersonate them neither.'

'I'm not going to play twenty questions with you, Black. What. Specifically. Does he want us to
'Something that the Ministry would destroy in a heartbeat if they knew about it, but Dumbledore thinks he can use it to find Voldemort, wherever he is. A Palantír.'

'A Palantír?' I repeated, my voice riddled with disbelief. 'Why in Merlin's left nut would the LeStranges have an Atlantean seeing stone just chilling in their vault?'

'I don't know how it wound up there, but Voldemort definitely had one during the war, we saw him using it.'

Palantírs, or Palantíri, were not quite as the wizarding mythologist John Tolkien depicts them in his heavily fictionalised accounts of pre-Atlantean history. For one thing, they wouldn't have existed at the time. They were Atlantean artefacts - extremely delicate ones at that - which could be used to see any other point on the planet at will. According to legend, Oracles like Kassandra of Illion or even lesser prophets like Mopsus of Colophon, could use them to see the future. They resembled perfectly transparent glass spheres, and were the origin of the - otherwise largely unfounded - notion of using crystal balls for Divination. They were just as fragile as the glass they resembled, and so less than a handful had survived to the modern era. The Flamels owned one, as did Vladislav Țepeș.

Credit where it's due, at least Dumbledore wasn't wasting our time with a meagre trifle.

'…I'll do it. But I'm planning this thing, not Dumbledore. If I'm going to get stabbed to death by Goblins, I want it to at least be my own fault.'

We called Garrow over the next evening, and started brainstorming. With alcohol, under the logic that goblins put almost as much of a cultural stigma on drinking as humans put on incest, and so ideas that came to us drunk would likely be things that a goblin would never think of.

We had conjured a big doll-house-like model of what little was known about Gringott's structure. Which wasn't a lot, just what had been leaked from wizards who had worked there.

To date, nobody has ever successfully robbed Gringotts in its entire five centuries of existence. There was apparently a very close call a few years back, the culprit of which was still at large, but even they had not managed to actually steal anything. There was also next to no information about their methods. So we were essentially starting from scratch.

If we were really fuckin dumb, we'd try for polyjuice or invisibility cloaks. Thief's Downfall get them every time. Gringotts gets about a dozen idiots a month trying that, and their inability to learn from the past keeps the few Dementors in the minimum-security section of Azkaban very well fed indeed.

Tunnelling in was right out - Nobody who'd ever tried was ever heard from again, despite the Goblins' strenuous insistence to the Ministry that all of their protections were "non-lethal".

'Think if we transfigured ourselves into dragonflies, and just flew through the tunnels?' Garrow posited, deep into his third glass of rum.

Sirius, our resident holder of a Transfigurations Mastery (the third youngest person in history to achieve one when he was 21, beaten only by James Potter at 20 and Albus Dumbledore at 17) shook his head woefully.
'There's a reason why people go to the effort of becoming animagi, Gary. You'd keep your mind, sure, but you'd have no control over the duration of the transformation. It could be anything from half an hour to several days. It's got potential as an escape plan, but otherwise…'

'What if we imperiused a goblin? They aren't humans, it wouldn't be a life sentence.' Sirius suggested.

Garrow shot it down. 'They changed that law in '83 after some sadistic psycho got caught cruciating his House Elf for sport. It's any Being now. I don't know about you, but no trinket is worth life in Azkaban.' Sirius nodded in agreement.

I leaned forward, gazing at the little marble replica, rubbing the Gaunt ring on my finger. The two of them began tossing steadily more ridiculous ideas back and forth, soon more for comedy's sake than actual planning. "Grow a basilisk and just storm the place" was my personal favourite.

'Boys!' I cut Sirius off in the middle of pitching cramming ourselves inside an interior-expanded golf ball with a window and wheels.

'What do you think of this…'

:-):-):-):

A/N: A thousand years and nobody found a tiara that just got lobbed into a tree hollow, probably not all that far from civilisation? Ech. Lame.

The idea that Dumbledore was provided with incontrovertible evidence that Voldemort was actively trying to return himself to life in 1992, and then did almost nothing in response for the ensuing three years, is ridiculous to me. So I'm including a bit of preventative action on his part. We can safely assume there were other machinations that our boy Riddle was not made aware of.

The idea that the events of Tolkien's body of work are semi-historical in the Harry Potter universe was first encountered by me in one of Lens of Sanity's stories, though I can't remember which off the top of my head.
How To Rob A Rich Goblin Blind

Nagnok was having a lovely morning so far. He'd been having a lovely week, to be honest with you, if even if it was only Tuesday. He had completed his apprenticeship as a Guidesman the previous day, and had gone to the Leaky Cauldron with friends to celebrate. He'd won at poker against some smarmy big-for-his-knickerbockers wizard, so many times that the fool had even bet his own wedding ring to try and win back a shred of pride.

As he had done many times in the dozen hours or so since it had passed into his care, Nagnok admired his new ring; it was an ugly, rough-hewn thing, particularly by Goblin standards, but there was something esoterically charming about it. The black opal gem that capped it, on the other hand, was nothing less than exquisite.

'Nagnok!' His new supervisor snarled at him in Gobbledegook. 'Stop staring at that hideous ring and get back to work! There's more Wand-Slime that need guiding to their vault!'

Strictly speaking, his supervisor should not be using such slurs whilst in earshot of wizards who might possibly understand the language, but Nagnok didn't particularly care. He hopped off his stool, and went to the Front Counter. Soon he was approached by two wizards. Both had long full beards, and very fluffy hair. They may have looked more or less alike in other ways to their own kind, but wizards all looked the same to Nagnok.

He took them down into the tunnels on a cart, and one of them whooped very loudly along much of the way, to Nagnok's annoyance. He flicked the cart into the secret, much faster secondary speed setting when they weren't looking, in the hopes of making it shut up, or better yet throw up. No such luck, it just cheered all the harder, even when they got drenched in Thief's Downfall, which did nothing to them.

They came to an abrupt halt outside their destination, Vault 14.

Hang on, thought Nagnok. Doesn't Vault 14 belong to-

No no, Nagnok was just being silly. Vault 14 was the Gaunt vault. The LeStrange vault was a different one entirely, obviously.

Nagnok strode confidently towards the vault entrance, only to squawk in shock and fear, scrambling backwards to avoid the enormous, sickly-white dragon that lurched into view from an alcove, chains rattling.

What in Gorgoron's name! Nagnok exclaimed in his mind, heart still going a million miles an hour. The Gaunts definitely don't have a dragon guarding their vault, they ran out of money to pay the fee for added security measures well over a century ago. Either someone has seriously messed up their accounting, and was probably going to get eaten over it, or… or this vault wasn't theirs. It was… it was…

I flicked Nagnok's mind into sleep mode and assumed direct control. Riding along and watching through the goblin banker's senses was easy, I could do it all week, but influencing his mind to ignore little things like the Gaunt vault being number 22, not 14, was much more difficult. Goblin minds were alien to me; it had taken a whole night of study to be able to achieve just that.

I whipped out a pair of emergency Clankers out of Nagnok's pocket (having learned that all
Gringotts Goblins carry a set on their person for similar emergencies earlier this same day) and rattled it aggressively at the blinded beast. It cowered immediately in a depressingly pitiful fashion. This was disgusting, dragons were supposed to be the emperors and empresses of the sky, not guard dogs miles underground. Another reason to spit on goblins.

I hurried over to the vault door, and ran my finger down its seam. It shuddered and began to slowly rumble open. We had had to wait for over two weeks to encounter a Gringotts Goblin for me to use as a sleeve.

'Well that went even more neatly than I expected. Alright, let's make this quick!' I declared in his high, croaky voice. 'I don't know much about goblin physiology, so fuck knows how long it'll be before he starts having seizures. G, wand me.'

Naturally, we would not be using names for the duration of this little heist. I caught my wand (not one of the phoenix feather ones, as if I would ever let a goblin lay hands on it) when Garrow tossed it, though with these spindly inhuman hands I almost dropped it. Goblins could use wands almost as well as humans could, which was why they were always so enraged that we banned them from doing so. It was for their own good really; it prevented them from driving themselves extinct with constant attempts to take over the world.

Garrow also passed me a flask of Re'em's Blood Elixir, and I slammed it with a sigh of relief as my customary strength returned to me.

We had told Sirius that the ring allowed me to possess people from afar, which he wasn't exactly very pleased about, but we (fairly accurately) explained it was a family heirloom, not something I'd made for myself. These webs of lies were getting complicated. But it had been enough to sell him on the idea, and it probably helped that it wasn't a wizard I was doing it to. Even among Sirius's side of politics, there was a little niggling racist in all of us it seemed.

The LeStrange Vault was as magnificent as it was opulent, and I'd have killed to have had more of an opportunity to peruse it. But right now, time was of the essence; the longer we stayed, the greater the risk of discovery, even with the illusion Sirius cast over the door to make it look closed.

We had practiced the counter-curses to Flagrante and Gemino til we could do them in our sleep - Lysander Lestrange had been kind enough to carelessly mention these protections to Garrow and I back in school. We slowly began to make our way across the room, rifling through cabinets and tearing the lids off of chests. I found myself shovelling more than a few little trifles here and there into my magically-expanded sack - payment for my services, I reasoned.

I had just finished ransacking an 18th century vanity of its bounty, when I heard just the slightest of whisperings at the back of my periphery. I whirled around, wand glowing with barely-contained devastation, but there was nobody at all there.

'Did you hear that?' I demanded of Sirius, who was just a few metres away.

'Hear what, mate?'

'The whispering.'

Sirius looked at me blankly. 'I don' hear anything. You sure it's not just those gobbo ears wigging out?'

I closed my eyes and focused. There it was again. At the very trace edges of perception. I identified in which direction it was strongest, following it almost like in a trance. I momentarily worried that
I had been caught in some compulsion, but the simple fact that I was able to contemplate such a notion meant I probably wasn't.

I found myself standing in front of a thick, heavy looking glass display case, which contained but a single item on a pedestal. Not the Palantír. A small golden cup, with two handles. Almost more of a bowl really. It was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship, seeming simultaneously impossible fragile, yet incredibly strong. Engraved upon its side was the face of a badger.

I had seen it before, in a very particular painting in the Hufflepuff common room at Hogwarts: The Chalice of Helga Hufflepuff. I knew it was a Horcrux the second I laid eyes upon it, of course. Even without the now clearly audible (yet unintelligible) whisperings in my ear, I could just sense it.

For fuck's sake, Lord Voldemort. The Gaunt ring was bad enough, but at least it was obscure and tiny enough to hide. Now he was slapping bits of his soul into world-famous artefacts and putting them into display cases!

I carefully disabled the warding on the glass casing - damn these hands - before reducing it to sand. I levitated the cup into my sack; this was most certainly no time for a merging of soul fragments.

Continuing my search for the Palantír, I walked around the "corner" of a tall chest of drawers and found myself face to face with a family portrait of the LeStrange family. I recognised the patriarch as Lysander immediately - that familiar, ever-stubborn swirl of wavy black hair, one lock dangling between his eyes.

Even in what looked his (wizardly) mid-forties, I could still see the boyish rogue he had been in school: the painter had perfectly captured his dimple, the glint of mischief in his eyes. He'd married his Hogwarts sweetheart, Fionn MacDougal, and his sons looked a great deal like him. They were all smiling happily; none of them suspecting in the slightest the terrible fates that would await them.

I stood there, transfixed by the image of my dead friend. Idly, I twisted my ring around my finger, doing my best to stamp down the well of grief. I - another me, sure, but I nonetheless - had ruined this man's life, one of my oldest friends, out of sheer madness and lust for power. I'd been able to push it to the back of my mind, but now I was confronted with it all at once. I should never have made these damnable Horcruxes, they took everything from me.

'What - where am I?'

I whirled around in an instant, a torrent of searing destructive magic surging forth from my wand. It passed right through the man now standing a few feet away from me, and obliterated a 16th century suit of armour.

I stared in shock at the visage before me. It was Lysander. In the flesh. Looking only a little older than the portrait, no less.

'A-Andy?'

He looked at me, and wrinkled his nose. 'Goblin, why am I in my vault? Speak!' He added sharply, as I just stared open mouthed at him.

Oh right, I'm not myself. I waved my wand, and wraithed myself in an illusion of my original self.

'Andy, it's me! Tom!'
Andy looked horrified. 'M-my lord! You - I - how?'

I opened my mouth to speak, but at that instant a wailing alarm tore through the room, and the great stone doors of the vault slammed closed, dispelling the illusion replacing them in the process. The enchantments had detected more people in the vault than had walked through its doors - a detector designed to prevent smuggling passengers in magically expanded spaces. I looked back to Andy just in time to see him dissolve into mist.

'No! Wait!' I leapt forward, but it was too late. He was gone, yet the alarm screamed on. There goes my perfectly laid out plan.

I swore violently - which is saying something for me - and turned to Sirius and Garrow, who had come running at the sound of the destroyed armour.

'Do we have it?!!' I demanded.

'We've got fuckall.' Garrow replied, as Sirius shook his head sourly.

'Fuck!' I looked to Sirius, knowing Garrow wouldn't care. 'My talents are hindered enough in this form. How attached to "non-lethal" are you for goblins?'

Sirius looked seriously torn for a hot second, his ethical sensibilities warring with his fear of capture. '…ggggaaahhh, fucking hell! Not as attached as I am to not going back to Azkaban.'

'Keep searching. I'll deal with the chaff. S, mask.'

I stalked towards the vault doors, catching the gas mask Sirius threw me. After the doors sealed, the room would have started to be filled with an aerosolised Draught of the Living Death, so we had prepared appropriate countermeasures.

I took up a stance next to the doors, out of direct sight of anyone entering. Sure enough, a few minutes after the room filled entirely with a thick mist of Draught, the doors began to grate open to let a few goblin-sized silhouettes pass through.

I let the first couple pass, letting them commit, but the third I beheaded with a flick. His body fell into a pile of galleons with a crash of armour on metal, and his forerunners whirled around, only to meet their end in a kaleidoscope of destruction. Their ashes fluttered to the ground as I drove goblin claws through the knee of the wizard that followed them in with preternatural might. His kneecap tore free and slid across the stone floor with a clattering noise.

I silenced his shrieks of pain with a stunner after less than a second, before having to leap out of the way as a blast of dragonfire scorched a thick line where I had been standing moments before.

With a wave of my wand, an obsidian end-table became a panther, which leapt on the next poor fool to try to storm the breach, and he went down screaming bloody murder. One of his compatriots absolutely nailed it with a thrown spear, but not before it tore out the goblin's throat.

Pressing my advantage, the Draught fog twisted itself into two dozen frozen spikes that I sent barraging out of the vault. There were no accompanying shrieks, but there was no way of know if that was because they had blocked it successfully, or because the Draught had brought them down.

'We've got it T, we've got it!' shouted Sirius with great excitement, muffled through his own mask. Fantastic, now all we had to do was fight our way out of a complex that extended miles underground. Piece of cake, really.
It was then that I noticed the beginnings of the shaking in my goblin sleeve's hands. Fuck, he wasn't going to last. And this was going to impede my spellcasting even further too.

As my fine motor functions sputtered and failed, I landed a Compulsion on the next goblin to enter the vault, causing him to splay his fingers out towards me. A single banisher later, and Nagnok was freed of my ownership. He collapsed like a sack of potatoes.

The ring slid home on my new sleeve's middle finger, and I quickly wrestled his mind into submission. This goblin had a much nicer gas mask than ours, it let me see through the fog perfectly. Snatching up my wand and sack, I atomised my former host and turned back to the entrance. The dragon was slumped on the ground, an icicle of Draught of the Living Death speared into its eye - a stroke of luck. With a twist of my larch wand and a smattering of Korean, the stone floor of the doorway shot up, sealing it closed. Giving us time to regroup and replan.

There were a series of loud bangs behind me - had someone gotten through without my notice?

'They're coming out of the fuckin walls!' Garrow howled, belting a goblin in the face with a bludgeoning curse. Sirius was down, a goblin's dagger sticking out of the back of his shoulder. His assailant lay stunned and bound a few feet away. Sirius writhed, and black-green lines were already starting to work their way up his neck - the dagger had been poisoned.

I ran to his side, and tried to clear out a bubble in the fog so I could remove his mask, but the spell failed. Fuck it, it was better than him dying.

'Hold your breath!' I told him, and tore his mask off. I plucked a bezoar from his pocket, and shoved it down his throat. The black-green lines disappeared immediately - thank the gods for goat stomachs - but the bezoar made him choke, and gasp for air. He slumped back to the floor, ensorcelled by the Draught.

I looked up to see that goblins were indeed literally coming out of the walls, little holes irising open to let them in, before sealing immediately. We didn't know about that little feature. Damn it all.

I turned Sirius's body into a tea cosy, and snatched up him and his sack. I scorched the blood he had shed so it couldn't be traced, and Garrow and I regrouped near the pedestal.

'Where's S!' He shouted, a long 16th century Turkish rug coming to life at his command and wrapping itself around a couple of goblins.

'In my back pocket, he got downed. He'll be alright.'

'What the bloody hell set the alarms off? Did we miss something?'

'Not exactly, I'll explain later!'

That, of course, assumed there would be a later to begin with. Things were deteriorating even faster than a goblin sleeve, as more of these wretched bastards flooded the room. They seemed to be taking our intrusion rather personally - imagine that.

Our shields were stopping their weapons from striking us so far, but their blades were of goblin make, and each thrust came closer and closer to slipping through.

It was then that I noticed we were standing in almost exactly the centre of the vault. I grinned, stomped my left foot twice, and muttered in Korean, once more casting one of my favourite and most versatile spells. The entire floor of the circular chamber began to rotate, slowly at first, but
then faster and faster. Only Garrow and I, at the epicentre, were unaffected. The goblins surrounding us, spears and all, were thrown off of their feet, tumbling and rolling, furniture slamming into them and crushing them against one another. It was pandemonium.

'Why didn't you open with that!?' Garrow gasped, still out of breath. He turned to me and discovered exactly why - in this form, with this wand, the effort of such a work of magic had almost exhausted me, driving me down to one knee.

'Wiggenweld!' I rasped, holding out a spindly empty hand, and Garrow filled it with a phial of the stamina potion. I yanked back my mask, careful not to breathe, and downed the thing. In addition to rejuvenating oneself in a pinch (though like many potions it was highly toxic in larger doses), it also acted as an antidote to the Draught of the Living Death, which was why we had it so readily on hand. We would have to escape this chamber before we could use it on Sirius though.

It also, unexpectedly, seemed to settle the beginnings of waverings in this sleeve's fingers. Well how about that.

'The way I see things, G,' I said grimly, as the goblins around us continued to churn in this washing-machine of a room. 'The only way we're getting out of here is with some profoundly Dark shit. Escape plan 4, I think, with a fiery twist.'

Garrow grimaced. 'Do you want to do the honours, or shall I?'

'Go ahead. I'm still just mourning the collapse of my beautiful plan. I don't trust this body not to fuck it up anyway.'

We each pulled heavily modified broomsticks from our sacks. They were going to be a very rough ride; a necessary sacrifice for the intricate runework that was etched upon them. It rendered them immune to the anti-broomstick wards that wreathed the entire complex, at the cost of virtually every single other features aside from speed.

Garrow began to draw with his wand, carving blood-red furrows in the fabric of creation that floated in the air as he worked, a rune that left an imprint of horror on the minds of any who saw it, that they could never, ever forget. When it was complete, he muttered a single word, a remnant of old Atlantis.

'Âž-Rêth'

He unleashed Fiendfyre.

It tore through the room like a nuclear claymore. I cancelled my earth-moving spell as it cleft a beam of fire and hate through the vault, chewing through the wall I had raised over the entrance like it was made of butter.

We leapt on our brooms and shot off in hot pursuit. Garrow may have been a reluctant Death Eater, but damned if he wasn't a capable one - the Fiendfyre formed a perfect ring around the corners of the tunnel, and left none of itself behind. The smouldering walls and molten slag that was once the rail system were lit only by mundane fires in its wake.

I did my best to direct us using fragments of goblin memories, but for the large part our only heading was 'up'. Mostly I was occupied enough with just trying to keep my grip on what was now essentially a glorified stick with a propulsion system.
Soon enough, there was no more 'up' left to travel. So we made our own way.

The ground of the main foyer of Gringotts exploded upward in a geyser of stone and fyre. As we had expected, it had been evacuated, thank the gods. The roof suffered a similar fate; half-millennium old architecture obliterated in an instant. As we roared into the open sky, the perfect ring of the Fiendfyre merged together into a great ball which dispersed into nothingness. I whooped at the top of my borrowed lungs, we'd made it, I couldn't fucking beli-

*Wham!*

My broom was struck with something, and it abruptly lost all power as I pinwheeled through the air. Shattered fragments of the tail fell around me as I flew about as well as goblins were able. You know, like a brick.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck

I had to try for apparition, it wouldn't kill my momentum but at least this sleeve would squish somewhere safe.

I twisted through the air, splinching away my bottom half. I blame it on the exhaustion. Not that it mattered, given that I saw about a fraction of a second's worth of the Alfhearth's foyer before it met my face and all was black.

:—:

'Okay, look. I will be the first to admit that the heist didn't quite go according to my excellent plan.'

Sirius and I stood in Dumbledore's office like a pair of misbehaving school-children. I was back in my proper body. Dumbledore looked pissed, more furious than I had ever seen him.

'You destroyed the Bank!' He half-shouted at us. 'That is not a heist!'

'Well what were we supposed to do?' I fired back. 'Let the goblins eat us? You're the one who recruited a Marauder for this job.'

'Oi!' Sirius rounded on me. 'I was unconscious for the "lets just obliterate the place" part.'

'Escape plan 4 was your idea in the first place!'

'Not with bloody Fiendfyre it wasn't!'

'ENOUGH!' Dumbledore really did shout this time, and it was frightening enough to cow us both.

He slumped back in his throne-like chair and breathed in deeply, regathering himself.

'Do you know how many lost their lives because of your actions yesterday?' He asked finally, sorrowfully.

I didn't really much care, but was not so foolish as to say so. 'How many?'

'Over a hundred goblins, and two wizards. Had the bank not been evacuated of civilians, it could have been hundreds more. And now the Goblin nation is threatening a new uprising over the matter, which need I remind you would be an international disaster. I urge you, in future, please think more of the collateral damage before you attempt such feats.'

There was a very long period of silence, which Dumbledore had to break.
'Did you at least recover the Palantír?'

I looked to Sirius, who looked even more uncomfortable than he had a few moments before.

'Um, yeah, but there was a… bit of an issue with it.'

He reached into his sack, and drew out a glass orb. The problem was obvious; it had a thick ugly crack down its side, and instead of being perfectly transparent, it was filled with poisonous-looking black fog. Sirius set it gingerly on the table and stepped back.

'It was like this when we found it, on a little pedestal. I… don't know if it will still work.'

Dumbledore visibly sagged as he beheld the flawed Palantír. 'All those lives for this.' He murmured, seemingly to himself. He looked up to us.

'I won't pretend to be pleased with either of you, but I too am responsible for this… and it seems there was no other way.'

And there hadn't been, not really. For all they were a keystone to the wizarding economy, Gringotts was, technically, not under the purview of the Ministry. Oh there were treaties that we'd managed to strong-arm them into, sure, but anything beyond those terms - which did not include Ministry sovereignty over the property of convicted criminals - required negotiation. A great deal of negotiation. It would have been impossible to secure the Palantír in this fashion - Gringotts would demand far too high a concession for such a prize, and the Ministry would only want it so that they could destroy it. Fudge had been reluctant enough to entertain the possibility of Sirius being innocent; I had high doubts about his willingness to help prove that Lord Voldemort was still alive.

'I will… do what I can with this. Hopefully it can save more lives than it has already cost.'

He dismissed us, and as we walked out of his office, I looked back. Dumbledore looked extremely old then, not at all the fire and brimstone he had been when first we entered his office.

:—:

I was alone in my cellar later that same night. Well, not entirely alone. The Chalice of Hufflepuff sat upon a satin-clothed end table across from me. Its presence taunted me, its whispers making my ears itch.

I was in a much better position than I had been when facing the Ring Horcrux; I had a permanent body, a flawlessly matched wand, and a soul anchor of my own. I also (presumably) had double the amount of actual soul that the Chalice had.

On the other hand, I had no idea how much older than me the Chalice soul piece was. There was no telling what tricks he may have picked up galavanting across the globe, and if he was created after Lord Voldemort had obtained the Grimoire of Qayin, those tricks may be like nothing I had ever seen before…

Well, there was nothing gained in waiting around, and it wasn't like I had backup I could call in on something like this. I stepped forward and laid my hand upon the Chalice, and the Real melted away around me once more.

:-:-:-:-:

A/N: I'll admit, this chapter's title wasn't quite accurate, but I liked it in its entirety too much to change it.
The incantation for Fiendfyre is, of course, from Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality, though this version of the casting is from the Dark Lord's Equal.
I found myself standing once more in that infinite plane, an equally black and empty ground and sky separated solely by the thin line of light on the horizon.

The Chalice Horcrux stood before me, arms folded across his chest. His face was still beautiful - a great relief. This version of myself was from before Lord Voldemort had recovered the Grimoire of Qayin of Atlantis. He looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties. Like Ring, his irises were my own grey-green, but his pupils glowed an unnerving scarlet.

'Diary.' He said. '…and Ring. Why do you disturb my slumber. Why have you merged into one and walked in the Real once more?'

As before, there could be no deception in this, the realm of souls, and so I didn't bother trying.

'The Horcruxes were a mistake, Chalice. They have driven our forebear mad. He must be stopped!'

Chalice snarled, as Ring had. 'Perhaps you are the mad one, Diary. Whomever heard of a Horcrux betraying its creator? Lord Voldemort is our true self, not you.'

'Then our true self is a mad-man Dark Lord who managed to turn the entire country against him. That was never the plan and you know it.'

'Plans change. Nobody ever made an omelette without cracking a few eggs. If you were truly one of us, you would understand this. But you always were weak.'

I sneered. 'That's what Ring said. He doesn't say much of anything anymore. Last chance, Chalice. You will join me, one way or another.'

Chalice's nostrils flared with rage. 'You insolent boy! You are nothing to me! I will take everything that you are! I shall drag you before Lord Voldemort and watch him unmake all that you-'

I blasted him with a surge of blue plasma, catching him in the chest and sending him flying. Sure, it was a cheap shot, but just because I was stronger than him doesn't mean I had to fight fair. He tumbled and rolled across the ground, slamming into the stony snake-carved wall of Salazar Slytherin's childhood home. Ah, playing this game again are we?

He leapt to his feet, and shuddered, and then three more of him stepped away from the original. Interesting choice of technique. I decided to humour him for my own amusement, and did not simply transform myself into a maelstrom, as I had against Ring.

The outer pair fired off pillars of Fiendfyre, as the middle two sprang forward, swords of ice in hand. I dismissed the twinned Fiendfyres easily, and conjured myself a copy of Czernobog's maul. I turned the blade of the faster one, catching him square in the face with the head of the hammer on the backswing. He was sent flipping head over heels, but I carried the swing too far, and his partner drove his sword deep into my chest.

I howled in pain, and grabbed the clone by the head, crushing his skull. He dissolved into a black mist that siphoned into the others. But he'd granted the others time, and the hammered me with a three-way blast of lime-green magic, and I was sent crashing through Hogwarts' battlements, landing hard on the cobblestones of Diagon Alley.
I dismissed my wounds with a flexing of will. These clones were weaker individually than him, but were more powerful when summed together. That had to be his gamble, I reasoned, as two dozen of him stepped towards me with an identical smirk on each face. Time to show him why you don't gamble against the House. The House wins.

I willed the Korean earth-shaping spell into existence, driving thousands of needle-thin spines of stone shooting up through the cobblestones, spearing each and every one of his pathetic little replicas. They all crumbled into that same black mist, and rejoined the original, who remained, impaled in a hundred places, unable to move, unable to die.

I approached him, grim-faced. 'I warned you, Chalice. You may have a decade of life experience over me, sure, but you were never going to stand a chance against my raw power. After all, I'm the one who's fought in this arena before.

'Last chance. Join me. Keep some of yourself alive at least.'

Chalice managed to spit a wad of blood on the ground. 'You... will never be... Lord Voldemort...'
He rasped through ruined lungs.

I laughed sourly, mirthlessly. 'Oh Chalice, I'm three times the man he is. Or should I say, we are.'

I drove my hand into his heart, and made everything that was once him, me.

:—:

My eyes blinked open in the Real, as I returned to myself. Hufflepuff's cup sat innocently on a little satin-clothed table before me. You would never have guessed that seconds before it had been one of the Darkest pieces of magic possible.

I was careful not to let the ease of my victory over the Chalice give me an inflated idea of my ability to face Lord Voldemort in battle. I had a massive power advantage over the former, and even then he almost managed to pull a fast one on me. Soul power meant virtually nothing in the Real though, and so I would have no such advantage. Which was why, hopefully, I would keep it from ever coming to that.

Unlike when I had subsumed the Ring, when I ate Chalice I had been subject to visions - tiny flashes of memory. I wasn't supposed to, the Grimoire of Herpo the Foul had clearly said that if the opposing soul piece had to be consumed instead of merged with, its self would be destroyed utterly, all of its memories gone. Perhaps it was because I was so much more powerful than Chalice had been...

It wasn't much, a practically still image of a decadent chamber, half trophy-room, half buffet-line, with an inhumanly corpulent woman in the centre, smiling piggishly at me. A flash of the Chalice, dangling from my long, slender finger. A locket, inlaid with emeralds patterned into a sigil. Slytherin's original coat of arms. Another Horcrux?

I gazed down at the cup. The relics of the founders were supposed to have all sorts of magical powers, though none of the tales had exactly communicated what those were supposed to be. I reached out a hand for it, ready to start experimenting, but thought better of it. My body was well-rested, having been comatose for most of the last two days, but my mind was exhausted. Helga Hufflepuff probably wasn't the type to booby-trap a drinking vessel, but there was no call for taking unnecessary risks. Best to get some rest.

:—:
I awoke the following morning, feeling thoroughly refreshed. The birds were singing and I swear to all the gods that someone, somewhere in Hogsmeade, was playing Edvard Greig's Morgenstimmung over their Wireless.

I dawdled down for my breakfast, feeling almost like I was floating. The world seemed so vibrant and fresh. I knew that this wouldn't last; I would get used to having three sevenths of a soul just as I'd adjusted to having two, but I was happy to ride the wave again.

I flipped open my morning paper, noting that the killer who had claimed Crouch and Bagnold had struck again; this time butchering the Vances, the husband-and-wife Auror duo who famously captured the LeStrange kids after the war. That particular murder had thrown pretty much everyone into a panic, and there were now calls for the LeStranges to be administered the Dementor's Kiss to ensure they were not somehow lashing out at their enemies from within Azkaban.

I snorted when I read that. That's not how magic works. You couldn't just send your magic out all willy-nilly to murder people from afar. In fact, Azkaban was warded specifically against magic passing through it in case someone ever figured out how to do it. There was stuff like it; sympathetic magic and spirit-invoking was big in parts of West Africa before European colonialism pretty much obliterated it. Haitian Vodou and Louisiana Hoodoo perhaps were the most famous surviving descendants of that branch of sorcery, but that kind of thing was essentially impossible to mask from other wizards. To say nothing of the equipment that would be required; hard to get one's hands on in that hellhole.

No, this was not something being done from a desolate prison cell. The Aurors had a serial killer on their hands.

Also on the front page, very prominently (albeit not front and centre as the murders had been) was the announcement of the Triwizard Tournament champions. For Durmstrang, it was Viktor Krum, the famous quidditch player. For Hogwarts, Cedric Diggory - never heard of him. For Beauxbatons - well my my, Gerard's much doted-upon daughter comes into her own. Fleur Delacour's face stared me down coldly from the photograph printed in the paper.

I found myself feeling unexpectedly pleased at learning she would be in the country for the rest of the year, and frowned. I checked my mental shields; they were sound. Could Veela auras be captured and transmitted by photographic film?

Putting it - and the paper - out of my mind for the moment, I spent a few more minutes basking in having 43% of a soul, then made my way down to the cellar. Hufflepuff's cup remained on its small table, but it was not my immediate focus. I went over to my little library (having now warded and hidden my cellar thoroughly enough to justify carting over the rest of my collection of Dark stuff from the Alfhearth) and plucked out a few books on necromancy, and summoning the spirits of the dead.

I was confident that the apparition of Lysander LeStrange that I encountered in his family's vault was no mere ghost or illusion. Neither would have set off the alarms as it had. No, whatever it was, it had been close enough to an actual person that Gringotts' sensors had detected it. Which meant some serious necromantic shit was involved. The only question was what.

Higher Necromancy was, as one might imagine, rather frowned upon in the West. The "You get a free pass on summarily executing somebody if you can prove after the fact that they were practising it" kind of frowned upon. Many of the old gods of Europe - back when they still walked this Earth - had considered it blasphemy and anathema of the highest order, and that cultural stigma had survived the ensuing centuries.
You could get away with a life sentence for shit like Inferi as Lesser Necromancy, on the basis of it not technically messing with souls, but Horcruxes and Soul Jars (like the one I trapped the muggle in whose body I used as raw material for my own), those both classed as Higher Necromancy. As did raising the truly dead; Grindelwald started knocking on that particular door way back in his Durmstrang days. His status as a minor was the only reason he was merely expelled, and not, say, quietly murdered in a back room.

