Summary

Harry’s date with Voldemort at the conclusion of the Triwizard Tournament didn’t go quite as planned. Fate steps in with a ‘unique’ opportunity, offering Harry the chance to live and mature in the past. For a while, anyway.

Notes

0: [25 August 2019] I’ve been updating various chapters to correct mis-aimed quotation marks, spaces that went missing between words, word choices (very rarely), capping, etc., as I read through it. Other issues were handled during upload (formatting for letters, for instance).

1: Originally posted at FFN and Grazhir 21 June 2004 - 15 February 2005. Finally felt like porting it to here. Lord knows enough people have asked me to.

2: Brief het relationship for Harry with an OFC.


4: Some scenes were inspired by reviewer comments.

5: I continue to be amused that I guessed well ahead of time what JKR had done, in part.

6: Prologue, forty chapters, two associated oneshots.
Journal Entry, 25 June 1995

I look back on my life, up until that moment, and can only hang my head. I don’t understand anymore, any of it. I don’t understand what I did to deserve the things I’ve suffered. Was there some dark aura that lingered around my body, originating from the scar on my forehead? Something that touched everyone I met and led them down the path of distrust and disbelief?

I know I may die at any moment, so I’m getting it out, getting it down, while I’m still able. Maybe someday they’ll read this and know. Most of them won’t understand, and I don’t expect that they ever would. Certainly not guilt, that would be like a miracle.

Growing up, I was taught I was worthless, a waste of space. I was a freak, an abomination. I was good only for the work I could do, the abuse I could suffer, and the amusement I could provide my cousin. It’s a wonder I lived so long. I still don’t know why my uncle had not simply strangled me as a baby, or left me to die in some back alley or desolate field.

Maybe the attraction or benefits of a legal slave was too much to give up.

When I found out about the wizarding world I thought I’d gone to heaven. When Hagrid came and stood up for me, I thought it was just some dream, but it was real. I took him seriously when he told me about Voldemort, when he told me that not a witch or wizard gone bad hadn’t come from Slytherin.

Malfy made his impression, too, of a spoiled snob from a privileged family of importance. But still, I thought I finally had a place to belong. My first year wasn’t so bad. It was even exciting, despite everything that happened and the risk to my life and that of the friends I’d made.

Snape was a nightmare. How can he hate me so much for something I never did? He’d like to think he never treated me specially, but he did. He treated me worse than any other single person.

I never told anyone but Dumbledore that the sorting hat wanted me in Slytherin. I wonder sometimes what things might have been different had I let it sort me as it wished. Would I have suffered less or more? Would I have been dead before a week was up?

I learned in my second year that fame is definitely not everything, as Snape once said. It was his fault I was revealed as a parslemouth. I think it shocked him as much as anyone else. Either way, it caused me to be subject to distrust and suspicion from everyone but those who believed in me. Me, the Heir of Slytherin?

Still, it backfired spectacularly on him. I wasn’t scared in the least. I think everyone at the club could see that, even if they didn’t have a clue what was happening. Imagine that—I inadvertently got one over on Snape.

Until Hermione was petrified, many wholeheartedly embraced the notion. But some couldn’t bring themselves to believe I would do that to one of my closest friends. Funny that—if I really was dark, that would have been an excellent ploy on my part. What better way to avert suspicion?
Even when I’d faced the memory of Tom Riddle, killed the basilisk, and saved Ginny’s life, people were still afraid. You simply cannot win.

I think it was around then that I started to appreciate something that my friends would have found crazy. No matter what happened, the Slytherins, from Snape on down to the youngest student, always treated me the same. They never wavered in their views. Okay, so they were awful, but they were consistent.

My third year was a picnic in comparison, though I still have to think back and wonder if I did the right thing in convincing Sirius and Remus not to kill Peter. Maybe if I’d given in to my rage and pain, Sirius might be free today, and I might not be here writing my last words, waiting for Voldemort to finish the job he set out to do thirteen years ago.

It’s done. I can’t change the past.

And then this year. The year the visions started. Everyone goes on about how participants in the tournament shouldn’t accept outside help. We all know cheating is wrong. Then how come people kept trying so hard to get me to do it? I managed, though.

But at the cost of another betrayal. People I thought were friends, the wizarding community at large. Lucius Malfoy and Rita Skeeter should work the media aspects of political campaigns, they’re that good at crucifying the competition.

From Savior and Boy-Who-Lived to the next Dark Lord in training. I was supposedly delusional, psychotic, a liar … an attention seeking, insolent, arrogant brat. Everything Snape had ever accused me of being.

What do I owe to a world that would as soon spit on me as adore me? The pedestal they put me on is crumbling from the blows they insist on wielding against it.

I lived because my mother loved me, so they say. I have my doubts. I helped protect the philosopher’s stone. I saved the life of a girl and saved an innocent man from the Dementor’s Kiss.

But people fear me, even as they expect me to be their Savior. I wouldn’t put it past people like Fudge to throw me in Azkaban the moment that happened, too, for fear that I’ll take Voldemort’s place.

Like I said, you can’t win.

But it won’t matter, because I’ll be dead. I’m not even sure why I’m still alive. He’ll be coming for me soon, though, I bet. I just hope it’s clean and quick.
Duel Interrupted

Wormtail approached Harry, who scrambled to find his feet, to support his own weight before the ropes were untied. Wormtail raised his new silver hand, pulled out the wad of material gagging Harry, and then, with one swipe, cut through the bonds tying Harry to the gravestone.

There was a split second, perhaps, when Harry might have considered running for it, but his injured leg shook under him as he stood on the overgrown grave, as the Death Eaters closed ranks, forming a tighter circle around him and Voldemort, so that the gaps where the missing Death Eaters should have stood were filled. Wormtail walked out of the circle to the place where Cedric’s body lay and returned with Harry’s wand, which he thrust roughly into Harry’s hand without looking at him. Then Wormtail resumed his place in the circle of watching Death Eaters.

“You have been taught how to duel, Harry Potter?” said Voldemort softly, his red eyes glinting through the darkness.

“No,” said Harry, “and I refuse to now.”

Voldemort was slightly taken aback at this and said without thought, “Excuse me?” He fixed his slit-pupiled eyes on the boy and stared.

“I said no. Why don’t you look like you did in the Chamber, Tom? Young, handsome, a deep commanding voice… What’s the point in achieving immortality if people can’t even stand to look at you? I mean, which is more frightening? Velvet-clad steel or a horror show freak?”

“Shut up, you worthless piece of—”

“Sod off,” Harry spat back defiantly at the Death Eater who dared speak. “I’ll be dead shortly anyway, so I might as well speak my mind.”

Voldemort had been on the verge of obliterating the boy when a phrase came back to him. The Chamber? Tom? The boy was still speaking, though, so he turned his attention outward and back to his words. After a second he realized Potter was hissing in Parseltongue, judging by the confused postures of his minions, and paid even closer attention.

“You know, I’ve had it. One minute I’m a muggle, the next a wizard. One I’m some hero, the next a dark lord in training. I’ve had it! In the muggle world, thanks to my oh-so-loving family, I’m an incurable criminal that everyone likes to either avoid or hunt down to be kicked and beaten. In the wizarding world I’ve already been painted in delusional colours, subject to fits, dangerous, even psychotic. I’d be willing to bet if I got back to Hogwarts alive I’d be blamed for Cedric’s death, too.”

Potter waved his wand around in agitation, sparks bursting from its tip as emphasis.

“So go ahead, do your worst, you scaly bastard. At least dead I could see my parents again, except this time I wouldn’t be seeing or hearing them die over and over again.”

The boy took a deep breath and clenched his hands tightly, his knuckles turning white.

“And I wouldn’t have to endure the petty tyranny of my so-called family, either. It’s no wonder that with muggles like them around some wizards think we’d be better off without them.”
Potter continued to rant, breathing heavily, and Voldemort began to wonder if the boy had finally gone over the edge. But that thought was dispelled a moment later when Potter paused long enough to stare him straight in the eye before starting in again. There was only sanity in those emerald depths, and passionate life, despite the boy’s words and air of teetering on the edge of despair and the potential battle against suicidal tendencies.

“You started it all, Tom. You killed them, you tried to kill me. Somehow you failed. Maybe he was right and it was my mother’s love that prevented you, but it set me up as an icon. I’m nothing more than a myth, something for people to pin their hopes on, or use as the whipping boy for everything that went wrong since Grindelwald.”

He paused and made a nasty little motion with his wand at the name, then continued. “I don’t care anymore! At least my so-called family was honest. They hated me, and our world, and never said otherwise. They were constant, just like the Slytherins, just like Snape. They never wasted time coddling me one moment, then fearing me the next. Whatever I am now, what started with you, and ended with them, it is because of them. They made me what I am now, willing to just lay down and die.”

Voldemort raised his hand, causing his faithful to each step back a pace, some out of respect, and some anticipation. Potter didn’t appear to notice anything until Voldemort moved to stand directly in front of the still ranting boy.

It was only then that Potter stopped his vehement hissing and looked up into his eyes. He did not, however, step back in response, nor did the fire in his eyes morph into fear. They remained starkly defiant in the face of the nearness of his enemy.

Voldemort lifted his wand and made a show of inspecting it before gazing back into Potter’s eyes. “This is much too easy,” he said dispassionately, then quickly stunned the boy, watching as he toppled to the ground bonelessly.

“Oh!”

“Wormtail!”

“Yes, master!” Wormtail slipped out of position and groveled at Voldemort’s feet.

“See that the Diggory boy is delivered back to Hogwarts.”

“Right away, master!” The rat-like man leapt to his feet and scurried away.

Voldemort turned back to the Potter boy and stared for a moment, then flicked his wand, levitating the body. Changing direction, he strode off toward the house, Potter floating along behind him as his Death Eaters watched.

Harry awoke to dimly-lit surroundings, though he was not uncomfortable. Given the yielding nature of the surface beneath him and the warm weight covering his body, he deduced he was in a bed.

His mind and body warred briefly, one happy, while the other was wondering just what was going on. His hand automatically reached to the side seeking his glasses. He had them on a second later and was trying to focus on the room before it occurred to him that it was odd that he had them at all.

After all, they were a decided disadvantage, so why he had access to them was, for now, beyond his ken. He shrugged and continued to look around, silently surprised at the opulence of the furnishings and decor. Looking down he saw he was dressed in a clean set of plain pajamas, and obviously
unhurt. Again, he shrugged, then pushed himself up, swinging his legs out from under the covers and onto the floor.

Lifting them aside, Harry stood and examined the room again. There were two doors, though only one of them was open. It revealed a bathroom, tiled in white and sea green. The closed door, he assumed without bothering to check, was locked against his efforts.

Next to the bed was a small table with a narrow drawer, and topped with an ornate lamp which was currently turned off. Looking up he saw that the molding was not flush with the wall, but angled outward at the top, and from the space within spilled soft light which illuminated the room.

Against one wall was a heavy desk and matching chair, set with an inkwell and several quills. The drawers were closed. As Harry approached it and sat down, a meal appeared in front of him, steaming slightly in the air.

He sighed. Did it matter if he ate? Did it matter if the food was poisoned in some way? He was already willing to die, wasn’t he, and end it all? Harry lifted the fork that had materialized beside the plate and began to eat, enjoying the food for what it was.

When he was done and had settled back in the chair, he felt a curious sense of calm descend over his mind and body, and knew that the meal had in fact been drugged. Any thoughts of worry, or anger, or escape were wiped away, and he found himself accepting the current situation.

As he stood to visit the bathroom and take care of his pressing needs, the plate and utensils disappeared. A half hour later he stepped back into the bedroom, dressed in a fresh set of pajamas, and sat down at the desk again for lack of anything better to do.

Opening one of the drawers revealed a small book, which he lifted free of its confinements and laid on the desk’s surface, then opened. The pages inside were empty and pristine. Harry reached out and uncapped the inkwell, took a quill in his hand, and began to write.

Some few days later, Voldemort took the time to assure that Potter’s evening meal was laced with a powerful sleeping draught, and entered the room to investigate exactly what the boy had been up to in his drugged little retreat from the world.

The journal he had left in the desk was sitting on top, practically begging to have its contents exploited to his benefit. So he sat down and opened it to the first page and began to read. Nothing of the first entry struck him as particularly odd, given what the boy had been ranting about the night of the duel that wasn’t, though he found Potter’s childhood an interesting parallel to his own.