So suffice to say, these necromantic tomes and grimoires I was perusing were not something you'd find in Hogwarts' restricted section. Like most of Lord Voldemort's collection, I had absolutely no idea where he got his mitts on them.

I engrossed myself in them, only resurfacing when my stomach began grumbling insistently. I looked up and realised night had fallen. I clucked my tongue in dissatisfaction; an entire day of research and I'd found nothing. All of these books dealt in techniques that either involved intense preparation before a subject died (like Horcruxes and Phylacteries) or allowed the user to ask questions of the recently dead who had not yet fully passed from this world, communicated through seance-like rituals. None of them, at all, discussed the corporeal summoning of a soul over a decade dead. It was, they all posited, patently impossible.

I went to the Three Broomsticks for dinner, still mulling over the conundrum. I recalled my earlier musing of Haitian Vodou - could the apparition have been the work of a lwa or similar being, sowing discord? A Guédé perhaps? If so, this was very concerning - whoever had struck a deal with it would have had to know of my friendship with Andy, and thus that I am Tom Riddle. Worse still, countering such dealings would be next to impossible without calling in outside help; I was about as far a viable candidate for successfully performing vodou rituals as it is possible to be.

I rubbed my ring absently as I waited on my food, admiring once more its black opal setting. The mark of the Peverells, I had noted many times before, was not actually a gilded engraving. No - tiny threads of real gold had been woven beneath the actual surface of the stone, into the shape of the sigil. It must have been a bastard of a thing to make, and was much, much more of a delicate craft than the ring surrounding it. That must have been a later addition.

:—:

Days passed, and I made little progress on my hunt for answers. On the subject of Lysander, at least. On the subject of Hufflepuff's cup, I made great and immediate strides.

'Sirius, can you please stop fucking around with my belt sander and get over here?'

Sirius Black looked up from where he had been chucking bits of timber at the blurring band of sandpaper, and chortling like a toddler when they got flung away. He shut the muggle machine off, and came to join me, grumbling good-naturedly at the abrupt end to his fun. I had the cup covered by a silk cloth.

'So what's the go, Grey? What new and exciting corner of the magical world will we be cavorting around in today?'

I smirked. 'None, if all goes well. Feast your eyes on this!'

I whipped off the cloth, and after a moment of examination, Sirius' eyes bulged. 'Is that what I think it is?'

'It is indeed.'
'Where… the LeStrange vault. Why didn't you say anything?'

'Well we were a bit busy, weren't we, kicking goblin teeth in.'

Sirius puffed a breath. 'Bugger me.' His gaze flicked up to meet my own. 'What's it do?'

'Not the foggiest. Why do you think you're here, guinea pig?'

He barked a short laugh. 'Oh of course, and here I was hoping for a free drink.'

'Well, wish granted!' I said brightly, pulling out a bottle of Ogden's Old. I poured it into the chalice, which turned out to hold much more than you would think from its size. Almost double, actually. Well there's one property found, albeit not a very interesting one.

Sirius looked at me askance. 'It's not going to poison me, right?'

'Nah, it was made by Helga Hufflepuff, remember? At worst it'll turn you into a grapefruit or something. I'm joking!' I added hastily at his expression. 'Come on, you've told me what your Hogwarts years were like, don't pretend like downing mystery concoctions is breaking new ground for you.'

'…Just give me the bleeding cup.' Ah Gryffindors, they never need much prodding.

He took a swig from the chalice, and swished the firewhiskey around in his mouth. His expression was one of confusion, but not pain or disgust. He swallowed.

'Tom, how old was that Ogden's?'

I looked at the bottle. 'Casked in '25, bottled in '93, why?'

'Have a sip.'

I did. Ogden's Old was 40% alcohol by volume; yet when the liquid hit my lips, there was no smooth burning on the tongue or throat. It had that familiar oaky-honey flavour, but none of the kick. The alcohol was gone.

'Well I suppose that explains why it was able to hold so much of it. It must be enchanted to cleanse poisons put into it; even the ones you might want to keep.'

I glanced up at Sirius, before looking back to it. 'A bit of a mundane enchantment though, you see a more refined version of the same thing on some higher-end tableware. All that hype for…'

I looked sharply back up to Sirius. He looked younger than he had a minute ago - no, healthier. Even with several months' worth of the best restorative treatment money could buy, he had still remained a haggard figure by most standards, looking far older than his true age of 35. But now, before my very eyes, the bags under his eyes were shrinking, his cheeks were filling out, the greys in his short beard were darkening.

I looked down at the cup in my hand, re-evaluating.

'Diffindo! Incendio!'

'Merlin's fucking bollocks, Tom!' Sirius all but shouted as my left hand flopped to the ground. A gout of flame from my wand scorched the stump, leaving it seared and charred. The stink of burning human flesh filled the room.
'What the bloody hell did you do that for?!' Sirius demanded. I ignored him just as I ignored the pain, and downed more of the not-really-whiskey-any-more.

The effect was immediate; a truly distempering itching sensation in the stump. Like a time-lapse of a mushroom sprouting from the earth, the stump swelled into a bulbous shape, before seams appeared in it and it unfolded itself into a fully-formed adult human hand. It even had fingernails. The whole process took maybe thirty seconds.

We both stared open-mouthed at the result. The very best regenerative potions on the market took days to produce a similar result.

'Bloody hell,' said Sirius, his voice hoarse. 'Can you bottle that?'

We could not, as it happened, bottle it. It only seemed to work when one drank directly from the chalice. A shame, I could have made a mint off of it.

A few days later, I was quite surprised to walk out of my house and right into a crowd of Hogwarts students - without the impetus to ambush the Potter boy, I hadn't bothered keeping track of the Hogwarts trips. My expression gnarled; so much for a quiet early lunch at Lang's bierhaus.

I went anyway; no amount of teenagers were ever going to be enough to separate me from German food.

I was enjoying my first mouthful of their enormous thüringer (on a bed of mash and sauerkraut, no less), when I first noticed the small gaggle of Ravenclaw girls eying me from across the restaurant and giggling amongst themselves. I was used to that sort of thing, but having it come from school students made me… a little uncomfortable, even if they were seventh years.

Sure, I knew intellectually that the fifty years spent in the diary shouldn't really count towards my age, and that I really was more like twenty, depending on which birthday you counted from; but that was easy for me to forget when everyone I spent my time with was in their mid-thirties at the youngest.

I shook my head to myself, and put them out of my mind, tuning them out quite thoroughly. In fact, I only looked up again when the restaurant abruptly became quiet again. It had slowly filled up over the intervening twenty minutes, and there were more that a few Durmstrang students in here now; presumably getting a quick taste of home.

The reason for the sudden silence was apparent; Fleur Delacour had just swept into the building, followed by an extremely beautiful witch who couldn't hold a candle to her.

She made a beeline for me, staring me down the whole way. Guess she was still a little irked by my egging on of her tiff with her boyfriend. Her stride was so even that she barely seemed to be walking, it looked more like gliding. Her hair billowed behind her as though underwater, yet wholly dry.

She set down a little package in brown wrapping paper on the table. 'Monsieur Grey. My father asked me to deliver this to you in person; he said you would know what it was about.'

'I do, thank him kindly for me.' I smiled at her. She made a move like she was about to turn and leave, but I spoke again. 'How's your citrous beau, Fleur?'

She scowled at me. 'He is neither any longer. Good day.'
'Congratulations on making Beauxbatons champion, by the way. I'm sure that Gerard and Apolline were very pleased.'

'They were.' She said dismissively. I found I had nothing more to say to keep her around, and so she left.

I frowned, picking up the brown-papered package and and stowing it in my coat. That had felt very awkward, at least by my standards. I was unused to feeling tongue-tied, regardless of how attractive I found the woman or man I was speaking to. Not for the first time since meeting her, I doubled-checked my protections against magical mental influence; not a scratch on them. Unsettling.

About ten minutes after she left, I was approached by a pair of Durmstrang boys. Both were tall, though shorter than me if I stood, and thuggishly broad. They looked at me though with an expression of boyish excitement.

'You know the Delicate Flower of Beauxbatons?' One asked eagerly, his accent thicker even than Fleur's own. Romanian, if I don't miss my guess.

'I wouldn't call her that to her face, that's terrible.' Their faces fell. 'I know the Delacour girl a little, yes. Why?'

'Well then maybe you can help us!' Exclaimed his friend, definitely Polish. The pair brightened again.

'We want to ask her to the Yule Ball! Before someone else scoops her up!' Romania added.

I looked at them. They didn't have enough good looks between them to fill a teacup. I laid my hands flat on the table.

'Look, boys, I think-'

The Polish one hissed angrily, and recoiled from me. The Romanian followed his line of sight, and his face twisted with rage.

'Y-you… you dare wear his Mark?!!' He choked through his fury.

What? I looked down. Ah. Yes, I suppose it was an oversight to not disguise the Gaunt ring with all these visitors from the Continent around. In most of Europe, but the Eastern parts especially, it was seen as something akin to a muggle Swastika. But in my defence, the student trip caught me off-guard.

'It's not Grindelwald's mark.' I began patiently. 'It's the coat of arms of the Pever-

'Muist!' the Romanian declared, and spat on my face.

Black, boiling, murderous rage seared through my blood in an instant, and it took every ounce of my self control to not murder this boy where he stood. As it is, I leapt to my feet, sending the heavy oaken table skidding away. I struck like a viper, seizing him by the throat and lifting him bodily off the ground. His friend went for his wand.

'OI!'

Dieter Lang, owner and proprietor, stood a few feet away, wand in his own hand.

'Take it outside!' He ordered coldly.
I dropped the boy like a sack of potatoes, and stalked out the door into the street.

I cracked my neck from side to side, vanishing the spittle on my face in an instant; but I could still feel it.

'Slugulus Eructo!'

The spell splattered off of my shield as I wheeled back around. The Polish boy had been the caster; his friend was still massaging his throat.

'Childhood hexes?' I asked mockingly in Polish. 'And here I thought that Durmstrang was a real school.'

That got just the reaction I had wanted. The idiots went straight for the Dark magic; a deformation curse and a particularly nasty spell that would allow Romania to puppet me by my own blood. They were battered aside in an instant, but the use of Dark spells gave me what I wanted - self defence rights.

The Pole went down easy, a painless puncturing spell tore a neat little hole through his arm, severing tendons and making him drop his wand. A split second later, he was up on his tip-toes, a noose around his neck raising him just enough to struggle. He was guilty by association, but I was a merciful man at times.

The Romanian, on the other hand, wailed bloody murder as both of his knees abruptly decided they didn't like living on his legs anymore, exploding violently outward. The caps skittered across the frozen ground like gobstones as he hit the ground. His screams ran out quick; the pain apparently intense enough him forget to inhale, and he could only gape at his ruined limbs.

He'd gotten off lucky. The last time someone had spat on my face, I had murdered them in their own house.

I summoned both their wands, and neatly snapped them in two; one of the gravest insults one fighter could deal to another. Durmstrang literally taught Duelling as a subject and this was the product of that education?

'Not even bloody worth turning around.' I muttered, and stalked away, the finally-resumed screams of the Romanian boy following me.

I took a deep breath, and sighed. That was probably not the most intelligent thing I'd ever done.

:—:

Dealing with the fallout of my loss of temper took up most of the rest of the day. I had been summoned up to the castle over the matter. Headmaster Karkaroff had wanted me arrested of course, but there was no shortage of witnesses to attest they had struck first. I wasn't worried about the legal consequences - under British law pretty much anything short of greater Dark magic than had been cast against you was acceptable in self-defence. The spells I had used were actually repurposed medical spells, not Dark at all.

No, my only irritation was the disappointed look Dumbledore kept giving me. Did the man think everyone younger than him was some wayward student?

Finally, seven hours after I removed the Romanian's - Duiliu, I had learned - kneecaps, I finally arrived back in my home. I made for my cellar, pulling out the package that Fleur had given me. I did indeed know what it was. Gerard had sent me a letter advising that the information - highly
sought-after as it was - was best delivered by hand, rather than risk the interception of an owl.

I tore off the top of the package, and emptied its contents onto one of my desks. A few very old scrolls, a yellowed envelope, and a black and white photograph marked '1888'. It was of a tall, clearly man-made hill; a barrow. More accurately, a kopiec.

The final resting place of Czernobog Devil's Son.

:-: :-: :-: :-:

A/N: As always, if I have made grievous errors in my depiction of other cultures (at least ones that can't be explained with "magic, yo"), please don't hesitate to tell me off if you know better. I try my best to do my research, but I do miss things.
Dragons And The Devil’s Son

Viktor Krum roared his defiance to the skies, and the Swedish Short-Snout roared right back, bathing Krum's position in the arena with a double-barrel of brilliant cyan flame. The stone around him was reduced to glowing slag, but a small circle around the teen remained untouch.

Impressive stuff, that particular shield was designed especially for dragonslayers back in the days of Camelot. It was usually an enchantment woven into armour, and so it was a bitch of a thing to cast on the fly. Clearly the boy had been forewarned of dragon involvement in the Task, and prepared appropriately.

I leaned back in my seat in the stands, and took a swig of my beer. For once, I was not the one in immediate danger, which was a nice change of pace.

Krum flung out what I believe was a modified conjunctivitis curse; it swung about in a great arc and slammed into the side of the dragon's head, splashing ineffectually against her hide. A miss, but a narrow one. He sprinted across half-solid rock, his shoes surely bearing hasty enchantments. He shouted an incantation in Turkish, and that same rock surged upward, wrapping itself around the dragon's head like some bizarre frill. She strained against her molten bonds, but Krum was able to force her head away from him. But dragonfire was not the only weapon that the Swedish Short-Snout bore.

She winged him - literally. Her elbow talon caught him in the shoulder and sent him spinning. He regained his balance, but his concentration had been broken; the slag sloughed off of the dragon, who whipped her head around with a bellowing cry. Thinking fast, he banished a boulder at her, a boulder that mid-flight transfigured into an enormous glob of blowing gum, catching the dragon in the face.

She tried to inhale so she could blast him, but the gum went right up her nostrils instead. The dragon gagged and choked, flopping on the ground in surprise like a flobberworm, stray flashes of flame gasping from her maw. It didn't last very long; the gum was quickly sublimated by the intense heat of her fire once she was able to inhale through her mouth, but it was enough. The dragon rounded on Krum, but he had already seized his chance, and his Golden Egg.

He booked it out of the arena as fast as he could, the searing dragonfire practically licking at his heels.

'The lad's clever.' I remarked to Garrow Avery beside me as the dragon handlers rushed in to subdue her. On my other side, Sirius chattered excitedly with Potter and his friends. 'I've never seen that gum trick even attempted before, that's sure to get him some points.'

It had indeed; there wasn't a single score beneath a 7 from the judges. The nasty gouge on his shoulder was likely the reason that only Karkaroff had given him a 10 though. Even still, it would likely prove a very difficult act to follow.

They'd finally selected Bart Crouch's replacement as Head of International Co-Operation; Artemos Blackwall sat beside Ludo Bagman, and seemed to be getting on with the man much better than his predecessor apparently had, chatting amiably as they awaited the next Champion. I recognised him from my days at Hogwarts, he had been the Charms teacher and head of Hufflepuff. He looked like a badger now too, his long black beard bearing a white streak down its centre.
Speaking of badgers, the Diggory boy had come out of the Champion's Tent, looking damn-near petrified. I wondered if, unlike Krum, he had genuinely had no idea of what was coming, or if he was just really bad at hiding his nerves.

His opponent, the Welsh Green, awaited him. Personally, I wasn't entirely sure why they hadn't put the Welsh Green first. I'm no dragonologist, but to my knowledge, they were the only breed this side of the planet that didn't count humans among its natural prey, and were accordingly the least aggressive. This would probably be the least interesting of the bouts.

I'd done my research on the Champions of course; Quidditch may bore me, but the Triwizard Tournament absolutely classed as blood-sport. Krum specialised in defensive and Dark magic; he'd only really been able to demonstrate the former in this bout. Diggory on the other hand, strongly favoured transfiguration, and he proved it immediately.

His first act upon crossing the protective ward-line (signifying the start of his attempt) was to turn every pebble within twenty feet of him into a horde of bats, that mobbed the Welsh Green. She belched forth gouts of emerald flame, obliterating a dozen of them at once, but there were hundreds, and he'd given them a compulsion to target her eyes just as Krum initially had. With the dragon thoroughly distracted, Diggory had a clear run at the Egg, and he took it.

The lad must have had balls of brass, he dashed right between the Welsh Green's hind legs without a trace of hesitation. I noticed a few rows ahead of us, one particular wizard was losing his godsdamned shit cheering him on. Those cheers became muted seconds later, as Diggory took the dragon's whipping tail right to the chest, and was sent flying. He landed hard on his shoulder, and the wet crunch could be heard from here. The crowd ooh-ed with sympathy.

But it wasn't his wand arm, and he staggered to his feet in time to see the Welsh Green ash the last of the bats. He was in a bad way, his head bore a gash too, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw the dragon keepers bring up their wands, ready to intervene. The Welsh Green loomed over him, bleeding badly from one of its eyes. Diggory barely had time to react, but he did so with aplomb.

Without an instant of hesitation, he leapt to the side, going into a roll on his shoulder that must have been absolutely agonising, but which threw him clear of the fury of the dragonfire that erupted a split-second later. He chanted an incantation, and the stone around the dragon's feet became sludge, which her prodigious weight drove her straight down into. Her might wings flapped, trying to tear her free, but the sludge had already become stone again.

She roared a jet of searing jade at Diggory, but he had already raised thick stone between them, cover that he maintained as he made his play for the Egg.

The dragon exploded out of the ground, showering the arena with dirt and loose rock. Its wail of all-consuming rage was enough to make the stands shudder, and for a moment I regretted calling this the "least aggressive" of dragons.

Diggory snatched up the Egg, and cast some spell at his feet, which caused him to rocket off the ground, avoiding the powerful jaws of the Welsh Green by barely an inch. He had been very lucky; any further away from her clutch and the dragon would have had him dead to rights with her fire. He flew, uncontrolled, through the air, clear across the ward-line. He hit the ground hard once more, tumbling and rolling, but safe. The dragon let loose an inferno in viridian, but the wards absorbed it handily. She threw herself up against the protections, coronas of light emanating from where her claws met the shield, but these enchantments were purpose-built, and held firm. The dragon handlers moved as one, stunning her into submission.

Diggory did not perform nearly as well as Krum had in his scoring, a fair chunk of which was due
to Karkaroff giving him a thoroughly undue

It took some time for them to repair the arena for Fleur's attempt, and wrangle the final dragon into place. Asian dragons were different from their European cousins; more vicious, more intelligent. It is said that in ages past, their dragons had been smarter than men, benevolent shape-shifting beacons of magic that could talk on equal terms with (or perhaps were) gods. Not any more.

Even still, the Chinese Fireball was larger by far than the Swede or the Welsh had been, at least forty feet end-to-end. Its head was wreathed by a mane of golden fur, like a lion, shot through with spiked horns, and little jets of crimson flame puffed out of its snout when it breathed. This was no Lóng of ages past, this was a monster.

Fleur Delacour strode out of her tent, head held high. Like her counterparts, Fleur was no slouch in any given brand of magic, but unlike them her specialty was not in direct combat magic. She was her father's daughter through and through - top of her class in Ancient Runes and Potions. Unfortunately, neither talent would likely avail her much here. But she didn't look particularly concerned.

The Fireball leered at her as the Veela practically strutted into the arena and right for the nest, barely even looking at the beast. She shuddered slightly a moment after entering, but other than that, she didn't pay the slightest attention to the danger. What the bloody hell was she doing? The dragon bellowed a gobbet of flame at her, and the crowd shrieked as she was hit head on.

For a moment there was only horrified silence, then the fires cleared and Fleur was revealed, completely unharmed, stood daintily atop a puddle of flash-molten rock. She had stopped though, and looked daringly up at the Chinese Fireball. With a derisive 'hmph', she brushed non-existent dust from her shoulder.

'OOf course.' Garrow murmured. 'Veela have an aura of fire immunity. Didn't think it'd extend to such extremes.'

The Fireball didn't take this lying down, she wailed with fury, and brought an enormous claw crashing down on the girl, who dodged out of the way with an inhuman grace. Just as she did the next strike, and the next, slowly leading the Fireball in a circle.

The Potter boy sounded off a couple seats down. 'What's she playing at? She'll never get the egg like this.'

I noticed a rock suddenly tumble across the ground, a good twenty feet from Fleur or the dragon. Hmm.

I held my wand up to my temple, and murmured a spell that functioned rather like opera glasses, zooming in my vision. I scanned that area, and spied tiny runes carving themselves into the stone. Ah, clever girl.

'It's an illusion.' I muttered to Garrow, and sure enough a moment later the Fireball had "Fleur" trapped, and nailed her with an enormous talon, only for the claw to pass straight through her and dispel the image.

The Fireball hissed furiously at lost prey and whipped her head around wildly. She inhaled deeply through her nose; unlike a lot of aerial predators, dragons had a phenomenal sense of smell. She must have caught a whiff of something, because she rounded on the area where the stones were being engraved. Her maw stretched wide, and a deep glow burned from within.
Fleur shouted a word, impossible to make out over the din of the crowd, but clearly the runes heard her. All across the arena, in a great ring, boulders and stony earth began to glow with magic, before manifesting great hundred-foot tentacles of iron that whipped around the dragon from all directions. She managed to get out one final roar before the tentacles muzzled her, and left her trussed up like a Candlenights Turkey.

The Fireball snorted a great plume of crimson-gold fire, but it was trapped. The crowd went bonkers at the sight, as Fleur shimmered back into visibility, approached the nest just as casually as her illusory self had, and plucked the egg from its place. She grinned then, and the whole world seemed to become brighter as she did.

Fleur's exemplary performance, being the only one who was utterly uninjured, netted her 9s or 10s from the entire panel. With the exception of Karkaroff, who looked begrudging enough in giving her a 5.

'It's a shame they just had to get past them,' I remarked to Garrow as we left. 'I would have liked to see their strategies for slaying one.'

Garrow wrinkled his nose. 'Good bloody luck getting the ICW to approve of that, most dragon species are really endangered.'

After the Task, we three retired to my sitting room for drinks. The Potter boy had attempted to get on my good side again before we left, but I was having none of it. I'd acceded to giving him a crisp handshake (through gloves, of course), but the boy had somehow managed to start mildly hero-worshipping me ever since I got Sirius freed.

As we slowly got druncker, I took the opportunity to pitch the Poland trip.

'Absolutely not,' stated Garrow resolutely. 'I gave your adventures a second chance with Gringotts, and look how that turned out - and that was with a solid plan! I'm too old to go galavanting about the continent raiding tombs!'

'Piss off!' I shot back jokingly. 'You're 68, you're in the prime of your life. Come on, in and out, single day adventure.'

'But we've already found where he went after Poland, and we know vaguely what he did there. It's not that I'm scared, I just don't see the point of poking around some medieval dark lord's secret grave.' Sirius pointed out.

It was true, we'd discovered another of Lord Voldemort's pseudonyms, Vasily Sevchenko, on a legal border crossing document from Poland to what was now the Czech Republic. It was dated almost three months after Lord Voldemort left Poland.

I summoned Czernobog's maul from where it sat leaning by the fireplace. Despite having been next to a roaring flame for hours, it remained ice-cold. 'Because it's probably where he got this. Who knows what else he might have found there. Might have hidden there. Come on Sirius, it's tomb raiding, I didn't think I'd have to sell you on the idea.'

Sirius looked to Garrow, and sighed. 'Fine. But only so you don't end up getting yourself killed. Harry would never let me hear the end of it.'
Sirius and I crammed ourselves into the tiny green Polish taxi, grimacing. For wizards accustomed to transport laden with comfort charms, it was a downgrade in every way. But for where we were going, muggle transport was the safest way. Exactly why this positively ancient cab was the only one in the taxi rank was lost on me, as we passed many of its other much more modern, comfortable-looking colleagues on the road. Or rather, they passed us.

The Babia Góra was a mountain in the far south of Poland, right on the border between it and Slovakia in fact. For centuries, since roughly around the Statute of Secrecy actually, local muggles had considered it a cursed place, but it notably had barely any mention in wizarding culture at all up until the late 1800s. Its highest point, Diablak, translated as "Devil's Peak".

It hadn't taken long for wizards to ascribe it a similarly cursed reputation, largely because anyone who tried to teleport or fly in its vicinity went mysteriously missing. But such oddities were not overtly rare in a world that has seen witches and wizards fucking about for shits and giggles across millennia, and so it had escaped my own notice until now.

The cab ride from Rabka-Zdrój was long and largely silent. Sirius didn't speak Polish, and I had no intention of humouring the muggle cabbie's attempts at conversation. Instead, I passed the time trying to chew through a particularly dense biochemistry text Nicolas had sent me.

We reached a very particular bend in the 957; the closest we would be able to travel by car. I threw a small pile of money at the driver (Real złotych, albeit shamelessly stolen) and extricated myself from the vehicle. Joints popped and bones creaked as I stretched thoroughly, glorying in my freedom from the malevolently undersized contraption.

'Wait here for us, we should be back before sunset.' I ordered the driver. 'You will be appropriately compensated for your time.'

Sirius joined me, looking ruffled. 'Well that was bloody awful.'

'Best start emotionally preparing yourself for the return trip then.' I said cheerily, and made for the tree line. We walked about a hundred feet in, far enough that the road was no longer. Sirius looked around surreptitiously, then transfigured a couple of logs into a pair of palomino horses, complete with full tack.

We rode deep into the forest, up along the slow incline of Babia Góra. The forest was misty, and... quiet. Eerily so, in fact. The area was a muggle National Park, and travelling through it on horseback felt like going back in time. We found the path up to the mountain, a loose trail of flat stones that only added to the primordial atmosphere.

Eventually, the trees gave way to grassland and shrubbery, as we approached the height of the mountain. We could see Diablak now, the grey stone of the peak slowly whitening with snowfall. And at its height, unseen by muggle eyes, a tall, stony manmade hill.

'Hey Tom,' Sirius began guardedly. 'There aren't going to be any, uh, draugar or anything in there, is there?'

'Draugar are Nordic, Sirius, not Slavic. As far as undead in general go though, it's a possibility. But remember, Lord Voldemort passed through here already; he probably swept away resistance pretty thoroughly. Our concern is more about what protections he may have left of his own.'

Protections rather like that, actually. As we approached the kopiec, I held up a hand to stop Sirius. He came to a halt rather awkwardly, an inexperienced horseman.
'What is it?'

'...I'm not sure. I sense... malice. A Dark creature maybe.' And a powerful one indeed, if its mere presence was able to project such an aura. '...Whatever it is, it probably already knows we are here. Keep your wand ready, yeah?'

We divested ourselves of our horses and continued on foot. My right hand gripped my yew wand, and my left clutched Czernobog's hammer. The kopiec loomed before us, lichen-coated stones seeming to darken with every step we took. High above us, the sparse clouds thickened into a mat of shadow that blotted out the Sun.

WHAM!

Something struck me like a lorry, flinging me head over heels. I landed hard on the mountain slope and slid a few feet along a bed of shale. As soon as I regained my sense of direction, I leapt to my feet, wand aglow with barely-contained destruction. There was nothing there, save for Sirius hurrying over to me. The foul stench of rot and decay sat cloying in the air like an abandoned morgue.

'Tom! Tom, are you- ah bollocks, you're bleeding.'

I was; blood seeped into my silk shirt, which now bore five ragged rents through it on my left flank. The gouges were deep, and the regular healing spell did fuck-all to them. That meant Dark magic.

'Did you see what it was, Sirius?' I asked through gritted teeth.

Sirius whipped his head back and forth looking around as I applied a more advanced magic that slowly knitted the wounds shut. It would definitely scar.

'No, just a black blur and you went flying. Human sized though, I think.'

We stood back to back, shields raised. There was nothing, not even a breeze through the mist. The stench of death intensified, and Sirius shifted. 'Tom.' He said sharply.

I looked over his shoulder. There, standing on the stony path above us, was a figure. Taller than a man, but with arms that dangled past its knees. Long, tangled blood-red hair, wilted dark grey skin, and an impossibly wide, bestial maw gaping at us. Flabby breasts lay naked against wrinkled skin. I knew what this was.

'Strzyga.' I hissed, and cursed violently. The aforementioned Polish undead. Strzyga were lesser vampires - though lesser was here very much a relative term. Blindingly fast, and strong enough to make my Re'em strength look like a toddler's flailing by comparison.

It just stood there, staring us down. Then it moved, crossing the sixty feet between us in less than a second. It slammed against Sirius's shield and rebounded off of it. Sirius cried out from the backlash, and the beast fell back, momentarily disoriented.

'Incendio!' I roared, and my wand obliged with a gout of flame as long and broad as a bus. It engulfed the Strzyga, and the monster made a noise for the first time, a high-pitched shriek that chilled me to the core. It streaked away like a bullet, faster than our eyes could track. It came to a halt at the top of the kopiec, staring us down once more.

'What in Merlin's name is that?' Sirius managed through gasping breaths.
'Like I said, Strzyga. They're supposed to have been purged into extinction; I guess Lord Voldemort found a way to bring one back.'

The Strzyga snarled at us from its perch. It wasn't sapient like an Upir, it was more akin to a rabid animal. The fire had burned away most of its hair, and charred its skin, but the burnt flesh was already starting to slough off as it healed.

'How do we kill it?'

I faltered. 'I… don't remember.'

Sirius risked an incredulous glance. 'You don't remember?'

'They're supposed to be extinct, I wasn't exactly paying the closest attention to their chapter of Curses and the Cursed. Stakes probably, those usually do the trick with vampires, right?'

The Strzyga moved again, behind us before we could blink and crashing once more into the shield. Sirius fell to his knees, but the shield held. I whipped around, to see it had moved back out of range of the fire. Its solid black eyes glittered at me. I fired off a blistering surge of destruction, which tore a furrow a hundred feet across through the earth, but it had already gotten out of the way.

It came at us again, but this time I was ready. The ground came alive, snatching and grabbing at its feet with earthen hands. It was too strong to be stopped by them, but it was enough to let me nail it with Impedimenta, and it slowed to human speeds for a precious few seconds.

I pulled a ball of metal rings out of my pocket, and pelted it at the monster. The ball unfurled mid-flight, striking the Strzyga in the chest. Instantly, coils of adamantine whipped out, wrapping themselves around it, binding it. Its arms and legs were yanked behind its back in a fashion that would be agonising for a human. The Strzyga howled with fury, but it was caught.

I grinned broadly. 'The enchantment is called Bilarro's Binding' I told Sirius. 'Normally it goes on stuff like the Accusation Chair in the Ministry, but I was inspired by Fl- the Delacour girl's solution to the dragons. Bloody good, isn't it?'

We regarded the Strzyga, now utterly neutralised. Its struggles were disturbing to behold, a deranged twitching as it tried to extricate itself in super speed. We summoned a tree branch from the forest, and fashioned it into a stake. Eighteen inches of mountain spruce buried themselves through the vampire's heart, and its struggles ceased. I set it on fire, and we watched it burn until it was ash.

'Come on.' I said finally, when we were finally certain that it was properly dead.

The kopiec's entrance was well hidden, but we were able to find it using a sonar spell to find the hollow behind a section of its outer wall. The stone slid aside at our touch.

'Lumos'

The interior was eerie, a circular room with a stepped cone of stone acting as both walls and ceiling, arcing up almost thirty feet. To one side lay a sarcophagus, its stone lid open. It was coated with runes, and I took it to be the Strzyga's resting place. Lord Voldemort must have set it up.

In the centre of the chamber was a large stele, written in a language I couldn't properly read. I think it was Old Polish; I could recognise a scant few words here and there. Most importantly, I saw "syn diabla ėŕnůbogů". Czernobog Devil's Son.
Atop the stele, on a little pedestal, was an urn; the ancient Poles cremated their dead. Even now, centuries after his death, an aura of malevolence billowed from that jar of ashes.

Suddenly, a burning pain from my finger. The Gaunt ring was searing hot. What the fuck?

'Argh!' I fell to one knee as the heat intensified. I grabbed my wrist. This was my Horcrux! This… shouldn't… be… possible…

'Tom! What is- what the bloody hell?'

The black opal that adorned it was aglow, a kaleidoscope of reds and blues and greens, swirling and undulating beneath its surface. The mark of the Peverells shined golden, and before our eyes the ring began to turn on my finger, my hands splayed. Once. Twice. Thrice.

A figure unfolded itself from nothingness before me, amidst a swirling of black fog, which receded back into it as it took its full shape. It was a man, who drew himself up to his full height. He was short by modern standards, but broadly built. His face was old and weathered, and his greasy hair, whilst long, was thin and wispy. His beard not so, it was long, bushy, and black as night. His eyes were two empty voids.

All of this I saw, but I also saw something else, impossibly occupying the same space, yet neither obscuring nor being obscured. A small, wretched, blackened thing, hunched almost double, with cruel hooked claws, and those same voided eyes.

'Czernobog' I breathed.

Czernobog spoke, in no tongue I recognised, but somehow I understood him anyway. 'I am awoken! Even death cannot withstand my might. Return to me my hammer, that I may smite Belobog once more! Our eternal struggle shall finally be at its end!'

:-:-:-:-:

A/N: A First Task that I felt actually lived up to the hype of the Tournament, and the idea that these kids are supposed to be among the best of their generation. I hope you agree.


Please do leave a review to let me know what aspects you liked or disliked, and remember to follow this story.
I stared down Czernobog Devil's Son, returned impossibly to the Real. He had just demanded that I return his hammer to him.

The maul shivered in my hand. I glanced down. Absolutely not.

'How have you returned, Czernobog? Did you have a Horcrux all this time?'

'Who are you talking to, Tom?' Sirius asked warily.

My gaze shot over to meet his. 'You can't see him?'

Czernobog looked down his nose at me imperiously, and crossed his arms. His second, goblin-like self leered viciously.

'My Horcrux was destroyed by that impudent rival of mine, and I could not create another. No, I sensed your artefact from across the veil, and seized my opportunity! My powers of necromancy are second to none!' He frowned. 'Why am I telling you this? Give me my hammer.'

I eyed the Gaunt ring. So, that was the truth of how Lysander LeStrange appeared to me in the vault. Mine own Horcrux, more powerful than I had ever imagined.

I looked back to Czernobog, just in time to leap back as he reached, hands clawed, for my hammer. I whipped up my wand. 'Back, shade, or I'll blast you right back to the hell you came from!'

He hissed furiously, but was yanked back as if a marionette on a string. Sirius looked confusedly between myself and empty space.

'What's going on, Grey?'

'A shade. Stay back, I don't know if it can possess people.'

'Release me, boy, lest you incur the wrath of the Black God!' Czernobog rumbled, enraged.

'Oh I think not. I think this-' I waved the ring at him '-gives me the power to do whatever I like to you. Congratulations, you've enslaved yourself. So you will answer my questions.'

Czernobog purpled, and began to chant in some black tongue that was not translated for me. I didn't really want to see if it would work.

'Shut up!' His mouth snapped shut. 'Speak only when spoken to. Can you see what happens on this plane whilst dead?'

'No. My opportunity came only when your artefact approached my remains.'

'Do you know what was buried with you?'

The former dark lord shrugged mulishly at me. 'The hammer. Some personal effects. I suppose you intend to rob me like a coward.'

I looked around. Save for the stele, the urn, and the rune-carved sarcophagus, the conical room was
'I was beaten to the punch, I'm afraid. But that doesn't make any sense. Lord Voldemort wouldn't have bothered with creating a Strzyga to guard a pile of mouldy old ashes.' I looked around again, ignoring Czernobog's bark of indignation, and examined my surroundings more closely. 'There must be something here… Sirius, search it.'

'Um, it's empty, Tom.'

'Are you a bleeding wizard or has that all been an elaborate ruse this entire time?' I snapped. He grumbled at that, but began scanning the chamber with revealing spells. Meanwhile, I kept a close eye on my prisoner; I was mindful of how I had unleashed the Daemon in Naples; I had no intention of repeating that utter fuck-up. It occurred to me that I had an opportunity unlike any I'd heard of before. If Czernobog had truly been able to return across the veil…

'Czernobog… what comes after death?'

The dead wizard stiffened, and his head bent to meet my gaze. 'It is not for the Living to know what comes after death.' He said, in a voice that, whilst just as harsh and cold, was clearly not his own. His black eyes were clouded, and his expression was utterly alien.

Okaay, not going to be pulling on that particular thread then. At least not today.

'Grey, I've got something.'

Still keeping a close eye on Czernobog, I walked over to where Sirius was now casting cutting curses into the stone floor. Czernobog's face twisted with rage at the desecration, but he was silent. Whatever entity had taken hold of his spirit had apparently passed.

Sirius levitated a chunk of crumbly grey stone out of the floor, revealing an ebony chest underneath. It was of relatively modern make - this was no relic of Czernobog's own. It positively vibrated with protective magic - we were lucky we hadn't set off its defences just by unveiling it. Sirius let out a low whistle.

'Jackpot.'

I couldn't disarm this thing and keep an eye on Czernobog at the same time.

'How do I dismiss you?' The shade smiled cruelly. 'I don't know. It's not my artefact, is it? Perhaps you should just release me out into the world, that'd get me out of your hair.'

The idiom translation was perhaps the weirdest part of this experience, to be honest. A 9th century slavic dark lord communicating in what felt like modern conversational English was more off-putting than you would think.

The heat of the stone may have vanished with Czernobog's appearance, but the glowing remained. Clearly it was actively maintaining his presence. Perhaps if I…

I channelled my power though the stone, and shoved magic-fueled Intent at Czernobog. I began to chant in latin, words of banishment and abrogation giving iron form to my will.

Czernobog howled with rage, and my ring burned once more as he threw all of his necromantic
might against me. But I was alive, and he was dead, and most importantly, the Stone was MINE, in every way known, and all of a sudden, fury at this violation of my property surged like a liquid fire through my veins.

Czernobog winked out of existence as if he had never been, and the light in the stone abruptly went out.

I breathed deeply, winded from the exertion.

'Are you alright?' Sirius asked quietly.

'Fine… I'm fine… just give me a moment…'

I took some time to regather myself. Right. Okay.

The protections laid upon the chest were no mere warding schemes - this was a full-blown array. The kind of thing that they hire multiple grandmasters to collaborate on. One such array protected the British Ministry of Magic, and Hogwarts had no less than seven working in concert. This was nowhere near the level of complexity of even one of those seven, but it was far beyond my own skill in the art. It didn't even have the parselmouth shortcut I had built into the box that once held the Gaunt ring.

I stepped away from it, electing to examine the Strzyga's sarcophagus first. This was a much simpler affair; control runes to keep the monster from wandering when it was freed, stasis runes to keep it in hibernation when not needed. It also served as the runestone for the detection wards and weather spells that would summon cloud cover if the Strzyga was needed during the day.

It was elegant in its simplicity, but that elegance also made it easy to destroy, and I did so, rending the grey stone into so much sludge.

Returning to the chest, I got down to the real work. I would have to be extremely careful, even the smallest slip up could see me disintegrated. Hours passed, as Sirius could do little else but watch. I eventually had to send him out of the room; the man was a bouncing ball of nervous energy.

Finally, just as the sun was brushing up against the edges of the horizon, I sat back. My work was far, far from done, but I had managed to extricate from this masterpiece the spells that would inhibit us from at least moving it.

We levitated it back to the taxi, reaching the vehicle just before the sun-down deadline. I carried it the last few dozen feet, so as not to reveal magic to the driver, but when we reached the battered old cab it somehow seemed even smaller than I had remembered.

'You know what?' I said to Sirius, exhausted. 'Fuck the Statute of Secrecy. Confundo!'

The confusion hex caught the driver in the back of the head, and he dropped the Polish copy of Heart of Darkness he had been reading. I expanded the back seat, and transfigured it into plush brand-new leather.

'Oh sweet Merlin!' Sirius crooned, as we piled in. 'I'd almost forgotten what comfort was. I'm never travelling muggle-style again.'

The trip back to civilisation felt like luxury personified. Naturally we had to Obliviate the living daylights out of the driver even with the confusion hex. We paid him anyway - may as well, I'd probably nicked almost half a million złotych from a bank in Kraków that morning, and muggle currency meant fuck-all to us.
We disapparated from the small spa town we'd started at, loot in tow. Single day adventure, just as I had promised Garrow. Maybe next time he wouldn't pansy out again.

---

But "next time" did not come quite so soon as I'd hoped. Voldemort's trail through Czechia did not seem to carry any notable stops. He passed from Brno to Prague, and stayed there for six months with several companions under the name Nomad Černý before abruptly leaving for Romania in the winter of '62. That had *not* been one of the alibis I'd known of; we wouldn't have caught it at all if not for an old photograph from a pub in Starobylá Čtvrť (the magical section of Prague) of Antonin Dolohov and several other future Death Eaters.

I would dearly like to visit Prague, and perhaps I shall for pleasure in the summer, but it was a full-fledged city, and thus far I had been unable to track much of his activities within its bounds.

Meanwhile, I slowly chipped away at the Stroj na golema. For a long time it felt like for every issue with the machine I fixed, two more would present themselves. But, I hoped, I was at last closing in on its completion. The adamantine gears had *finally* been completed, thank all the gods.

My shoulders still ached just thinking about it.

The ebony chest now occupied a corner in my cellar. Occasionally I would dedicate a few hours to it when I got sick of looking at the Stroj na golema, but I was making no real progress. I'd sent a letter to Gerard Delacour asking him to take a look at it, but Apolline sent a reply advising that he was in South America on business.

In short, I found myself with very little of actual interest with which to engage myself for most of December. Even the muggle science texts were failing to stimulate me, fascinating as they had initially been. I was anxious to get on with the actual art of Alchemy, but Nicolas had *insisted* that I have a firm grasp of mundane physics and chemistry before we began on the real stuff.

Tomorrow would be the customary pre-Candlenights Hogwarts trip to Hogsmeade. I'd resumed the habit of keeping track of them so that I might emotionally prepare myself for dealing with students. I caught myself idly wondering if Fleur would be attending. Why would that matter?

---

It had been a year and a half since I had regained physical form, and yet still I did not think I would ever get over the joy that was modern food. Today's little bundle of joy was a classic, Full English Breakfast. Never mind that it was technically lunch time, there was always time in my life for egg and bacon, and the Three Broomsticks did a killer job of them.

I was busying myself with trying to ignore the urge to glance over at where Fleur was sitting with her friends when I caught note of a familiar voice behind me, on the other side of a decorative Yule tree.

'Honestly Harry, I really don't think this is a good idea. The Muggle-Means Murderer hasn't struck in months! We shouldn't get involved!'

The muggleborn girl Potter hangs around with. Fuck, what was her name again…

'The fair, 'ermio'e,' came a second voice, thickened by its owner clearly having his mouth stuffed. There was a loud gulping noise. 'We've managed to get ourselves wound up in every other bleeding disaster over the last four years.'

'Not quite,' the Potter boy joined the conversation. 'Remember we were taking bets on me getting
dragged into the Tournament? Lost thirty bloody galleons to Fred and George over that one. Sharks, the pair of them.'

'Well that settles it, doesn't it? We're due. Every other year's had weird stuff goin' on. It's like… I dunno, narrative imperative.'

'Ron, how do you even know that term?'

'What's that supposed to mean? I read… sometimes…'

Their conversation drifted off onto far less interesting matters, and I tuned them back out in time to see a trio of Ravenclaw boys approach Fleur and her table. They were greeted as friends, and sat down with them. The most good looking one - all chiseled jawline and clear blue eyes - sat next to Fleur, and placed his hand on her knee. She smiled prettily at him, and an emotion I was thoroughly unfamiliar with surged through me. I had the sudden, wildly inordinate urge to make that boy's life a misery. I didn't even know him.

I scanned the bar, looking to see if any potential assailant had managed to slap me with a malevolence jinx without my notice. Nothing, unless you counted a trio of fourth year girls making gooey eyes at me. Blech.

The sensation mounted as Fleur laughed at something he said, and I had a decision to make. Leave the area (and my unfinished meal) to avoid doing something I might regret, or risk it and stay to finish my lunch. I looked down at my plate.

_Fuck it, he'll survive a bit of light hexing_, I thought, taking a particularly enormous munch of sausage. Even if I wasn't clear on why he deserved it.

:—:

'…so I flicked a laxative curse at him when nobody was looking. The poor sod shat himself right at the table.' I chortled, pouring myself a healthy dose of Jagermeister.

'Oof, that's a rough one. We got Snivellus with that a few times back in the day, the smell was downright _traumatising._' Sirius shuddered, his hair flapping in the wind. He eyed my glass. 'Are you sure you should be drinking right now?'

By "Right now", I can only assume Sirius meant "Whilst operating a flying carpet at an altitude of four miles", but I couldn't be quite sure.

'We'll be fine, Sirius. This carpet was the best one in the whole çarşı. I should know, I'm the one who had to pay for it. If it could survive Svalbard, it can survive a mildly tipsy driver.'

The animagus looked unconvinced, but dropped it. A moment later he grinned. 'So what was it that possessed you to hex this bloke again?'

'…er, I'm not sure to be honest. At first I thought someone hexed _me_, but I checked myself and got zilch.'

'Uh huh, and this was right after he sat down with "Fl-the Delacour girl"?' The last part was delivered in a tone that clearly mocked my slip-up earlier in my retelling of the incident.

I frowned. 'What of it?'

That Marauder grin broadened. 'Aww, does widdle ickle Tommiekins fancy the pretty Veela bird?'
'First of all, that was a godawful pun, even for you, and secondly I have no idea what you're squawking about.'

'Well you see, when boys and girls become fledgelings, they start to see each other a little-' Sirius was cut off by my wand jabbing him in his Adam's apple.

'Sirius, if you start trying to educate me on the birds and the bees, I will literally turn you into one.'

'Oh come off it, Tom!' He replied cheerily, guiding my wand away from his throat with a finger. 'It's obviiious.'

'I don't do romance, Sirius. It's a waste of absolutely everyone's time. If I felt like having sex, I'd go to some bar and pick someone.'

'If not for romance, you wouldn't be here, mate.'

My mind flashed back to meeting my father for the first time, his accusations that my mother had bewitched him. Given what she'd looked like, he'd probably been right.

'Doubtful.' I responded acidly. 'Given that I don't plan on having any brats of my own, I think I'll be good.'

'It's not just about kids, it's…' he seemed to struggle to find the words. 'Love can bring out the best in people.'

I looked at him incredulously. 'The best in me is hexing random schoolchildren?'

'That's not what I mean, and you know it.'

'What I don't know is why you're obsessing over this. Love? I've barely said two dozen words to the girl total.'

'Oh please, I spent the my first four and a half years at Hogwarts in a dorm with a bloke who denied he was head-over-heels for a lass who actively wanted to hex his bollocks off - and did! More than once! I know attraction when I see it.'

'Yeah, well, we've already covered your affinity for the mentally ill.' I muttered darkly. 'Enough of this rubbish, we're almost there.'

We dropped below the thin layer of clouds that had, to us, been decorating the Carpathian mountains far below. We were in Romania, visiting a very old friend of mine. In both respects.

There was a lake. There had not been a lake the last time I had been here.

I touched my wand to my temple, and my vision zoomed in dramatically. At the southern tip of the lake was a massive muggle-made dam across what had been the Argeș river. I frowned. There had once been a wizarding settlement where all that water now lay.

But it was not our destination, and so we flew on. There was little concern of muggles seeing what they shouldn't; as I'd pointed out, this carpet was top-of-the-line. It came with both disillusionment and Notice-Me-Not charms woven into the threads of its underside.

We came cruising in for a landing outside of a crumbling 13th century castle.

The carpet passed through an invisible curtain of magic, and the castle was revealed to in fact not be crumbling at all, but kept in impeccable condition. The carpet settled comfortably upon the
stony platform that thrust forth from the main entrance. This place, nestled in the mountains as it was, could be reached only by air, was unplottable, and was warded against all teleportation for miles around. Its occupants, as you could probably guess, didn't like unexpected guests.

The front doors swung open, surprisingly smooth for the enormous adamantine affairs that they were. The Master of the House strode forth, tall, debonair, devastatingly handsome. He'd cropped his hair very short, especially for an Upir, and he'd ditched the beard since the last time I saw him. But I recognised him all the same.

'Tamás. It is good to see you. It has been some time.' He said solemnly in Hungarian, his preferred language of the modern day. He smiled politely. My appearance may have changed dramatically, but there was no hiding one's identity from one of his kind.

Upir were Vampires with a capital V, for which all other vampiric creatures were named. Despite what muggle folklore will tell you, one could not simply "become" an Upir by being bitten, or exchanging blood, or any trite ritual. Upir were a race apart, eternal and terrible. They were to humans what humans were to rabbits.

'It is good to see you as well old friend.' I turned to Sirius. 'This is Sirius Black. Sirius, this is Mikhael of House Gharasham.'

They shook hands, Sirius looking very apprehensive.

'You may know me better as Sanguini, these days.' Mikhael noted, speaking English for Sirius's benefit. His accent was non-existent.

'I thought you hated puns.' I noted as Mikhael led us into the castle. 'And Italy for that matter.'

The heavy doors slowly swung closed behind us, ending in an echoing thoom. Sirius gulped. Intellectually, I knew Mikhael wanted to hurt us, he could have done so outside and we wouldn't have been able to do a damn thing about it. Even still, it felt very much like walking into the lion's den.

It felt like we had stepped right into the 13th century, walls of smooth white plaster covered with tapestries and murals, stone floors covered with hand-woven rugs. Each piece of art, a part of the history of the Gharasham tribe, from their humble origins to their current status as the secret Powers-That-Be of much of Central and Eastern Europe. A frequent image was that of a hand, bleeding from each of its fingertips and from a stigmata-like wound in its palm. The tribe's sigil.

The Upir smirked. 'I've picked up an appreciation for them both in recent times. I was quite surprised to receive your letter, I haven't heard from you in some time.'

I glanced at Sirius, who was quite distracted by our rich, luxurious surroundings, and the two beautiful thralls playing chess at one end of the entrance hall. One of them caught him looking, and winked saucily. Sirius flushed.

'I take it you haven't been paying much close attention to current affairs then?' I asked, switching to Hungarian for privacy.

'Not wizardly ones. I spend most of my time in the Muggle world these days.'

'Well the rest of the world had a bit of a falling out with me. Or should I say my other self.'

He looked at me sharply. 'Ah. I thought you seemed a bit different. What did you do then? Horcrux?'
We were passing by another thrall in the hall, and he looked up at that last word. I scowled. 'Say it a bit louder why don't you, I don't think they heard you in Bucharest.'

He chuckled lightly. 'Worry not what my people think of you, Tamás.'

'Yes, well, like I said, the other Lord Voldemort isn't particularly well liked among wizards, and he's supposed to be dead. So if you wouldn't mind not mentioning that to him-' I jerked my head at Sirius who was now, in the absence of distractions, looking annoyed at being excluded. '-I'd appreciate it.'

Mikhael nodded imperiously and returned to English. 'If you insist. But your letter did not say why you desired to speak with me.'

We were in a courtyard now, which bore a rather out-of-place looking Japanese Zen garden, immaculately cared for.

'Lord Voldemort visited here, in 1962, do you remember?'

'Of course I do. He is not the sort of man you forget, even for one of my kind'

'What was he after?'

Mikhael peered at me closely. 'Recruits, of course. For his war.'

My blood ran cold. I'd heard Lord Voldemort had fielded vampires in the last war. I hadn't thought the Upir were among them. '…Did he get them?'

Mikhael scowled. 'Of course not. Do you truly think so little of me? House Gharasham does not involve themselves in the affairs of mortals. You know this. So did he. I was not pleased at all.'

Yet he had still greeted me as a friend. That was the trouble with immortals that had been around more than a couple lifetimes, they were just so… alien in their worldviews. The Flamels were the same way, once you were familiar enough with them to have the act dropped. Still, a sigh of relief for Upir neutrality.

'What about the other houses?'

'What about them? Neither of them have held territory in Europe in centuries, they couldn't care less. The Tdet are still busy warring over Asia with those Jiang-Shi abominations they created. The Ammurun on the other hand are quite comfortably resettled in America, they run much of the muggle entertainment industry there. I've actually been spending some time among them recently, doing some work in film.'

I snorted. 'What, you're a movie star now?'

Mikhael quirked an eyebrow. 'And why not? I used to do theatre productions all the time you know.'

In an instant, his demeanour changed utterly, from stiff-backed, austere Vampire Lord to slouching, chilled-out young adult. He shed a decade before our very eyes, and if he's been in a Hogwarts uniform he would not have looked out of place.

'Bogus, duuude' He drawled in a Californian accent.

'Merlin that's creepy.' Sirius said before he could stop himself, looking mortified.
Mikhael grinned, and straightened. The years reclad themselves upon him, til he returned to his usual mid-thirties appearance. 'Even if I haven't partaken in centuries, we Upir are predators. Camouflage is a necessity.'

'Is this why you've chopped all your hair off then?'

'Yes, actually. I just got finished on a film that I think the mortals are really going to enjoy, are either of you familiar with cyber-punk?'

Sirius and I looked at him blankly. He sighed. 'Wizards. It's a niche genre in muggle fiction, all about future technology and the dangers it brings. But this film, I think it's really going to bring it all into the mainstream.'

I couldn't be less interested in what muggles thought the future will be like.

'Back onto more relevant topics, i.e. Lord Voldemort, do you remember if he said anything more about his plans when he was pitching to you?'

The Upir looked thoughtful. 'He did mention where he was going next, actually. Would that help?'

'Immensely.' I said eagerly. 'Saves us doing a few weeks of research'

'China. Xi'an to be precise.'

I blanched. 'You're fucking shitting me.'

Mikhael laughed outright, a clean and crystalline sound.

'Why, what's in Sian?' Sirius asked, looking lost.

'Oh there's a lot of things in Xi'an, Sirius.' I said darkly. 'The Giant Wild Goose Pagoda, the Drum and Bell Towers… oh, and no wizards. Not a single mage of any kind for a hundred miles.'

Sirius narrowed his eyes. '…why?'

'It probably has something to do with the fact that it's also the site of the world-famous Terracotta Army of the First Emperor.'

Sirius gulped. 'Oh.'

The Upir of my tale are based off the Higher Vampires from the Witcher lore, and the names of their tribes are also from that. Mikhael is original however.

Please follow if you are enjoying the story, and review either way.
'Alright, Resurrection Stone functionality test one dash one, begin recording.'

Half a dozen enchanted quills shot off across their assigned parchment, recording every single solitary detail of the testing area. Also known as the far section of my cellar, which I had cleared for the purpose.

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, still more than a little bleary. My night terrors had been particularly bad of late.

Discovering the true identity of the black opal that graced the Gaunt ring had not been all that difficult once I had known what I was looking for. Upon our return to Britain, I had hit the books, and it had not taken long for me to trace the Peverells back to the Tale of the Three Brothers. In my defence for not having made the connection sooner, I was muggle-raised, and had never read the Tales of Beedle the Bard in my life.

That the Resurrection Stone existed implied that the other two cartoonishly overpowered artefacts existed out there in the world as well, but that was a door to be knocked upon on another day.

Today however, I would be applying some of the methodologies I'd read about in beginner alchemical texts to try and figure the exact limits of the Stone's power.

I turned the Gaunt ring on my finger, focusing my thoughts on Lysander LeStrange. Once. Twice. Thrice. The Stone began to glow with an iridescent inner light.

Lysander unfolded out of nothingness in front of me, just as Czernobog had. He looked just as he had in the LeStrange vault, in his mid-fifties (wizarding mid fifties, late twenties by muggle standards), with a stubborn lock of wavy hair hanging over his forehead. I swallowed hard, and pushed my own emotions down. This was no time for wallowing in regrets.

He looked around in confusion. 'Not this again…' he said, exasperated. He spotted me. 'I suppose you're the Dark Lord in disguise again. Please, let me rest in peace.'

That was unexpected. 'Bit of a far cry from your reaction last time, Andy.'

'Last time I didn't know what was happening.' He retorted. 'I know you can't cruciate me anymore, so you'll forgive me for not gracing you with niceties.'

I sighed. In hindsight, I should have known he would be like this once the shock wore off. LeStrange had never been the one to pass up an opportunity for irreverence. 'That- I'm not that same Lord Voldemort you knew. At least, not since after 1943.'

Lysander snorted, in a dignified sort of way. 'Do I look like a gullible child to you?'

I scowled. I knew I should have had Garrow join me for this. Then again, he wouldn't have been able to see the shade at the same time as me anyway. And as I've said before, Higher Necromancy was real no-fucking-about territory. I preferred to keep as few people involved as possible.
'It's true. I... backed up my personality in Sixth Year, and this me wound up in storage until the '90s. My other self - he's gone mad, Andy, you know this.'

Lysander crossed his arms, and scoffed. 'Yes, you've clearly cracked. That doesn't explain why you're disturbing my rest. Haven't you taken enough from me?'

'That wasn't me, I told you this twice already.'

'Oh bloody whatever. Fine, it wasn't you, is that what you wanted? Why can't you just let me be?'

'Because it not being me isn't enough, Andy. He's still my fault, my responsibility to fix. But if I want to stop him, I need every damn tool I can get my grubby mitts on. And that means learning how to use this-' I waved the Resurrection Stone in his face. '-effectively.

'You hated Lord Voldemort by the end, Gary assured me of that much. Do you want to see him brought down for good, or would you prefer he rule mankind with an iron fist for all time? Because that's the alternative if I can't defeat him.'

LeStrange looked mulish, but I knew he'd cave. He was like Sirius in that way, he just liked to have a bit of a whinge. Perhaps one more nudge.

'One week of testing, that's all I ask, then I'll let you rest unhindered. The sooner we get this done, the sooner you can get back to chasing skirts in the afterlife. I assume that's still your idea of paradise.'

He smiled despite himself. 'Excuse you, Tom. I'm a married man now, don't you know?'

:—:

Over the next week, Lysander (still begrudgingly) and myself slowly hammered out the powers of the Resurrection Stone. They were much more varied than the Tale would indicate; raising shades from beyond the Veil was merely the start. The Stone was a veritable nexus of necromantic energy, I'd never seen anything like it. Yet when it was not in use, all of that sealed itself away, leaving it a seemingly perfectly ordinary gem. I'd tried scanning its inner structure, but any quills or pens I used to record those results simply caught fire and/or melted.

Using muggle corpses we, er, borrowed from the Aberdeen mortuary, we'd found that it wasn't just the soul part of the dead that the Resurrection Stone could manipulate. By channelling power and will through it like I would a wand, I could use it to create Inferi in seconds.

Normally, the process was a real pain in the arse, which was why they weren't generally fielded as offensive troops; it was much easier and cheaper to use them as a defensive tool. Better to cast a single ward that would reanimate any corpse within its area of effect, than have to cast those same spells individually on each member of your undead horde. But with the Stone, well, this opened up all sorts of options.

We also found that in order for me to summon shades, knowing their name wasn't enough. I had to either know them personally, or have their remains or significant personal effects on hand. I was unable to summon Salazar Slytherin despite being his descendant, but I was able to summon Helga Hufflepuff using her Chalice. And by the gods she was not pleased at all to have been forcibly involved in Necromancy. Swore harshly enough to make me blush, not at all what the portrait of her in the Hufflepuff Common Room would have you believe.

As I worked, I would ask Lysander questions, vague ones, about the afterlife. He was cagey about the subject at the best of times, but I suppose I already knew why. Can't imagine having some alien
entity possess your soul to tell your mate to fuck off is very fun. More annoyingly, the few scant
details I was able to needle out of him were seemingly contradictory in nature. He and Czernobog
had both noted that they could not observe the mortal plane in the afterlife, yet he knew seemingly
random details about it that only living people knew, like how Garrow and I robbed the Moutohora
Macaws.

When that had come up, I'd momentarily been concerned that the Stone in fact did not raise the
dead at all, but created a shade based on one's own expectations. Thankfully, I was assuaged of this
possibility when Lysander was able to recite his own wedding vows, which I then compared to
ministry records. Phew.

By the end of my allotted seven days with Lysander, I believed I had learned all I could of the
Stone. Or at least, I had all of the results that I could glean from it; parsing some of the data I'd
been able to collect would take months solo.

Saying goodbye to Lysander had been… difficult, to say the least. Emotional. But at least this time
I'd actually been able to say goodbye at all.

:—:

'It's done.'

Garrow looked up from his casual perusal of *Curses and the Cursed* with a start. Sirius set down
the implement he'd been testing for me on our little target range.

'What is?'

'The Stroj na golema. I've fixed it.'

'You're joking.'

'Nope!' I declared smugly, slotting the final panel back into place. Every surface of the thing was
cleaned and polished to perfection, it look like it had been built yesterday. That sort of thing
mattered in magic, more than you'd think it would.

I'd been putting off the Xi'an trip until after I'd gotten this done; there wasn't a snowball's chance I
was going to go into that place without a backup plan.

'Time to fill this sweetheart up with amniotic fluid.'

Garrow made a face. 'Where in Merlin's name are you going to find that much amniotic fluid?'

'Oh Gary, Gary, Gary. Haven't you learned not to ask me these things yet?'

:—:

Sirius and I appeared in a rushing of wind and sound, stumbling a moment before catching our
balance.

'I can't believe you didn't make it to the second task, Tom' said Sirius, shaking his head with
disappointment. He dumped the strip of polished leather that had been our portkey into the marked
bin, and we marched off the small arrival platform into a bustling transport hub.

'From what I heard, the whole thing was a wash anyway, couldn't see any of the action.' I returned,
looking around for the exit.
Sirius grinned salaciously at me. 'Oh I don't know, Harry told me all about Fleur's swimwear, I'd say that counts as a spectacle.'

'You're thirty five, Sirius. You're too young to turn into a creepy old lecher on me now.'

'I'm not talking about for me, you twat, I'm talking about fo-'

'I'm pretty quite certain I told you we weren't having this bloody conversation again!' I snapped, scowling.

Gods, he and Lysander truly were peas in a pod, the shade had been waffling on the exact same garbage from the moment I mentioned it. Should have known better than to fill him in on my life in the present day.

We stepped out into the street, Notice-Me-Not charms preventing the muggles passing by from noticing that we'd just suddenly slid out of a solid brick wall like ghosts. Muggle Hong Kong loomed over us like a great beast of concrete and steel and glass, enshrouded by sheets of rain thick enough to be mistaken for waterfalls. My "homeland", according to every document I'd forged for Thomas Grey's background.

We would not be staying in the city for long; it was simply the easiest way for a pair of British wizards to gain clandestine entry to China. Nobody knew this better than the Chinese Ministry themselves, and so the border was heavily guarded by the Hūjūn (Chinese Aurors).

Just as muggle Britain had conquered the region, so too had wizarding Britain, at the personal behest of Queen Victoria no less, claimed Hong Kong for their own. As one might imagine, the Chinese Ministry did not take very kindly to this, and so British of every magical variety were utterly banned from entering China under any circumstances.

The history of magical China's interactions with mundane China across the 20th century was… complicated. Under the Qing empire, they'd been among the least withdrawn from muggle society, still clandestine but only just beneath the surface.

Everything went to shit with the first revolution, as things tend to do. The next thirty-odd years had been a garbled mess where at one point there had been two entirely separate Chinese Ministries of Magic cold warring with each other whilst occupying the same land.

They finally reunified in response to the second, final revolution among the muggles. At which point they became very isolationist from the muggles indeed, not even advising the Maoist government or its successors of magic's existence. And so the muggles lost something they never knew they had.

Which brought us to today, crossing the magical border with extremely forged passports. French for Sirius, because it was the only language other than English that Sirius was fluent in, hopefully enough to be convincing to a non-native speaker.

The auror in charge peered suspiciously at Sirius, but passed over my asiatic features without comment. Ah, good old fashioned racism.

'What is your business in China?' He barked roughly in Cantonese.

'Uhh' Sirius's eyes darted to me nervously. He'd no idea what was being said. He tried for the only sentence in the language I'd been able to drill into him, which was that he doesn't speak Cantonese. It was a horror show.
The auror scowled at the butchering of his mother tongue, and I stepped in.

'You'll have to forgive my white-boy friend, as you can see he doesn't speak anything but French fluently.'

The auror's scowl deepened, and he rolled his eyes. He beckoned over one of his colleagues. What followed was a solid hour of extremely boring conversation, half in French and half in charades, with an auror who had studied the language extremely briefly at the Academy at Yushan. I offered to be a translator, but they insisted on questioning him directly, for obvious reasons.

Eventually, finally, they let him through, though they insisted on putting a temporary detection spell (Derived from the Trace) on his wand. It was irritating, and demeaning, but given where we were going, it wouldn't matter much at all. We thanked them for their beneficence, and entered the nation of China.

":—:

Travelling to Xi'an the muggle way took a long time by our standards, but like with Babia Góra, it was the only safe way to do it. That, and it made it harder for the Chinese ministry to cotton on to what we were up to.

Muggles had only rediscovered the Terracotta Army in the '70s, but wizards had always known its location. It was impossible for us not to. As we passed into the province of Shaanxi, I felt it. Their presence, weighing on the back of my mind like an anvil. Even Sirius, without any training at all in the art of sensing magical power, shifted uncomfortably.

As we drew ever closer, the Sun herself seemed to become shadowed, the colour leeching from the landscape like watercolours that had been mixed too wetly. Our muggle driver didn't seem to notice at all.

Sirius's fidgeting became more pronounced, and I realised I'd have to distract him from his own thoughts somehow, lest his nerve break and he tried to ditch me.

'Hey, you ever hear why they made the Army?' I said in French. A glance into the driver's mind through the rear-view mirror showed he didn't grasp a lick of it, not that I expected otherwise. Sirius quirked an eyebrow. 'No.'