He sneered when he read of Hagrid, and snarled when the younger Malfoy was mentioned. He would need to give Lucius a little reinforcement to pass along to his wayward child for such behavior. Obviously Lucius had been remiss in his teaching to produce a child who was unaware of political machinations and sly subversions. What a waste of pure blood.

However, when he reached Potter’s words on Severus, his eyes widened slightly. The implications were quite illuminating. He knew full well that Snape was a traitor, and had not been the least bit surprised to note that he had not been among those who came to his rebirth calling. He had not known that it was by his actions though that Potter had been exposed to the first stirrings of betrayal.

Furthermore, it made him realize that for all Lucius’s failings, it must have been him who released his own diary into the life of the youngest Weasley in an attempt to raise his master once more, despite
never having searched in the more conventional way. Of all his Death Eaters, Lucius was the first to have consciously tried to bring back the old order.

Perhaps he would reward and punish. Good deeds must not go unremarked.

He would need to question Lucius closely about the aftermath of that event. Thoughtful, he read through the remainder of the entry, then flipped to the next.

26 June 1995

Actually, I have no idea what day it is. I have no idea how long I was sleeping before I woke up in this room. I guess it doesn’t matter, just like whatever I write here has no real meaning. I know my food is being drugged. I’d have to be stupid not to realize that. But anyway.

I’m tired of alternately being thrust upon a pedestal and dragged off it into the mud. If I truly am the Savior of the wizarding world then you have all damned yourselves to hell, for I will no longer serve as the whipping boy of or for corrupt officials and a capricious public.

Well, I’ll be dead, right?

If the wizarding community and its leaders had been as united against the problem of Voldemort and his followers as they have been in persecuting me, then maybe he would have no power base from which to strike, and we would not now be in a state of abject fear and denial.

It’s all very stupid really. Just because I somehow miraculously lived I’m supposed to have the power to defeat Voldemort again? And how come it was only my mother’s love that could save a child, and not all those other mothers and fathers who must have died for their children. How come none of those survived? I’m having a hard time believing now the things that Dumbledore said.

I don’t really think that anyone in the general public will ever read any of this. If they did though, maybe they’ll come to understand just what they’ve done. How they’ve made sure of their own destruction by ripping to shreds their icon of fool’s gold.

I wonder if there’s a special place in hell reserved for idiots?

So let me see … since I’m getting it all out, let’s start with my family. No, not my parents, since they’re dead. I’m talking about Uncle Vernon, and Aunt Petunia, and Dudley. I think the idea was to squash the magic out of me. Dudley didn’t know much, but they knew enough certainly. Petunia hated mum, despised her, and Vernon is the same.

They thought if they tried hard enough, the magic would leave me, and I’d be an ordinary boy they could cast off at the first opportunity. Yet, I was useful to have around. I learned very early not to ask questions and not to expect anything but hardship. I still wonder why I was placed there. Surely it would have better elsewhere?

I know Dumbledore said he didn’t want me growing up with a swelled head, but is abuse the right response in contrast? I never bothered to say anything. I knew he’d give me one of those gentle smiles, pet me on the head, and send me right back again saying it was for my own good and I’d be safe there. Does that make him a bad man, or just
Dudley and his friends love to play a game they call Harry Hunting. Trying to chase me down so they can rough me up and feel better for it. Well, when they aren’t out terrorizing anyone else they can get their hands on.

Still, something must have gone right, because I don’t think I’m such a bad person in the end. I’m not cruel, and I’m not timid either. I guess you could say that adversity breeds either contempt or strength. Maybe both.

And that stupid sorting hat, insisting I’d have done well in Slytherin. How the hell would it know? Was that some sort of oblique way of telling me I could have corrupted Slytherin from within? Or that I’d make a fine dark lord in training so I could join right up and have fun exterminating muggles like my family?

And then there’s Dumbledore again, saying things like choices make us who we are. What about the choices made for us? Is he saying that his choice not to assist a young Tom Riddle had no bearing on the outcome? That Tom could have decided to push aside what had happened to him and strove to be better for it rather than submit?

It makes me wonder, since he knew I never liked going back to the Dursley’s, but made me go anyway, just like he never bothered to help Tom. Am I identifying too much here? Never mind, it doesn’t matter. He’s dead set on revenge, and dead is what I expect to be.

The boy certainly had a way with words, and it was clear that he understood far more than some gave him credit for. Voldemort wondered if it would be more prudent to simply kill him, or keep him around to see what evolved.

He wondered if killing off the boy’s remaining family would be seen in a good light or bad, if it would be a release or a further burden upon those slender shoulders. Not having decided what to do, he decided not to decide for the time being.

He smirked when he read about Dumbledore’s choices and actions. It seemed as though in some respects the old man was doing his work for him. Surely he must be ignorant of the effect it was having—or was this some ploy to force the child to see him as the epitome of safety and a deserving recipient of gratefulness when the boy was rescued each year from his relatives?

Several days later Voldemort returned. Potter was in another of his forced sleeps, though it could not be used very often. Too much of the potion would likely permanently harm him. Addiction was not unknown in the wizarding world, and insomnia was one of the easiest problems to abuse.

He sat down and began to flip through the new entries in the journal.

27 June 1995

Draco is an idiot. I remember when I accidentally floo’d into Borgin & Burkes and listened, hiding in the cupboard, to what he and his father were saying. When Lucius told Draco that it wasn’t wise to appear less than fond of me against the tide of the wizarding world’s opinion.

Draco thinks he’s so superior, but he never listens. All we ever hear are the same old
tired taunts. No wonder his father is so cruel about his grades. He should spend less time repeating himself and more time studying, since it’s obvious he hasn’t got a jot of creativity to his name. Of course, Hermione is loads more brilliant than he is, but did he ever bother to find a way to slow her down and make her grades drop?

Having his father buy his way onto the team was typical, I guess, though I can’t imagine why Mr Malfoy agreed to it. If Draco’s grades are so awful, why give him a treat like that? Fairly stupid if you ask me.

At least I got him back third year when he pulled that silly dementor trick. I hope he pissed himself in fright. He’s nothing more than a gormless bully, who runs at the first sign of real resistance. He can’t even do anything without his two hulking twits at his side.

Some tatty old books appeared overnight. At least now I have something to do other to stare at the ceiling or write in this book. They don’t exactly look thrilling, but they’re different.

28 June 1995

Snape is an unmitigated bastard, you know? Takes every chance he can get to ridicule me, humiliate me, and punish me, all because I’m supposedly so enamored of my fame. He can have it for all I care. I just wanted to be normal.

Asking me questions on the first day of class I couldn’t possibly answer. Slapping me and my friends with detention every time we turned around. Looking the other way when Slytherin students ruined our potions and blaming us for the destruction.

Why did he even make the effort to save me? Honestly, I have to wonder if it’s only because of Dumbledore. Maybe he didn’t want to go back to Azkaban as a Death Eater. Not much use he’d be in there, but his personality might have improved.

I wonder what he’s doing now. Has Dumbledore forced him into returning so that he can spy on Voldemort? Is he alive or dead? Or has he been biding his time all the while, waiting for the moment he can return and tell his master all that he knows?

I wonder why I’m still alive. I wonder why I’m not reading one of those boring books instead of sitting here at this stupid desk writing drivel?

29 June 1995

I’m tired of this place. It’s lonely. I haven’t seen a soul since I got here. Just this journal, those books, that bed, and meals that appear at timed intervals.

I almost think I’d rather be sitting in Professor Binns’s history class than endure this too much longer. I finished two of the books—they’re dry. I bet Hermione would like them. Forget it, I’m tired. I may as well just go back to sleep.

Harry had been imprisoned for what he reckoned was several weeks. He couldn’t be sure by any means, as he had no idea how long he slept each time, and no way of knowing the passage of time in any meaningful way. The lights came on when he started to rise from the depths of sleep, and winked out when he laid down and began to slip under.
He continued to alternate between writing in the journal—whatever came to mind—and reading the books that rotated on the single shelf. Every time he’d finished what was available, another group appeared to take their place.

His wand had been found in the side table drawer, but no amount of spellwork on the closed door made it open, so he’d long since given up trying. When he felt willing he practiced the spells he knew, just to keep in shape, though he wondered at the futility of the exercise.

Aside from the books changing, nothing else did. Not even after the nights when he knew he’d been drugged into a heavy sleep. No bruises, no wounds, no aches or pains. Not a single thing in the room appeared to have changed on those ‘mornings’.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t even feel sorry for himself, not with whatever was spiking his food, and he wasn’t the type to try and starve himself to death. So he waited.

He woke up, or was it fell asleep, to find himself in a plain white room. His mind called it a room, but in fact it was more like an endless existence of white stretching in all directions. He walked around until he noticed that not only was he getting nowhere fast, but that he wasn’t tired after all that exertion. So he sat down on the spot, then flopped over onto to his back.

After a time, streaks of not-white began colouring the bleached expanse, slowly devolving into a recognizable grey, and then into black. The swirling made him want to feel dizzy, but he was not. After a short time he heard an androgynous voice speak to him.

~Greetings, young Harry, and tidings on the day that marks the fifteenth year since your birth.~

“Hullo,” he replied, “and thank you. Where am I?”

~You are nowhere and everywhere.~

“What choice is it that you expect me to make?” he asked curiously, strangely unbothered by the situation.

~In this timeless moment you have a choice, young Harry. Here you will be unburdened by grief and guilt, by fatigue and hunger, for so long as it takes you to decide your own fate. You will see, and understand, and think clearly for perhaps the only time in your young life. You may ask of me any question you desire, in order that you may properly formulate your answer. You stand at a crossroads, a divergence, and you alone have the power to decide which path is correct.~

“What choice is it that you expect me to make?” he asked curiously, strangely unbothered by the situation.

~You will decide your fate, young Harry. Do you choose to return to what you have just left, and give over the choice of your fate to the hands of the Dark Lord? Or do you choose to leave that place behind you and move forward through another kind of uncertainty?~

A pause, of indeterminate length.

“Are you able to tell me what would result in either choice?”

~Each choice presents a multitude of results, young Harry. Should you choose to stay, then Voldemort will decide for you, whether it be torture or death, or corruption enough to turn you as black of heart as he. Should you choose to move forward you will be taken from that place and brought elsewhere, to train, to learn and grow, and eventually to come back to a point in this circle
to confront what you may not choose to, or be capable of, doing now.~

“If I chose to stay, what fate the wizarding world?”

~A wise question, young Harry. If you were to die now, the wizarding world would rally to the cause of a martyr, fighting against the darkness that threatens them, but in the end they too would die. A few here, a few there, a crowd or a mass, and many too weak to believe or defend would submit to dominion.~

“And if I were turned?”

~Then the people of the light would despair and fall into apathy. Precious few would hold fast to their ideals, and people would come to know death faster and in greater numbers. In the end, the result is the same.~

“Who are you?”

~I am everything and nothing. I am the voice of the earth's cry and the sound of magic as it whispers along your veins. I am the blinding white of life and the suffocating darkness of death. I am, in a word, opportunity.~

“Then I have no choice,” Harry stated calmly.

~How so, young Harry?~

“A choice that allows me to hasten the demise of the only world I knew happiness in is no choice I could bear. I have no choice but to move forward. To do otherwise at this junction would be to deny everything that shaped me.”

~And if I told you that Albus Dumbledore has consistently and knowingly manipulated your life in order to produce such an answer?~

“Then I would say that it is that much more imperative that I move forward, so that I may have the chance to investigate the validity of your claim, and act accordingly when the opportunity arises.”

~Interesting, young Harry. I think that you would be angered presently were you able to feel negatively.~

“Perhaps. But anger clouds clarity, and you do not allow for it. Anger won’t help me anyway, will it. You are manipulating me though.”

~How so, young Harry?~

“Wouldn’t it have been more cunning to ask me my thoughts on a claim that staying might prove out Voldemort’s kind and cuddly nature in the face of a man who had shaped him as he shaped me, to kill two birds with one stone and retain his ascendancy of power? You lean toward moving forward, and it shows.”

~You are quite clever, young Harry. And correct. Regardless, the choice is yours.~

“As I said, there is no choice. I don’t know everything, and I can’t, but I do know that stagnation is death, so moving forward is the only option there is.”