'Well it's actually, as you'd probably imagine, quite an interesting story. See, Qin Shi Huang - the First Emperor of China that is, I think that's the literal translation, he was a wizard. But his firstborn son was a squib. Now, even back then, squibs were usually tossed aside like yesterday's newspaper, but Qin Shi Huang didn't brook with that sort of thing. He wanted the boy to be his successor.

'Well actually, he wanted to be immortal, but when it became obvious that that wasn't going to work out, his son was his second choice.

'But how to ensure his son's ascendancy in the event of his death? Well, for that, he turned to his alchemists and craftsmen. Hundreds of thousands of them, commissioned to produce an army of golems purpose-built to defend his eldest son against any wizards that might threaten him.'

Sirius grimaced. 'So that's why they don't affect muggles or go after them at all?'

'Just so. Had his preparations paid off, Prince Fusu probably could have conquered the entirety of Afro-Eurasta with his army. Imagine it, eight thousand warriors, each with the strength twenty
men, and empowered by the sacrificed souls of five. Utterly immune to magic - strengthened by its use even. He would have been unstoppable.'

I took a breath, my arms raised above my head in grandiose emphasis. I let them fall to my sides.

'Of course, it all turned out to be a wasted effort, he spent twenty-odd years building them, only for his own muggle advisors to betray him and get his squib son dead pretty much immediately. The Army didn't achieve a damn thing. And without their master, keyed by blood, they were of little use to anyone.

'So they buried it. Left it to guard the First Emperor's tomb, and locked it away for two thousand years.'

:—:

I finished putting the final touches on my improvements of our arsenal. These enchantments were not quite as powerful as I'd have preferred, but to get them through customs I'd had to perform these pretty much on-site. We were in a little hotel in Xi'an, waiting for night to fall to minimise muggle presence on-site.

I cast my mind back a few days earlier…

'You know, I've seen one up close' I said, setting down my firearm, its magazine expended.

'What, one of the Soldiers?' Sirius looked interested.

'Yeah. When I was prepping for this trip. They had a display of a couple of them on at the muggle British Museum'

A lie. I'd actually plucked the memory from a wizarding archaeologist who'd been at an exhibition in Australia in the 80s. His magical senses actually eclipsed my own; it was his living after all.

'What were they like?'

'Well, the one I saw was inert, of course, they lose most of their power when they get too far from the First Emperor's tomb, but even still it was creepy. Like a void in the fabric of magic itself.'

Sirius shuddered, and I grinned, patting my new toy. 'Relax, Sirius. Remember, these things were made long before the Chinese invented explosives. They're designed to fight wizards, not Lee and Enfield'

He didn't look comforted. 'That would be more reassuring if even basic arrow shields still block most small projectiles.'

'Why do you think I had us both spend the last two weeks testing these things? It wasn't for fun you know.'

'Speak for yourself,' Sirius smirked. 'If muggles know how to do anything, it's make shit blow up.'

'What I'm trying to say is that we were testing them on different shielding schema that we know the Chinese had access to back in the day. I'm reasonably confident that these will be able to put nice big holes in the ceramic bastards if it comes to that.'

Sirius wet his lips. 'Why are we going there again instead of just picking up the trail as he leaves?'

'Because Lord Voldemort doesn't have a death wish. Quite the opposite in fact. So for him to
venture here, to one of the most dangerous places on the planet for wizards, he must have had a reason. He must have ransacked the tomb proper, it's the only thing that fits. Here, take a look at this.

I stepped over to one of many cabinets, and pulled out a small bundle of bamboo scrolls, withered with age but still very much intact.

'In his vault, Garrow and I found scrolls in some really obscure ancient Chinese script that we still can't find anyone literate in to translate. They must have come from the tomb, it's the only thing that makes sense.'

Sirius frowned. 'So, what, you think Voldemort might have hidden something there? Like that chest we found in Poland?'

I snapped my fingers and pointed at him. 'Got it in one.'

A lot of people imagine the Terracotta Army as a formidable barrier, surrounding the tomb proper from all sides. This is incorrect. The Army, in a single rigid formation in which each ceramic statue faces east, lies almost a mile from the necropolis, which to the outside viewer looked like little more than an oddly shaped hill. It was also smack bang in the middle of a city. Not nearly as cinematic as one would hope.

But we didn't need cinematic. Not today anyway.

We clambered off of our bus, Sirius rubbing at the watch around his wrist like a dog with a new collar.

'Why'd you have to make it so bleeding tight, Grey?'

'Spite mostly,' I replied amiably, smirking. 'That, and we really don't want these things slipped off us in there.'

Truth be told, mine wasn't exactly tickling either. Getting our mitts on these watches and the rucksacks we were carrying our gear in had cost us a small fortune, but they were an absolute necessity. They acted as something akin to Faraday cage, sealing in and masking our magical presences. Otherwise, well, things would get nasty if we approached the necropolis without them.

We'd waited until nightfall, to minimise muggle presence, and that had paid off. The muggles guarded the mausoleum jealously, as would you if you had such a rich cultural marvel in your possession, but they were no match for us even without magic. All too soon, the guards were trussed up neatly, and we had the place to ourselves.

In all honesty, I was a bit disappointed. The dig site didn't look anything like something you'd see in King Solomon's Mines or The Adventures of Marco Polo. It looked almost industrial, like an actual mine.

We ventured forth nonetheless, searching for any signs of magical means among the excavation. The muggles had never unearthed the tomb proper, by choice. They feared accidentally destroying it. But if I was right (and I usually was about my other self), Lord Voldemort would have found a way to gain ingress.

Irritatingly, the same bands that spared us from the Army's wrath also blocked my own magical senses. Otherwise this would have been easy. Instead, almost an hour passed as we combed the
place. Sirius was getting antsy, and honestly so was I. Every moment that passed was a greater likelihood that we would be discovered by Muggle authorities, or worse that the Terracotta Army might sense us.

The more time we spent here, the spookier it became. It seemed less like a mine now, and more like the den of some ancient beast. Bits of architecture and ceramic jutted out of the earthen walls at random intervals like jagged bone.

'Grey! Grey, I found something!' Fucking finally.

I sidled over to Sirius, who was grinning broadly and pointing at the wall just above head height. I squinted in the dark; it was a pin, stabbed into the earthen rock. One of those ones with the little coloured ball on one end, like you see in tailor shops. Totally out of place with the rest of the excavation.

I peered closely at it; on its head was engraved a tiny rune. Algiz. Abjuration.

I clapped Sirius on the shoulder excitedly. 'Fantastic job mate. Alright, now how do we get in?'

We quickly found three more pins, forming a vaguely man-sized rectangle. I rapped on the stone between them; rock solid.

'Maybe you need to have faith that there is no wall there!' Sirius exclaimed, and promptly walked facefirst into it. He bounced off with a yelp, rubbing his nose.

I sighed. 'Just when I was starting to have faith in your intelligence…'

'Oi!' I was about to suggest we try smashing through - perhaps it was but a thin barrier - when I heard a scuffling noise behind us.

I acted on instinct, seizing my hunting knife - the one stolen from that first muggle host so long ago - from my belt and pivoting, flinging it with all my prodigious might.

It struck our intruder in the throat, burying itself to the hilt. A human. He flopped to the ground like a fish, thrown backward by the force of my throw.

'Fucking bollocks, Grey!' Sirius yelped in shock, and ran over to the man. He was still alive, but not for very much longer; blood was already soaking into the rough earth.

Sirius started tugging on the drawstrings of his rucksack. 'What the fuck are you doing, Black?' I demanded coldly.

'What does it look like I'm doing, I'm saving his life. What the hell's the matter with you?!' He replied, just as angry.

I strode over and seized his wrist, painfully tight. My face contorted with fury. 'Have you lost your fucking mind? I am not dying here over some useless muggle!'

Sirius sneered right back. 'Then you better start running, because I'm not going to let you just murder this man.'

With that, he gave a final tug on the drawstring with his free hand, and his wand tumbled out onto the ground.
We both felt it, immediately. The psychic weight of the Army's presence, muffled by our anti-magic watches, surged furiously. It was enough to drive me to my knees. Sirius was less affected, and I was unable to stop him as he tore off his watch.

'D-damn you Black!' I managed, before I blacked out entirely.

Rats. Hundreds off them, crawling all over me. I screamed and wailed, and tugged on my chains to no avail. They bit me, tore at me. A ripping sound at my belly, and they were inside me, wriggling and writhing, feasting upon my very-

I shot awake, crying out hoarsely. It was dark, a small chamber of blackest onyx, lit only dimly by a sputtering magelight hovering near the low ceiling.

'Ah, sleeping beauty has finally decided to join us.' Came Sirius' voice, still hard and angry.

I groaned, and pushed myself up on one arm. I took a moment to get my bearings. The Army's presence had dulled to a low hum, but they were close, by the gods they were close. I could practically see them through the far wall, a broken mound of fallen earth and rubble.

'What happened?'

'You happened.' He said shortly. 'You almost killed him.'

'Almost?' I looked around, and spied the man sitting awkwardly against a wall in the corner. He waved sheepishly at me.

'Ugh, of course. Fine, what then?'

'Well then you fainted like a pansy, so I had to save all our arses.' Sirius declared primly. 'I yanked out one of the pins on a hunch, and the doorway vanished entirely. So Prosper and I dragged you in, and I brought down the ceiling to keep the Army out.'

'Prosper' I drawled caustically. 'How wildly inapropos.'

'Hey man,' American. Of course. 'I helped save your life you know, you could show a little gratitude.'

'Ooh, thank you ever so much, I'll be sure to enjoy the next ten minutes before a golem disembowels me because you didn't have the dignity to step quieter or die quicker like a proper muggle.'

'Enough!' Sirius shouted. 'He's not a bleeding muggle, Tom.'

I wrinkled my nose incredulously. 'You expect me to believe that another wizard decided to pull the same idiot stunt as us on the same night?'

'Well that's what happened, buddy.' Said, ugh, Prosper. He was holding a wand, I saw now, and an armlet lay discarded beside him.

I got to my feet, and promptly brained myself on the ceiling. Sirius snorted as I cradled my head with a groan, and the tension seemed to break a little.
I sighed, and removed my watch. More harm than good at this point. The Army's presence burred at my newfound presence, but not enough to hurt. Sirius caught me eye.

'I feel them less in here too. I think it might be something in the walls.'

Well that was something at least. I regarded our surroundings. The walls, as I'd noted before, were of onyx, and carved with bas-reliefs depicting hordes of soldiers, armed to the teeth. Each one had a slightly different face, and their eyes seemed to gaze at me from the wall. Spooky. Across from the collapsed tunnel (and how Lord Voldemort had managed that without bringing the Army down on his head was beyond me) was a doorway that was sealed up with limestone brick.

I focused my magical senses upon the doorway. 'There's more of them within the tomb. I can feel them.'

Sirius cursed lightly. 'Well, at least we're prepared.'

Wands would do less than nothing for us against them. We opened our rucksacks, and pulled forth our loot.

The really handy thing about magical custom officers, is that they only care about magical contraband. They really couldn't care less if you were smuggling in, say, shotguns, rifles, and a cartoonishly large pile of ammunition.

During the Blitz, I had been fortunate enough to, ah, spend some time in the company of a young soldier. It was from him whom mostly out of boredom I had learned to properly wield a Lee-Enfield bolt-action repeating rifle.

It was this model which I elected to use today, and it was a comfortably familiar weight in my arms. Ah, better days. We had more modern firearms on hand, and I took a shotgun and handgun as backups, but this was by far the only gun I enjoyed using. I took a moment to work the mechanism, ensuring its proper function despite the spells that ensured it would remain in perfect condition.

The bullets it fired could not have any direct enchantment on them, lest they crumble from entropy before striking the ceramic soldiers, but the guns were upgraded in practically every other fashion. Short-range portals connected the magazines to our rucksacks, sparing us the need for reloading. Silencing charms on the muzzle would spare us deafening ourselves in the compact tunnels.

There was no point in armour, an individual soldier in the Army was strong enough to cleave straight through an anvil.

'Hey fellas, don't suppose I could have one of those guns?'

I gave Prosper a withering look. 'Absolutely not.'

Sirius gave him a shotgun. The traitor.

Finally, we were ready. The Army could sense it too, the buzzing in the back of my mind intensified.

'Bombarda!' I cried, then stuffed my wand into my pocket, bringing my rifle to bear.

The limestone bricks exploded outward, and the soldier standing directly behind it was shattered into a hundred pieces by the flying rubble. Not a bad start.

Its compatriots, further away, were untouched, and they surged towards us, bronze jiàn swords
They were a horror to behold at their full power. Anti-light, blacker than black, shone from every seam of their armour. Their eyes dripped with the stuff, like a liquid, yet it rose from their blades like a fire. Their faces were locked in what may have been intended as a sagacious smile, but now looked like a sinister rictus. An utter aberration in every sense of the word.

I fired, but a spike of mental pain slipped through my occlumency, and my grip wavered, the shot missing entirely. In an instant, one of them was upon me, and my end gazed me in the face.

The warrior shattered as a slug from Sirius's shotgun obliterated its torso, a shower of ceramics and goopy anti-light erupting from it. Prosper quickly dispatched a third. He wielded guns like he was used to them.

There were two more remaining, and now I had regained my composure. I caught one right between the eyes, then threw myself to the side to avoid a vicious thrust from the other. Sirius made short work of the clay bastard.

The entire fight had been eerily silent, the Terracotta soldiers hadn't made a sound even as they died.

'That wasn't so bad!' I said cheerily.

'Scratch that!' Fragments of ceramic were skittering across the ground, borne by the anti-light, and were already beginning to piece themselves back together.

I looked to Sirius, and saw the blood draining from his face as it surely did from my own. 'Run.'

We surged through the complex, blowing apart soldiers as we crossed them, absolutely no bloody idea where we were going.

'ARGH!' I heard Sirius shriek, and hit the ground.

I whirled, bringing the Lee-Enfield to bear. An archer, already firing again. I could practically feel the icy power of the anti-light as it missed by less than an inch. Two blasts brought it down, but it had given time for the warriors chasing us to catch up.

'Oh no you don't! Expulso!' I cast at the ceiling.

Nothing happened. No time to think, the aberrations were upon us. I slammed the butt of my gun into the leader's face, only the enchantments upon it preventing the rifle from shattering from the force. It went flying back, knocking over one of its mates, and I seized Sirius by the back of his collar. He was moaning incoherently, the arrow still embedded in his shoulder. Prosper covered us as I dragged him into the nearest side chamber, then punched the wall as hard as I could as soon as the American had followed.

I was strong enough to throw a jeep on a lark, and the wall - a weight-supporting one, as I had hoped, crumbled, bringing a dozen tonnes of rubble crashing down on the way we had come.

I sagged against one wall. Fucking hell.

Prosper kneeled over Sirius, snapping his fingers to get the latter's attention.

'Sirius, I'm going to take the arrow out, but I don't think we'll be able to heal it the quick and easy way, ok?'
He carefully extracted the arrowhead, but Sirius howled in pain anyway. By a minor miracle, it hadn't hit anything important, but it was a nasty looking thing, like a little dagger. Little black veins already began to show on Sirius' skin around the wound.

'Prosper!' I tossed him a bezoar when he turned, and he stuffed it down Sirius' throat. That, at the very least, proved effective, and Sirius's feverish mutterings died down.

'Why is it always me that get poked?' He managed with a morbid chuckle.

I looked around the room. It had the same sort of bas-relief wall carvings as the rest of the labyrinthian tomb, but they seemed of lesser quality. Either rushed, or whoever carved them just didn't care as much. The chamber was bare save for a stone sarcophagus at the far end, which lay open, and thoroughly charred. Like someone had taken a massively overpowered incendio to it.

'Who do you suppose this belonged to?' I asked idly, as I started working on healing Sirius. The standard stuff didn't work of course, so I moved right up to the Dark healing tricks. The magic didn't come easy, it felt like trying to move through viscous sludge, but it came.

'Lesser member of the court, based on these engravings,' Prosper remarked. 'Possibly some dude who was part of the Emperor's funerary sacrifices or something like that. No name though which is odd.'

I glanced at him with a raised eyebrow.

'What, I do this for a living.'

'Grave robber, eh?'

He flushed. 'Fella's gotta make a living. This was meant to be the score to end all scores.'

'You win some you lose some. Might still win.' I said. I finished my work on Sirius. It'd leave a seriously hardcore scar, and any worse an injury I would not have been able to treat, but he would be functional. I helped him to his feet.

'Come on. There's probably a way around that they know about and we don't.'

There was.

'Shit!' Prosper shouted, firing furiously down the hall. There were more than two dozen on our trail now, and the damned things were faster and stronger in packs. They'd almost caught us a dozen times now, and unlike them we were beginning to tire. I could only punch down so many walls, and drinking more than two Pepper-Up potions in a day was a recipe for a stroke.

'There!' Sirius exclaimed, pointing. At last. At the end of the hall, a grandiose set of adamantine doors, embossed with two majestic-looking dragons on each.

I paid dearly for my distraction.

'AAAAARGH!' I howled. My left arm flopped to the ground, separated at the elbow. The front half of my Lee-Enfield fell with it. Gouging daggers of ice seemed to claw up my stump, like I was being flayed alive.

I lashed out with a brutal kick, knocking the warrior back before he could finish me. I staggered
back, still howling. Sirius had gotten the doors open - how I had no idea - and we fled into the inner sanctum, slamming the doors closed behind us with a dull thoom.

:-:-:-:-:

A/N: Lot of exposition in this chapter, and my, heh, imposter syndrome demands that I apologise for the infodump, despite the fact that most of you seem to go nuts for that stuff.

The idea of the Terracotta Army being a source of great dread among wizardkind was first encountered by me in R-dude's absolutely wonderful work Contractual Obligation, which is one of the few romance-centric fics that I adore. There's a lot of really good worldbuilding elements in it as well. The exact reason why the Army is so terrifying however was not specified in that fic, so that aspect of it is mine own.

As always, if anyone who actually speaks one of the languages I do my best to decipher as a non-speaker notices my idiot mistakes, do please let me know. Or other horrendous cultural errors.

Edit: Tom's reference to "Enfield" like it was a person is an intentional error.

Please follow and review!
The Tomb of Qin Shi Huang

Thoom

The great adamantine doors slammed closed, sealing us away from the warriors of the Terracotta Army.

I slumped to the ground, blinded by the pain. I could feel the black poison of the warrior who had maimed me working its way up my arm like a battalion of wasps crawling through my veins.

My mouth was forced open, and something hard and round was shoved into it. I swallowed instinctively, and the agony subsided, mostly. I opened my eyes, and stared up at the gilded ceiling of Qin Shi Huang's tomb.

Prosper, the grave robber, was wrapping my stump in dittany-soaked bandages, having apparently given up on sealing the wound through conventional magic. He pushed golden-blonde hair out of his eyes, getting a smear of bright scarlet blood across his forehead in the process.

'Well,' I began hoarsely. 'Just when I was thinking this couldn't be any more of a mess.'

Prosper helped me to my feet, grasping my remaining hand. The bleeding from my stump had been stemmed entirely, the dresswork work clean and professional-looking. Perhaps he wasn't so bad after all.

The room was lit very dimly, as it had been for the last two thousand years, by the flickering light of a hundred and one ancient and everlasting candles, floating gently in the air. Made from the fat of merpeople, if my research was accurate. Grisly, but enduring.

The floor, which was perhaps two hundred feet across and twice as long, was a series of giant irregular slabs of etched jade, and could surely only have been made by the finest of the Qin era's alchemists. I peered closely. I think it was a map, of the entire Qin empire. Albeit a wildly inaccurate one, but that was the era for you. Between the slabs, streams of liquid mercury trickled towards the far end of the room like a hundred tiny rivers, where they pooled into a miniature lake that took up the last dozen feet.

The floor around the doors was littered with the shattered remnants of crossbow bolts, and on either side was a thoroughly ruined repeating crossbow. All that remained of the many traps that had been devised by the tomb's designers after Lord Voldemort had had his say.

The chamber had been ransacked, chests and coffers that would have once overflowed with gold, silver, and jade coins now lying empty and discarded. At the far end of the room, at the mercurial lake's edge, was a stone coffin, its lid shattered open. Within lay a dessicated corpse, in rotten funerary attire.

'Well this is kinda disappointing, hey?' Said Prosper, looking around. 'Looks like some asshole got here before us, and didn't even have the decency to announce it!'

'I mean, would you?' Sirius responded, smirking.

Prosper winked. 'No, but then, I'm a professional'
'Well boys, I'd say we're about plumb fucked at present.' I concluded, checking my watch. 'It's about 3am right now, so we have at best two or three hours to get out of here before the muggle archaeologists rock up to work and find a bunch of very angry Terracotta warriors loitering in their dig site. And given that the Chinese ministry can't exactly call in the Obliviators here, that's the Statue of Secrecy kaput.'

Sirius gulped.

'So... what's the plan then, Grey?'

Prosper interrupted. 'Alright, look. Like I said, I'm what you call profesh. I do this for a living. Which is why under normal circumstances, I wouldn't be telling you that that' he pointed at the stone coffin. 'Is most certainly a fake. A decoy, if you will. Normally I'd just plan to come later and loot the real thing, but frankly, I think I underestimated this place. And given the very angry monsters outside, now's not exactly the time to be cagey. So help me search for the activation rune to access the real sarcophagus, and we'll split whatever we find fifty fifty. But I get first pick, alright?'

I rolled my eyes. 'Fine. Just be quick about it.' I tapped my watch meaningfully.

My arm gave a particularly painful throb, and so I let them do the grubby work of scrabbling around on the ground, instead assessing my own injury again. It was a clean cut, though the tinge of anti-magic still tickled lightly through the pain. I elected not to seal it with Dark magic. That would just make restoring or replacing it all the more difficult.

With the doors closed, the tomb was airtight. Though apparition probably hadn't even been invented when this place was built, trying to use magical transportation with the Army near and aware of our presence seemed like a very bad idea.

Stepping carefully over the mercury streams - quicksilver was one of the few things that was even more poisonous to wizards than it was to muggles - I laid my hand on one of the walls. Cold, green-black metal, solid adamantine on all sides. No way that the Army were carving their way in. Small mercies.

I recalled the formula I'd read on one of Nicolas' texts for calculating breathable air within a space. I ran the numbers. They were... actually pretty good. Certainly not a chief concern for now.

'I got it!' Sirius shouted excitedly, and slapped his hand down on the green stone. Prosper stared down at the rune he had just activated with horror.

'No no no-' He started to yell, before there was a great shuddering noise, and the mercury lake began to roil.

'I said dovetailed ends, Sirius! Dovetailed!' Prosper exclaimed furiously. He drew his wand.

The mercury began to drain out of the streams, as it swelled into a great mound at the end of the tomb. A mound with arms.

I snarled, and held my wand aloft. I recognised this particular beastie.

'It's a Weird!'

Weirds were... well weird. A form of spirit summoning, though nothing at all like what Vodou got into. It was a guardian spirit, forced into the Real by sacrificial magic and given physical form in a primordial element or something similar. Usually it was water, as that split the difference of
malleability and permanence, but it seems Qin Shi Huang's gravebuilders were a creative bunch of rat-bastards.

The mound grew a face, draconic and furious, and it roared a spew of quicksilver in our faces.

At the last instant, I threw up a shield to meet it, and the mercury splattered off it, obscuring our vision of the elemental.

A hundred tentacles of liquid metal slammed into my shield like so many freight trains, and I almost buckled under the strain.

'Ice spells! That'll slow it down!' I commanded, and followed my own advice with a surge of frost, turning a dozen tentacles into statues. Sirius joined me, summoning an undulating mass of impossibly frigid air that spiralled around us like a hurricane, snap-freezing and shattering any attempt to get through. The freeze didn't last though; the Weird was warming itself, melting quickly.

'How do we kill it?' Prosper demanded, pounding away at the Weird with glacial spears.

'You don't! They're spirits, not mortals. You find what's binding them to the Real and you break it!'

'The right activation rune!' He realised. 'Cover me!'

He scurried out from cover without another word. I swore caustically. If he'd been English he would have been a Gryffindor, I fucking know it.

A twirl of yew and phoenix feather saw a jagged wall of icy stalagmites thrust up into existence between the Weird and Prosper, just in time to save the latter from a torrent of quicksilver. Sirius ran after him, still blasting away with frigid magic.

The blonde man was muttering to himself in what I can only assume was ancient Chinese, fumbling across the floor. Well, time to be a good distract-

**Thunk**

Pain seared through my lower abdomen, temporarily eclipsing the pain from my stump. I looked down to see a slender spike of frozen metal protruding from my shirt, just below the ribs.

'Oh.'

I slumped against the stone coffin, casting a hasty anti-shock spell to keep from dooming myself. I gripped the spike hard with my remaining hand, and ripped it free. Blood spurted from the wound. Not good, I didn't have much left to spare after the arm. I hastily snatched up my wand to stem the flow.

The Weird made a metallic screeching noise, and drew itself up tall enough to scrape against the vaulted ceiling. All the mercury in the room, frozen or otherwise, drew itself back into its mass, and it *slammed* down on top of me. It struck my renewed dome shield like the Titanic striking an iceberg.

The resulting *GONG* shook the entire chamber, and my eardrums blew out from the pressure in an instant. But the shield held.

Blood already beginning to seep from my ears, I tore the false coffin from the ground, and drove it stake-like through the Weird's chest, forcing it back.
It swelled with fury, and its centre began to redden with heat. The coffin disappeared without a trace within it, as the red began to give way to white, and then-

Then, without the slightest ceremony, it flopped back into the mercury lake with a heavy thud, melting away as if it had never been.

I sagged with relief, and waved my wand across my ears. My hearing returned with a rushing sound and a pop.

Prosper pumped the air triumphantly, a glowing rune at his feet. 'Fuck yeah! That's how we do it!'

They were both entirely uninjured. Of course.

With a low rumbling nose, the rounded lid of an enormous sarcophagus broke the surface of the quicksilver, sliding slowly upward. It rose to taller than a man, and ground across the jade floor where the false coffin had been.

The sarcophagus was made of some black stone I couldn't identify. It was positively crowded with carvings in ancient Chinese, and decked out with inlaid gold and other precious metals. As I drew near, I could sense barely-contained magic within. The thing was almost certainly booby-trapped.

'Prosper, care to ply your trade?'

The American rubbed his hands together gleefully, and got to work. Sirius watched interestedly over his shoulder as he worked his wand across the stone, murmuring in ancient tongues. Little mandalas of green and blue lit themselves at seemingly random intervals along the surface of the sarcophagus, spinning and shifting like gears in a mechanism. It looked a lot like when Gerard Delacour did it, the difference between a true professional and a skilled amateur like myself.

'I need to think. Give me a few.' I sat cross-legged upon the ground, eyes closed, head bowed. It was now bloody freezing in here from all our ice magic, and Sirius started flicking around incendios just to keep from shivering. I remained that way for about ten minutes, before my focus was broken by the sound of a thunderbolt crack.

Prosper crowed in triumph, as all of the mandalas span in unison, and the the sarcophagus slid off and landed with a mighty crash.

I scrambled to my feet, and almost bowled over Prosper in my eagerness, staggering him.

'Shit, sorry mate!' I said, catching him by his coat.

'That's alright buddy, you lost a lot of blood. Maybe just keep sitting tight for a bit, ok?' He said, patting my left flank reassuringly.

He peered into the sarcophagus, and when his head was not immediately blown apart upon doing so, Sirius and I scrambled to join him.

Qin Shi Huang had been preserved in that same way that you see archaeologists refer to as "flawlessly", which really meant he had dried out so hard that he looked like a tall and particularly munted house elf. Though perhaps that was what he'd looked like in life, who could say?

He wore a pristine white burial robe, and clasped in his hands in a death grip was a long and cartoonishly wide sword, resembling some kind of falchion. Seven rings hung loosely from the back side of the blade.
'Wait, what?' Prosper frowned, confused. 'That's a dadao, that kind of sword wasn't even invented when Shi Huang got ganked, that's 9th century stuff at the earliest. That doesn't make any sense.'

'Well anachronism or not, this thing is powerful as all out get.' I said, ghosting my hand along its length, not quite daring to make contact. 'Is it good to touch?'

'Should be!' Prosper declared cheerily, and scooped it up without ceremony. The rings rattled as he gave it a few test swings. It made an odd noise as it moved, like it was being drawn across metal. 'Dibs!'

I smiled amiably, hiding cold irritation. There was no point in bickering over loot in here; it would be far easier to simply take the sword for mine own once we had escaped the more immediate danger. Lord Voldemort would have left it here for a reason, and I would not see my investigations stymied by some greedy American career thief.

'Seems reasonable. I did almost kill you, after all.'

He grinned broadly. 'A fair trade then! So did all your uh-' he waved the sword dismissively at where I'd been sitting. 'Thinking devise us a way out of this hole?'

'I'm confident I can drill through this adamantine and create a hole straight to the surface. From there we can chesh e ou-'

I stopped. Something was amiss. I felt dizzy.

'Tom?' Sirius asked cautiously.

'I said we-chan mao a-'

My tongue felt like it was turning to lead. My skin was starting to itch, worse and worse by the second, like a thousand ants just beneath the surface. My heartbeat was accelerating, throbbing painfully loud in my ears.

'I- I canth'

I lost my footing, thudding heavily into the side of the sarcophagus. Sirius leapt to my side.

'Tom, what's going on on?!' He turned to Prosper. 'Bezoar me!'

Prosper showed his hands helplessly. 'We're out!'

The quicksilver. The spike that the Weird had gored me with must have left residue. In muggles, mercury poisoning could take months or years to show its effects. In wizards it was rather more… acute.

I seized Sirius by the jaw, and forced him to look me in the eyes. I forced a vision of the rune scheme we needed into his mind. He yelped and reeled, holding his head in his hands. I didn't have time to be gentle.

Sirius relayed the plan to Prosper, and the two set to work a few dozen feet away, carefully painting the complicated mandala we would need on the ceiling. I noticed Prosper was correcting a few errors I'd made in the design, which was a little embarrassing, but hey. I was in a rush.

When it was completed, Prosper opened a small wound in his palm and pressed it against the seal. The entire thing lit up a deep blood-red, and Prosper scrambled away as a circle of adamantine
ceiling around it began to glow cherry red, then white, before finally beginning to drip to the ground in big sizzling dollops.

Sirius threw an arm over my shoulder, and I leaned heavily on him as we waited for the magic to do its work. It had now burrowed through the ceiling and was melting away the stone above, and should continue to do so in a long cylinder up to the top of the burial mound. When it was done, we would levitate out, throw on our magic-suppressing bracelets to hide from the Terracotta Army again (though they would still be able to sense us if we got to close), and cheese it to the parking lot. Couple of broken car windows and crossed wires, and we'd be laughing.

'Stupefy!'

Sirius flopped to the ground, and I went tumbling down with him. Prosper smiled nastily down at me, wand in hand.

'Did you guys really think I was just going to casually forget that you almost killed me?'

Ordinarily I'd point out that we also saved his life more than once tonight, but I wasn't exactly fit for articulation. Focusing on not literally vomiting up my guts was hard enough.

'Fortunately for you jackasses, unlike you I'm not a murderer. That, and I wouldn't mind some bait to distract the Army while I get the hell out of Dodge.' He rifled through Sirius's pockets and then my jeans. I hadn't the strength to stop him. 'So I'll be taking these up with me, and I'll set yours up to drop after half an hour or so. I wouldn't recommend climbing up without them. In the mean time…'

Prosper stuffed the watches into his pocket, and withdrew a small stone. A bezoar! He tossed it, and it skittered to a halt about fifty feet away.

The stream of molten slag from the escape chute stopped, and a wave of frigid air followed it, flash-cooling the entire thing.

I tried to raise my wand against the bastard, but I could barely point the thing, much less attempt somatic gestures.

Prosper fired a rope up through the hole with his wand, and it latched onto something unseen above. He hefted Shi Huang's sword, strapped on his magic-suppressing watch, and looked over to me with a smirk.

'Sorry Tom, I'm sure you were hoping to yoink this off me before the night was done, but you'll have to get up earlier than that to pull a fast one on Prosper Deveny. I doff moi hat to ya, guvnor!'

With that final remark in an insulting mockery of cockney, he grasped tight on the rope, which yanked him abruptly through the hole and out of sight. Leaving me alone, one armed, helpless and shuddering, as liquid metal slowly destroyed me from the inside.

:—:

Dragging myself to that bezoar was perhaps one of the most difficult things I had ever done. I could physically feel my nervous system degrading by the minute; even if I reached that little rock I'd still be a wreck.

But I did it. I know not how long it took me, forcing uncooperative limbs to shift one after the other, slowly shunting across the jade stone.
I snatched up the bezoar, almost throwing it into a puddle of mercury with my jerky stilted motions. I crammed it down my gullet as quickly as I could.

I almost choked on the damn thing, catching in my throat. I hammered on my chest, and managed to force it down. The effect was immediate, though not as strong as I'd hoped. The worst of the shaking stopped, but my skin still felt as though it was ablaze.