~If you say so. Strange though how only a month ago you were ready to die.~

“It doesn’t matter. What happens now?”
Now? Now you begin a new life. Right now, in fact.
At the edge of the maze, the stands rising above with the shapes of people moving in them, and the stars overhead, lay the body of Cedric Diggory. Beside him, his wand, and clutched in his stiffening hand, the Triwizard cup. Had he been alive to hear it, he would have been hit by a confused welter of sound, of screams and the pounding of feet, the groaning of the stands as its inhabitants struggled to escape their confines and set the framework to swaying.

Had he been alive to see it, he would have noticed the note pinned to his robes. He would have been able to read the scarlet ink that read, “Potter is mine now,” and seen the dark mark burned black into the parchment.

But Cedric was dead and could not hear, nor could he see. Others did those things in his stead.

At the leaving feast, Dumbledore raised a toast to Cedric, reminding everyone of his good nature and sense of fair play, his bravery and honesty, and his loyalty to his friends. But he could not explain what happened the night of the third task, when Cedric returned to them dead, and alone.

And he did not tell those assembled of the note he had ripped from Cedric’s body before anyone else noticed it, nor of the strange trunk he had found in Moody’s quarters, or how the professor was found within one of the compartments of that same trunk, thin and starved in appearance, missing his glass eye and wooden leg and hanks of his grizzled hair.

Dumbledore didn’t know what had happened, but he suspected.

So the students were merely given a speech about Cedric Diggory, one that praised his fine example, and bemoaned the loss of a young man who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Of Harry Potter, he said little. Missing, and presumed dead, he called for a toast to another brave young man.

That night, the Gryffindors were beside themselves, clustered in the common room of their tower. All of them had been forbidden the hospital wing ever since the night Cedric returned, and none of their questions had been answered. Not one of them knew what had happened to Harry, or if he was even locked away in the infirmary.

And now they knew.

There was very little talk, just scattered murmurs and low-voiced speculation. For a while.

Harry awoke to dimly-lit surroundings, though he was not uncomfortable. Given the yielding nature of the surface beneath him and the warm weight covering his body, he deduced he was in a bed.

Harry had a strange sense of déjà vu. That alone made him want to just keep his eyes closed and wait for the moment he knew was coming. But as he lay there, he started to remember that strange place and the strange conversation with someone he couldn’t see. Or should that be some thing?

When nothing happened, Harry finally cracked an eye open and saw a different blur of colours than he had been greeted with previously. From that he took courage enough to open both eyes and reach for his glasses. They were in the exact right place. He slipped them on and pulled himself upright, then looked around.
The room was quite plain. Off-white walls, white ceiling and pale wood furniture. Harry decided it was either a guest room of some kind, or the bedroom of one of those cheerful, perky, morning people. However, the decided lack of things had him leaning toward it being a normally unused room.

As if on cue, just when he was about to slip out of the bed, one of the doors opened and a young man stepped in. He was average height in Harry’s opinion, perhaps 5’10, maybe even six foot. Taller than Harry, at any rate. His hair was a glossy black that reached his shoulders, curling slightly at the ends. Pale skin, high cheekbones, and a well-shaped, sultry mouth were surmounted by the greenest eyes Harry had ever seen.

The stranger, whoever he was, smiled.

Harry hesitantly smiled back.

“Well, you’re awake. That’s good. You had us worried.” The man stepped further into the room, leaving the door ajar. “You’ve been out cold for over a week. How do you feel?”

“Er, fine, I guess. Do I even dare ask where I am?”

The stranger tilted his head and smiled again. “Had a rough time of it lately?” He produced a wand from his sleeve and conjured up a chair, then sat. “You’re safe, if that means anything. My friends and I built this place. We plan on making it into a school.”

“I’m going to make a wild guess and say you named the castle Hogwarts.”

The man blinked. “Yes, actually. What, are you skilled at Legilimency or something?”

Harry narrowed his eyes for a moment, vaguely recalling something about that from one of the books rotated through on the shelf. “I’m not holding a wand. I’m not sure why you think that.”

“True, though you need only look in that table to find yours. We saw no reason to hide it.”

Harry took his eyes off the man long enough to fumble open the drawer and pull out his beloved wand.

“Interesting, though,” said the man, “that you carry a wand with a phoenix feather core. It’s quite rare. Then again, it was because of that that we didn’t see you as any danger.”

Harry let out a bark of laughter. “I wouldn’t be so sure of that. I know the owner of this wand’s brother, and he’s no saint.”

“Well, you seem to be all right, so I suppose I should introduce myself. Salazar Slytherin, at your service.” He inclined his head for a moment in greeting.

“I assumed that to be the case,” Harry hissed, then switched to English. “Harry Potter, though I doubt that name means anything.” He was pleased to see the look of gentle astonishment on Salazar’s face, which quickly turned into another smile.

“Well and so. You are an interesting fellow, aren’t you.” Salazar gave him a once over. “Hungry?”

Harry took stock, realizing he didn’t feel nearly as hungry as he should have if he’d been out for a week. “Yes, a little.”

Salazar pointed his wand at the other door. “Facilities are through there, and some clothes that should
fit you. If you’d prefer to eat here I can arrange that, or you can come with me and meet the others.”

Harry glanced over, then back at Salazar, wrinkling his brow. “To eat in here would be to say I was never a Gryffindor. If you’ll wait, I’ll go get ready.”

Salazar gave him a very odd look, but nodded, so Harry slipped out of the bed and disappeared into the next room. His clothing, what there was of it, he stripped off and dropped in a basket that served the purpose of hamper well enough to Harry’s mind. The room itself was partitioned, with a rack of clothing and a puffy velvet bench to one side, and what was obviously a bathroom to the other.

Harry could only assume that in this time, no one would be threatening him for using magic, and so spent a good ten minutes bathing, using his wand to dry off afterward. The rack offered him a choice of trews, shirts, and several sets of robes in various styles. He yanked out a pair of dark green trews, and spent several minutes fiddling with the buttons along the side of each calf, then pulled a shirt of lighter green on and tucked it in. Plain black leather boots went on next, followed by a set of plain black robes.

When he stepped back into the bedroom, Salazar was still waiting. Harry gave him a small smile and said, “I have a request, if I may.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve said my name, but if I’m really when I think I am, I’d rather not use it. Do you suppose when we go to eat, that perhaps we could come up with something else? Not mention what I said earlier?”

“That’s a peculiar request. When? Something tells me you have quite a story to tell.” Salazar stood, making an odd movement with his head, then said, “As you wish. Please follow me.”

He left the room and Harry followed, not immediately recognizing his surroundings. If hadn’t been told otherwise, he would not have known he was in the castle he’d lived in for four years. After they walked for several minutes and turned down several corridors, Harry finally knew where he was.

“Are we headed for the Great Hall,” he asked, “or someplace else?”

Salazar spared him another odd look but continued to walk. “The kitchens, actually. Seems rather silly to eat in the Great Hall when there’s only a few of us.”

Harry nodded and spent the rest of the journey in silence, wondering how it was that they could communicate so readily given the time difference. He smiled slightly when a familiar painting came into view. He’d had no idea paintings could last that long. Or perhaps, it had simply been replaced over time when the need became apparent.

Inside, Harry noticed only a few house-elves, but those that were there were busy putting together a meal for the founders—as Harry was mentally calling them—and he could see it would be no trouble to feed one more mouth. The others smiled when they saw the two approach, though their smiles for Harry were polite rather than warmly welcoming as they were for Salazar.

“It’s evening, by the way;” Salazar said in an aside to Harry after he had greeted his friends. Turning back he began to say to them, “This is—” He looked back at Harry. “Suggestions?” he hissed.

Harry looked at his hands for a moment, thinking, then smiled and hissed, “Heru. I read it in a book somewhere.”

“All right. This is Heru.” He turned back and hissed, “Should I assume you already know who they are?”
Heru nodded and said, “Hello, Rowena, Helga, Godric. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I hope I haven’t been too much of an inconvenience.” He copied Salazar’s earlier greeting, inclining his head briefly toward the three, and held back his amusement at the ping-pong match of looks that had occurred over he and Salazar speaking to each other in Parseltongue.

“Heru, have a seat, please,” Salazar said as he slipped onto a padded chair.

“Thank you.” Heru sat down beside Salazar and waited for the onslaught of questions.

“So, Salazar … you never told us you had a relative close by,” commented Rowena blandly.

“I don’t,” he said, which occasioned a series of looks at Heru.

“Would you like me to explain?” offered Heru. “It’s a long story, but I think I can compress it well enough, though you’ll probably think I’m insane.”

Since everyone immediately nodded, Heru started to speak, pausing only to fill his plate, take an occasional bite to eat, or drink to moisten his throat.

“You could say, I’m not from around here;” he began. “The worst of the matter is that which you’ll have the most trouble believing, I suppose. By all accounts, I’m from a thousand years into the future, give or take a decade or so. The records of your time are very imprecise. Later on, if any of you happen to have a pensieve handy, I’d be happy to let you rummage around in my head for supporting evidence.”

He ignored the wide eyes and went on. “I was born in nineteen-eighty to a couple who were part of a group of people fighting against the dark lord of the time. My family was in hiding for some reason—I suspect a prophecy was involved—using the fidelius charm. Anyway, it was unfortunate that the secret-keeper chosen to safeguard my parents was an agent of the Dark Lord, and he betrayed them. The Dark Lord came and killed my father as my mother tried to get to me and escape. However, the Dark Lord caught up with her. When she refused to let him kill me, offering her own life in exchange, he killed her and then tried to kill me.

“Just as with them, he cast the killing curse, except that things didn’t go the way he planned. The spell rebounded and destroyed his physical form, and left me with this scar.” He fingered his forehead. “After that, I was known throughout the wizarding world as the Boy-Who-Lived and famous for that and as the defeater of the Dark Lord.

“As you might expect, he didn’t die. His soul remained and he spent years trying to find a way to get back his body. I didn’t find out I was a wizard until I was eleven, when I was brought into the magical world by the groundskeeper of Hogwarts, a half giant. From then on, every year was a struggle of some kind. I prevented the Dark Lord from regaining his body during my first year; he’d possessed the body of our Defense professor and was after the philosopher’s stone.

“Second year I prevented his return again, by stopping him from completing a transformation from memory into life at the expense of a young girl, by finding and entering a very well hidden place within the school and defeating a creature down there, then destroying the container of the Dark Lord’s memories.”

Heru turned to Salazar and hissed, “Created the Chamber of Secrets yet, Salazar? Started with basilisk wrangling as a hobby?”

Salazar blanched.

“Third year, well, he wasn’t really a factor, but I did save an innocent man from getting the
dementor’s kiss, though he’s still on the run. Turns out he was my godfather. In the process, the betrayer escaped us, and went off to find what remained of the Dark Lord.”

Heru smiled briefly. “This year, fourth year, was a nightmare. Though, I think I was still being held during my birthday, so I should be fifteen now. Fourth year Hogwarts hosted the Triwizard Tournament and I was forced to participate—and I still have no idea how they managed it—and eventually got to the cup along with my fellow Hogwarts student. After arguing back and forth about who should take the cup and be declared winner, we compromised and took it together. It was a portkey, taking us to a graveyard, where the Dark Lord was waiting with the betrayer, and he used the bones of his father, the flesh of his servant, and the blood of his enemy, me, to become corporeal again.

“So that brings us to very near the end of this story. Short form, anyway. By this point I was fed up, and I don’t expect you all to understand that just now. I was fed up of the image, the fame, the wizarding public and students alternately loving me and hating me, idolizing me, and cowering away as though I’d become a dark lord myself. And I snapped. He challenged me to a duel, and I snapped. Starting ranting in Parseltongue until he stunned me, hauled me off to Merlin knows where, and locked me in a room. I was there for at least a month, but I had no way of knowing just how long.

“The really hilarious thing about this whole thing is that the Dark Lord was supposedly carrying on the work of someone in my distant past, an effort to cleanse the world of mudbloods and muggles, when he himself was a half-blood, just like me. This last part is, again, where you’ll think I’m insane. I woke up at one point in a totally white place that got rather strange looking after a while, had a conversation with a disembodied voice, was given a choice to stay or move onward, and ended up saying I’d take the offer. The next thing I knew, I woke up here.

“Oh. From what I understand, I’m not a natural parselmouth, either. Supposedly the Dark Lord passed on that ability when he tried to kill me the first time. I’m rather fond of it, though. Snakes are lovely creatures.”

He looked around the table, then calmly reached out and snagged a small cake and bit into it.

After swallowing, when no one had spoken a single word, he said, “Are we all right here, or should I prepare for a long stay in a room with padded walls and a binding spell?”

A pensieve was set on the table, hardly making a sound as it touched the smooth wood. Heru felt a little nervous, never having used one before. “Er, this process doesn’t actually take my memories does it? I mean, is this just like copying them, or what?”

“Just copies, Heru. And you can put them back afterward, as the process does have the effect of dulling them in your mind as a result,” Salazar assured him.

“If you say so. It isn’t as though I’ve got much to lose by doing this.”

Rowena nodded and gave him a small smile. “Touch your wand to your temple and concentrate on a memory you wish to copy. You’ll feel it when it happens. Pull your wand away and place the resulting strand into the pensieve. After that it’s a matter of putting in as much as you think we need to see.”

“Very well. I suppose I should mention that my name isn’t Heru. You’ll see that anyway, shortly. I don’t much feel like using it though. It’d be easier if I could just stick my head in and let it copy everything,” he quipped, then raised his wand.
Several hours later he was finished. Heru did conceal a few things. Any mention of the founders was omitted from the selection he had provided, with the sole exception of revealing that he had used Godric’s sword at one point. He did not reveal where, though. It was evident that no one would be getting sleep anytime soon.

“Should I go in with you? I don’t know if it might be easier since I’d be there to explain if necessary.”

“Yes, please. You can direct the flow of memories we see. Otherwise it’s likely to be a jumble of time.”

Heru nodded, gave them a wan smile, then dove in.

It was some time the next day, or perhaps the one after that, that they emerged exhausted. None of the four had any trouble believing his story, and his presence had been immensely helpful in filling in the small details as they skipped through his life. Heru was given charge of the pensieve so that he could reclaim his memories later on, and all of them dragged off to their respective bedrooms, promising that one of them would come to fetch him later if he had not already woken and found them first.

“I don’t know. You saw the memory,” Heru said. “I mean, I assume I’m here for a reason, but what, I have no idea.”

“Well, I can see why you don’t want to use your real name, but you’re going to need more that just the one.”

Heru shrugged. “I don’t care about names. You pick them.”

“In that case, your second name is now officially Servius,” proclaimed Rowena.

Heru nodded, unconcerned.

“Your third name is Tychon,” decided Helga.

“Your fourth name is Anselm,” chimed in Godric.

Heru blinked at the rapidity of these decisions, then stared at the final founder.

“And your surname … is Slytherin,” Salazar declared, lifting his chin.

“Eh?” Heru raised his brows in surprise.

“I said, your new surname is Slytherin,” he repeated firmly.

“Er, not that I mind or anything,” said Heru, “but isn’t that a little—I mean, I’m not even family. Why would you do that? I don’t understand.”

“Have you bothered to take a look at yourself, then at me?” replied Salazar. “We could practically be brothers.”

“Well … no, I hadn’t.”

“If you have no objections, we will be.”
“Will be? How?” Heru asked, bewildered.

“Blood magic, of course. Don’t they teach that anymore?” Salazar shot a look at his friends.

“Noooooo,” drawled Heru. “Could you explain?”

“It’s simple, Heru. A little of my blood, some of yours, a few quick rituals—it should only take a couple of days—and you’d be my blood brother.”

“But … are you really sure you want to do that?”

“Would I offer if I didn’t?” Salazar countered. “The bonus is that it will magically change your name and identity.”

When Heru just stared at him in disbelief for a minute, Salazar hissed, “And besides, you’ve kept my secrets.”

“All right. Let’s do it, then,” Heru declared with a quirky grin.

Many things happened in the week which followed the agreement, but the culmination of it all was the final ritual of blood bonding. Godric claimed the right as Heru’s ancestor—which boggled everyone for a while—to actually perform the rites. Once the last words were chanted, the last runes were inscribed, the final blood spilled and mixed, and all his names added in, Heru was officially a Slytherin.

Months passed as the group worked on a number of things, among which were ways to record the births of magical children, how to apportion teaching duties and what to teach, where to house the students within the castle, and any number of other details that could not be overlooked.

During that time it became quite clear that by the founders’ standards Heru already knew most of what they be teaching. Heru knew that was only because they did not have to deal with a thousand years of spell development. Insofar as the regular students that would eventually be attending, Heru would be a fully qualified teacher.

On the other hand, the founders knew magics that were considered ancient to Heru, things he had only read or heard vague references to, magics that had unfortunately been lost over the centuries. So it was those that they taught him, once it was clear that even at fifteen, Heru was quite intelligent, a fast learner, and exceptionally strong magically. Or was, once they fixed him.

After a lot of frustration on their parts, they realized the fundamental problem that plagued Heru. The power and ability was there, but he couldn’t access all of it. Once they had spent the time to go over him with the ancient—by Heru’s standards—magical equivalent of a fine-toothed comb, they pinpointed the culprit. His scar.

In the end, it was modified. With Voldemort being centuries in the future they had, perhaps, a much easier time tinkering with its composition, resulting in a release of Heru’s innate power, the unblocking of his divinatory ability, and a severing of the scar’s pathway into his mind. Heru very much doubted that anyone from his time could have accomplished it.

It was not much longer after that, after Salazar had thoroughly tutored Heru in the fine art of potion making, that they started to do a great deal of experimental work. Potions, potions layered with spells, and anything else they could think of. In particular, Salazar was fascinated by Heru’s description of polyjuice potion. However, while he thought that was an interesting potion, he felt it
was not quite good enough for his tastes.

It was nearing the time when the school would begin its first year of operations that a rather nasty accident occurred in the dungeons. In another time and place, Heru would have placed bets on Neville Longbottom being the cause, but of course that was not so here. The resulting disaster was cleaned up in careful stages, and Salazar chucked his notes in the bottom drawer of his office desk, cursing at the lack of progress, and resolving to deal with it some other time.

The actual consequences of the incident were rather more far reaching that either he or Heru expected.
“I didn’t say I’d deny the children entrance,” protested Salazar. “I’m just saying it’d be easier to let only pure-bloods in.”

“Then what exactly is the problem?” asked Godric.

“I already said. The parents! Perhaps I’m too imaginative, but I’d be willing to bet they’ll be storming the castle at some point, waving pitchforks and starting bonfires.”

“What do you suggest, then?” asked Helga.

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t we worry about that if and when it happens,” said Heru. “I’m sure a solution can be found if it becomes necessary.”

Salazar stared at him.

“What? If you worry yourself to a thread over it, don’t expect me to experiment on potions with you anymore. One accident was enough, thank you.” Heru crossed his arms over his chest and huffed. He didn’t bother to say aloud that he knew exactly what they’d come up with.

“We have more pressing issues to attend to. For example, a new wand for Heru,” pointed out Rowena as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“What’s wrong with the one I’ve got?” protested Heru.

Rowena gave him a patient smile. “Heru, if you end up going back at some point, and I expect you will, do you honestly think no one will recognize the wand you have now?”

Heru sulked for a moment, then said, “Sure, be reasonable and logical. See if I care.”

“Well, then, I suggest you and Salazar get to it.”

“Is she always this bossy?” hissed Heru, darting a glance at Salazar.

Salazar blinked innocently and stood up. “Come along, brother. We’ll go see Ollivander.”

Unlike in Harry’s time, the Ollivander making wands in the founder’s time did not have a shop filled with shelves of boxed wands. The magical population wasn’t large enough to require it, and some families had a tradition of creating them personally.

The current Ollivander, who looked suspiciously like his descendant to Heru’s eyes and who did not admit to a given name, instead had shelf upon shelf loaded with various kinds of wood and a plethora of core ingredients. After being graciously ushered into his workshop, Salazar and Heru sat down to have a spot of tea while Ollivander quizzed them on the school.

Once the tea had been drunk and the biscuits eaten, they got down to business. Heru was bidden to stand in the center of a circle of wood samples and close his eyes, which he did, feeling a little foolish for it. Ollivander simply requested that Heru lend his hand to the wood that felt most comfortable to him.

In Heru’s case his hands eventually found their way to both a shaft of black birch and of linden,
which caused Ollivander to make curious noises in his throat and jot down some notes. After that, when Heru was once again seated, Ollivander began to ask a series of questions about his likes and dislikes, not to mention any odd abilities he might have.

In the end, after finding out that Heru was a parselmouth like Salazar, and that he thought flying was the most freeing sensation in the world, Ollivander decided to use one of his highly-prized snidget feathers, coated in the dust of an expired ashwinder.

The resulting wand was stunning. Highly polished black birch was inlaid with spirals of the much lighter coloured linden, and affixed with an even darker handle, at a total length of twelve inches and quite rigid.

The price was 1½ galleons, which Salazar gladly paid for.

Nearly a full day later the brothers returned to the castle, and were still arguing over the cost when they rejoined the others.

“How many children are lined up so far?” asked Heru, idly tapping his newer wand against the table.

“Forty-two,” supplied Godric, “three of which are muggle-borns.”

Salazar made a moue of distaste and flipped his hand. “I suppose it could be worse.”

After giving his brother a harsh stare Heru said, “Then we’ll have plenty of room, won’t we, when they come.”

“Speaking of room, dear brother, we need to do something about you,” hissed Salazar.

“Pardon?” Heru responded.

“This topic bores me, friends. I need to drag Heru here off to discuss something else lest I become irascible.” To Heru he hissed, “Come along. You and I have some work to be getting on with.”

Heru stood as Salazar sauntered out, casting a confused look at the remaining founders, who responded with almost identical shrugs, and followed his brother. Once through the door his arm was latched onto and Salazar dragged him off toward the dungeons, eventually slipping through a door Heru had never noticed in his days at school, which was guarded by a very subtle snake inlay of stone in stone.

“What’s this about?” Heru asked the moment he was seated.

“As I said, room. Specifically, your rooms. You didn’t honestly think I’d stick my brother in a guest room forever, did you?”

“Er… It hadn’t occurred to me?”

Salazar snorted and flung himself into a chair, sending a dark look his way. “It must be those damned muggles you had to live with. Rooms, Heru. Yours! You know, like the Chamber, but with decorating more to your tastes? Perhaps under the lake with a lovely one-way ceiling?”

Heru stared at him blankly.

“And on a related topic…” Salazar snickered. “You need to be thinking about producing an heir.”
“What!? Salazar, I’m not quite sixteen!”

“Don’t be foolish. Most men get handfasted at fourteen. Muggles only live to their mid-thirties or so. They’d have died out by now if they didn’t start young.”

“But we live longer!” Heru protested loudly.

“Yes, we do. So?”

“Salazar, we don’t even know how long I’ll be here.”

“All the more reason to get started,” Salazar said with a firm nod.

Heru groaned and placed his head in his hands. “I’m not sure I even like women,” he mumbled softly.

“We’ll find you a nice girl and—” Salazar’s mouth snapped shut, then opened. “What was that?”

“Nothing,” Heru muttered.

“Well unless you plan on brewing one in a cauldron I suggest you listen up.”

Heru gave him a pleading look and said, “About those rooms…”

“Right, change the subject. You won’t get me off track that easily, dear brother.”

“You changed the subject first, may I remind you,” Heru shot back.

“Stow it. You have a duty as a Slytherin to produce at least one heir. Preferably several. I intend to do so myself just as soon as I find a likely girl of high magical talent, with wide hips, and who doesn’t squint too much.”

Heru gaped at his brother in a mixture of shock and mild disgust.

“There, see? You’re stunned at my forward and practical thinking. You should take notes. Now, about those rooms…”

As it turned out, creating a flat for himself—with Salazar’s help, of course—wasn’t all that difficult. It did, however, mean expending huge quantities of magic between the two of them. In the end Heru had a set of private quarters under the lake that anyone would be envious of.