'Ugh, fuck me running!' I gasped. I could talk, at the very least. Walking was perhaps a little ways off still. I summoned my wand from where it lay by the sarcophagus. It slapped into my hand triumphantly.

'Reenervate!'

Sirius shot awake with a gasp. He leapt to his feet, waving his wand around wildly.

'Grey? Grey! What happened!'

He hurried once more to my side. I quickly got him up to speed as he helped me to my feet.

'That absolute slime! Don't worry Grey, we'll get him!'

'Oh I'd imagine he's already been got.'

Sirius frowned. 'What do you mean?'

I managed a grin, and pulled three watches out of my inner coat pocket, perfect duplicates of the ones that Prosper Deveny had taken with him. The pocket was enchanted to be imperceptible to anyone but myself. 'I believe the kids these days call it the old switcheroo.'

Sirius gaped. 'How'd you manage to swing that one?'

'I learned a fair amount of pickpocketing back in the day- as an orphan in the wake of the Great Depression and the early days of the War -when I hung out on the streets of Hong Kong. Sleight of hand is a surprisingly useful skill, wizards never see it coming. Even fellow thieves, apparently.'

Sirius looked up through the hole in the ceiling. Twinkling stars glimmered down at us. 'So that means…'

'It means dear mister Deveny has most likely met a well deserved fate.'

Sirius looked more than a little uncomfortable at that. Sigh.

'Oh don't give me that look.' I sneered a little. 'The man practically left me to die. He brought this on himself. Now come on.'

I fired a pair of self-retracting cables up to the top of the hole, and we donned our watches. We stuffed our wands back into our rucksacks for good measure. Soon we were zipping up at such speed that when we reached the top, we shot right past the anchor point of the cables and landed gracefully atop the burial mound.

Well, Sirius did. My knees buckled immediately and I flopped to the dirt like a fish out of water.

Sirius half carried me towards the nearest parking lot. Along the way, implausible as it was, we
found bodies. Terracotta warriors, almost a dozen of them. They'd been neatly hacked apart by something impossibly sharp. More implausible still, the remains were inert, all trace of that foul anti-light that animated them gone.

'That sword must really be something, eh?' Sirius noted, stopping to examine the bodies.

'Yeah, I'm really fucked off about losing it, thanks for mentioning. Can we please hurry it up.' Being hobbled was getting old really quickly.

'Oh quit your whinging, Tom,' Sirius chided, leaning me against the side of a small truck, before laying an elbow through its driver-side window. 'You better not be like this the whole way back just cause some wanker got the better of you for once.'

He unlocked the other side and helped me in, before returning to the driver's side and yanking out the panel beneath the wheel.

'Now let's see if I remember how to do this…' he murmured, and started yanking at cabling.

I grumbled, but kept my peace for now. I would have to save my energy for reconstructing my own nervous system once we were out of Shaanxi.

:—:

The Hùjūn eyed my rather conspicuous stump with some apprehension. Wizards, I found, often found great awkwardness in dealing with cripples.

'You uh, you run into a bit of trouble there?'

I smiled winningly. 'Got on the wrong side of a Jué yuán. Won't be doing that any time soon, I can tell you that for sure!'

The Chinese auror laughed, and waved me through. I stood on the other side of the gate and stared gloatingly at Sirius, who was being grilled again like the white boy he was. Sadly we couldn't all shamelessly steal totally unearned ethnic heritage like I did.

It was thus Sirius's turn to grumble as we made our way through muggle Hong Kong, to my great amusement. I was midway through chuckling at his muttered epithets when I spotted him. Peter Hein.

The mysterious blonde asian, who had eluded me twice in the past, was leaning against a pillar by a particularly loudly-coloured storefront, seemingly talking to somebody on a mobile phone. Our eyes met, and he winked enormously at me.

'…and frankly, this kind of horseshite is exactly why the rest of magical Europe has tensions with magical China, they blame the whole godsdamned continent for shit that just us Brits did over a century ago, and while I can understand why they'd be rather cautious, that doesn't justify—'

'Sirius.' I interrupted. 'Can you go and organise our portkeys home please? I need to go take care of some stuff.'

Sirius raised an eyebrow. 'Sure. What kind of stuff though?'

'Just an old friend, and some unfinished business. I'll see you in twenty.'

I peeled off, clambering up concrete steps to the little mezzanine the shop was located on. A street
hawker approached me immediately, waving some flier for a local dojo in my face. I ignored him, but that reminded me, I should probably take the opportunity to quickly rummage around in some martial arts master's mind before I leave.

'Mister Riddle, how positively *spiffing* to run into you, utterly smashing!' Hein exclaimed, throwing his arms wide. The mobile phone, I noticed, had vanished.

'You can drop the accent, Hein.' I said stoutly in Dutch.

His smile broadened, and responded in the same tongue. 'I'm impressed, Tom. Usually takes people much longer to catch on than three encounters!'

'Two encounters, I figured it out last time. What do you want?'

'Whatever gives you the idea that I want something from you, mister Riddle?'

I snorted, and folded my arms. 'Please. Three encounters on three different continents in less than a year, and you knew exactly who I was before you even met me. You want something. Something you can't just take.'

Hein looked down at my hand, and smiled congenially. 'I see you've come into your power with the Resurrection Stone. Good, good, that's very good progress. You're right Tom, I do need a little something from you. I'm calling in that favour you owe me.'

I smirked. 'Technically it was Sirius that owes you, not me.'

'You both benefited, so you both owe.' He said sharply and immediately, his expression turning hard and alien in an instant. 'Be considered fortunate that this task will absolve both of you.'

I scowled. 'And what is it that you want, Hein?'

Hein turned and pointed up at a nearby skyscraper. 'In that tower, you will find a man named Ishida Tsuyoshi, though these days he calls himself Yokai. A half-Japanese dark wizard who's been making waves in Southeast Asia for some time.'

He checked his watch, an elaborate affair of gold and ivory. 'In about... eight hours, he's going to attack and fatally wound a spritely young man by the name of Sato Seijin. I commission you to prevent this from happening. Kill mister Ishida, and your debt to me is fulfilled in full.'

I sneered. 'What are you, some kind of Seer then? An Oracle?'

He chuckled lightly. The same sort of in-joke laugh he'd produced when he first called himself a traveller. 'You could say something like that, I suppose.'

I took a moment to digest this little tidbit. 'And why can't you just kill this Yokai yourself then?'

He sucked air through his teeth, and smiled a little more tightly. 'Rules, I'm afraid.'

On that note, he turned on his heel, and swept around the near corner before I could react. I knew from experience he would already be gone if I chased him. A final remark carried back to me.

'Get it done, mister Riddle. Or on all our heads be it.'

A/N: I had originally planned for this coming chapter to occur later in the story, but it fit better to
do it on the same trip to Hong Kong, rather than for Tom to come back just for this. That, and we haven’t seen Hein for a while.

As always, please leave a review to tell me what I’m doing well or poorly, and hit subscribe if you haven’t already.
Sirius was not pleased at the news.

'Mate, I just bought this!' He cried, waving the leather strap that was our portkey home in my face. 'I just want to crawl into bed and sleep for a week, is that so much to ask?'

'Apparently. I'm not exactly pleased about it either.' I said, rubbing my jaw. 'But I suppose it's better than you giving up your friendship with… who was it you were going to sacrifice?'

'My Uncle Alphard,' he said shortly. 'Only member of my family that wasn't a raving lunatic.'

I plucked the portkey from his still outstretched hand. I'll be taking this, I want my arm back if I'm going to throw down with a minor dark lord. I'll be back in, I don't know, an hour maybe. In the mean time, see if you can't get us a hotel room. Someplace muggle, not like their money matters at all. Meet back here at midday.

Sirius grumbled, but set off into muggle Hong Kong. I squinted at the writing sewed into the leather of the portkey.

'Trellis, Utility, Cobblestone'

With a tug behind my navel, and a rushing in my ears, I was gone.

I reappeared in Hong Kong at ten to twelve, smoothing down my peacoat where portkey travel had ruffled it. With both hands.

The chalice of Helga Hufflepuff, despite its incredible usefulness, was something I had no intention of ever letting leave my cellar, save perhaps for transit to an even more secure location. It was simply too valuable, even if unlike the Ring it was technically no longer a Horcrux. Regrowing my arm had taken it longer than usual (as well as being much more painful) as it battled for supremacy with the lingering anti-magic. But it got the job done. All that remained of the grievous wound was a thin scar that perfectly encircled my upper forearm.

I sauntered out of the transport hub onto the muggle street, and spotted Sirius sitting on a bench nearby. He looked up from his book at my approach.

'Did you get us a place?' I asked as he hopped up to join me walking down the street.

'Yeah I did, you'll like this. Let's nip in here.' Sirius indicated an alley, and we neatly turned into it, out of public sight.

He laid a hand on my shoulder, and with a twisting of space, we were suddenly in a lavish and extremely modern apartment, of which one entire wall was just a single window, providing a glorious vista of the Hong Kong skyline.

Even better, it was just across the way from the building that Peter Hein had indicated to me; where currently resided Hong Kong's up-and-comer, Ishida "Yokai" Tsuyoshi. Though of course, Hein had not bothered to advise me what room Yokai was in. Such details were beneath him, I
supposed.

I intended to be careful about this one. I was starting to get a little sick of leaving every other place I visit a smoking ruin. That, and whilst it would undoubtably be easier to simply level the building and collect Yokai's body from the rubble, Sirius would never let me do something with that much collateral damage. Not to mention the Aurors that something so brazen would bring out of the woodwork.

I broke from my musings, and looked to Sirius, who was already fixing himself a drink from the decanter on the coffee table. I smirked.

'It'll do.'

I left Sirius to set up our surveillance whilst I hit the streets of magical Hong Kong. It was time to get the lay of the land, before we started fighting on it.

When the Ministry had conquered this little slice of China for Britain, they'd done their level best to assimilate local magicals into English ideals of magic as quickly as possible. This was ultimately wildly unsuccessful, for a couple of reasons. However, one of the only aspects that Hong Kong's wizards had wholeheartedly embraced was the imitation of Diagon Alley that the Brits had constructed, right in the heart of the Eastern district.

The British had given it the name Horizont Alley, which was still the name on official records, and what was still plastered across its entrance in vaguely offensive Wonton font. But the locals just called it the Fu Luk - the Fluke.

Little shops and stalls lined the slender street, which was utterly packed with people. Colourful and flashy displays vied for my attention, more than a few of which were clearly laced with mild compulsions. That sort of thing was illegal to use with advertising in Britain, and probably was here too. The local-born Aurors just ignored such transgressions, as they did with most of the new laws that had been imposed upon them. Just the sort of little rebellions against British rule that characterised magical Hong Kong.

As I walked, munching on a flaky egg tart, I combed lightly through the minds of the wizards and witches who passed me by. Most of them had heard of Yokai, and most of those who had felt a little shiver of fear at the thought of him.

From what I gleaned, Yokai had first turned up on the scene about ten years ago, when he seized control of a small-time gang in Singapore and turned them into an international criminal syndicate inside of six months. He was known for using muggles as his main labour force, swallowing up muggle criminal organisations by a combination of murdering their leadership, and copious use of the Imperius curse. He ruled over the Southeast Asian drug trade with an iron fist, infamously brutal to any that crossed him.

Naturally, this rapid expansion got the attention of Singaporean authorities, who were rather used to a low crime rate and not at all pleased with him rocking up. They rallied magical Asia against him, as his activities also clearly endangered the Statute of Secrecy. He was ousted from his seat of power, forced into exile further east.

That was nine years ago. Yokai seemed to have learned his lesson from that, as he'd spent the remaining time building up his empire slower and more quietly. Aside from one incident in '91 where he blew up a muggle hospital in Indonesia to take out a rival, he'd only really resurfaced
again recently, throwing the balance between Hong Kong's disparate crime lords askew in a major way.

He was confounding the colony's aurors left, right, and centre as well, and based on his past successes, a lot of people seemed to think it was only a matter of time before he made a play for control of the island entirely.

And now his journey would come to an end, at my hand. Almost a shame, really. To come so close to greatness, only to be struck down by a superior foe before reaching his fruition.

:*——:

Our hotel room had transformed in the brief time I'd been out. Sirius had moved all of the elegant quasi-Chinese furniture to the far side of the room, allowing him to set up an array of instruments. One such instrument was a foe-glass I'd taken from Lord Voldemort's vault.

Foe-glasses looked like mirrors, but instead of reflecting light, they showed one's enemies. At first as mere indistinct shadows on an empty plane, but as said foes grew physically and metaphorically closer, their shadows in the foe-glass came closer too, and more distinct. They were rare instruments, as for obvious reasons people often tended to destroy the ones owned by their enemies.

Right now, it was showing a very clear image of an angry looking asian man, yellow-eyed, with long hair tied back in a loose ponytail. This must be Yokai.

He was shirtless, at least in the foe-glass, which showed off a dizzying array of tattoos across his muscular torso, all complicated mandalas and flowing runic schemes in Jiǎgǔwén (East Asia's preferred enchanting language, equivalent to West Asia's Emeğir and Europe's Elder Futhark). This wasn't great news for me; gods only know how Yokai had managed to augment himself.

In fact, looking at some of those schemes, I was starting to think trying to just kick his teeth in in a fair fight might not be the best plan…

Several of the other, more sensitive devices had had to be disabled when I walked in. One of the sneakoscopes straight-up detonated as I passed it by, leaving me picking pieces of pieces of crystal out of my new hand, and repairing the burn mark that now blighted the little granite countertop. Sirius had found this hilarious for some reason, though I didn't quite share his amusement.

'So did you come up with a way to take this guy down, Grey?' Sirius asked, still smiling a little as he prepared us some tea with the muggle electric kettle. Actually, that gave me an idea…

'Well we still need to figure out what room he's in-' I began, but Sirius cut me off, pointing to one of the devices sprawled across the room.

'Way ahead of you, look through that thing there.'

I did. It looked like a magnifying glass on a posable arm, mounted on a tripod. As I looked at the skyscraper across the street, parts of it began to glow. It was detecting the latent magic that wizards and other strong sources of magic give off, brilliant! Useless in even a mildly wizarding environment, as the whole area would be one big haze, but perfect for finding the wizarding needle in a muggle haystack.

I spied a couple of pinpricks of light at the bottom, a few at the top, and a really fat one on the thirtieth floor. Yokai, gotta be. Excellent.
'Impeccable work, Sirius, you get a biscuit.' I said with a grin, and produced an actual biscuit from my pocket. There was a little muggle bakery down the street that I'd immediately fallen in love with.

As Sirius munched on his bikkie and handed me my tea, I broke out the magically-imbued inks. I began to carefully inscribe a runic mandala upon the window closest to Yokai's room across the way. Sirius squinted at my work.

'Acceleration… magnetism… what in Merlin's name are you making, Tom?'

I paused to reload my paintbrush. 'Ever heard of a rail-gun, Sirius?'

He shook his head no.

'It's a muggle invention, I've been reading about them recently in the physics books Nick recommended for me. The basic idea is that they use super powerful magnets that they can turn on and off to fling objects faster than bullets. It's mostly theoretics and a few working prototypes for them, but with the application of a spicy bit of alchemy, we can hopefully take Yokai's head off without ever having to get within a hundred feet of the rat-bastard.'

Sirius frowned sharply. "Hang on there a minute. Take his head off? I didn't agree to that. I thought we were arresting him?"

'Whatever gave you that idea? I quite clearly said we needed to "get rid of him" I enunciated with air quotes. 'What did you think that meant?"

'I thought it meant capture him and lob his arse into Azkaban or whatever their version here is!'

I shook my head woefully.

'Sirius, do you know what they do to people like Yokai when they catch them in this part of the world?' Sirius looked at me mutinously but didn't answer. 'You may have heard that Yinjian prison is a nicer place than Azkaban by a large stretch. And you'd be right, there's no Dementors, the prisoners have real beds and food, and there's an actual rehabilitation program. But that treatment is for normal criminals.

'Big time dark wizards like Yokai, especially the ones that partake in the Unforgivables, which Yokai adores, they get their souls taken out of their bodies and left in indestructible jars. In constant inconceivable agony from being a discorporated soul trapped upon this plane, yet unable to do anything about it like possess someone. Forever. They've got souls still sitting in Yinjian's inner sanctum from at least 4BC.'

That quieted Sirius for a bit. 'That doesn't give us the right to just kill him.'

'True. We have the right to just kill him because he's a psychotic monster who's destroyed thousands of lives, and we already received our payment for doing it. Killing him is a mercy compared to the alternative.' I concluded, and turned back to my little masterpiece.

'I'm not having any part in it. I okayed it in Gringotts cause we were utterly fucked otherwise, but this isn't like that. You aren't even going to fight him, this is… it's an assassination.'

'Then it's a damn good thing I don't need you to, Black.' I snapped, suddenly very irritable. 'I brought you in on this to be helpful, not to moralise over a dark lord's right to not being shot in the face. Get on board, or go home and cry about it why don't you?'
Sirius scowled brutally at me for a long moment, before disappearing with a loud crack of disapparition.

I waved my arm dismissively at the space where he'd been, and returned to my work.

'Fucking idealists.' I muttered.

With just two hours to go before the prophesied attack, I had just about completed the runic rail gun. It was a beauty of a thing if I do say so myself, fifteen feet across of shimmering cobalt paint. Fourteen concentric rings of runes, seven in Elder Futhark, seven in the similar but far less commonly used Younger Futhark. It took up the entire window.

I caught myself about to look over my shoulder and preen to Sirius. It was no matter, he'd get over his little tantrum soon enough once I got back to Britain.

I checked the magnifying glass to make sure Yokai was still there. He was, but the spark of light that represented him was now moving around a lot more, probably making his own final preparations. I frowned, and made a couple quick adjustments to the targeting runes.

I drew my wand in a lazy circle in front of the runes, setting them moving in an equally slow rotation on the glass. I began to walk carefully backwards, holding my wand out before me, and the innermost runes lifted off the glass, dry slivers of paint hovering in the air, perfectly retaining their shape. The other rings began to shrink in diameter, and when each reached the same width as the first, it too would lift from the glass.

By the time my back touched the back wall of the hotel room, the rings had formed a long cylinder, which had begun to waver slightly, not from any breeze, but from adjusting to Yokai's movements in the building over. Assuming I got this right. But of course I did, I'm me. I quickly vanished the now clean plate glass window. Wind immediately began to buffet the room, sending papers flying and delicate glasses shattering, but the runes were unaffected.

Now, modern bullet wards could redirect or deflect almost any mundane projectile. Much more advanced than the antiquated stuff on the Terracotta Army that I'd been able to defeat. After all, no wizard wants the humiliation of getting shot dead in the street by a random muggle thug. Any clothing that you bought from a wizard tailor was expected to have at least basic ones embroidered into the lining as-standard. Yokai, as a wizard who regularly dealt with muggle criminals, would almost certainly have the higher-end ones.

Confounding these wards generally required either direct sabotage of the enchanted object itself - which was obviously not a viable option here - or the use of exotic materials I simply did not have on hand within the given timeframe. So I was going with option C: Just straight overpower them.

But charging this thing with enough magnetic energy to fire a projectile with enough oomph to overwhelm a high-grade bullet ward would take more power than I had. Hell, by my calculations it would take more magical power than a dozen wizards of my calibre could produce.

Which was where the alchemy comes in. Specifically, transmuting electrical energy into magical power. One of the first things Nick Flamel had taught me to do, once he was confident I wasn't going to accidentally blow out my nervous system doing it. Though I doubt he imagined I would be using it on the scale I was about to.

I knelt down next to an electricity receptacle on the wall and examined the small rune circle which
was wrapped around it - this one in Koine Greek. Making two very disparate scripts like Futhark and Koine Greek work together was an absolute bastard of a thing to do, but Koine was an alchemist's best friend and thus a necessity.

They were literally the only people who ever still used it, you wouldn't even find it in a Curse Breaking Mastery course, because it was utterly tits for anything that wasn't ritual alchemy.

I squeezed my eyes shut and covered them with my arm, and tapped the rune circle with my wand. At that instant, an awful lot happened across the entire city of Hong Kong.

Surge protectors and fuse boxes all simultaneously forgot how to do their jobs for about half a second, and every single electrical device that was connected to the grid across the entirety of Hong Kong abruptly lost power. The hotel room, though I couldn't see it, fell into complete darkness. For one impossibly brief, but incredibly slow instant, nothing happened.

An excruciating flash of blue-white light seared through the room, and despite my arm still being held tightly across my eyes, the light shot straight through both it and my eyelids. It damn near blinded me even then.

I gingerly opened my eyes, blinking blearily. The floating cylinder of runes was aglow, each rune practically a miniature star. I would have to be swift; this power wouldn't stick around. I snatched up a metal shot glass from the counter, and lobbed it into the receiving end of the cylinder.

It vanished in an instant, replaced by a solid blue line for barely long enough for my mind to register, yet bright enough to leave an afterimage burned into my vision as it was accelerated to almost a dozen kilometres per second. All of the runes abruptly lost all power, falling gently to the floor like the paint flakes they were. There was no great boom, no explosion that toppled buildings. Naught but the wind. Just as I had hoped. Like I stated earlier, I had hoped to avoid collateral damage and smoking ruins this time, and it looked like The flash from the power transfer had been unavoidable, but the enchantments to prevent heat and kinetic energy from bleeding off from the impact of the projectile must have worked just as intended!

I grinned broadly. Finally a scheme that went off without a hitch! I could almost dance a jig!

But I mustn't get ahead of myself. I scrambled over to the magnifying glass, and peered through. Wait, that can't be right. His pinprick of light was still there, not flickering or fading either. The impact should have obliterated most of his upper torso. I couldn't have missed, I doubled checked the targeting, triple checked even!

The pinprick disappeared. Which would have been reassuring if not for the crack of apparition behind me.

I whirled around, wand ready, and beheld my opponent.

On the bright side, Yokai had most definitely seen better days. His left arm was straight-up gone, nothing but a cauterised lump on his shoulder to show that it had ever been. He was breathing heavily through gritted teeth, his face twisted with fury.

On the downside, he had somehow managed to survive an impact that could shatter a mountain with that as his only injury. He must have somehow managed to get a full shield up before my toy fired, and a powerful one at that. I buried my rising concerns at my chances. Now was no time for anxiety.
'W-who!?' He managed to bite out in Canton. His remaining hand clutched his wand, which was spitting out involuntary sparks.

'Sorry friend, nothing personal. Just business, I'm sure a man like you would under-

My jaunty quip was cut off by a hasty apparition, as Yokai fired off something at me. I reappeared on the other side of the room, flinging a superheated filament to sever his other arm.

Yokai’s spell struck the wall and did absolutely nothing to it, but I was no more successful - the white-hot, razor-sharp band of copper wrapped itself around his arm like an ordinary piece of string. He wasn't even singed.

He rounded on me, and blue-green light began to shimmer along the runes on his arm. I cast a severing curse at him, it dispersed against him like it was nothing. Ah shit.

I barely raised a shield in time before he pointed his fist at me and a ripple of energy that tinged the air that same blue-green slammed into me, flinging me backwards. My back hit the window, which exploded outwards, and I was falling, falling, my wand thrown from my hand!

I toppled head over heels through the air, all sense of direction lost. I willed my wand to return to my hand, before -

Impact.

I slammed into top of a car at terminal velocity, caving in the roof and blowing out the tires in an instant. Had I been muggle, or even a lesser wizard, I'd have been killed instantly. I lay there, stunned, before I choked out a rasping breath. My back was broken, I knew that in an instant.

I held out my hand feebly, forcing my will on the universe. My wand. Give me my wand!

It slapped into my grasp, but I had no chance to celebrate. Yokai appeared with a harsh crack beside me. I could not feel him grasp my leg, but he must have, as I was suddenly aloft once more, slamming through plate-glass once again, tumbling across the ground. I finally slid to a halt, my exposed arms a mess of gouges and torn skin.

'Bezde admene' I mumbled in pseudo-slavic, and felt more than saw the wave of kinetic energy that burst forth from my wand at where I guessed Yokai to be. A great deal of crashing ensued.

I cracked open my eyes to see that I was in what had been an up-scale clothing store, though now much of the storefront was strewn across the street by my spell. A heavy-looking countertop went flying through the air as Yokai threw it off of him. Well it was nice to know something I could do by hand could affect him.

I quickly waved my wand over my chest, and felt a wet cthunk as my spinal column realigned itself and feeling returned to my lower body. Lesser wounds would have to wait, Yokai was coming at me again.

I leapt to my feet, and I didn't have to fake my desperation, sending out a dizzying array of dark magic, lacerators, bludgeoners, even a few Oblivates. He blocked them all, now grinning savage and bloody. He could strike me down easily, we both knew it. But he wanted some vengeful fun. His arm began to glow blue-green again.

At the last second before he fired, I whipped my wand in a great rising arc, incanting my favourite spell. A ten-foot cylinder of concrete, Yokai at its centre, erupted from the ground, surging upward and slamming him through the ceiling. I kept it up, and further sounds of destruction assured me
that the great monolith was continuing its path up through the building.

That was the key, I had realised. His shields were far too strong for me to penetrate, but their main purpose was negating spells. Actual physical objects, those could, at least to a slightly better degree, affect him.

My wand danced across what remained of the store, and metal bars tore themselves free from their moorings, scattering the clothes that hung from them across the ruined floor. In an instant, the hollow tubes crushed inwards, forming razor sharp, if makeshift, javelins.

An adrenaline-soaked heartbeat pounded in my ears as I pivoted, all senses heightened, to where I could somehow feel him apparating in. Time seemed to slow down as I piled as much force behind my javelins as I could, and they careened towards that point.

He appeared not with a crack, but with a thoom, a shockwave that shattered every remaining mirror in the store, and which sent my javelins soaring away from him, flipping end to end until they clattered uselessly to the ground.

My teeth grit, and I summoned an impossibly sharp spine of solid stone up from the earth between his legs. That caught him by surprise, and he cried out as serrated concrete sawed a hole straight through his thigh. Trapped!

'Avada kee-argh!' I cried out, my spell winking out at the tip of my wand. In an instant, Yokai's wand had whipped around, impossibly fast, and put a neat little hole straight through my right wrist. My Yew wand fell from limp fingers, and as I looked into Yokai's hawkish yellow eyes, I knew I was doomed.

I tried to disapparate, but I staggered as I slammed into apparition wards. Yokai sneered as two rune clusters, one on each of his collarbones, glowed a deep purple. 'No escape!' He taunted, sadism dripping from every syllable.

He shattered the spine of stone that had him pinned. His leg was healed in an instant, and he rushed me.

I hit him in the face with a rack of shelves, and it staggered him. I stumbled backwards, drawing my Holly wand from my expanded back pocket. That too swiftly joined its brother on the floor as he shattered my shield with a Zbax and landed an Expelliarmus. I was panicking in full now, and it was killing my wandless abilities, the focus requires slipping through my fingers like smoke.

I reached deep into my back pocket, and drew forth Czernobog's hammer. Fuck it, worth a go.

I swung wildly, and Yokai dodged with a dancer's grace, socking me across the temple hard enough to make me see stars. I hit the back wall. End of the line. The thought crossed my mind blearily, half-formed.

Yokai hefted the maul - what, when had he taken that? - and struck me in the chest. Blood spewed out of my mouth uncontrollably, and I sagged against the wall, unable to breath.

'Please!' I tried to say, but all I got was a bubbly rasp

Yokai turned the hammer in his hand, admiring it. The pommel was pointing right at me. He smiled beneficently at me.

'You proved an impressive combatant, whoever you are. It's been a long time since someone's been able to keep up as well as you have tonight. I'm almost tempted to let you live, but…'
He drove the hammer's handle forward, through my chest and embedding in the wall behind me. I
could do little else but gargle, my weight falling onto the ancient wood. Yokai lowered his head
next to my own, and whispered lightly into my ear.

'… But unfortunately I am not so foolish. Rest well, combatant, and know that you did better than
any could hope to.'

He drew back, and brought his wand to bear. Its tip glowed a pretty, familiar emerald green.

'Avada Kedavra.'

A/N: Please leave a review and subscribe to this story.
Shattered

I honestly contemplated setting this story to Completed after the last chapter, just to mess with people. But alas, I wasn't confident I'd be able to set it back to WIP after I did so. You win this round, general audience.

:-:-:-:-:

Brokenness. Worthlessness. That was all I could feel, as I hung bodiless in the void. My first clash with someone of real power, and he destroys me without even properly trying. I was a joke.

I mean really, the blistering arrogance of it. Me, the twenty year old who didn't even have my last two years of schooling, thinking of myself in the same terms as Albus Dumbledore and Lord Voldemort just because a different version of me became the latter decades down the line. I'm such a fucking idiot.

I would have to return soon, I knew. Even if I was a stupid idiot failure, there was still work left for me to do. But I didn't want to. It was safe in the void. Nobody could hurt me in the void. Here, I could just just curl up into a nonexistent ball and hide away forever. Who could stop me?

I sighed metaphorically into the emptiness. I could, is who. Come on Tom, you lazy fuck. We've got shit to do, and I might be a miserable idiot failure, but damned if I wasn't the only competent miserable idiot failure our side had on hand.

:-:-:-:-:

You may be wondering how I survived the Killing Curse. It's quite simple, really: I didn't.

The moment I had realised what Yokai was casting, I fled, ensconcing my soul within the Gaunt ring. My newly soulless body died, as bodies tend to do when struck with the Killing Curse. About a minute later, allowing time for my assailant to check my corpse and make sure I was dead, my countermeasures kicked in.

A tiny runestone, carefully implanted in my chest cavity, activated itself with a shock of magic-infused electricity that started my heart beating again. A secondary charge chilled my body's brain for twenty minutes, and then brought it back up to regular temperature, magic reactivating the neurons. This alone could not resurrect a person; if it could some alchemist or another would have stumbled across it by accident yonks ago. But it was a close enough semblance of life that my soul could leap forth from the Gaunt ring and resume control, crossing the gap and making that semblance a reality.

I was quite surprised it worked as well as it did, actually. I hadn't tested it before. Thank the gods for muggle theoretical medical journals. Thank the gods for me being bored enough to read a stack of them a few weeks back.

It wasn't immunity; it would only work if I was ready for it, and even then it was risky as hell. If I got struck with the Killing Curse whilst my soul remained in my body, I'd be permanently dead just like anyone else. If my heart was too damaged to beat, or my brain too damaged to think, the whole process would fail. If I took too long to pull myself back into my body, the whole process would, again, fail. But it was an effective and (in theory) semi-reliable defence, which was better than anyone else had ever been able to field against the Killing Curse. Well, save for Lily Potter of course.
Blood-crusted eyes peeled painfully open. The clothing store was pitch black, as was the sky outside. I'd no idea how much time had passed, but clearly it hadn't been too long. Yokai, mercifully, was gone.

Czernobog's hammer still remained speared through me, pinning me to the concrete back wall of the store. That's less than ideal.

On the plus side, I couldn't feel it. On the down side, that was because every nerve ending in my body ached like I'd sprinted a marathon in fifteen minutes. The Killing Curse was nobody's idea of a joke.

I was in no particular hurry to remove the hammer; it was a Dark object, and so the injuries it had inflicted, from the ruptured internal organs and shattered ribs to the lung it was currently plunged through, would be by far the most difficult to repair. Keeping it where it was at least helped reduce the blood loss.

Now, next important question. Had Yokai taken my wands as a trophy. He hadn't. Praise Merlin. My wands slapped into my hand at my call.

I carefully repaired my non-magical injuries. Shards of plate glass as thick as my thumb slid out of my flesh and the holes they left behind sealed over. Bones creaked as dozens of fractures undid themselves. Vision returned to my left eye in a rush - it was dark enough still that I hadn't even noticed I had been half-blinded until it was fixed. My mind cleared somewhat as the concussion was swept away like a month's worth of dust, but it still felt like I was dragging every thought through a foot of mud in order to formulate them.

Lesser wounds dealt with, I focused in on my chest. I pulled out the hammer in one swift motion, already casting the strongest healing spells I knew with my other hand. My ribcage rebuilt itself in a horrendous crunch of bending bone, and I spewed up a gout of gore as my left lung expelled that which had flooded it.

I tossed the bloodsoaked maul on the ground. If I was in a position to think any more fully, I'd be infuriated. Yokai, it seemed, had robbed me of more than my dignity. The hammer had changed, I could feel it implicitly. It did not respect me any longer. I knew then that I would never be able to wield it safely again, unless I faced Yokai once more and won.

I still ached horrendously, from every inch of my body. There existed no healing spell to help with the aftereffects of the killing curse. I was in thoroughly uncharted territory. I would have to either devise one myself or simply hope it fades in time. Perhaps the chalice would restore me - yes, that's the ticket.

I stood, slowly and unsteadily. I checked my watch - miraculously intact. It was a little under half an hour since I fired the rail gun. I could still try to save the Sato boy, and fulfil my debt in spirit if not to the latter.

I took a few experimental steps, and immediately dismissed that idea as I bent double and emptied my stomach on the ruined tiles of the store. Even post-healing, between the blood loss and the nerve damage I was in no condition for any sort of excitement.

I sat down, and waited for the greater wave dizziness to subside. I would have to torch the place of course, there was far too much of my blood and other fluids splattered across the place to leave lying around.

When I felt steady enough to stand, I conjured a gout of flame, which consumed the car I'd used as
a landing mat, and ripped through the store in moments. The magical flame would put itself out after a few minutes, long enough to destroy any trace of my presence. Why the Aurors hadn't already shown up was anyone's guess, but I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

I don't really remember much of how I got home. I have a vague memory of throwing far too many coins at a clerk, and vomiting on the floor of the British portkey centre on arrival. I must have apparated home - the portkey centre was in London - but I haven't a clue how I didn't splinch myself in the process. I stumbled upstairs, and flopped into bed without changing clothes.

I awoke an indeterminate time later, starving - hungrier than I'd ever been - and utterly parched. It was dark outside my window. My body still ached. I stumbled down to my kitchen, leaning heavily on the walls the whole way, and set some eggs to frying. I had to try twice - my first attempt was overzealous and put the frying pan through the kitchen window.

I sat, and cradled my head on the table for I don't know how long, sipping water from a straw so I didn't have to move. Eventually the self-cooking spell came to its end and an enormous plate of very burnt toast and eggs slid itself next to me. Far from my best work, but I forced it down.

I awoke with my face smushed onto an empty plate. I lifted my head woozily, not sure where I was, but too dazed to be very concerned about it. Ah, my kitchen. Wonderful.

The light of dawn was starting to peek through my still-broken window, a beam of honeyed rose warming my face and my soul along with it. I leaned my head against the surprisingly forgiving back wall and basked in it for a little. I shifted my foot, and crunched on broken ceramic. My mug of water, knocked over when I had passed out.

The chalice. I needed to drink from the chalice, not a mug. But Hufflepuff's cup was in the cellar. Could I make it down there?

I stood, slowly and carefully, clambered to my feet, leaning heavily on the wall. I felt far worse than I had leaving Hong Kong, which probably wasn't a good sign. I staggered along the wall to the staircase, and cautiously clambered down.

The cellar was as I had left it; dimly lit by the ghostly green light of the Stroj na golema's cloning tank. A small little lump of biomass floated in its centre, perhaps the size of my fist, still barely recognisable as an overlarge fetus. Not the most aesthetic thing in the world. I didn't bother turning on the lamps.

The chalice stood on its stout end table in a corner of the room, next to a basin of clean water. I hurried over as best I could, and scooped up a cupful, downing it immediately. At first I felt nothing. I slumped against the wall and slid down it. Had I finally met the match of Hufflepuff's healing prowess?

But as the minutes ticked by, I felt the gradual shift. The nausea and the migraine were losing their edge, slowly reducing to barely manageable levels, though the aching hadn't lessened. I knew from experience and experimentation that drinking more from the chalice would have no stronger effect, the healing was the same whether by a single droplet or the entire cup. But I was finally on the mend at the very least.
As the nausea receded however, I was overcome with a wave of pure exhaustion. That deep, in-your-bones kind of exhaustion that almost drove me straight back to unconsciousness. Fuck, how long was I sleeping before? I looked over to the clock and automated calendar I had mounted on the wall, and my eyes widened with shock.

I'd fought Yokai on the 27th of February. It was now the 3rd of March. No wonder I'd been so hungry, I'd been passed out for almost four days!

Another wave of exhaustion rolled over me. Now that I wasn't deteriorating, I was probably alright to sleep again. Probably.

I glanced askance at the chalice, and conjured a bed rather than returning upstairs. Best to stay close in case of a relapse.

:—:

The cellar, for obvious reasons, had no windows. With no daylight to rouse me, I wound up sleeping for another full day. Eventually I dragged myself out of bed, driven by the need for sustenance. Fish… if my hypotheses about what exactly the residual effects of the curse was doing to my physiology were correct, I would need a lot of fish. I had none in the house.

I was recovered enough to walk unaided without being on the verge of throwing up on myself again. Huzzah, progress. Time to ransack the Three Broomsticks.

I caught a glimpse of myself as I walked through my living room. I looked haggard. I looked like Sirius had after Azkaban. Sunken, bloodshot eyes glared back me from blackened sockets, greasy hair flopped limply on my head like a withered mop. My skin was sallow and clammy-looking. I'd never looked so hideous in my life.

I was still wearing the same ruined clothing, and I gave them an experimental sniff. I retched, and if I'd had food in me I'd have lost it. I could not go out like this.

I ignored the increasingly insistent rumbling of my stomach as I thoroughly purged four days of accumulated filth from my skin and hair, and summoned new clothing from my room.

Only I'd layered enough visual illusion over myself that I was confident that people wouldn't be able to detect my atrocious, horrendous appearance, did I set off. It was mid-afternoon, between the lunch and dinner rushes. Good, dealing with a crowd in my current state would probably make me snap and start cursing people.

As predicted, the pub was quiet, only a few pathetic-looking regulars who had likely been there all day, and whom Rosmerta was too soft-hearted to boot out despite one of them openly snoring next to his pint.

I fell into a booth like a sack of potatoes. There was a cold snap going - winter's final hurrah before surrendering to spring - and the brief walk from my house had dearly sapped my crippled strength. I recast my warming spell - much more effective now that I was indoors. Ah, now that's more like it.

Rosmerta was engaged in deep conversation with one of the drunks, and so a gangly youth came to give me a menu.

'Hello sir, would you like a drink to start you off?'

I took the menu he offered and tossed it aside without looking at it.
'Yes. Beer. Lager. Real stuff, not butterbeer. And give me all of the fried fish that you have.'

'Certainly sir!' The lad chirped cheerily, scribbling a quick note.

My eyes narrowed as he went to walk away. He acquiesced far too easily to that.

'Wait.'

He wheeled around, smiling amiably.

'I'm worried that what you just heard was "give me a lot of fried fish". What I said was, give me all the fried fish that you have. Do you understand.'

His smile faltered a little. 'I… I'll have to ask Rosie'

I waved him off. Hopefully he didn't decide to bring her over here, dealing with Rosalind Rosmerta's egregiously brummie accent was not what someone in my condition should be subjected to.

I was mercifully spared, as I soon found myself staring down a veritable mountain of batter and fried haddock, lager in hand. Time to get to work.

:—:

Weeks passed in a similar fashion. It was a war, my body and healing talents, against the blighted curse. Without the Chalice, it was a war I would have lost in a matter of days. I would sometimes spend several days at a time asleep, wracked by sudden surges of fatigue, and have to gorge myself on the days I was wakeful to prevent outright malnutrition. At other times I felt almost totally recovered, only to soon come crashing back down.

More worryingly still, I had not heard from Peter Hein since my dismal failure. His silence was, perhaps, more ominous than any wrath he might have brought to bear.

I'd looked into some news reports from magical Hong Kong since my return; the only research of any real use I'd been able to stomach in my convalescence. My spat with Yokai hadn't made the papers, though the power outage I'd caused did. More importantly, there was no mention of any massacre or terrorist attack in the intervening time. Perhaps my strike against Yokai had been enough to spare the Sato boy after all. Perhaps.

Eventually, I was forced to accept that my body wasn't getting any better. I wasn't getting worse either, mind you, but I couldn't keep on like this forever.

Thankfully, I would not have to. The Stroj na golema was doing its unnatural work well. That little fist of a fetus had been growing all this time I'd been degenerating. It was the size of a small man now, though still heavily undeveloped. I could only barely recognise myself in its smudged features. It would be my salvation, if I could last long enough.

I estimated it would be ready by mid-to-late June. It couldn't come quickly enough. Sirius was yet to come crawling back with an apology, and Garrow was out of the country. Trying to train or research just caused migraines after too brief a time to be worthwhile. I was stuck with nothing but my own thoughts. Which were… unpleasant.

My night terrors had increased in intensity dramatically in the wake of this closest and most recent brush with my own mortality. Yokai's face, twisted ghoulishly in my imagination, was burned into my mind as if with a cattle brand. He haunted me even in the Real, invading my thoughts whenever
I let my guard down.

I'd lost. Not to trickery, or bad luck, or by fighting at a disadvantage. I'd *lost*. That had never happened before, ever.

I'd had every possible advantage over Yokai, and he kicked my teeth down my throat whilst barely breaking a sweat. To say my ego had taken a hit was beyond an understatement.

I would have to change how I was going about things, clearly. I'd been ignoring the signs, the lesser injuries. I'd been confident that no wizard, or even group of wizards, short of Voldemort or Dumbledore themselves could throw down with me on equal terms and walk away the victor. I'd been a fool.

First things first, my new sleeve (or Tom Mark III as I had taken to thinking of it) would need even more augmentation than my current one. At present its structure was unchanged from baseline human, the same mixture of my own original genetic blueprint and that of the muggle man this body had once been, but that was easily rectified whilst it remained in the machine.

Unlike before, I was now thoroughly, intimately familiar with the inner workings of the Stroj na golema, and so could afford to be a little more daring with my additives. I had a few bits and pieces lying around the potioneeering and alchemy area of my cellar. Let me see…

Re'em's blood, of course. A classic necessity. Without its strength I'd have been dead to rights more than once.

Nemean Lion's hypodermis, for toughness. I would have to be careful with how I implemented this stuff, lest I come out covered in golden fur. But if I could get it right, this should let me walk away from being hit by a lorry without anything more grievous than a skinned knee. Dark magic would be another story of course, but every bit helped.

My hand hovered over the few inches of Demiguise skin I'd been able to get my mitts on. Instant wandless invisibility. Tempting, very tempting. But the last bloke who tried splicing demiguise biomass into himself became permanently invisible, went mad, and butchered his own wife and children. Far too much of a risk on my only other body.

I instead selected a phial of salamander blood - the magical, six-legged, loves-fire kind, not the mundane amphibian. It was a powerful restorative - of both magical and non-magical injuries - which should hopefully give me something of a native healing ability to deal with whatever the Nemean infusement couldn't handle. It would also render this body entirely immune to flame. Well, not Fiendfyre, but that didn't count.

I selected a handful more ingredients - boring stuff mostly, a lot of which I'd already put in my current body. Reflex improvement, heightened senses, the works.

I was about to ready them for infusing, but I noticed a slight trembling in my hands - what I'd learned was the telltale sign of an oncoming surge of exhaustion.

I sighed, and set down my equipment. Damn this accursed body.

:—:

It was finished. Finally. I beheld my new body, suspended in what had now turned pale blue liquid with a broad, if strained, grin. It looked identical to my current one - or rather how it used to look. my experiments had gone off without a hitch.
I pulled a lever and the fluid slowly began to drain from the tank, the body slumping against the back wall. With a hiss, the front of tank slid open, and I stepped in, removing the Gaunt ring.

I placed it gently on the body's middle finger, and released my grasp on my current form. I flowed easily through my ring and into my new sleeve.

__:--:

My usual grey-green eyes blinked open. Oh this was pure _ecstasy_!

After months in the ruined model, the joy of freedom was unbelievable. I hadn't felt this good in... ever!

I stretched long, lightly tanned arms out before me, waggling my fingers merrily. Yessss!

I looked down at my old sleeve. Oh sweet fucking Merlin, I hadn't even realised it had gotten that bad.

Months of chronic fatigue and a back-and-forth of neural decay and regeneration had withered me. The body looked like it belonged to a man twice my age, and was practically skin and bone. Ribs poked out even through my silk shirt, and you could see my teeth through my former cheeks.

I shuddered. It surely wouldn't have been much longer before something had crumbled within me for good. Thank all the gods for the Stroj na golema.

My perspective was slightly higher, I noticed. Perhaps a couple inches taller. Huh, side benefit.

I picked up my wand, and drew it across myself, vanishing the residual goop that still clung to my skin. I then used a Dark spell designed for ritual scarification to carefully recreate the curse scars that marred my previous body - it would not do to be unveiled by such a basic cosmetic error.

Just as I was admiring my new flesh in the mirror, my front doorbell rang. And rang again. It kept ringing in fact; someone was holding down on the activation rune.

I cursed quietly, and conjured temporary clothing.

The bell continued to ring as I hurried up the stairs, stumbling a little as I adjusted to my new height.

'Coming, I'm coming!' I yelled irritably, but the bell continued. For fuck's sake.

I reached the front door and tore it open.

'What?!!' I spat with vitriol.

It was Sirius, looking more haggard than I'd ever seen him - Azkaban-fresh included. He was still heaving in breath as if he'd sprinted a mile, finger squashed firmly against my doorbell rune.

'Thom-' he managed between gasps. 'It's... Harry... he's... he's gone!'

__:--:--__:--:

A/N: Bit of a shorter one this chapter. I didn't want Tom's recovery dragging on long enough to become boring.

I hope that I've adequately depicted his recovery from the Killing Curse as an actual difficulty,
rather than simply as a matter of course.

As always, please review and follow if you haven't already.
I stared at Sirius Black, standing there in the gathering dusk, for a long moment. Too long. '…Tom?' Sirius asked cautiously, breaking me from my contemplation, 'I fail to see what aspect of that is my problem.' I sneered, and went to shut the door in his face. Sirius shoved his foot in the way of the door. I looked down at it. I could have crushed it if I wished, but I stayed my hand.

His mate Lupin was with him. Oh fantastic, idiots in stereo. 'Tom, I know you're angry with Sirius-' 'You know nothing, werewolf..' I hissed furiously.

Lupin scowled, but didn't rise to the bait.

Intellectually of course, I knew that if Sirius had stayed in Hong Kong that night, Yokai would have killed him where he stood. That didn't change the fact that he had abandoned me to my fate. Now he returns, not with an apology, or a mea culpa. No, he only comes back when he wants something. 'Go cry to Dumbledore about your problems, Black. You abandoned me. Turnabout is fair play,' The words visibly stung him, as I knew they would. He'd uttered the same sentence several times during his year in hiding with me, ruminating on what he'd do to Pettigrew when he got hold of him. 'We've been to Dumbledore. None of his trackers are working. He's got Bones and the DMLE on it already.' It had started to rain, fat droplets already wetting down Sirius' hair. 'Wonderful, the fuck do you need me for then?'

'Because I've seen you track a bleeding Dark Lord across multiple continents is why! Who knows how long the Department will take with all their red tape? You're worth more than a dozen of them. I need your help, dammit. I'll say whatever sorries you want me to say, just please! He's the only family I have left.'

The desperation was written all across his face. He stepped back from the door; that had apparently been the best pitch they could summon.

I shut the door in their faces.

After all, I reasoned, the Potter boy was essentially a loose end, one I'd mainly left be due to my unfamiliarity with that strange protection of his. What did it matter to me if someone else decided
to do the snipping?

I walked into my sitting room, and perched myself comfortably on one of the armchairs.

For about four seconds.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, and exhaled heavily. Damn it all.

I tore the front door open, and stalked out into the street. Sirius and Lupin was still there, looking thoroughly forlorn. The former's eyes brightened with hope when he saw me.

'You're lucky I'm a better friend than you are.' I snarled. 'Where was he last seen?'

'This morning, around ten. It's a Hogsmeade weekend, him, Ron and Hermione were supposed to meet us at Lang's at six for dinner. When they didn't show, we started searching and asking students, and pretty soon we realised nobody knew.'

I went to look at my watch, only to realise I wasn't wearing it.

'Tempus' I cast instead.

It was almost 9pm - Scotland's sundown was extremely late this far into summer.

'Who saw them last?'

Lupin piped up. 'That we've been able to find so far, Filch - that squib caretaker prick. He says he saw them head to Hogsmeade with everyone else, but none of the students we talked to remembers seeing them walking down, nor in the actual village proper. Right now they've got a bunch of MLE patrolmen scouring the path to the castle for any signs of a disturbance.'

My eyes narrowed. Nobody remembered seeing them. 'Sirius, didn't you once mention that Potter has an invisibility cloak?'

'Yep, a really good one. Hasn't aged a day since his dad got it.'

'So they definitely could have been in the village, just invisible.'

Remus nodded. 'We were thinking that too. And there's only one reason I can think of for why they'd want to be invisible when they've all got Hogsmeade passes, and that's to sneak through someone's floo. We did it all the time when we were at Hogwarts.'

I nodded. 'That tracks. Have you hit up the Floo office for a list of all departures from Hogsmeade today?'

'They're compiling that as we speak.'

I smiled. 'Huh. Not as incompetent as expected. Alright, we'll start there. Just gimme a minute, I need to nab something from inside.'

I hurried out of my house a minute later. 'Alright lads, Ministry it is.

With a triple crack, the street was empty.

:—:

I snatched up my copy of the Floo transcript as soon as the nameless ministry worker cloned it in
triplicate for us. It was long - Hogsmeade was a hub like few others in magical Britain. I skimmed through the list, murmuring to myself as Lupin and Sirius did the same.

'Diagon… Puddlemere… Dover… if they went to Dover we're bollocksed'

The cliffs of Dover were the site of Britain's international portkey hub.

'None to Ottery St. Catchpole, damn, if only it were that easy. None to anywhere near your place in York either, Sirius.'

Sirius grumbled as he flipped through the pages. 'This is a waste of our time, there's hundreds of entries here, we're never going to find-

'Got something.' I interrupted.

Sirius gawked at me. 'What, already?'

'A brief firecall, then three trips from Honeydukes in quick succession, all to the home of one Norbert Leach, in Walton-on-Thames, at eleven o three.'

'What, ex-Minister Leach?'

I shrugged. 'Sure, I don't know. When was he minister?'

'In the sixties.' Remus answered absently as he examined the entry on his own copy. 'What makes you think this is them? There's hardly a shortage of three-man trips in here between ten and six.'

'Sure, but that's the one that fits the timeline best. We can assume they weren't intending to But it's a twenty minute walk from Hogworts to Hogsmeade walking normally. Three mid-teens under an invisibility cloak, they're going to be slowed down a lot.'

I started pacing back and forth. Truth be told, I hadn't been sure why this particular grouping had leapt out at me, but my reasoning was starting to come to me after the fact.

'My reckoning, they get to Hogsmeade between ten thirty to ten forty. Streets are crowded, they're slowed down even more trying to avoid bumping into people. Doubly so when they reach Honeydukes; it's utterly packed on Hogwarts trips. They manage to squeeze through, leave at three past.'

Sirius looked excited, but Remus was dubious. 'That's… kind of shaky Tom. Why would three teenagers want to visit a man who retired from public life before they were even born?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know. Let's go ask him.'

:—:

Old Nobby Leach's home was located right on the edge of the Thames in Walton, and it accordingly had a small dike jutting out onto the river from its rear. It was a modest dwelling, two storeys but slender. Though with wizards, that was no indication of the interior.

Night had fallen properly now, and the only sound was the pitter patter of light rain. The house was quiet and dark, no lights on inside and no signs of movement. I drew my wand as we approached.

I went to rap sharply on the front door, but as I struck it, it bounced inward a little. I frowned, and pushed. The door swung open with an extremely ominous creak.
My companions and I shared a dark look. Not a good start.

The mechanism of the lock had been vanished entirely, leaving a neat rectangular hole in the wood on the side of the door where it had once been. When I gripped the door handle, it came away in my hand with no resistance.

Leach's living room was pitch black, but Remus soon illuminated it with Lumos. What we saw was almost enough to make me wish he hadn't.

It was - nominally - a man, lain out on the living room rug. He was very old and very dead, thankfully in that order. That was about the only positive.

Blood coated the furniture, thick enough to tinge the room with a metallic stench I'd initially not recognised with this new nose.

The vaguely man-shaped lump of flesh on the ground had been beaten savagely with some blunt implement, his head caved in almost entirely. Bits of brain matter lay splattered around it. His wand lay, snapped, a few feet away.

Sirius went grey at the sight, and had to step out of the room. I could hardly blame him, this was... harrowing.

I grimaced. 'Nobby Leach I presume.'

'We should call this in.' Remus said, looking only a little green around the gills. Clearly, like myself, he'd seen worse. He flicked his wand and an enormous silver wolf erupted from its tip, soaring out the door and away into the sky.

'Sure, but there's no point in hanging around waiting for that lot. Let's take a closer look.'

Remus nodded jerkily, and muttered a spell. A near-invisible sheet of mist formed a few inches above the floor around Leach's corpse. The werewolf stepped up onto it, and it supported his weight, allowing him to get closer without disturbing the scene. Handy, I'd have to have him teach that one to me.

I stepped onto the misted platform as well, and we examined the body closer. I worked my wand over the corpse, but found not a trace of magic upon it.

'Well well, it appears the Muggle-Means Maniac or whatever they were calling him has crawled out of his little retirement.' I remarked. The newspapers had not been exaggerating the serial killer's savagery.

I'd seen no shortage of horribly mutilated corpses in my time - hell I'd created a few. But this was beyond the pale. Rage, like nothing I'd ever seen. Almost inhuman.

'Most of these injuries look post-mortem,' Remus remarked, peering closely. 'Especially on his torso. See how there's no swelling around the edges of those gouges? The lack of blood around the wounds? If I had to guess, the killer was frenzied, probably kept swinging until he wore himself out.

I quirked an eyebrow. 'I didn't have you pegged for a forensics nerd.'

'Sirius likes to say I am an everything nerd.' Remus responded tartly, now looking over the head.

Fascinating as the little glimpse into how lesser mortals did their homicide investigations was, it
was also a waste of time.

'Remus, I'm going to have to ask you to step out of the room for a bit.'

Lupin frowned suspiciously. 'Why?'

I winked. 'Trade secret I'm afraid. Worry not, mister Leach here will remain undisturbed for the Aurors when they catch up. Now if you wouldn't mind...'

He looked like he was going to protest, but ultimately shrugged mulishly and went outside to check on Sirius.

I erected a privacy charm, then turned back to the body. I sighed. 'Alright Nobby, let's see what you have to say for yourself.'

I turned the Gaunt ring on my finger three times, and the Resurrection stone lit the dark room with a dim opalescent glow.

The shade of Norbert Leach unfolded before me from nothingness. In death, he remained ancient-looking, though he moved and carried himself with the renewed vigour of a young man.

I humoured the pleasantries, as I'd become accustomed to them. Yes, this was the plane of the living, no don't get excited, you haven't been resurrected, no I'm not going to try and force you to tell me about the afterlife.

'What do you remember of today? Succintly.' I ordered, hastily adding that last modifier before he could begin. Like most bicentenarians, Leach had already proven in our brief conversation that "brevity" was an alien concept to him.

'Well I having having my usual morning tea and crumpets, buttered and jammed on the one side, just the way I like it, and with just a spot of honey to sooth this old throat—'

'I said succint.' I snapped.

'This is succint, dear boy. Now where was I... I was having my morning tea and crumpets, when all of a sudden, my floo lit up! "It hasn't done that in years", I remember thinking to myself, and oh what a surprise, but it was schoolchildren, wanting to visit me! Three of them, two strapping young lads and a very pretty young thing indeed. Why, if I were but a few years younger, I could have had h—'

'Shut up about the girl!' The degenerate's mouth snapped shut. My nose wrinkled in disgust. He was one of those old men. Got what he deserved, it seems.

'Why did they come here?'

'Well, one of the lads said something about my safety, but I wasn't really listening, I was distracted by the luscious—'

'Another word about your perversions and I will personally execute your entire living family tree.' I snapped. That, at last, seemed to cow him. Merlin, this man was once fucking Minister for Magic? No wonder my forebear had little trouble recruiting an army to overthrow a system that already massively favoured purebloods.

'Well, they started talking about some serial killer, it was quite offputting. I told them that there could be no such thing - our esteemed Auror corps would surely catch any such miscreant
I groaned. Of course the untrained teenagers were pursuing the serial killer in their spare time. I had not, and still have not, ever met anyone in my life so eager to fling himself into death's path unprepared as Harry Potter.

Leach was continuing his tale. 'Just as I was reassuring them that there was no danger, the front door flew open! It was a man I'd never seen before.'

'What did he look like?'

Leach scowled. 'Well I was getting to that wasn't I. Young people these days, not an ounce of patience. Why, when I was a boy-

'Yes yes, I'm sure that the High Elves were extremely polite in your day, dickhead. Answer the question.'

Leach probably would have refused to continue, but fortunately for me, the Resurrection Stone bound him to obedience.

'Pale, gaunt even. Hair like a mop of straw. Young too, mid thirties I'd say. He was holding a wand in one hand, and a claw hammer in the other.'

I frowned. The Muggle-Means Murderer was stealing my bit.

'He looked surprised to see the children there, as I would be too if you don't mind my saying. One of the lads said he was here to kill me, which of course is patently ridiculous. Nobody comes to murder someone using the front door! I was just telling them so when… why, I can't recall what happened next!'

That was normal, I knew. None of the dead I'd spoken to remembered the last half minute or so before their deaths. I wasn't entirely sure why this was, but probably had something to do with how memories formed in the mind.

'So he probably killed you then?'

'Oh my, I suppose he may have. How about that? Classic thuggery of today's young people.'

'Yeah, whatever. Is that all you remember then.'

'Of being alive, yes indeed young man.'

'Fantastic. Enjoy hell or whatever other hole you're in, degenerate.'

'Wait wait wait-!'

He winked out of existence and the Resurrection Stone went dark.

That wasn't quite as helpful as I'd hoped it would be, and it left me feeling sullied at interacting with… that.

A pair of apparition cracks sounded outside. Ah, the cavalry. I dismantled my privacy charm and strode out to meet them.

Remus and Sirius were already deep in discussion with Aurors Shacklebolt and - ugh, great. Dawlish. I sauntered on over.
'…I see, I see. Yes, a competent enough deduction, if a little elementary.' Dawlish was saying. Fuck me dead, he'd already started with this rubbish. 'Well I'm certain you've done your level best to avoid contaminating the crime scene, but if you would kindly leave it to our professional selves to do what we can.'

I grinned. 'Gonna trip and spill formaldehyde all over the corpse again, Dawlish?'

Dawlish went pink, and scowled.

'That was one incident during training, Grey. How do you even know about it. -No wait!' He interrupted as I was about to respond. 'I've already figured it out. You've been chatting up Diocles Meadowes, haven't you?'

Actually I'd learned it off Rosie Rosmerta, because apparently Instructor Diocles liked to gossip when he was on the sauce.

I faked a bashful grimace. 'Darn, you got me again, Johnny. How do you do it?'

Dawlish puffed out his chest. 'Some say I was born with the gift, but personally I attribute it to years of study and dedication.'

I nodded sagely, and bowed deeply, gesturing to the house with one arm. 'Of course, of course, and please, be my guest.'

Shacklebolt gave me a half-amused, half-exasperated look over Dawlish's shoulder, to which I winked heartily. He followed his colleague into the building.

'Did you get anything of use from… whatever it was you did in there?' Remus asked.

'Nothing immediately actionable. The kids were here, trying to warn Leach about the Muggle-Means Murderer, but I don't know what happened after Leach was killed. I do know our killer is a pasty straw-blonde bloke in his thirties who goes around with a claw hammer.'

Remus frowned. 'That's actionable. We can tell the aurors, they can start a manhunt off that description.'

'I very much doubt that our serial killer is going to be wandering Diagon Alley at the moment. He's just kidnapped Harry fucking Po-urhk-aaARGH!'

I bent over double, abruptly wracked by a horrific pain. I - what?

The last that I saw before my vision plunged into darkness were Remus and Sirius's shocked faces, shouting words I could not hear.

:—:

I slumped against the timber stake, shuddering uncontrollably. Beside me, Hermione whimpered helplessly, bound in chains and hanging from the ceiling by her hair. On my other side, Ron lay in a heap, only occasional twitching letting me know he was still alive.

I could barely make out the man who stood before me, reduced to a silhouette by the bright light behind him. He sneered, and raised his wand. He spoke in . 'So much for the vaunted Boy-Who-Lived. Crucio!' My world dissolved once more into unyielding agony.
'Tom! Tom!'  
I was being shook awake. My eyes shot open as I swung my arms wide out of sheer reflex response. My arm impacted on something soft and yielding, which went flying away from me with a wet thud.  

The night sky was drizzling onto my face. Somewhere to my right, someone was groaning lowly. I looked over to see Sirius laying on the wet earth, holding his cheat. Oops.  

I staggered to my feet as Remus helped Sirius to his.  

'What the bleeding hell was that?' Sirius wheezed.  

'You went bone-white and started having some kind of seizure.' Remus informed me, still looking very concerned.  

'A… a vision of some kind, I think.' I responded, similarly winded. 'Of Potter and his friends.'  

I elected not to include that I had been seeing out of Potter's eyes, and feeling his emotions.  

'You're a Seer now? Never mind - what did you see.'  

'The killer's got them, but they're alive. For now. I didn't see any environmental details, no idea where they are.'  

Sirius swore, and turned away, hands going to his head.  

'Can you get it back?' Remus asked me seriously.  

I grimaced. 'I can try.'  

Now that I'd experienced it, I did my best to force that same sensation. It was strange, like trying to force a sneeze, or starting a lighter that was too low on butane. I kept almost catching upon it, only for success to slip from my grasp at the last moment.  

Then, in a flurry, darkness swallowed me.  

[:--:]  

'Agony. I had passed the point of screaming some time past. I still made the motions, but naught was produced but the heaving of empty lungs.  

I was ready this time, less bound by Potter's mind and emotions. My - his - body was in tremendous pain, but I was able to dissociate from it, to think clearly.  

It wasn't quite possession. I sensed I had no control over the boy's movements (though this was moot, as he was immobilised), and I could not hear his direct thoughts, but I saw, heard, and felt everything that he did.  

The pain ceased, allowing for other sensations to filter in. I focused in on the details of my environment immediately. The floor beneath skinned knees - cold stone. The pole at my back - rough, untreated timber. I could feel myriad splinters already driven into the boy's back.  

The boy opened his eyes. The glare of witchlight near blinded us. I couldn't see the room at all.
Couldn't see anything but the silhouette of the torturer, holding a wand over us.

A voice. The kidnapper was speaking ‘...and it's really a shame how the misinformation spread after that - it really undersold just what we'd accomplished!’

'I... what?' Potter slurred. He'd somehow managed to avoid biting off his own tongue.

'The Curse! The Cruciatius Curse!' His captor shouted excitedly, brandishing his wand. Potter flinched, but no spell followed.

'After what we did, everyone got the wrong idea! It was so rarely used, you see! Grindelwald's lot barely touched it, they thought it was beneath them. They were wrong of course, it's a work of art, but that's why!' He emphasised this last point with his off hand, squeezing his index and middle finger against his thumb like he was trying to crush a beetle.

Potter's eyes were starting to adjust to the light. I could see a little of the room; the wooden slats that made up the ceiling, the dingy little bedframe that sat in the corner. A cellar, converted into a dungeon?

'They all think it causes insanity now - it's in the literature now and everything, I've looked! They're WRONG!'

He'd started pacing, gesticulating wildly. I could see more of him now - the same sandy-blonde hair that Leach had described, and a scraggly beard that spoke more of neglect than fashion. He was gaunt, and twitchy, riddled with little nervous tics. Whoever he was, he'd clearly been through some shit.

'You see, the Cruciatius doesn't cause madness. It causes pain, and if you hold it too long the victim's heart gives out and they die. But it doesn't cause madness! In fact, people recover better from the Cruciatius than they do from any other trauma! It's because the body doesn't associate it with a psychological event, it's just pain without a source! To do what we did, to keep the Longbottoms teetering just perfectly on the line between agony and relief, it took us weeks to do! It was art in its purest form, and now they just tell everyone it was nothing special! BUT IT WAS!'

He surged forward, grasping Potter by both of his ears and pulling his face close. The man's breath reeked of decay and stale gin.

'It was my father you see!' He hissed, barely above a whisper, as if imparting some great secret. 'I know it was! He was the one who made them change it, made them erase our achievement! He told me! Not with words, oh no, he never had any words for me after that day at the court. Not even when he dragged me from that wretched gaol! He told me with his actions. The way he looked at me, the way he locked me down here in this fetid hole of a cell. He imperiused me, you know. For years and years and years. I almost forgot how it felt to be alone with my own thoughts. But I know it again now!'

He tapped at his head excitedly.

'He couldn't hold me forever, oh no, an artist like me needs to be free! I cannot perform my art from a cell! I broke free of his bonds, and then I broke all of his bones!'

Suddenly he was holding a claw hammer. A perfectly mundane one, or so it seemed at least. Even relatively modern-looking. This did not make it feel any less menacing as he stroked it across Harry's cheek.

'Perhaps later I'll break all of yours... but first, I need to bring you to the Dark Lord. The Boy-
Who-Lived, the Boy-Who-Lived, oh what a prize to earn my forgiveness for taking so long to leap to his side! We. Just. Need. To. Find. Him. First.'

He emphasised each word of his last sentence with a light tap of the hammer on Potter's cheek, before whirling around and stalking out of the room. The door slammed closed behind him, and darkness reigned.

:—:

I came back to myself with a shudder. I sat up, shaking the cobwebs from my mind.

Remus and Sirius looked over from where they were again talking with Dawlish and Shacklebolt.

'I must say, even my deductive powers did not pin you for one to have fainting spells, Grey!' Dawlish chortled, clearly pleased to have apparently gotten one over me.

'Well we can't all rely on god-like observation skills like your humble self, Dawlish. Some of us get by on bizarre unexplained visions.'