The ceilings were, indeed, of a magical one-way substance which gave him a watery view of the lake, nearer to the shore so that the sunlight could filter down to some degree. All in all, his quarters were approximately the size of a small manor house. The lowest level contained a vault and rooms for a potions lab and storage. The middle level, in which the door leading to castle was located, consisted of things like a kitchen, library, lounge, dining room, and a necessary. The upper floor was comprised of bedrooms, each with their own facilities, more storage, and a private library and study which led off the master bedroom. It went without saying that the storage rooms had normal ceilings.

When Heru asked why he needed a vault, Salazar simply gave him a look which said everyone of importance needs a vault, and a few days later snuck in long enough to fill it with gold and jewels. Heru didn’t notice the change for weeks, and by then it was too late to protest the phantom gift. It did, however, raise an important point in his mind, one which he planned on addressing in the future,
just as soon as he figured out the logistics.

The entrance to the complex, which was located deep within the bowels of the dungeons proper, was guarded by a portrait of himself, which Heru insisted be left unlabeled except for the surname "Slytherin." A matching portrait was placed inside the entrance hall—which extended two floors high—so that his painted self could move between them and announce who was on the other side if necessary.

A secondary entrance, located at the end of one of the lower floor’s hallways, led to a spot deep within the forest located to the east of the castle itself. To Heru’s eye the forest was much smaller than he remembered it being, but that only made sense. If the scenery was anything to go by, his rooms were on the east-most side of the lake. Heru had insisted on the addition after a discussion about Salazar’s Chamber, which also had an alternate, outside entrance.

It wasn’t until several weeks later that Salazar finally noticed something odd about the arrangement. He and Heru were heading in to make some last minute changes. When they stopped at the portrait, Salazar looked at it closely, then at Heru, and back again.

“Am I imagining things,” he asked, looking at Heru intently, “or have you changed?

Heru hissed the password then said, “I don’t know what you mean,” as he waited for it to fully open. Once they were inside Salazar conjured up a mirror and stuck it to the wall temporarily. “Look here. Your face, and the portrait’s.”

So Heru did, a number of times. “Why don’t we look the same anymore?” he finally asked.

“I don’t know. Why do you think I brought it up?”

“You’re asking me? Is it the blood bond?”

“It’s never done that before. At least not that I’ve seen.” Salazar squinted at him. “It certainly affects the appearance of any children, but never the one who goes through the ritual.”

Heru shrugged helplessly.

“We’ll just keep an eye on it, then. If you keep changing, we’ll have to check you over for mysterious maladies.”

Heru was not comforted by the pronouncement. Not in the least.

Heru’s sixteenth birthday finally arrived, and as a gift from his four friends Heru received a portrait of each of them, which he promptly hung in his study. This occasioned a small party, which brought on comments from all of the founders on his appearance, and resulted in an interruption of said party while they went over Heru again with every test known to see if anything was ailing him.

Nothing was.

Later that evening, after the others had left, Heru went to bed unable to get the mystery out of his mind.

When he awoke and was in the middle of going about his normal routine, he was brought up short in front of his mirror. He looked like himself again. He stumbled out into his bedroom, dressed, and
drifted off to the castle proper in a daze.

The others noticed immediately and crowded around him, pestering him with questions he couldn’t answer to their satisfaction. After he had been led through an excruciating account of his evening after they had sought their own beds, they all sat back, lost in thought.

Finally, Helga spoke. “Heru, you were concentrating really hard on this last night, correct?”

“Yes,” he allowed. “It was really bothering me and I kept thinking of how I looked when I first came here.”

“Did you feel anything strange?”

“Not really.”

“And you woke up like this. Hm…” After another period of silence she said, “All right. Think about how you looked before you went to sleep, Heru. Concentrate on that for a few minutes.”

Heru shot her an incredulous look, then closed his eyes, building an image of himself against the grey canvas of his mind. He opened his eyes when he heard a gasp and said, “What?”

Rowena conjured a hand mirror and turned it to face him.

Somehow, Heru wasn’t surprised at his reflection.

It was a week later when Heru remembered about the potion accident. He had been assured repeatedly, to the point of having to dodge the hexes of a very irate Godric, that there was no such ability. The only thing out of the ordinary that had happened to him was the explosion.

So he went in search of his brother, finding him sitting at the edge of the forest conversing with a small snake.

“Salazar?”

His brother looked up and nodded a greeting.

“Do me a favor, would you?”

Salazar arched a brow and tilted his head to the side.

“Just for curiosity’s sake, form an image in your head of Godric and concentrate on it really hard?”

Salazar straightened up, gave him a look as though to say he was daft, then closed his eyes. A short time later, his features shifted abruptly.

Heru conjured a mirror and coughed; Salazar passed out. Heru told the snake to keep an eye on his brother, then left to find the notes that Salazar had put in his desk almost a year ago.

Several weeks after that, when everything was ready and settled—including the slightly sullen look on Salazar’s face—the students arrived.
Of Enchantments

Heru was tired. The school had been open for two years and the number of students per year had risen. What started at forty-two was now almost one hundred. Unlike in his day professors did not specialize in teaching, with the exception of Salazar. Being the youngest, Heru had taken on the task of teaching the least skilled of the students. Helga had the second bunch, Godric the third, and Rowena the last. Salazar alone taught a specific subject: potions to all years. He spent most of his free time—which was copious—in his private lab working on experimental potions. Heru had the sense not to be anywhere close by when that was the case.

As it was, the school year was coming to a close, and Heru was glad of the fact. Though it would have been easier to keep the children year-round—and probably safer—they had obligations to their families. Many of the children needed to be home during the early summer months to help on their parents’ farmsteads, as well as for the harvest.

The school year did not start until after the harvest, accordingly, and ended before planting season began. Even so, most of the muggle-born students could be overheard lamenting their return home, even as they applauded not having to be there for the rest of the year, and thus got out of other duties that needed to be handled year round. Magic was, in their opinion, ever so much more fun. Milking a cow was in no way comparable to their way of thinking.

They had but days left before they were shipped home, some parents having already arrived to escort their progeny home, and the students were getting antsy because of it. Heru was forced to employ stern methods in his classes to keep the children in line, which caused any number of complaints that he promptly ignored. When his day finally ended, Heru was tired, and relieved. Soon enough, they would be gone, and that day, at least, was the end of the working week.

Dinner that evening was noisy as the student’s high spirits continued to shine, making Heru that much happier when he was able to retire to the peace and privacy of his rooms. Unfortunately, Salazar decided to come visit.

“So,” Salazar said as he dropped into a squashy chair across from Heru.

“So,” said Heru, not bothering to look up.

“It’s been two years, and you still haven’t taken a wife.”

“Neither have you,” pointed out Heru.

“Ah, but you see, dear brother, I have already decided upon whom I shall confer the favor of my hand. Or should I say, whose hand I will take.” Salazar smirked and tossed his hair back.

Heru absently thought of how close in appearance they were; he had stopped trying to control his change and had ended up looking almost like Salazar’s twin. His eyes, however, stayed that same rare green. He was glad for that much, though he knew he could have kept them regardless. Either way, he no longer looked much like he had when he’d arrived. There was only a passing resemblance left, and he very much doubted that anyone from his time would believe it to be him.

His scar he had hidden from the world, before the first students had arrived. Perhaps it would not have mattered long term, but he had thought at the time it was the proper thing to do, much like changing his name.

“Oh? And who is this lucky lady, pray tell?” Heru asked indifferently. He did not much care who his
brother married, so long as she wasn’t annoying. And perhaps, just maybe, a wife would occupy enough of Salazar’s time that he would leave off bugging Heru about his lack of one.

“Ah, sweet bud. Her name is Ethelinda. She’s from a pure-blood family, naturally. She’s passing fair in looks, doesn’t squint, and looks to be quite well suited for childbearing.”

Herau blinked slowly. “I see. And is she a nice girl?”

Salazar shrugged. “Does it matter? But yes, she’s a biddable thing, so I shan’t have any problems I expect. She graduates this year, in fact.”

“Of course. A docile child-bearer. Just what every man dreams of,” Herau said, masking the sarcasm he felt welling up inside him.

“Naturally. Well … I trust you aren’t foolish enough to say things like that in front of Rowena and Helga,” Salazar said. “They have rather different views.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” Herau said dryly. “Though, I would have thought that with those two as friends, your own views might have been different.”

“I can’t imagine why,” responded Salazar. “But come now, stop avoiding the subject at hand. Why have you not found a girl for yourself?”

Herau sighed heavily. “I still think I’m too young. I know it’s different here and now, but you have to understand where I come from.”

“Forsooth. But you shall not be able to hold me off forever, dear brother. I consider this matter to be of paramount importance.”

“I’m sure you do. I will keep an eye out, but I promise nothing in the way of expeditious compliance.”

“Hmpfh. We shall see.” Salazar stood and brushed down his tunic. “I will, then, see you tomorrow,” he said as he strode toward the exit to the castle proper.

Breakfast went by rather quietly, the students not really yet awake. But as the hour drew to a close they began to perk up, knowing that they had the day in its entirety to spend outside, or in any way they pleased. So it was that several hours later that a young girl came stumbling in through the main doors, screaming at the top of her lungs.

Herau, relaxing in his rooms, felt the stirrings of unease, like clouds of poisonous gas coming to envelop him where he sat. Standing, he let himself be guided by some unknown sense, ending up several minutes later where the girl was gasping out words of warning. Muggles were on the grounds, trying to either capture or kill anyone they could find.

Herau and his fellow adults sprinted through the main doors and out to the grounds. Spotting a cluster of taller figures menacing a group of children, they raced toward them, wands at the ready. As they approached a volley of stunning spells were cast, felling the attackers one by one. When they drew close enough, Helga motioned to the students, then herded them back to the castle to calm them down, by force if necessary, and check them over for injuries.

Rowena and the men cast spells to bind the muggles as quickly, then a single target was ennervated.
“What have you done to me!” demanded the fellow, struggling against his bonds. “Foul creatures! Abominations! We will destroy you!” he yelled in defiance.

Salazar looked at Godric and snorted, then said, “You lot are here to destroy us?”

“Yes!” the man shouted. “Your kind is abhorrent to normal people. You don’t deserve to live, you perversions of nature.” He continued to struggle and shout nauseatingly obscene insults until Godric stunned him again. The sudden silence was shocking.

After staring at him for a minute, Heru finally asked, “What shall we do?”

“What is there to do? Take them far from here and corrupt their memories. If they cannot remember this place, they cannot come back to cause more problems,” said Rowena.

Salazar sighed and shot infuriatingly knowing looks at the others, then said, “Wait here. Keep an eye on them until I get back.”

He returned with a sack of potions and administered a phial to each of the captives, stroking their throats to force them to swallow.

“They’ll be out for at least a day. Let’s obliviate them, then load them up in a wagon and let one of the local farmers haul them somewhere.”

As no one had a better idea, they did exactly that, removing the ropes before turning the task over to one of the men who routinely worked in the castle gardens, a squib by nature. He was more than happy to assist, saying that he’d be sure to take the bumpiest route he could think. After a wide, toothless grin, he clucked at the nag harnessed to the wagon and set off.

It was then, as they canvassed the grounds for any others hiding in wait, that they found the dead bodies.

The bodies had been identified, and seven students were left orphaned in the aftermath. The last few days of the school year were canceled. The remainder of the children left for home as soon as their escorts arrived and had rested overnight. All were assured that the founders would ensure this could not happen a second time.

After hours of discussion, constantly interrupted by at least one of them being called away to comfort the bereaved children, they had decided what to do—about the orphaned students at least. Local families of good standing would be endowed, and in return they would take on the responsibility of caring for the children. Some of their own children would soon be coming to Hogwarts.

The first exception was Caedryn, a second year male student to whom Heru had taken a great liking to. He expressed his interest to the others of adopting the child, and they agreed, despite the fact that Heru had no wife. They knew how well he usually interacted with the youngest of students, and had seen for themselves how Caedryn looked up to Heru after two years at the castle.

The second was Ethelinda, Salazar’s intended. There was no question of where she would be living, having already agreed to wed. Her family had been thrilled at such a fine match their daughter, and had given their blessing almost as soon as they had been approached. Salazar would abide by the conventions and put off the bonding until a year of mourning had passed, but other than that, his plans stood firm. She would live in the castle until that time, in an apartment of her own.

The only thing remaining to do was to contact the families in the tiny settlement nearby, and talk to
the children. Heru, though nervous, thought that Caedryn would be agreeable. Or at least, as agreeable as one could be with such a fresh loss.