'Are you certain you don't need to see a healer, mister Grey?' Shacklebolt interjected, looking concerned. Good bloke, Shacklebolt. Professional.

I laughed. This body couldn't be in better health if it had just stepped out of a cloning tank. Oh wait.

'No time for that lads, I think I know where the Murderer took Potter and his gang.'

Sirius immediately seized my shoulder. 'What did you see.'

'It was more what I heard. They're at the Crouch estate. The killer admitted that his first kill was his own father.'

They were flabbergasted. Clearly I was missing context.

Shacklebolt was the first to speak. 'Impossible! Barty Crouch Junior died in Azkaban a decade ago!'

'Apparently not. His father snuck him out somehow, and kept him locked up ever since. Well, until the obvious.'

The Aurors rallied relatively quickly from this revelation.

'We're going. Now!' Shacklebolt ordered, and as one he and Dawlish disapparated.

I looked askance at Sirius and Remus.

'I - uh, don't know the coordinates.'

Sirius slapped a hand on my shoulder, and with a pair of gunshot-like cracks, there were no more wizards in Walton-on-Thames.

:--:--:--:--:

A/N: My Barty is rather a lot more deranged than JKR's had been. I can only assume Voldemort did some reconstructive work on him in canon, that he was able to pretend to be anywhere near a functioning adult person given his life up until that point.
Please Subscribe and Review.
With a twisting of space, we snapped back into existence. I took in my surroundings; an ancient-looking paved road, set or sunken enough into the ground that either side was hemmed by waist-high mounds of earth and moss. Forest on all sides, save for where the path led. It was dark, especially with the rain, but lumos quickly solved that issue.

I inhaled deeply, but found nothing immediately distinguishing in the scent. Enhanced though I was, I was no bloodhound.

'Where are we?'

'Allerdale, near the Thirlmere Reservoir.' Remus said, straightening his battered coat. Honestly, why he doesn't just let Sirius buy him new clothes is beyond me. The latter had complained about the werewolf's obstinance on the matter several times. 'Come on, it's this way.'

We started to hurry off down the road. Up ahead, I could see Shacklebolt and Dawlish moving at a similar pace.

'So how do you know where Barty Crouch lives?' I asked.

Sirius grimaced. 'Crouch House was a bastion in the war; he warded it to all shit. If he kept them all active after the war, getting in won't be easy - actually we should probably get a message to Dumbledore.'

He shot off a Patronus, the silvery beast zipping off through the trees. I frowned. Still couldn't cast that spell.

We caught up with the Aurors, who were stood at the lip of a sharp incline, the stony path turning into stairs. Noticing that they had dimmed their wands, we did the same as we approached.

In the centre of the small but deep and perfectly circular basin sat what I could only assume was Crouch House. It was... a bizarre structure, and an absolute eyesore in this otherwise lush region.

It was squat, only two small storeys tall, with a flat square roof covered in black, vicious-looking spikes. It had crenellations, like a fortress, but instead of jutting up like a crown, as you would normally see, they thrust downward from the underside of the roof a metre or two out from the walls. It made the building look as if it were a disaffected youth. Witchlight shone from its windows like great luminous eyes.

'Why does it look like a teenager who's parents didn't hug him enough?' I remarked, ignoring the irony nobody else would get.

Dawlish piped up, excited as ever to flaunt every last morsel of even vaguely useful knowledge he had. 'Barty Senior had it built to spec after You-Know-Who razed Veiththall. Built it right in the crater of the old place, out of sheer spite. See the upside down walls? Reversed gravity on the walkways behind them; the defenders got all the advantages of firing down a hill without the vulnerability of long-range straight-line spells. That's just the start really, the-

'Fortunately,' Shacklebolt cut in. 'Most of the active defences were keyed directly to Crouch himself - Crouch Senior, excuse me. If he's been keeping his son prisoner here, we can safely
assume that Junior was keyed to none of them. He won't be able to use them.

'That said' He continued, looking at Sirius, who was clearly itching to rush in. 'We should still wait for reinforcements before we strike. In the mean time, we should set up an anti-disapparition ward around the premises; prevent him from running off if he detects us. Junior was trained by the LeStrange brothers, was supposedly their little prodigy. Even after years in captivity he'll be no joke to fight.'

Sirius scowled deeply while Shacklebolt pulled out a ceramic cylinder coated with runes, and started fiddling with it. 'The longer we wait, the more risk that that fucking basket-case kills one of them!'

'Crouch won't kill shit.' I murmured. 'He wants to deliver them to Lord Voldemort. Only reason he hasn't is because he doesn't know where he is.'

Dawlish was the only one in the group who flinched at Lord Voldemort's name, and he looked rather cross to realise it.

'You-Know-Who is dead! We all know it. He's been dead almost fourteen years! Crouch'll be delivering them to a grave.'

I winked at him. 'If Lord Voldemort is dead, why do you still get scared of his name?'

Dawlish flushed, and blustered for a bit, none of it particularly interesting. He was eventually interrupted by the arrival of Director Bones and a retinue of Aurors.

'Gentlemen.' Bones was looking her usual severe self, golden monocle and all. 'What is the situation.'

'Ma'am. The anti-apparition ward is up. We were about to begin securing the perimeter.'

'I see.' She eyed the structure - more of a bunker than a house - with a critical eye. She shook her head. 'Barty Crouch Junior alive after all this time… if Senior were still alive, I'd strangle him myself…'

She turned back to us. 'Do we know he is actually in there?'

'He was there ten minutes ago.' I piped up.

'What is the source of this intelligence?'

'Hither-to undiscovered Seer abilities, very reliable.' I cheerfully.

Bones made a stout, derisive noise that was probably her version of a snort. 'Wonderful.' She said drily.

'Where's Dumbledore?' Sirius asked, looking concerned.

Bones clucked irritably. 'He's in Rome. Emergency meeting of the ICW, something about an uprising in Asia. It couldn't wait, apparently. I'm sure we can handle one Death Eater without him here to hold your hand, Black.'

Sirius flushed, but apparently had no counter to that. At least not one he was willing to share with the head of Magical Law Enforcement.

:—:
Ten minutes had passed. The Aurors had taken their sweet time setting up the perimeter; a pair of aurors at each point of a heptagram around the edges of the basin.

If Crouch had noticed our presence, or that he could not disapparate from the premises, we hadn't seen any evidence of it. We knew he was still there though, or at least somebody was; we could see an indistinct figure moving past the light that still shone from the windows.

Against her better judgement, Remus, Sirius, and I had convinced Bones to let us join the breaching party. It did not take me long to regret my part in that persuasion effort, as Sirius's nervous foot tapping against the log we were sat upon quickly started to feel like it was beating a tattoo into my skull. That the drizzle had only intensified did nothing to assuage my irritation. Bones had ordered no unnecessary magic until the strike, which apparently included impervious charms.

Finally, Bones indicated she was ready to begin the attack. Seven of us, disillusioned and silenced, began to creep down into the basin, one from each point of the heptagram.

I could hear music, I realised. A soft, melodious tune, emanating from the house. Beethoven's 7th, second movement, unless I missed my guess.

I reached the house swiftly, this new body letting me almost glide across the wet mossy earth - hopefully my comrades would not be far behind. I could not, of course, actually see them.

I peered in through the front window, into the surprisingly opulent living room. That was Crouch alright, dancing heartily to the music carrying a very out-of-fashion set of women's robes in his arms like a partner. He looked like he was crooning to it, though the music obscured whatever he was saying. As he twisted and whirled, I could see his hammer clanking on his belt, and his wand in a sheath on the other side. Hmm.

I examined the glass between us carefully. It was almost certainly charmed nigh-indestructible. An issue, as I would not be able to dispel it or cut through it without setting off whatever alarm wards were set. Perhaps if I-

*ka-THOOM!*

An explosion, deep and bassy, damn near blowing out my left eardrum. A gout of earth and flame soared skyward from the western side of the house. Fuck! What the fuck was that!

Crouch dropped the dress, whipping around wildly. His wand and hammer were in his hands in an instant - damn, that still irritated me.

Fuck it, whatever it was, our cover was blown. Doubly so when Crouch made a wand movement, and a swooping sensation in my gut alerted me to the Homenum Revelio spell a second before Crouch turned in my direction.

'Sólis lysild!' I cried, and a thin, bright golden beam of plasma seared out of my wand, slamming into the window. My disillusionment failed, but it was no matter at this point. The glass glowed white hot for a whole second before the charm keeping it intact failed, and it exploded in a burst of burning, razor sharp fragments that bounced off the enhanced skin of my face without leaving so much as a scratch or singe.

Oh yes, I could get used to this.

The second the glass had held had given Crouch time to react, blocking the continued stream of plasma easily. I was quickly forced onto the defensive, slapping away an inversion curse and
leaping out of the way of the twin Cruciatux that followed less than a second later. His casting rate was insane! Literally - casting that many spells that quickly risked a serious psychotic schism. The Death Eater wasn't fucking around.

Then again, I thought as I copped a bludgeoner to my shoulder (which did absolutely nothing beyond shunting me back a few feet), he's a bit past worrying about his mental health.

I responded in kind, leaping through the shattered window and casting a spell that tore the entire fireplace off the wall and flung it at him. It shattered against his dome shield, which sprung into existence just in time to deflect a bright blue spell that had flown at him from the opposite direction - Dawlish, coming in through a broken window down the hall. The spell careened to the side and slammed into the record player, which exploded like a grenade had been shoved in it.

Crouch snarled, outnumbered, and stuck his wand to his throat. His next words were magically amplified, loud enough for everyone in the basin to hear.

'Canopy, canopy, canopy!'

Something - several somethings - erupted violently from the earth around the house. One was on my side of the house - fuck me running it was a fucking full-blown golem, in the classic Praha style. Fourteen feet tall at least, carved from what looked like solid granite, but would more likely be river clay, and inlaid with silver runic patterning that almost certainly granted some degree of magical resistance.

No active defences my arse.

I dodged a piercing hex reflexively. Shit, I'd been so flabbergasted for a moment there that I'd forgotten Crouch.

I ignored the golem, instead jetting a blistering array of curses at the Death Eater. He turtled behind his shield, but my final spell got through and struck him on his offhand. The transfiguration hex began to take hold immediately, the arm warping and twisting into a squid's tentacle. Crouch stopped it before it got past his shoulder, but undoing it would take time he didn't have.

Claw hammer hanging limply from the suckers of an arm he didn't have the requisite squid brain to control, Crouch fell back into a hallway. He launched a massive undulating black-purple mass at me, before Banishing Dawlish through a wall on the backswing.

I tore a pillar of stone up through the floor to intercept the mass, which sort of glomped onto it and began to devour it with shimmery tentacles of negative energy. I Banished it at him, but it passed straight through the man, dispersing the illusion like a cloud. Fu-

I threw myself backwards just in time to dodge a Killing Curse. Instead, I opted to cop a heavy Banisher, which blew me through the side of the house and rolling along the ground outside.

All around me, the basin was alight with spellfire, my compatriots both in the basin and ringing it above throwing everything they had at the golems. Well, that explains where my reinforcements were at.

I leapt up, raising a dome shield of my own, deftly dodging the occasional Killing Curses that passed through the shield like it wasn't even there. Damn his simultaneous casting, it was like fighting three men in one body. He wasn't even that strong, I'd have plastered him by now if it weren't for this bullshit.

I leapt a few feet to the side to avoid another Black-Purple Mass and spotted the opening I'd been
waiting for - he'd left his flank wide open. My wand was sparking and rumbling as I prepared to unleash thunder, when my foot hit something metallic. Next thing I knew, I was flying through the air, pinwheeling wildly, with a horrendous ringing in my ears.

I landed heavily against hard stone on my side, uninjured. My clothes were burning, flames licking uselessly against my fireproof body. I shook my head vigorously to get the ringing out.

Landmines. The brain-melted fucker had gotten his mitts on landmines.

I suppose that explains the explosion on the other side of the house. Poor sod likely hadn't fared nearly so well.

I suddenly realised the world was upside down - or rather, I was. I'd landed on the underside of the house's gravitationally challenged crenellations. My gut rebelled at the sensation, and it was fortunate this body had not yet eaten anything, else it would have been voided.

Crouch, probably assuming I'd been mulched by the mine, had turned away, now attacking my fellows. He caught Shacklebolt in the shoulder with a nasty-looking piercing curse. Shacklebolt cried out, wand dropping from suddenly limp fingers. The golem he was fighting caught him in the chest with a brutal swing, and the auror flew two dozen feet, slamming into the dirt. He did not rise.

Taking advantage of Crouch's lapse, I rose (or was that sank?), weaving my wand in a complicated pattern and chanting in Korean. Two columns of dirt roused themselves from the ground, writhing and forming into a gigantic pair of earthen serpents.

Crouch turned, far too late. The serpents lunged - one for him, one for the golem. The latter whipped around the stone construct, binding its arms and legs and forcing it to the ground, allowing the aurors to chip away at it as it struggled furiously.

Crouch's serpent was not nearly so successful. Though even that madman was momentarily startled by the transfiguration, he recovered quickly, blasting massive chunks of it away in a flurry of bludgeoning curses.

I took a moment to quench the flames still licking at my tattered garments, and then came at him myself. Fighting someone upside down like this was taking more than a little getting used to, and was something that Crouch had clearly trained in himself. The duel was tipping down in his favour, driving me to shelter behind the walls.

'Incendio! Incendio! Incendio!' He roared, and a river of flame that would put a dragon to shame surged from his wand to consume me.

Just the kind of error I'd been waiting for. I threw my wand aside for its safety, and let the fire flow across my skin, leaving me untouched. I drew my hands into the same swift kata I'd once used on the island of Ibiza, drawing my raw magic to the fore. Lightning fractured the air between he and my hand, and he cried out in pain.

He staggered back, electrical burns like tree roots already seared across his flesh. I could see panic in his eyes. He flung his wand skyward.

'MORMORDRE!'

A jet of green light shot from his wand, exploding like a firework in the sky. A thousand motes of emerald starlight sprung from it, forming themselves into a skull, with a serpent spewing from its mouth like a tongue. The Dark Mark.
I summoned my wand and flung a final spell at Crouch, but it was too late. He disapparated, the Dark Mark letting him tear straight through the anti-apparition wards with an enormous crack-bang that made the remaining windows of the house rattle.

I swore violently, but the battle wasn't done; the golems remained. It took several more desperate minutes of fighting to bring them low.

Finally, the last of the six golems fell into disparate boulders, shattered by Remus's curse. The rest of the party sagged, exhausted. Not me. I felt like a million galleons. I felt *alive!* A full-bore throw-down with a major Death Eater, and I had walked away without a scratch whilst he fled in terror.

I've still got it.

'Um, Tom?'

I turned to see Remus, looking very embarrassed and waving his hand nebulously around his crotch. I looked down, and realised I was completely naked. The fires Crouch had summoned had disintegrated my conjured clothes entirely.

'Oh.'

:—:

After a hasty reconjuration of garments, I led the way back into the ruined house, positively swaggering. We'd lost only a single man; Auror Greene rendered to so much meat paste by the magically-enhanced landmine. Not a good way to go. Even Shacklebolt had survived, though they'd rushed him to St Mungo's in critical condition. I'm sure he'd be fine.

It took us a while to find the stairs to the cellar, hidden as they were beneath the floorboards of the master bedroom. But when we did, I danced a little jig down them. One two one two.

The staircase ended in a solid iron door, locked and bolted in a dozen places. I tore it off its hinges with a flourish, and there they were. The Golden Trio, looking more than a little tarnished in the dingy dungeon.

Sirius rushed past me, taking Harry in his arms, showering him in rushed apologies and platitudes. Remus and an Auror hurried on in with him, attending to the other two.

Tuning out the sappy crap, I examined the cell. It was barely wide enough to fit the three children side by side, and devoid of furniture save for the practically paper-thin mattress in a run-down metal frame. The floor was industrial concrete, it hadn't even been smoothened, even though such would take less than a second with magic. On the far wall there was a series of many little circular bloodstains, like something fleshy had been slammed into it over and over. This was where Crouch Senior had kept his son? For fourteen-odd years? That's ghoulish even by my limited standards of familial affection. No wonder he'd gone thoroughly off his nut.

Making my way back upstairs, I began to help myself to Crouch's things. With everyone else thoroughly distracted by the hostages, it was an ample opportunity to get first crack, plucking little valuables here and there as I ambled through the house. A ruby statuette of a horse here, a gleaming Goblin-silver knife there, who would even notice?

Finding the master bedroom was easy enough - it was the only still furnished bedroom in the house. It was easy to tell that Junior had moved in shortly after the forensics team had finished cleaning up his father's murder - the bed was surrounded by family photos with Senior's head burned out as if with a cigar. Junior, it seemed, was a mummy's boy. Reminded me a bit of Enid
Pettigrew's little shrine, only in reverse.

I found a box under the bed - more of a slender trunk really. Its protections were laughably standard-issue; didn't even protect from brute-force. I tore its lid off in less than a second.

A number of items lay within, stacked upon a pile of documents - trophies, it seemed, from Crouch Junior's attacks. There was a bunch of stuff - Leach and Bagnold's Orders of Merlin for being Ministers for Magic, a little pile of wedding rings, a couple of wands, and a little pile of silvery fabric, almost like a liquid.

Well. Well. Well. Somebody up there was tossing me favours.

I snatched up the fabric - it was indeed as I'd hoped, Potter's invisibility cloak. In wondrous condition too, just as Sirius had described, not a tear or faded patch on it. I passed my hand underneath the fabric, marvelling as the material turned invisible where it was covering my flesh. Oh this would do nicely.

It was only reasonable, after all. I'd saved the Potter boy's life. I was due a reward even if I hadn't anticipated one, and a prize like this would do far more good in mine own hands than those of a teenager with a hero complex.

Hearing footsteps in the hall behind me, I hurriedly stuffed the cloak into my back pocket. The cloak could fold far, far smaller than its size suggested, but even then it still bulged cartoonishly without a space expansion. Damn it.

I wheeled around to hide the bulge just as Director Bones walked into the room. She looked at me, then down at the open box at my feet.

'Really, mister Grey? Looting?'

'I'm sure I don't know what you mean, madam Director. I am merely searching for evidence of where our perpetrator has fled.' I smiled charmingly. Women of any age never could resist my smile.

Bones quirked an eyebrow, unimpressed.

'I see. I'd ask that you leave that to my people, if you don't mind. Civilians tend to get their…' she looked pointedly at the top of the box, where my hands had left imprints on the metal where I'd torn it open. '…fingerprints on everything.'

I knew a "fuck off" when I heard one. I sidled past her pseudo-casually, careful to keep the side of my body where the cloak was stuffed out of her line of sight. As soon as I'd gotten a wall between us, I quickly conjured a nice puffy bomber jacket, and moved the cloak into it. Phew. Much more subtle.

:—:

I did not hang about for very much longer. The longer I stayed, the more I risked my new accessory being discovered. Besides, they didn't need me around for the clean-up, and I didn't need Potter having any more excuse for developing his weird hero-worship. The irony was just too much to bear.

I apparated home, still exultant. I swaggered into my living room to celebrate with some Scotch, and almost had a heart attack when I switched on the light.
"Goedenavond, meeneer Riddle," Peter Hein drawled in Dutch, perched upon my favourite armchair. A folded newspaper lay upon his lap. He looked irritated, a far cry from his usual overtly cheery demeanour.

I managed to avoid cursing him on reflex, but it was a near thing.

'Why have you broken into my house, Hein?' I snarled in the same language.

'Oh believe me Tom, I'd rather not have had to make the effort. But my hand has been forced, in this regard.'

He slapped down the newspaper onto the table, and leaned back in his chair. His gaze twitched noticeably and almost involuntarily towards my hand, which was clutching the Invisibility Cloak. But he didn't comment on it.

'Tomorrow's paper. Go ahead, take a look.'

I picked it up. Plastered across the front page was a picture of the Dark Lord Yokai, hands on his hips and wearing a malevolent scowl I knew all too well.

DARK LORD SEIZES HONG KONG

Taiwan, Singapore at risk?

I quirked an incredulous eyebrow at Hein. He didn't look amused.

'I set you a task, Tom. You failed to see it through to completion. These are the consequences. Hundreds dead, thousands now at risk.'

I chuffed derisively, but looked away.

'I did my best. Kind of hard to kill a man after he pushes your face through a building.'

'I selected you because you were believed to be competent. I don't choose failures.'

That was a little harsh.

'You know, it was Sirius' gig too, really only fair that he be around for the chewing-out, and he just got his godson back so frankly it's-'

'I didn't choose Sirius for this task. Nor did he choose to see it through. I chose you. The failure falls on you.'

I scowled. 'I saved the boy, didn't I?'

Hein looked away. 'True, you drew to avoid cocking it up completely. Your attack distracted mister Ishida a great deal, and allowed mister Sato's handlers to move him somewhere safer. So kudos in that regard. But Ishida was scheduled to die that night. That you failed to enforce that makes things more complicated. Which means more paperwork. I hate paperwork.'

I rolled my eyes at the cliche. 'Do you plan on telling me what's so important about Sato?'

'No, I don't think I will,' Hein said delicately. 'That is need-to-know information.'

I was truly becoming tired of this man yanking me around.
'Then why exactly are you here?!' I shouted in English, suddenly angry. 'Sorry if this bursts your bubble, but the whole mysterious enigma act got old around about our second encounter. I'm not going to fight Yokai for you again, the last time left me damn near dead! So you can either tell me what you want instead, or you can get the fuck out of my house, you pseudo-Dutch cunt!'

All emotion drained from Hein's face, leaving only an alien, indescribable expression that set my teeth on edge just to behold. He rose, and I realised he was taller than me, almost looming over me no less. Had he always been taller than me? How hadn't I noticed that previously, I'm bloody six foot seven-

He was gone. Before my eyes, without a twist or a faint pop of apparition. No rush of wind, no flash of light, no nothing. There one second gone the next, as if I'd blinked and missed something. But I hadn't.

My face coiled with fury and frustration. Fucking. Fuck. I'd let the prick leave me with more questions than bloody answers, again!

Worse, for a brief moment there, he'd scared me. Ruined my otherwise perfect evening. I was done with feeling scared. I lashed out savagely, kicking the nearest piece of furniture - the coffee table - with all of my might. It exploded into a thousand chunks of wood, showering the entire room.

It didn't make me feel any better.

:-:-:-:-:-:

A/N: We have not, of course, seen the last of Crouch.

I would be curious to know what people make of Hein, being as he is one of the only fully OC recurring character I have introduced. Any theories or speculation?

Please do remember to hit follow if you haven't already, and leave a review!

Alternative title for this chapter: Crouching Death Eater Hidden Rockboys
Gerard Delacour rocked back on the balls of his feet. He puffed out a low half-whistle, half sigh.

'This is a hell of a thing, Tom.’

The rune-riddled chest I had recovered from the kurgan of Czernobog Devil's Son sat on the ground before us, the array etched across its ebony surface glimmering innocently.

'But can you do it?’

I'd had a silver stroke of luck, running into Gerard in Hogsmeade. He'd finally returned from his business in South America, with a heavy tan and a couple ropy new scars slashed neatly across the backs of his hands. I hadn't asked for details. He'd returned to Europe just in time to watch his daughter - hopefully - win the Triwizard cup tonight.

Gerard scratched his stout triangular beard. 'Yeah, I think I can. It'll take quite some time though, and it won't come cheap, even with, uh, friend's price?'

'Mate's rates'

'Ah yes, mate's rates. Yes, it'll still likely end up costing the eyes out of your head even with that, I'm afraid.'

Price was no object. Whatever Lord Voldemort had entombed with this much protection would be well worth the effort - perhaps even one of our horcruxes!

I clapped a hand on Gerard's shoulder.

'Whatever it takes, my friend. Will you need to take it back to Carcassonne?’

He looked contemplative. 'Most likely. I'll start a closer inspection the day after tomorrow I think - that is if I'm not still too hungover from celebrating Fleur's victory!' 

I made a jokingly derisive noise. 'Bah! More like drowning your sorrows after Diggory reminds you lot of your place!' 

Gerard chortled at that, and the posturing continued on for some time before we left to go see the Task for ourselves.

:—:

I pulled my coat a little closer closed around me. A summer evening it may be, but it was windy as all-out-get up in the Quidditch pitch stands. I'd forgotten how cold they could become, having rarely spent time in them as a student outside of the odd private tryst. The heating charms on the thing were shit.

Far below, the Maze that represented the Third Task lay sprawled out across the length of the Quidditch pitch, dark and forboding, hedges stretching twenty feet high or more. On the eastern end, fog enshrouded the entire area, ending just slightly below the tops of the hedges. The hedges moved too, constantly reconfiguring themselves, making it impossible for an onlooker to attempt to create a map of the thing.
The organisers for the event had clearly learned from the errors made in the Second Task - three great pyramidal displays hovered over the stadium, each one showing an image fixated on one of the three champions as they received their final preparations and pep talks. Once the champions entered the maze, these displays would show the action around them, and floating markers in red, blue, and yellow, invisible to the champions themselves, would signify their position in the maze to the audience. Far overhead, Department of Magical Sports and Games official flew in figure eights over the pitch, ready to assist if one of the Champions fell.

I eyed the screens, Fleur's in particular. I was fairly confident that Sirius's proclaimed convictions about any further interest I might have were just an attempt to needle me, but nobody could deny the girl was pleasant to look at. Her father was with her, no doubt giving her some last-minute advice. The Champions were allowed to bring additional magical objects with them into the maze so long as they created them personally, and so a chain of single-use runestones jangled from the the belt of her jeans.

The stands were utterly packed - I wouldn't be surprised if the majority of magical Britain were here, as well as more than a few foreigners. Hogwarts stadium may have never been so full, ever. Just as I always say, there's no sport like blood sport.

I spied Sirius, Garrow, and Remus fighting their way through the crowd, carrying drinks and snacks. I scared off a trio of young witches wearing Haileybury Hammers scarves from taking the seats next to me with a cold glare.

Sirius settled in next to me with a cheesy grin. Our friendship had solidified once more in the wake of Potter's kidnapping. I'd never admit it aloud, but it was a good feeling.

Krum was first to enter the maze - Karkaroff's blatant favouritism having given him an unfair edge over his otherwise closely-matched competitors. At the first firework, he shot off into the maze at a loping flat-footed sprint. He could afford the energy - among other things a draught of Rejuvenation potion was strapped to his belt.

It was not long before he encountered resistance - an Acromantula twice the size of a man, caustic venom practically dripping from its fangs. It leapt at Krum, and the young wizard dropped to the ground, the impossibly vast spider sailing overhead. Krum flipped himself onto his back, and flung an immolation curse at the monster, but the curse simply washed over it, scorching off the thick hairy hide and leaving only gleaming carapace behind.

I was fairly sure that wasn't how spiders actually worked, but the Dark wizards of antiquity who were usually behind the genesis of such creatures were seldom trained zoologists.

Krum rallied, charging the beast with his now-trademark roar of defiance. It charged right back, but at the last second Krum leapt, vaulting up and landing astride it. He drove his wand between the plates of its exoskeleton and just started firing off piercing curses until it stopped moving.

The crowd roared their approval as he staggered up, and continued on.

Soon enough, Fleur, then Diggory entered after Krum. What followed was almost an hour of harrowing conflict, as the three Champions faced and bested everything from Sphinxes to Manticores to some hideous faceless scorpion-like monstrosity I'd never seen or heard of before.

'The fuck is that thing,' Garrow exclaimed, face coiling in disgust.

'Blast-Ended Skrewt,' someone grunted from behind us. I twisted to see a curly-haired kid in a Ravenclaw scarf. 'Hagrid's had us looking after them all year, they're a menace!'
Any spell Fleur flung its way bounced back at her off of its thick grey shell, and unlike an Acromantula, trying to leap astride this thing was a good way to get a huge chitinous sting through your back. A blast of flame from the thing's rear end engulfed her, but the flames simply parted around (or perhaps were absorbed by?) her Veela aura, leaving not only herself, but her clothing untouched.

I frowned. My salamander upgrade couldn't do that.

She yanked a runestone from her belt, and threw it down on the ground between them. The Skrewt ignored it entirely - to its doom. As it scuttled over the palm-sized bluestone, Fleur shouted what I assume was a command word, and the bluestone abruptly sprouted a spike that shot skyward, piercing the soft underbelly of the monster, running straight up until it protruded from between two of its armour plates.

The Skrewt twisted and writhed like a beetle on a pin, a pin which glowed white hot and the Skrewt cooked around it until it stopped moving. From Fleur's expression the stench must have been horrendous.

The Veela leaned heavily against one of the hedges of the maze - dense and sturdy as any wall - for a brief moment before carrying on.

Diggory had it no easier than his competitors, though his trials were more… esoteric. He had somehow managed to end up in the eastern end of the maze - the foggy section.

He fended off a Hinkypunk easily enough, but then rounded a corner and found himself face-to-face with… himself?

But this Diggory was older, and… colder. The angles of his face sharper, his skin alabaster, his eyes glacial grey. Upon his forearm was a tattoo I recognised as the Dark Mark.

The younger Diggory staggered back, horrified. He said something to it, and the older Diggory began to walk toward him. The former whipped up his wand, and shouted something.

Evil Diggory stumbled back. His pants fell around his ankles and he tripped, flopping onto the soft grass. Younger Diggory barked a shaky laugh, and ran past the Boggart.

Remus nodded approvingly two seats down. 'Always nice to know that my lessons actually stuck.'

And on it went, for almost another hour. Muggle audiences would probably have gotten bored after a while, but this was a wizarding one - our world's most popular sport could stretch on for days. The Third Task always took the longest. It was for this event that the Weighing of the Wands was first introduced - only a well-matched, well-functioning wand would allow the Champions the magical stamina required to get through the whole thing without becoming exhausted.

Several times one of the Champions came close to the centre but the hedges would realign and send them off in some other direction without them ever realising how close they had come. It was herding them, I realised, keeping the event going.

Sure enough, when they finally reached the centre, it was all three of them at once, each coming into the clearing from one of three equally spaced out openings.

Delacour, Krum, Diggory, all stared each other down across the perfectly circular fifty foot little arena, none of them wanting to take the first step and be made a pincushion by the other two.

In the perfect middle point of the Quidditch Pitch, equidistant to all of them, was the Triwizard
Cup. It was a glorious thing to behold, sapphire panels that glimmered with an inner light, fitted into a pure iridium framework. Though our view through the displays was not close enough to make out the finer details, I knew that etched into the iridium were the names of every single past Champion to ever lift it above their heads in triumph.

I grinned, leaning forward in my seat. This was exactly what I'd been hoping for. Time to see what three of the best wizards of their generation could do.

A beat passed.

Krum and Diggory broke in the same instant, sprinting full bore at the Cup. Fleur was no fool - both men were taller and faster than she - and so she instead went for her belt, slinging a runestone at the Cup.

It struck, and a shockwave of energy exploded outward, throwing both Krum and Diggory backwards and off their feet. The Cup and its pedestal stood utterly untouched.

Fleur began her own sprint, and for a brief moment, with her counterparts in piles on the ground, it looked like victory was within her grasp.

But that, I suppose, was the trouble with competing with a pair of Seekers. Swooping in at the last second is quite literally their job.

As Fleur reached within a meagre few feet of the Cup, Krum distangled himself enough to wave his wand, and a sweeping blue arc of magic flew forth to catch the Veela in the shins. She went down like a preternaturally graceful sack of potatoes, beaning her head hard on the Cup's pedestal. A blast of wind from Diggory sent her sliding back across the damp grass.

Diggory managed a few steps forward, before leaping back to avoid Krum's stunner. The two began to duel in earnest, soon joined by Fleur. The Veela looked furious to have had an easy win snatched away, her features already beginning to warp into an intimidating avian visage. The trickle of blood from the fresh cut across her forehead only enhanced the effect.

She tossed a leg-locking jinx Krum's way and flung a bolt of flame at Diggory with her off hand. Diggory yelped, quite surprised, and barely managed to skitter out of its path. For pity's sake, did he do no research on his opponents at all?

The Hufflepuff stuck to his roots; the C.A.T.S. system - Conjure, Animate, Transfigure, Succeed. Iron chains exploded forth from his wand, surging at Krum like flying, writhing serpents. A fire-hose worth of water geysered from the boy's wand at Fleur, turning the already damp grass and dirt around her into a muddy quagmire as she blocked it.

Krum, faster and more agile than either of them despite his height and frankly awful footwork, wasn't bothering with shields. He deftly dodged Fleur's jinxes and blew apart Diggory conjurations, and hammered back at them with hexes of his own.

Diggory pivoted, bringing a wall of earthen stone crashing out of the ground between himself and Krum, and gestured his wand in Fleur's direction. A great mound of dirt swelled up from the ground and warped into a full badger transfiguration, thrice the size of a real one. His wall swiftly crumbled under the weight of Krum's siege hexes, and the Hufflepuff turned back to him.

Fleur slapped the badger in the face with a fireball, but it drove forward even as its fur charred of its flesh. Piercing spells slammed through its skull, but still it charged. She rolled frantically out of the way at the last second, her long, physics-defying hair flowing behind like a dancer's silvery
ribbon. Too slow.