Several days later, after the worst of the initial shock had worn off, Heru pulled Caedryn aside and away from his fellow orphans, bringing him to his private quarters deep under the lake. Once Caedryn was safely settled in a comfortable chair, Heru began his appeal.

“Caedryn, I wanted to ask you something,” Heru said in soothing tones.

“Sir?” Caedryn said in a dull voice.

“You see, we get along very well. I’ve grown rather attached to you over the past two years.”

Caedryn raised his head a little, looking slightly more interested in both his surroundings and his professor.

“I really don’t want to upset you any further, but you’re going to need a new home.” Heru glanced down at his hands and realized he was wringing them slowly; he stilled the movement of his hands abruptly. “And, I thought I would offer my home to you, if you’d like that.”

“What about the others?” Caedryn asked.

“Assuming things go to plan, they’ll be placed with good families in the nearby settlement since they have no other family left, either,” Heru explained.

“Why am I different, then?”

“You just are. I see a lot of myself in you.” Heru hesitated then said, “If you’d rather not, we’ll find you a family in the village like for the others. Either way you’d still be able to attend school here.”

“What about my home?”

“We’ve been making arrangements to travel to everyone’s homes to collect anything they need and settle affairs, so you’ll be going as well. You needn’t fear that you’d be left out, Caedryn. And if you want a few days to think about my offer, that’s fine. The last thing I want is for you to feel pressured.”

“No, it’s all right, sir. I accept your offer.” Caedryn gave Heru a tentative smile, which Heru returned.

“I’m very glad to hear that, Caedryn. Would you prefer to stay in your current rooms, or move your things here? Just because I’m to be your guardian does not mean I’ll insist that you stay down here, but I would like it if you did.”

Caedryn said, “I’d need to stay with my year during school, though.” When Heru nodded, he said, “I think I’d like to live here with you.”

“Then let me help you collect your belongings, and I’ll give you a tour when we come back.”

The founders took turns escorting the orphans to their homes, along with one member of their new family, to gather up anything they might wish to keep, and collect anything else that might be of use in the village. Salazar accompanied Heru and Caedryn, traveling mainly by mundane methods; one could not very well apparate to an unknown place without severe risk of damage.
When they arrived, Heru and Caedryn set about dealing with the contents of the small home while Salazar went off to see the local Lord to inform him of the abandonment of the property due to the death of the family who held the land of him. Salazar prudently did not mention that the boy lived, and by the time anyone arrived to check on things, the trio were well away.

The village outside the castle was scheduled for renovation. The founders wished to expand it to accommodate the influx of residents, especially the homes of those families which were taking on additional mouths to feed. Because of the villagers’ fondness for mead—a number of them harvested wild honey to ferment—a name was chosen: Hogsmeade.

The tiny inn, as yet unnamed, was expanded as well, as it belonged to one of the families taking on orphans. Things brought back from the trips were divided up into groups. Anything a particular child didn’t care to keep was placed to the side for division among the villagers, with records kept of the approximate value of the goods.

Records were kept of the totals; the orphans who availed themselves of the inn’s primitive tavern could get simple meals, paid for out of their credits. Once those were gone, they would need to find other ways to pay, such as bartering chores or other work either in the village or up at the castle.

All of the new construction was arranged and paid for out of the founders’ personal funds, much like the Lord of a castle would take care of the settlements on his land and under his control. Having done that, the founders turned to even more important matters.

Day after day was spent either in discussion or work, devising, experimenting, and finally creating defensive wards for the castle and its immediate environs. The final touch were the repellant enchantments, those that made it impossible for muggles to see the reality of the landscape in the vicinity, and which subtly encouraged them to find business elsewhere post haste. These extended to cover the small forest off to the east on the grounds that it presented an issue of security; in many places forests were used as hideouts for bandits and thugs, and the founders did not want to overlook this potential problem.

At the beginning of the month before school was due to resume, Heru found himself with a young boy on his hands who was persistent in pushing a particular wish of his.

“But we’re magic,” Caedryn had said. “Can you not make it so that you are more than just a guardian to me?”

Heru had closely questioned the boy, wanting to be sure of exactly what Caedryn was requesting. In the end he had gone to Salazar and Godric to discuss things.

“He wants to blood bond to me,” explained Heru once they were settled comfortably.

“Well, it would be a step toward you having legitimate heirs,” pointed out Salazar reasonably, “and you are to all accounts his parent now.”

“Yes. But will you do it?” asked Heru.

“But of course. As Godric stood in for family before, so shall I this time. We’ll bond the boy to you as child.”

In preparation of the event, Heru decided to do something a little different. He spent a full week spell weaving, taking threads of raw silk and magically binding them together, laced with the essence of his blood. When he was done, he held a fair sized tapestry which he permanently stuck to the wall in his study. Thus far it only showed his name and Salazar’s.
After the ritual was complete, with Salazar standing in to perform the rites, the tapestry was seen to update itself to include Caedryn. Heru’s family was begun, at a mere eighteen years of age.
Things Change

It was a very private bonding; the only attendees were Godric, Rowena and Helga, Heru and Caedryn, and of course, Salazar and Ethelinda. The bride was dressed in forest green silk embroidered with delicate silver thread. Her robes were form fitting above the waist, then flaring out over her hips, split down the front to reveal a chemise of pale green. Had Heru not known better, he would have sworn it was a dress. Salazar was dressed similarly, though he looked eminently masculine in his attire.

In less than an hour the ceremony was complete and everyone made for the refreshments. Less than an hour after that Salazar and Ethelinda had disappeared. Shortly thereafter the group dispersed.

Heru thought it was a good thing, having come back here and learning things long since forgotten. Whether no one had bothered to write things down, or the books had eventually turned to dust, or even if those with the knowledge had died without issue or capable apprentices, Heru did not know. But his personal library held the wisdom of the age, and every book in his collection was protected by enchantments. So long as they were kept stored in their cases, time could not erase their lore.

He was especially glad of the knowledge he had obtained when he decided to rework the external entrance to his quarters. It was warded, certainly, but not in a way he was happy with for the long term. No one had figured out the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets for centuries, and he wanted something as innocuous, or at least better protected than it was now.

The forest would get larger, he knew; it was currently nowhere near the size it was in his time. He hovered overhead, the broom he was riding a far cry from what he considered to be minimally decent, and sighted landmarks to triangulate by. He assumed, given what he’d chosen, that they would stand the test of time. If not, he would be remembering the location the hard way.

Once he had the locations fixed in his mind, he landed at the entrance and began to work. The entrance currently was a simple descent into the earth, lined with stone, and covered with obfuscation and repelling charms. Further in was a password-protected door, much in the same style as the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. But the present arrangement wasn’t good enough.

It took him hours, but when he was done he had a new, unobtrusive entrance a short distance away from the original. In looks it was simple enough; it greatly resembled a milestone pillar. Surrounding it was an innocent looking disc of flat stones with the occasional weed or spot of grass growing from the mortar that bound them together.

In reality, it was far more complicated. The pillar was imbued with magic to create a control mechanism which would activate when the password was given, but only if the person attempting it had Heru’s own magical signature.

The stones he had so painstakingly arranged would drop into a circular staircase which led down to the second gateway, a door which was also password-protected like the pillar. The redundancy was tedious, but Heru decided that one couldn’t be too careful. Only once you were past the door would you enter the passageway to his private quarters.

The pillar would both raise and lower the stairs, as would similar mechanism on the passage side of the door. After testing his efforts a dozen times over, Heru decided to rework the original entrance as it was no longer needed, and covered it after converting it into a small storage room.
The last thing he did was to add in spells which would allow him to spy on the surrounding area to see if anyone was present. All this work would be of little use otherwise if he opened the entrance while someone was present to see it happen.

Eventually pleased with the results, Heru wandered around the forest for a while, making non-functional replicas of the pillar and its surrounding ring of stone. Each had the approximate distance to the castle incised in bas-relief. Absolutely nothing set them apart from the original in appearance except the distance marking.

When he was done making decoys, Heru returned to his private entrance, descended and closed it back up. After he carefully made his way to his quarters, Heru choked down some food, stripped and cast a cleansing charm on himself, then passed out in bed.

The next morning after breakfast, Heru and Caedryn took their daily constitutional around the grounds, skirting the lake and forest, and even down to the village and back. The past year had been a good one for their relationship, and Heru had come to realize how emotionally rewarding it was for him to have a son, though he understood that he had missed much having acquired a child of that age.

As they walked past the forest for the second time, their discussion was interrupted by trilling. It was rather far off at first, but it continued to draw closer, causing them to stop and wait to see if the songmaker would appear. Out of the forest flew a brilliantly scarlet and gold phoenix, its beak open to let loose liquid sound that soothed and invigorated at the same time.

The bird swooped in and landed on Heru’s shoulder, flipped its wings back and finished its song.

Heru gave Caedryn a sidelong look then turned his head at an angle to gaze at the phoenix, which clicked its beak at him. Caedryn, eyes wide with astonishment, stepped around to face his father, carefully tucking his hands behind him and leaning forward slightly.

“Greetings, my fine friend,” Heru said, not knowing what else to do, but knowing that, like Fawkes, this phoenix would likely appreciate being treated courteously.

The bird gave a short, happy trill and nudged his cheek with its beak.

“Has it chosen you, father?” asked Caedryn breathlessly.

“It?” he replied, still gazing at the phoenix. “I don’t know, Caedryn. Though why—my dear fellow, would that be right? Have you chosen me, or are you just in the mood for company?”

The phoenix trilled again, sending a shiver of warmth down Heru’s spine, then nuzzled against his face. Heru flicked his eyes toward his son, arched a brow, then looked back at the bird.

“How about we head back to the castle? If our friend here would like to accompany us, perhaps the others could assist us with that question. And if he chooses to fly away, we shall be grateful that we were visited by such a delightful creature even for such a short time.”

Caedryn nodded eagerly so Heru turned carefully so as not to disturb the phoenix’s perch, and started the walk back up, his son tagging along at his side. When they reached the main doors the bird was still perfectly content to remain so they continued on in to search out the founders.

They found them in the kitchen, clustered around one of the tables discussing the rising number of students and what should be done to handle the increase. Heru’s appearance with a phoenix on his
shoulder stopped everyone cold, causing them to stare at him with varying degrees of surprise on their faces.

“Isn’t it wonderful!” crowed Caedryn, who was bouncing up and down.

“Henu, what have we here?” asked Rowena, tilting her head to the side and giving him an intense look.

“Well, that’s what I was hoping to find out. I’ve only ever met one phoenix before, and he was the familiar of, um—well, anyway, I’m not really sure what’s going on, but Caedryn seems to think I’ve been chosen.”

“And you have,” spoke Salazar with no small amount of smugness. Heru did not doubt that his brother counted this as coup for the family name. After Heru gave him a quizzical look, Salazar said, “You merely need to accept. Formally, that is. They very rarely choose the company of a wizard, or witch for that matter.”

As Heru stood there feeling a bit lost—it wasn’t as though anyone had ever explained this formal acceptance thing to him—Godric began to smile widely. “Go on, then. Say something along the lines of ‘I accept your offer of companionship’.”

“Er, right.” Heru angled his head again so he could look the phoenix in the eye. “Though I know not why, I am very honored that you have come, and would be pleased if you would remain with me to be my companion and guard my back should it be needful.”

The phoenix seemed to think that was suitable and let loose another glorious trilling sequence. Heru felt the bird’s acceptance of his words settle over him like a warm, comfortable mist, and grinned rather foolishly.

After several suggestions were tossed at Heru as to a name for his new friend, Heru said, “Would you like Praecino as your name, perhaps?”

The phoenix nodded and nudged him, so Heru took it as given. “Right. I should show you where I live, no? And find you a nice place to rest when you like.” Heru turned back to his companions and smiled, saying, “Thank you for your guidance.”

As he turned to go Caedryn was already by the door, pulling it open. Back in his private quarters, Heru watched as Praecino flew over to perch on the back of a chair, then started looking for something handy to transfigure into a stand—something vaguely similar to the one that Professor Dumbledore used.

Heru suddenly felt tired, watching his son acting with all the exuberance of youth, and gave a half smile to Caedryn when he had a chance to sit down and Praecino was testing out his new perch.

“I wonder what phoenixes eat?” he mused.

That afternoon he sat with the founders to bring himself up to speed on the discussion he had interrupted that morning. Helga was advocating the hire of additional staff. People were needed to teach, to tend to the castle, to cook, and so forth. While Salazar agreed, he found it hard to believe that they would be able to find enough people to meet their growing needs.

So Heru said, “What about more house-elves? Not for teaching, of course, but for everything else. They’re small, loyal, and just love to work. I think if it were a given that any in service to the school continue to be well treated…”
The others mulled that over for a bit, casting speculative glances at each other. “We wouldn’t be able to bring in that many at first,” said Rowena, “but Heru is right. They work very hard, and do excellent work.”

Heru spared a moment to send up a prayer for forgiveness to Hermione for such a betrayal of her ideals. Realistically, however, he knew very well it would have happened regardless, so he didn’t feel all that bad about having suggested it.

“And, if they take on the mantle of most of the domestic work, that leaves only a few people to be hired on for teaching duties,” Heru added in a reasonable tone. “However, I think it makes sense to say that we should specialize more if we’ve more people. Salazar already does.”

More nods followed, along with talk of who might be suitable. Heru eventually became bored and slipped off to admire Praecino; they were bogged down in a discussion of various candidates, none of which Heru knew or could comment intelligently on.

Though it had not occurred to him at the time of his change, it was when Caedryn complained that the entrance portrait didn’t look like Heru that he decided it would be the better part of discretion to have it updated. He really should have thought of it earlier. It was not until well after Salazar had proudly announced that Ethelinda was expecting that Heru managed to secure the services of the same artist who had painted it to come to the castle and begin the delicate work.

That he needed to do both portraits was something that profoundly disturbed Heru, as it meant either letting the man inside his quarters, or adding an alternate method of entrance to the rooms. In the end he let the man complete the first portrait, then had them switched, and let the man finish the second. The portraits didn’t care which one was outside, after all, and they often switched frames. In the end both pictures looked a great deal more like he was presently.

By then Salazar’s wife was starting to show her condition—that is, when anyone actually saw her. Salazar seemed rather happy about the fact that she was a retiring, rather shy creature. Heru simply rolled his eyes a lot when her name came up—out of Salazar’s sight, naturally—and declined to comment whenever possible.

It was easy enough to do when Salazar insisted on extolling the supposed virtues of his Ethelinda, those being the very kinds of things that Heru considered to be incredibly sexist and archaic. And as he knew without question that Salazar was not about to change—and Heru had no business thinking he would—he held his tongue, nodded a great deal, and hoped his brother would forget about his own lack of a wife.

After all, he did genuinely like Salazar and enjoy his company, just not when it came to discussing any female aside from Rowena or Helga. Partly in the hopes that it would keep his brother too busy to remember certain details he would prefer Salazar forget, Heru suggested that his brother begin writing down his doctrines, along with anything else he felt relevant.

Heru himself was interested to see what Salazar would commit to paper, and had hopes that he could read his brother’s writings in the future. How far into the future that would be he had no idea of knowing, though.

He also took the time to ask Salazar about the basilisk. Salazar was rather offhand about the entire subject, insisting it was really nothing special.

“Look here. She’s just a pet, dear brother. A bit on the large side, I admit, but still a pet. What’s to
worry about?"

“But, Salazar, knowing what I know, your answer doesn’t tell me much of anything,” he protested.

“Well, you’ve never been very forthcoming on the subject yourself.”

Heru came to the conclusion after several minutes of circular arguments that Salazar would never admit to anything. He could only conclude that the basilisk was a failsafe of some kind. It was not something he could actively interfere with, much as it pained him. He did feel that he had won something, though, when Salazar agreed to keep a journal.

The school year continued on; the new teachers were settling into their positions, and Heru was happy to be teaching the Defense classes, though he felt some loss at not having as close a relationship with a year group. Had things been like this when Caedryn had lost his family, he might not have a son.

Spring arrived in due time and Ethelinda was blooming along with the early flowers. Unfortunately, she was not the type to attain that special glow some women did. Instead she was even more rarely seen due to her increasingly cranky mood and erratic behavior.Shortly thereafter, she delivered up a healthy son, which Salazar promptly named Salvalus.

It was a bad day for Heru when he realized that the birth of Salazar’s son meant his brother’s mind could now switch focus from that happy event to the scandalizing lack of a wife on Heru’s part. Salazar became increasingly persistent on the subject, going so far as to grab the arm of passing girls in the school and subject them to numerous questions about their parentage, then look at Heru questioningly.

Heru finally appealed to Helga and Rowena for assistance. He spent several hours talking with them, all but coming out and saying that women did absolutely nothing for him, without quite making it plain. Whatever they thought of his diffidence was left unsaid. They did, however, take the time to winnow through the current student population in an attempt to find a girl of good breeding and suitable age, who was as indifferent as Heru to the idea, yet still willing to secure herself a good marriage if offered.

Heru took to spying up and down corridors in an effort to avoid his brother, and while that worked well enough, it did not prevent Salazar from entering his quarters to ambush him and inquire about his progress in the search. An offer to personally assist sent Heru flying back to the ladies for protection.

When they finally decided on the girl they deemed best, Heru was caught between relief and further anxiety. He met with her to talk, and to ascertain that she was actually willing—not that he distrusted the ladies—and that she was someone he could at least get along with. It was just as well she was in her last year. Once Salazar found out about her and had given his personal seal of approval, he would let nothing stop their joining come the summer.

That Caedryn seemed to be pleased with the idea of a step-mother was enough for Heru to strictly forbid himself from ever appearing anything but pleased by the whole venture. The boy got along with Regan far better than Heru did, but then he wasn’t the one who had to marry her. Even Praecino acted as though he approved of the girl.

A small distraction came in the form of the upcoming end of term. Another discussion broke out when the numbers were compiled for the next year; the people in the village had never been slow about producing children, nor had wizarding families living farther away.
The problem was not so much that they were lacking personnel, but that the student housing was becoming an issue. All the girls were placed in one location, the boys in another; the founders knew that their population would continue to rise, and the current arrangement would not suit forever.

Add to that their differing opinions on who should be allowed to attend the school. Salazar was still against the idea of muggle-borns being accepted, but grudgingly gave way. Heru was wondering if he would have to remind his friends of what they had learned from seeing his memories or if they’d spontaneously recall how it was handled in later years.

They still had not decided by the time the students returned home and Heru was seriously considering giving his friends a sharp nudge. Anything to keep Salazar distracted from the upcoming wedding. Godric saved the day when he ambled into the kitchen and flung himself into a chair carelessly, tossed his hat down, and promptly squished it by swinging his legs up to rest on the table.

After an exclamation of dismay—Salazar chided him on his bad manners—Godric tried to rectify the damage, but the poor hat sat there bent and crumpled. When one looked at it right, it rather resembled a crotchety old man who’d had a little too much to drink, tilted over as though it couldn’t keep its balance.

Heru waited patiently for their minds to produce what he knew must be there, waiting to come to fruition, and heaved a sigh of relief when Helga said, “Oh, how charming! It looks like you after a night in the tavern, Godric.” She laughed merrily as she looked at the hat again.

“Hush,” he scolded.

“No, really. All it needs is a bit of your personality and we’d be all set.”

Something flickered across Rowena’s face, then subsided, but she gave the hat a closer look.

Helga snatched the hat off the table and placed it over one hand, playing with it like a puppet. Raising it in front of her face she used her fingers to move an impromptu mouth.

“Godric,” she had the hat say gruffly, “you should be more careful!”

Salazar began snickering quietly and Rowena covered her mouth hastily. Heru sat back with a slight smirk on his face.

“I ought to have said something sooner,” said the hat. “If I had half your brain I’d—”

Helga stopped and turned the hat around to face her with a frown on her face. “Now there’s an interesting thought. Don’t you think?”

She turned the hat back. “I would if I could,” said the hat.

Helga moved the hat to the side and raised her brows at Rowena in a silent question. Rowena in turn tilted her head down to the right for a moment, her forehead furrowed slightly, before looking up over at Salazar. He was tapping his chin with one long finger.

Heru felt almost sad. He would never know if the sorting hat was a paradoxical creation, or their own idea spun from the whole cloth of their imaginations.

It took a month for them to work out the details of the hat and how it would determine who went where, and to infuse it with their own thoughts and power. Once completed it enjoyed pride of place on the desk in Godric’s office.
Then, Salazar remembered about Regan.
A small gathering was held at the end of July that year, a small honoring of Heru’s twentieth birthday. He might have enjoyed it more—and he usually did—had it not been for the fact that on the next day he was to wed Regan. It continued to annoy him that his brother had been and was so damnably insistent on this, whereas his other friends—the remaining founders—hadn’t even started looking for themselves.

He still worried about what would happen if he were called back to his own time. Would Regan even care? Would she be relieved that she was free of an arrangement of convenience? Should he even mention it? It was bad enough that Heru had adopted a son—not that he would change that if he could—but marriage implied more children, and that meant more people left behind.

In consequence he drank perhaps a little more than he should have, and went to bed feeling rather giddy when he wasn’t morose. When he awoke the next morning, rousted out of bed at an abominably early hour by a disgustingly cheerful Salazar, he was surly and ready to snap at everyone and everything. His head ached and his stomach was queasy, though he honestly wasn’t sure if it was the mead or his feelings about the day which brought them on.

His brother chivvied him about like a mother hen, chattering away brightly as Heru bathed and got dressed, and adjusted his clothing as though Heru were a life sized doll of some kind. It was with a great deal of self control that Heru nobly refrained from socking his brother in the teeth as he blathered on about the benefits of having a wife to warm one’s bed and be available to do his bidding and any number of other domestic things that Heru had been managing on his own quite comfortably for years.

The ceremony was held at the top of one of the towers, providing a brilliant backdrop of cloudless blue sky and a gentle breeze to flirt with their clothing and hair. Heru was too preoccupied with not stumbling over his lines to appreciate the setting though, keeping his eyes on Godric the entire time.

Regan spoke in a calm, clear voice, seemingly indifferent. In an odd way that served to help settle Heru’s nerves. Once the final vows were spoken and Heru had given his new bride a chaste kiss, they repaired to a room inside the tower for a light meal. Gifts were displayed off to one side long enough to be noticed before a house-elf delivered them to Heru’s quarters for later investigation.

When they were finally able to escape the tower, Heru bade his son to go find something to amuse himself with and led Regan down to the dungeons and into his quarters, giving her a non-Parseltongue password with which to gain entrance. Inside they settled into a pair of comfortable chairs by the fire, which had been lit in anticipation of their arrival.

“Regan?”

“Yes, husband?” she replied calmly, gazing into the flickering flames.

Heru winced. “Er, please don’t call me that. It sounds so … formal.”

“As you wish.” She gave him a placid look.

“I know I’ve already asked you this before, and it’s a little late to be asking it again, but are you really all right with this? We barely even know one another.”

“I was not forced. From all that I have seen you are a good man, and a kind one. While I was not actively seeking a husband, I could do far worse than to be married to you, and well know it.”
“And you could possibly have done far better.”

“That is irrelevant now, is it not? Conversely, you may be trampled by a hippogriff tomorrow and I left a rich widow.”

Heru was startled enough out of his anxiety to chuckle. “All right. I’m sorry.”

“Do not apologize to me for speaking your feelings, Heru. I think that both of us would prefer honesty over sweet little lies designed to accommodate rather than reveal.”

He nodded and looked at his hands for a moment. “Yes. Does it bother you that Caedryn is almost as old as you are?”

“He is a delightful boy. You took him in, I presume, out of the kindness of your heart and because you felt some sense of kinship with him. I would be a fool to disdain such an action. If it is easier for us to be as mother and son, so be it. Else, if sister and younger brother, that is also well.”

“I think,” said Heru slowly, “that you are likely far wiser than I am.”

She gave him a faintly impish smile and replied, “Some say women always are.” Then she sobered and looked at him quite seriously. “Heru, speak your mind. You sit there so uncomfortably, perched at the edge of your chair. I would be blind to still not see that you did not want this, but I am not offended by it. I do not feel it has anything to do with me, and I would like to at least be your friend.”

Heru slumped in his chair. “That would be nice. It’s true, I didn’t want this. I didn’t think I was ready for it. And it’s true that it has nothing to do with you. I just—I see my brother, and how he is, and I think—that isn’t me.”