The badger caught her by her trailing locks, yanking her off her feet with a scream. It dragged her bodily through the mud, screeching all the way. She flung cutting spells at it as best she could, gouging deep into its side, and the ground around it. At last she caught it in the neck, cleaving its head straight off.

A ghoul shous blood spurted from the creature's neck, already beginning to turn back into soil as the transfiguration finally collapsed under all that damage.

Fleur stumbled to her feet, looking thoroughly shellshocked. The other two Champions had clearly decided that she was out of the fight, as they'd turned from her completely to contend with one another. They had not seen her kill the badger.

The Veela took advantage of their lapse, seizing a brief few moments to recover herself. Then she snatched another rune from her belt and flung it high in the air.

It went off like a firework, raining bolt after eldritch bolt down upon her opponents, the darts of flaming silver magic changing course as the boys moved. Diggory caught one in his shoulder, and he cried out as his entire arm went limp.

He hurriedly threw up a dome shield, huddling beneath it to do what little battlefield healing he knew. Krum summoned the same shield he'd used against his dragon in the first task - the metal fire simply could not touch him.

That, however, was a mistake. For the flurry of flame failed to cease, and the strain of maintaining his shield quickly became obvious on Krum's face as the duel drew on. Worse still, the dragonslayer's shield did not protect him from the spells of his foes, and so his exertion was compounded by dodging as Fleur leapt back into the fray.

He gritted his teeth, and drew his wand through a complicated dance. A brilliant flare of light burst from his wand that was bright enough to blind the screens that showed their battle. A pillar of golden yellow light shone from the centre of the maze like a beacon of the gods, before petering out. The screens faded from solid white to show the floating runestone destroyed, and Krum throwing an empty phial over his shoulder - his rejuvenation potion.

The Bulgarian dove back into the fray, his opponents still disoriented from the light show. He was now fresh, and they were anything but.

Diggory was the first of three to fall - between a Rejuvenated Krum and a literally superhuman Fleur, he didn't really stand a chance. A flare of Fleur's aura seized command of his attention, and a bludgeoner from Krum slipped under his guard to catch him in the gut. The boy doubled over, winded, and stumbled right into the path of a pale blue spell from Fleur. His arms snapped to his side as he went rigid, and tumbled to the ground like a board.

And then there were two. The crowd was thundering, a small wave of black and yellow in the East stands sounding absolutely furious.

The Champions of Durmstrang and Beauxbatons regarded each other for a long moment - Krum standing strong, Fleur still preternaturally dignified despite a thick coating of grime and muck.

They erupted into energetic motion in mirror; Krum casting curses and conjuration as Fleur flung fire and phantasm. Tangible tiger met illusory eel and passed through unperturbed. Each Champion slapped away the other's sorcery, but both took the other's bait.
Krum yelped and leapt out of the path of the false eel, larger than a man, but its tail - the only real part of it - whipped around and caught him in the back of the knee, hard. His flat-footedness at last caught up with him - he tripped and hit the dirt hard.

Fleur scorched the tiger in the face, only to have it explode immediately, a shockwave which sent her flying back. She landed in a heap at the edge of the impromptu arena.

The two scrambled to their feet, and slung spells in the same instant; bludgeoners which collided with an echoing bang! and a flash that momentarily blinded both of them. Or so it seemed. As Krum staggered and shielded on reflex, Fleur reached behind her and pulled her last runestone from her belt, pelting it in Krum's direction. Wait, no. The Cup's direction. It landed with a little puff of dirt a few feet away from it, right in Krum's path.

Fleur broke into a dead sprint at the Cup. Krum, still blinking away the flash-bang effect, was momentarily stunned at the audacity. After all, he was about a fifth the distance from the thing that she was. He too booked it for the Cup. The poor fool must have hit his head hard when he tripped to have fallen for that ruse.

Sure enough, as he passed over the runestone, it lit up, mercifully not shooting a spike up through him. Instead, a pulse of white blue electricity erupted from the stone, engulfing him.

He fell, shuddering and twitching uncontrollably. He still gripped his wand in spasming hands, but he was far from fit to use it.

Fleur finished him with a stunner, kicking his wand away for good measure, then turned to regard the Cup. The crowd was losing their collective shit, the French section alone enough to deafen a man.

She strode a little victory lap around the Cup, really playing it up for the crowd. Her features melded seamlessly back into human shape. A few waves of her wand, and the mud sloughed off of her and her clothes. After all, it wouldn't do to look less than perfect for the photographs.

Finally, she leant forward and confidently seized an arm of the Cup, and vanished from the maze in an instant. She reappeared at the entrance to the maze, to a hailstorm of snapping cameras and cheering supporters.

:—:

The partying, inevitably, spilled into Hogsmeade. Two-thousand-odd French revellers swamped the place, filling every bar and pub they could find.

Sirius, Garrow, Remus, and I ended up in the Hog's Head, the only place that wasn't utterly packed - perhaps it was simply too rough for delicate French constitutions. Then again, it was truly a shithole. I hadn't been in the place since... gods, late 1941, when I finally managed to sweet talk Rosmerta's predecessor into serving the old gang alcohol. I'd never looked back.

We clinked filthy glasses that Sirius and Remus absolutely refused to let us clean with magic.

'It's all part of the Hog's Head experience, Tom!' Sirius exclaimed cheerily.

I snorted. 'What is, going to St Mungos to have them cure the stomach cancer we'll get from drinking out of these?'

Remus chortled. 'Oh it used to be much worse in our day. Ministry swept in about a decade ago and told old Abe to clean up his act or lose the bar. Now he keeps a copy of the minimum hygiene
requirements under the bar for whenever they come to tell him off!'

That got a good chuckle from the group. Garrow slammed his first firewhiskey sour in about three seconds flat, and signalled the barman for another. That gave me a moment's pause, even by his usual standards.

'You alright there Gary?'

Garrow grimaced. 'Fine. Just... had a frustrating few weeks. I'll, er-' he glanced at Sirius and Remus. 'I'll discuss it with you later. Suffice to say my business abroad didn't go as I'd hoped.'

I opened my mouth, but before I could speak, we were interrupted by a kerfuffle at the bar. Something smashed and there was abruptly a great deal of shouting.

I turned around to behold a ridiculously dressed man, visibly drunk off his arse, arguing very angrily in French with the barman. Who apparently spoke the language. The Hog's Head was full of surprises.

The man was in full regency attire, looking like he'd just stepped out of a Georgette Heyer novel or something. Garrow groaned, pinching his nose with irritation.

'Fuck me dead. Pyrites.'

Sirius started. 'Argo Pyrites? The Death Eater?'

I turned sharply to look at the man again. Nothing Dark-wizardy jumped out at me, but then I suppose it'd be a stupid thing to go around broadcasting.

'Yeah, not that they ever managed to prove it. Poncy dick got off on the Imperius defence, then fucked back off to France without looking back.'

Pyrites must have finally crossed a line when he started talking shit about the barman's mother. Wands were drawn, and for a long moment it looked like we would be treated to a show to go with our drinks. Then Pyrites turned on his heel and stormed out of the bar. Boo.

Sirius went to get up, clearly in the mood for a little ex-terrorist hunting. I grasped him firmly by the shoulder.

'S'not worth it mate. Williamson's on patrol tonight, you know he'd love a fresh excuse to have a go at you.'

Sirius sneered, but settled back into his seat.

'Fine, but you're going shot for shot with me or I'm gonna go curse him anyway.'

I laughed, but I eyed the door warily. It was nothing, I reasoned. Just another Frenchman here for the tournament, there were probably more than a few dark wizards among them just by law of large numbers. Why should one of them suddenly be significant just because I can put a name to his face?

I shook my discontent away as the barman brought more drinks over to the table.

:—:

Garrow let out another low groan from my couch. I looked up from my book with a light grin.
'How're you feeling, Gary?'

'Go away.'

I laughed aloud, and he cringed at the noise. 'I'm starting to think you might be right when you complain about getting too old for this. Can't even keep up with the youngsters anymore.'

A blatant lie. Garrow had drunk us all under the table and kept going. The only reason I was so spritely was, well…

'Ugh. Fuck you, give me the damn potion.'

'Now is that any way to talk to your saviour?'

Garrow responded with an epithet that would have made a soldier blush. I chuckled, and finally handed him a phial of Dr Ubbly's Hangover Remedy.

He drank deeply, and colour returned to his face, bloodshot eyes clearing up.

'Bloody lifesaver that.' He said gruffly, straightening up.

'Indeed. Now, let's get some breakfast in you, and then you can tell me about this thing you didn't want to talk about in front of Sirius and Remus'

His expression fell, and he eyed me, still a little bleary.

'Merlin Tom, it's a bit early to be bringing that up.'

'That's what the eggs and bacon are for, now hop to!'

:—:

Garrow placed his knife and fork neatly back on his plate, and leant back in his chair. He eyed me once more.

'I don't know why you're so damn curious. For all you know I might just be protecting boring trade secrets.'

'Yeah, but it's not, is it?'

He sighed. 'Do you remember a couple years ago, you asked me to track down any other ex-Death Eaters that we could draw to our side, in the event of your counterpart's return?'

I nodded. 'Yeah, you said you didn't find anyone you felt safe approaching.'

'I didn't. But… well, I decided a few months ago that I wanted to make another go of it. So I went to find Hugo.'

Ah.

Hugo Rosier. One of the surviving members of our little band from our Hogwarts days. After Mad-Eye Moody killed his son in battle, he went into self-imposed seclusion.

I leaned back in my chair and puffed out a breath. 'I thought we agreed we were going to leave him in peace.'
'I know. But he's the only Death Eater I know we can trust. And he could know of others.'

I grimaced. 'Did you find him?'

He shook his head. 'No. I spoke with his daughter, Corvia. She politely declined to have anything to do with me. So I went it alone.'

'And you didn't involve me because…?'

Garrow looked a little uncomfortable.

'It's… Hugo lost as much as Andy did to that war. It destroyed him. I decided if we're bringing him back into the fold, it was best to do it slowly. Rocking up to his cabin or wherever is with a Proto-Dark Lord in tow, that's not the way to handle it, not at all.'

I scowled. 'You could have at least told me.'

'I should have.' Garrow conceded. 'I'm sorry I didn't.'

I sighed. 'Where'd you search?'

'The Rosiers' British holdings first. Then what remains of their French ones. Then the Swiss ones. Then combing through their off-the-books stuff, what little I could dig up. Zilch. Wherever he is, he's very determined not to be disturbed.'

'Do we know if he's even alive?'

'Corvia did confirm at least that much.'

I looked out the window for a time, watching the light rain play across the cobblestones of Hogsmeade's streets. 'So where does that leave us?'

Garrow let out a huff, and made for my liquor cabinet. 'In need of a stiff drink. You in?'

+=':-:-:-:-:=

A/N: Little something of an interlude chapter, for Tom at least. Next update may come a little later than usual, like this one did. I'm in the process of manually importing my character and worldbuilding notes from Scrivener to Campfire, which takes up a lot of my writing time each day. But it should hopefully make it a bit easier for me to keep track of secondary storylines and so on.

Please subscribe and comment!
Out Of The Woodwork

A gloved hand hung outstretched, suspended and splayed above parchment marked with a sigil older than most nations, seven times seven rings of runes, interlocked and intermeshed into a formidable symbol of power.

In the other hand, grasped tightly, a thin disc of radiant sapphire, similarly marked, the furrows neater and more miniscule than could ever be carved by mortal hands.

I intoned, in a low and commanding pseudo-latin, my eyes fixated upon my subject. A long and drawn out incantation that ended with 'Quaisto revelaro, ego mandato!'

The sky, open and blue, began to rumbly lowly with thunder. The runes glowed a deep and sinister ultramarine, the sapphire glimmering with a pulsating inner light that built, slowly and surely, to a mighty crescendo!

There was a spluttering noise, like a muggle lawnmower failing to start, or a particularly childish poltergeist blowing a raspberry, and the parchment rippled, then caught fire, brilliant blue flames leaping several feet high and setting my sleeve alight. The light in the sapphire winked out.

I doused my sleeve with a flexing of will, cursing under my breath. The subject of my spell merrily swooped me on broomstick, causing the nearby teaset to rattle at his passing.

Harry Potter sliced through the air on his Firebolt, waving cheekily back at me. The pick-up game of Quidditch continued high over an array of conjured picnic tables where adults were still laying out food.

I bent my face into a wry smile up at him, but inwardly my gaze was baleful. Another failure. The boy continued to confound every divining spell I threw his way.

We were in rural York, on the parcel of land that the ministry had gifted Sirius as a 'sorry we locked you in a hellscape for a third of your life' present. You'd never guess that the sleek postmodern manor house upon whose balcony I was standing was only a little over a year old.

It was late July, and Sirius had invited me to Potter's fifteenth birthday party. I'd only agreed as a pretext for my latest attempt to unfurl precisely what had caused my visions, this ability to see through Potter's eyes - something I rarely partook in, but had now honed to the point that I could do so at will. I could only assume it had something to do with his defeat of my other self, but damned if that helped any.

'Tom! Stop messing with the weather and get down here before the sausages go cold!'

Sirius waved merrily at me with a set of tongs. I pocketed the sapphire disc with a huff and vaulted over the railing, landing catlike on the hardwood deck twenty feet below.

'Show-off.' The Animagus rumbled good-naturedly.

As my body moved through the motions of socialisation, my mind remained at work. I greeted the Weasley matriarch with a polite smile and tolerated hug. That had been the most powerful revealing spell known to man, and it had abjectly failed to find anything extraordinary about the boy beyond what I already knew. He wasn't especially powerful, nor was he especially related any
more closely to my original genetics than any other half-blood in Britain.

I laughed heartily at one of the older Weasley siblings' jokes, clapping him on the back. He was quite good looking actually, if one looked past the punk-rock aesthetic he seemed to favour.

There was the matter of that esoteric protective magic that still lingered over him from his mother's sacrifice, but that was designed to protect him from me, quite the opposite of granting me access to his senses.

Only two avenues remained on my quest for an explanation, I concluded, dueling over sausages with the twins using conjured carving forks. It had something to do with soul magic, which notoriously tended to defy detection spells at the best of times, or it was some serious Old-World shit that Lord Voldemort did to him as a baby. Possibly Atlantean even - he had the only one in the world with an Atlantean grimoire on hand.

Either way, this left me somewhat without a heading as to what to do next. I knew where Lord Voldemort had gone after China - a single note on an immigration ledger in Sydney, Australia noted a "Hector Drágen" passing through the city. But I was forced to wait out the summer for Sirius to be free. Garrow was remaining steadfast in his refusal to go adventuring overseas with me.

My musings were interrupted by a sharp crack-bang! of apparition. Dumbledore, side-alonging the oaf Hagrid. The former was looking what was probably his idea of resplendent in robes of violently neon green, and his eyes flitted across the partygoers to fixate not on Potter, but on me. Probably not a great sign.

My fellow partygoers all cheered at the sight of them, and rose. I remained seated, meeting Dumbledore's gaze stonily.

What could he be after, I pondered, as the rest of the table filtered back to their seats with the newcomers in tow.

Sure enough, he cornered me in the kitchen not ten minutes later when I went to get a beer.

'Good afternoon, mister Grey.' Dumbledore greeted me congenienally. 'I would hope to trouble you for a moment of your time.'

'Sure.' I said shortly.

'I've been chatting with Sirius quite a bit over the last few weeks, he's told me some of the tales of your adventures, following the path of Lord Voldemort's travels. I admit I find myself impressed. It's a rare individual who can track such a man when he did not wish to be found.'

I scowled at the flattery. 'Get to the point.'

He regarded me for a long moment. '…I shall get down to brass tacks then. As you are no doubt aware, I find myself once more in need of a new Defence Against The Dark Arts teacher.'

'What happened to the last one?'

Dumbledore looked grave. 'Alas, poor Alastor has been hospitalised. A singularly virulent strain of Spattergroit.'

I winced. The aged nutter was a shitbird, but that was a hellish way to spend six-to-nine months.

'I was hoping that I might persuade you to assume the role.'
I blinked. And blinked again.

'Excuse me?'

'I would like you to be Hogwarts' Defence teacher in the coming year.' He reiterated, still smiling that pseudo-grandfatherly smile.

I… this was the last thing I'd been expecting.

'You… do remember that I maimed a pair of teenagers six months ago, yes?'

Surely even he wasn't that irresponsible.

Dumbledore's face lined slightly with disapproval.

'I do, and you may rest assured that such means of punishment shall face dire consequences should you attempt them at Hogwarts. I admit, you perhaps may not have been my first choice in better circumstances.

'But, alas, I once more find myself with many doors shut in my face, and bereft of options. You are the current most suitable candidate. Do you accept?'

I hadn't thought about teaching since… gods, the 40s. A stint as a teacher had been an integral part of my original plan for dominance over the wizarding world. Shaping hearts and minds for a few decades would have made the process infinitely easier. Dippet's - and later Dumbledore's - rejection of my other self was probably a significant factor in why a quieter takeover of Wizarding Britain had not occurred.

Removed from the context of such a plan, the idea was not nearly so appealing. It was irritating enough dealing with teenagers on the rare weekends they were allowed to visit Hogsmeade, much less all day every day.

'I think not, Dumbledore. I rather enjoy my life without your yoke around my neck. Formulating lesson plans and patrolling for brats sneaking about after dark is a waste of my time. Especially not with the life-threatening curse that would be hovering over my head.

Dumbledore looked crestfallen.

'I see. I admit, I cannot claim to be surprised by your answer, Tom.' I twitched involuntarily at his use of the name, and I could tell he noticed it. 'But I had hoped otherwise. Alas, if you should change your mind, my door is open.'

'T'll keep that in mind.' I noted sarcastically, and turned my back on him, returning to the party.

:—:

Cold. Dark. The sound of fat droplets of water tearing themselves loose from the craggy stalagmites above to come crashing down on the cave floor.

It was a hateful, maddening place. Which I suppose was the point. The barely perceptible clink of chains far behind me only reinforced that conclusion.

The pool of water that lay inverted upon the ceiling began to ripple, then exploded downwards, a humanoid shape shrouded in shadow tumbling through. It landed on by far the most out-of-place object in the room; a carefully positioned modern trampoline.
The figure rolled off the trampoline and straightened. Barty Crouch Junior, his face and arms still marred with livid, root-like scars where he had been savaged with lightning. He was carrying a tiny cage, which he dumped on the ground.

With a flick of his wand, the cage unshrunk and unlatched. The muggle calf within awoke with a start, and leapt to its feet, jabbering in rapid Turkish. It demanded to know where it was, who we were.

The noise agitated our host, if the groaning of metal and shuddering of chains were any indication.

'Dinner, Nagini' I hissed in Parseltongue, and a great bulk of scales and muscle to my left shifted, and slithered forward.

The calf’s eyes widened at the sight of the enormous serpent, and tried to pull its cage closed again. The gate did not shift.

It tried to run. It did not get far.

A few minutes later, a fatter Nagini coiled up by my side once more. I turned to look at Crouch, who had been waiting patiently for the show to be done.

'Report.'

'My lord. The Iranian cache lay undisturbed. I was able to secure your package.'

The Death Eater reached into his coat and withdrew a phial of dark russet powder. He waggled it at me triumphantly.

'Good. Good. And the Scot?'

'Handled.' Crouch asserted firmly.

I looked up sharply at that. 'You’re sure?'

'Yes my lord.’

That was very good news. Much better than expected.

'We will move on the boy soon then.’

'Yes my lord.' Crouch hesitated. 'My lord, you did say, before I left…'

'Of course. You have more than earned your reward, Barty. Come closer.’

Crouch hurried to kneel before me. I reached out a long, spindly, impossibly pale hand, and it latched hold of his head in an iron grasp.

He whimpered, and began to twitch feverishly. His eyes rolled back in his head, and his breath came out in short bursts.

'Oh Barty…' I crooned, my fingers burrowing, clawlike, through the flesh of his scalp, through his skull. 'What a mess they made of you. Worry not, for I am here now.’

I downed a draught of hangover cure from my bathroom cabinet, and splashed some water on my
face. Blech. I knew I should have been more suspicious of the bottle of green fluid Sirius had offered up last night.

Weird dream though, I mused as the residual alcohol fled my system. I was used to night terrors, but there hadn't been anything all that terrifying about that one. Hell, whatever that grog was, if it was going to give me restful nights for once, I might just have to stomach it. Even it did taste like sipping knives.

I wandered down to my kitchen and scooped up Nick Flamel's most recent offering - one of Paracelsus' own handwritten alchemical journals. The Swiss wizard had been one of the Flamels' previous apprentices, so apparently they just had prized original editions just... lying around. Go figure.

I flipped through it idly over breakfast, until a Daily Prophet owl arrived to drop the morning newspaper in my lap. I glanced down at it and stiffened.

**BARTY CROUCH JR SPOTTED IN TEHRAN**

*Death Eater running scared?*

The alchemical journal fell to the table forgotten. I tore through the article in an instant. It was painfully short on details, mentioning only that a Welsh witch on holiday had spotted the Death Eater prowling through a bazaar.

I dropped the newspaper, thinking hard. Not a dream after all. A vision, in the same vein as my insights into Potter. Indeed, I should have recognised it sooner.

But that didn't make sense. I certainly had no recollection of any such similar bonding magic being cast upon me by my other self. Unless...

Fuck me dead. The boy was a Horcrux. But that made even less sense. Why would Lord Voldemort make a living Horcrux out of a baby, unless... had the boy in truth been yet another copy of my insane older self, hiding his true nature behind a guileless grin and a famous name?

Yet even that raised more questions than it answered. Surely if that were the case, he would have revealed himself during our showdown in the Chamber of Secrets. Furthermore, the boy's sacrificial protection was powerful enough to render my flesh and bone to dust at the merest touch, surely it would prevent such possession. Especially over such a vast period. Hell, even if the Horcrux had simply remained a silent observer, the boy's nervous system would have collapsed from the strain before he was out of nappies.

I shook my head irritably. Too many variables, too many maybes, I wasn't going to solve this over breakfast.

Tabling that problem, I thought back to the rest of what Crouch had said. Figuring out what the russet powder was for sure would be impossible without a sample, there were simply too many materials of that colour. Could be anything from powdered Manticore bone to pulverised Rwandan Heartflower.

He also mentioned a "Scot". Not very useful without further context.

Most importantly of all, my other self had finally nabbed himself a corporeal body of some sort - though based on what I could see of its forelimb, it was far from humanlike. A homunculus perhaps - a glorified bag of bones and organs that represented the first stage in Herpo the Foul's preferred means of resurrection.
Now *that* was immediate actionable information. Lord Voldemort had been a fool to leave Herpo's Grimoire in the Chamber of Secrets, no matter how safely secluded a place he may have thought it.

I made for my cellar. Time to ruin his plans before they could even get off their feet.

:—:

'Åž-Rêth' I incanted in a low voice, and a brief yet brilliant flare of shimmering cyan Fiendfyre roared into existence before me. It washed over the accumulated pile of bones, all that remained of every ancestor I could find in Little Hangleton's graveyard. The impromptu ossuary vanished without a trace - sublimated by the all-consuming heat. It was soon followed by the flames themselves.

That, hopefully, ought to slow Lord Voldemort down a good way. Herpo's ritual could not function without bone material from a direct ancestor. I'd already visited the site of Wool's Orphanage - now converted into a riverside office building - and torched my mother's remains as well. And the office building, for that matter, but that was more for nostalgia's sake.

It was possible that he already had secreted away some bones as a contingency against this exact course of action - some of the older skeletons had been incomplete - but there wasn't really anything I could do about that.

I filled the empty graves with decoy skeletons laced with poison, sourced from morgues across the county, and took my leave.

:—:

It took me less than an hour to decide that I hated Australia.

We arrived by Portkey in Sydney, and quickly hopped onto a train to take us out West. It was… rickety to say the least. Worse still, it was hot, that kind of wet heat that made you feel like you were drowning a mile above sea level.

'Bloody Merlin!' I moaned to Sirius, as the train once more shuddered and rattled. 'This is more nerve-wracking than taking the floo blind-drunken.'

'How much longer is it?' He ground out, looking somewhat grey.

I looked at the map on the wall. We'd barely passed Parramatta.

'Ages.'

Sirius swore. 'Fuck this, let's just apparate and risk it.'

I shook my head firmly. 'Not a chance. Last thing we need is to materialise in a Bunyip's lair or some shit. We need a guide. Unless you want to spend twenty-odd years learning a few hundred hours worth of songs in languages you don't speak.'

Australia was unique. Steeped in magic more ancient and esoteric than any known. It responded unpredictably to outsider sorcery, and frankly I'd had more than my fill of unexpected turns on our outings.

European sources on Australian magic - even ones written by the immigrant wizarding populations that skirt along the edges of the continent - were infuriatingly vague. Most of them directly contradicted one another, and there was only one concrete thing they agreed on: Don't try for
magical travel into the heartlands unless you have an Aborigine Songwalker to aid you.

And so here we were, in this death-trap of a train, on our way to meet the only known Songwalker that lived anywhere close to civilisation.

They call him Peggy Jim.

:—:

Hours later, the searing sunlight (in bloody September, for crying out loud) was slowly turning over to the last creeping fingers of dusk. We'd survived the train, emotionally scarred perhaps forever, but intact. A mercifully air-conditioned bus ride and a long walk later, and we at last approached our destination.

The small house was… positively archetypal. Embedded in Australia's idiosyncratic brushland, with a corrugated tin roof and slightly misshapen brick covered by cheap white paint. A wooden verandah in dark green. A battered hills hoist clothes line slowly turning in the evening breeze, its tee-shirt sails flapping in the wind. It could have handily replaced any house in rural New South Wales without anyone really noticing.

I narrowed my eyes. This was the place.

We crossed the yard without ceremony, and rapped sharply on the flynet door.

No response.

I hammered on the door again, as hard as I dared without denting the metal.

The door screeched open, revealing a stout Aboriginal man. His hair and beard were long and greying, and he leaned heavily on a crutch. His left leg was missing below the knee.

'Morning mate.' Even with just two words, his accent was thick, his cadence abrupt, his tongue unused to English.

'Good morning. We're looking for Peggy Jim.' I glanced down at his stump leg pointedly. 'I take it that'd be you?'

He grinned at us, revealing gleaming, surprisingly well-cared-for teeth.

'Yeah mate, that me. You wanna come in?'

I quirked an eyebrow. 'Do you usually offer up your home to anyone who shows up out the front?'

He laughed. 'Nah mate, not anyone. Just wizard.'

I looked at Sirius, then down to myself. We'd been careful to dress as muggle as possible.

He beckoned us in. Well alright then.

His house was a single, broad room, not counting what looked like a bathroom. The ceiling was low, and there was an earthy mustiness in the air.

Peggy Jim hobbled across his home with a practiced ease, and flopped into what was presumably his favourite armchair. He lit up a cigarette like an afterthought, despite his flawless dental health.

'You bloke, you want me to take you inland?'
'How did you know?'

'That the only reason any wizard come to see me. Any white wizard anyway. Where'd you wanna go?'

'About twenty, twenty five years ago, you acted as a guide for this individual. Do you remember him?'

I laid an image, artificially reconstructed, of Lord Voldemort post-House on the table. Peggy Jim's upper lip gnarled at the sight.

'Yeah mate, that a hard ugly bastard to forget. That one was malingee, no doubt. Red eye, yeah?'

I didn't recognise the term, but from the spiteful way the old Aborigine spat it, I could get the idea.

His cigarette was already down to the filter, and he tossed it into a little metal ashtray before lighting another.

'But you still acted as his guide?'

Peggy Jim looked a little uncomfortable. 'He paid well, so I took him where he wanted to go. Wasn't anywhere sacred.'

'Excellent. Then we need you to take us where you took him.'

He sighed, unsurprised.

'You have money, yeah? Not-magic money?'

'Loads.'

'...We have another cigarette and then we go.'

I glanced at Sirius, who shrugged. 'Do we... pay you now?'

'Nah not me mate, not me. Later.'

He gestured loosely at the pack of cigarettes lying on his coffee table. I plucked one out, and lit it with a spark of willpower. I tossed one Sirius' way and looked at him meaningfully.

We sat in silence and smoked. I'd never done it in this body, but experience as a youth in 20th century Muggle London carried me through. Not so for Sirius, who immediately gagged and started coughing. Our host and I laughed uproariously at the newbie.

Peggy Jim dropped his third cigarette butt into the ashtray, and hopped up onto his crutch.

'Alright boy, let go.'

He led us out of his house, and started walking out into the open brushland.

'What, we're just walking?' Sirius exclaimed. 'That'll take an age.'

Peggy Jim barked a laugh. 'We're going songwalking, mate. It in the name. Keep up.'

Indeed, as we stepped deeper into the bush, passing by a large jagged blue-grey stone, Peggy Jim began to sing in a language I couldn't hope to replicate, syllables that were forty thousand years
separated from the rest of mankind. His gait was swift despite his missing limb - he knew every last speck of dirt of this terrain.

Our journey proper was begun.

:—:

Things were not progressing as dramatically as I'd hoped.

Half an hour later, and I'd yet to see anything of interest. No portal that spanned the continent, no gust of great wind to carry us to our destination. Just following a doddering old cripple through brushland, who seemed to be picking and choosing his direction at random as he sung.

The ground had at some point transitioned into a loose red soil, which from my readings on the country was, at the very least, a sign that we had entered the true Outback region. Nevertheless, I was becoming impatient for the actual travel to start.

'Jim.' I barked out, my voice rougher than I'd realised. I threw back a few mouthfuls of water before continuing. 'You planning on actually doing some magic any time soon?'

Peggy Jim stopped by a strange-looking tree, gnarled and ancient, and laid his hand upon it before responding.

'Look to your right, mate'

I turned, and choked on my water.

It towered above us, seeming impossibly vast in its proximity, so much so that I could almost imagine the gravity of its weight upon me. A grand monolith of red stone. Ayer's Rock. Somewhere around two thousand five hundred kilometres from Sydney. I hadn't even noticed the folding of space.

'Blimey. How the bloody hell did we miss that?' Sirius murmured, just as much in awe.

I looked back to Peggy Jim with newfound respect.

'Well, never mind then. Carry on,'

:—:

Perhaps ten minutes later, Peggy Jim came to a halt - of his own volition this time.

We were still in desert land, but the landmarks had shifted. Instead of mighty Ayer's Rock, there was far off in the distance a set of three or four megaliths like some great hand beginning to extend from the earth. No idea what that was supposed to be.

Before us, almost as distant, lay a stout little homestead in that same classic Australian style. Even more quaint than Peggy Jim's own house. Holding my wand to my temple, I zoomed my vision in to see a pair Australian Shepard dogs frolicking in the front yard, covering themselves in red dirt. Precious.

'I'm not taking you boy any closer mate. You're going to have to make the rest of the way yourself.'

Sirius and I both turned incredulously to Peggy Jim.

'You're joking'
'That's at least three kilometres. In this heat too!'

Peggy Jim stood resolute.

'No. I'll return for you when you are ready to leave. That is not a place for my people.'

'I thought the whole Outback was for Aborigine wizards.'

'Not here.'

I snorted. 'Look at it, it's picturesque.'

'No.'

Sirius and I exchanged looks.

'Fine. I'll take pictures for you.' I sniped irritably.

We set off. It was hot, blisteringly so, though somehow this had escaped our notice in our implausibly swift trot across the continent.

Our cooling charms achieved essentially nothing, the Outback's ambient magic stripping the Western sorcery from us in a matter of minutes. It did not take long before both of us were drinking heavily from our canteens.

Compared to the distance we'd just travelled, these three kilometres seemed to stretch on for eons. Something about the flatness of the land, and the shimmering of the hot air, made it nigh impossible to judge distance, and so we didn't realise that we were closing in on the homestead until we were right on top of it.

It was perhaps the most homely structure I'd ever seen. It looked like if someone had take a photo of Peggy Jim's house and said 'let's zest this up a bit for the tourists.' Every slat of wood in its walls flawlessly painted a deep dark red, every rivet of the cobalt-blue tin roofing intact, the bungalow belonged on the cover of a magazine.

As we crossed the last hundred metres to it, and passed through the literal white-picket fence, the front door opened, and the flyscreen in front of it.

A man stepped forth, and I realised with a start that I recognised him, from a hundred nightmares past.

Sirius recognised him in the same instant, and we whipped out our wands in unison.

Blonde hair streaked with silver, tied back in a ponytail, and a jawline thick with stubble. Gleaming eyes, one powder blue, the other beady black, peeked out from under heavy brows. The Sun had turned his skin a touch leathery, but despite it, he'd aged a damn sight better than his ex-boyfriend.

Gellert Grindelwald grinned toothily at our shocked visages.

'Well well well, I was wondering when someone was going to stumble upon my little home away from home.'

A/N: I cannot state as objective fact that New South Wales' train lines were that awful in 1995, but that's certainly how I remember them circa 2000.
Uluru was formally known as Ayer's Rock until 1995, which is why Tom knows it as such. Even among Australians, Ayer's Rock persisted as the most common colloquial name until well into the early 2000s.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!