“And you are not. Had you been, I would not have agreed to this.”

He brushed the hair out of his eyes to study her for a few seconds. He thought that perhaps this would not be so bad after all. After a moment he pulled out his wand and summoned the table over to them, then returned it to its holster.

“We might as well see what presents we got,” he said with a faint smile for her.

They took their time opening each offering, pulling away the wrappings to be set aside for later use, and reversing the miniaturization used to keep down the sheer size of some of the gifts. There were bolts of silks and velvets for Regan, a set of manticore-skin clothing for Heru, and a portrait of Regan to be placed in the study.

There was a phial of re’em blood, which Heru carefully set aside for later. He only vaguely recalled what it was for and thought it wiser to wait before availing himself of it. And there was a cradle, which caused Heru to flush uncomfortably as Regan looked on in quiet contemplation.

“Do you … want children?” he asked softly.

“I would be lying if I said otherwise,” she replied with equal softness. “But I do not consider such to be my life’s sole ambition.” Regan reached out and lifted his chin with her fingers, gently making him meet her eyes. “I do not claim to fully understand your reluctance on some things, but rest assured that I will ask no more of you than you are capable of giving. I do, though, find it in my heart to yearn for a few.”

“Very well. I would prefer you not be unhappy, Regan, so I will do my best.”
“That is all I could ask for.” She smiled and released him, then picked up the last gift, which was revealed to be a set of cloak pins with the Slytherin family crest.

A short time later as they were sipping tea and cautiously feeling each other out on various topics, Caedryn dashed through the door and skidded to a stop.

“Is it all right if I stay in the village with Carsis and Clanar for a few days, father?” he asked breathlessly, then blushed and gave Regan a sketchy bow of greeting.

“Their family does not mind?” Heru asked.

Caedryn shook his head. “Not at all, and it would be ever so much fun. Do say yes, please, father?”

“Hmmm.” Heru finished his tea, swirled the cup, and flipped it over onto a service tray to drain.

“Oh, father, really! Not that again,” whined Caedryn.

Heru silenced him with a stern look, waited a bit, then flipped over the cup and peered into it. After mumbling unintelligibly for a few moments and making some odd noises, he looked up and smiled. “Very well. But I trust you will comport yourself properly during your stay.”

“Of course, father.” Caedryn looked positively scandalized at the idea of acting up, though they were both well aware that he was no more saintly than any other boy his age.

Heru gave him an incredulous look and waved his hand. “Off with you, then, and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Thank you, father,” Caedryn said with a bounce. “I’ll just go collect a few things and see you both in a few days.” He sketched another bow to Regan and dashed out.

She gave Heru an amused look and said, “You really do care about each other.”

“He’s one of the best things that ever happened to me;” he replied, then rinsed and re-filled his cup.

Heru was, to put it mildly, discomfited. He had at first tried to recall how he’d felt when he’d see Cho in the halls or at meal times, to remember exactly what sensations those encounters had produced within him. But those memories were fleeting and unreal, as difficult to grasp as mist and as hard to hold on to as a fading dream.

Kissing Regan made him feel as though something was out of kilter, or missing. While her body was finely formed, it did not incite him to any particular action, but rather left him indifferent. And when he joined with her and began the slow but steadily quickening dance of lovers, he could not help but feel curiously detached from the process.

He did not know if it was because she was nearly a stranger to him, or if it was that she had a way of unintentionally making him feel so much younger. He was not even sure if his breakdown in the graveyard and the subsequent events had somehow shattered a part of him that might never be mended. All he knew was that this act, supposed to be one of pleasure and joy, left him as unmoved as he had ever known.

That knowledge weighed heavily on his shoulders, even as they came together more quickly and strived for that pinnacle to be sought after. And yet … there was a soft song that reached his ears, a song that cleared away the worry from his mind and allowed him to continue where he might have
faltered. The song of what could only be Praecino, soothing away his inadequacies long enough for them to cry out and collapse.

Some few minutes later, Regan’s quiet voice sounded out of the darkness. “Is that normal behavior for a phoenix?”

September found Salazar strutting through the castle well pleased with himself. Ethelinda was expecting again, and Heru’s brother was the type to think that showed how manly he was. Heru privately wondered how on earth Salazar had become such good friends with ladies like Helga and Rowena given his rather muggle-like views on the proper place and duties of women. He also wondered how it was that his brother still had his own teeth given the frequency with which he invariably infuriated someone over the course of any given day.

While Salazar had not been the easiest of men to begin with, marriage had had the effect of solidifying certain views he held. And, while it was not clear why it seemed to strengthen some and not others, Heru and everyone else was made exceedingly well aware of Salazar’s increasingly demanding recommendations that muggle-born children not be allowed into the school.

He went out of his way to cite examples of the barbarism that muggles appeared to revel in, and shared each and every report of muggle activity anywhere near Hogwarts as though it were a crowning piece in his arguments. And yet, Salazar had so many admirable qualities about him; his generosity was legend, his breadth of talent astonishing, and his mind blazingly intelligent. He would no sooner snub one of the muggle-born students under their care than he would slap Rowena for a joke at his expense.

Heru knew what would eventually come. He just did not know how, or why, or when. That partial knowledge ate at his insides and caused him to ignore much of the unpleasantness that Salazar brought into their lives. However it happened, he knew he would fiercely miss the man who made him brother.

But that, it appeared, would not be for some time yet. The castle seemed to sparkle, and inhabitants within its walls moved about with a quiet confidence that bespoke safe and happy lives.

Regan’s parents arrived in the village one fine morning with a wagon piled high with their belongings, intent on settling closer to their daughter, and on getting to know their new son-in-law Heru. Everyone pitched in to construct a modest house on a quiet, though developing street for them, and lingered long hours when they had completed their welcoming gesture over mead and victuals laid out on tables that groaned from their weight.

Despite his nervousness, Regan was so clearly content with her life that Heru found he need not have worried about his reception with her parents. They were openly pleased to meet him, and her father stole away Caedryn almost immediately to explain to him all about their family business.

If it were not for the part of his life that Heru could not still fully embrace—that part that only Praecino could ease him through—one might have said he was the epitome of a happily married man. He had a son he loved, a wife he found to be an intelligent, witty companion and good friend, and a home and friends he frankly adored. And wonder of wonders, he got along splendidly with Regan’s parents. The only people who knew differently were Heru, Regan, and Praecino, and they never talked of it.

In October, when the temperature began to chill and the air took on a crisp quality, the people of Hogwarts began to notice that the staircases were often not in the same position as they were the day
before, or the day before that. Since no one wanted to stay awake of a night spying on them, it was shrugged off and laughed about as an oddity, a quirk, and not anything harmful.

Midway through the month the students began to arrive, stopping in at the village to rest before making the final leg of their journey. As they wandered into the Great Hall in small groups, some paused to take in the changes that had been made, then turn back to their companions to speculate on what was to happen.

They milled around uncertainly until Helga took charge, bidding them to form lines according to their year groups and quiet themselves so that they might proceed.

“There are,” began Godric, “as you may have wondered, to be some few changes starting this year. Because we are so many, and expect to be more as the years roll on, we have decided to alter how we handle certain aspects of your life here, and our own.”

He swept his gaze out across the many upturned faces and continued. “You are to be sorted into houses, which will determine where in the castle you will reside, with whom you will sit at meals, and so forth. Each of you in turn will come up, and once your house is named will be directed to the appropriate table.”

After a quick glance at his fellow founders, Godric nodded and pointed at the first column of children. “We’ll start with you.”

In retrospect it was a good thing the students had arrived early that day, well rested and fed, for it took several hours to sort every child standing in the hall. Heru, who normally enjoyed sorting ceremonies, found himself stifling yawn after yawn and feeling as though his brains would leak out his ears if he had to listen for much longer. It was a shame, though, he reflected, that the sorting hat had not yet inspired itself to song. Perhaps it was too young in life to be bored enough to find ways to amuse itself.

When the last student had been sorted and taken a seat, Heru sat up a little straighter at the high table and tried to look more awake. Godric gratefully slumped into a seat and let Rowena take the floor.

“Now that we are all settled, I have a few announcements to make before we eat, so please bear with me. It will not take long,” she said.

“Thank goodness that’s over,” said Godric in an undertone. “Much more of that and I’d have had to hex myself senseless to relieve the sheer tedium.”

Heru gave him a quick look and choked back a bark of laughter, nudged Godric into an upright position, then turned to face the students with a perfectly composed face.

Rowena went on to explain about the increase in professors, and quickly introduce each and which subject they would be teaching. In mere minutes everyone was ravenously tucking into plates heaped with food, the prevailing mood throughout the hall being relieved appreciation.

When the students were as groaningly full with food as the tables had been, and the professors were quite willing to retreat for that one last evening sans children, the four founders stood. Each went to the house table they headed and bid the children to follow them to their new rooms.

It was around then that Heru realized he hadn’t even registered which house Caedryn had been sorted into.

November brought with it another change to the school. Heretofore, no one had ever actually caught the staircases in movement, though the evidence of their activity was clearly seen on a regular basis.
Now, however, students could occasionally be heard shrieking with laughter over the rumbling noises of a stair swiveling from one landing to another, often delaying the children in their attempts to navigate the castle.

After the first few times, when adults had come running from every direction at what they perceived as the sound of a child in peril, they stopped bolting like frightened rabbits each time it happened.

They had only just become accustomed to this new facet of castle life when previously normal portraits—ones that had been placed in various spots for a bit of colour or to soften the stone walls—began to act just like their magically-created counterparts.

One might see a shy shepherdess peeking out from among her flock, or a strapping young man brandishing his sword to excite the fancy of girls passing by. Heru speculated with Regan that it could be that as the level of available magic rose, and with each and every spell that released that energy into the air, that the castle itself was coming to life.

She had taken to giving him odd looks over some of his theories, but that might have simply been because she, like Ethelinda, was now expecting. Heru had been mystified by the changes he’d seen previously in Salazar’s wife during those rare occasions that he spent time with her, and wondered very privately if his own wife would become practically another person over the course of the months ahead.

On the other hand, when Regan had come to him with a smile of restrained pride and announced that she was with child, he had experienced a deep wave of relief that he could for a time ignore that particular portion of his life, like a poorly fitted costume tucked back into the dark depths of a seldom used closet. Because of it, he was able to be tenderly solicitous about her health and needs, even if he wasn’t sure he was ready for the end results.
Caedryn was nowhere to be found. Heru suspected the boy was down in the village enjoying the hospitality of Regan’s parents and pestering the father about his work. The moment the year had finished he had begun talking about moving down to be closer to his friends. Not, of course, he had assured Heru, that he wouldn’t miss him. Heru had taken it with fairly good grace. After all, he knew it would happen at some point. He would miss their morning walks, though.

More important was the announcement that Ethelinda had delivered up another son, which Salazar had proudly named Solonis. Heru wondered just how many Salazar was after, and if either of the boys had inherited his ability as a parselmouth. The summer rolled along sweetly with the addition of a permanent healer to the staff, though when it came time for Regan to deliver, she was attended by Rowena and Helga.

And she delivered up twin boys. As they had already discussed this beforehand, Heru was able to name both immediately as Servius and Tychon, using the names the founders had given him. After that he was swept off by the founders, leaving his wife to recover, and subjected to a great deal of tinkering.

They had decided—behind his back—that a little something more ought to be done about his scar. While Regan attended to the twins during the day, Heru sat quietly in a chair while the founders poked and prodded, going over his scar a second time. They were of the opinion that it might be used as a line back to the mind of the originator, one that Heru could access and manipulate with ease. And since it could no longer be used as a pathway into his mind, it couldn’t be used to identify him either. Unfortunately, when they were done fiddling there was no way to test their efforts, so Heru went back to spending his days with Regan and the twins, and with Caedryn when the boy was around.

The sweetness of summer turned abruptly sour near the end of August. Ethelinda, back on her feet and back to her customary visits to the village, encountered something she might not have had she left just a few minutes earlier. Or so the messenger said.

Salazar pulled himself up to his full height, an imposingly grave look on his face, and started for the door. When the others made haste as though to accompany him, he cut them off with a sharp gesture and left with the messenger in tow.

The others looked to Heru, and he in turn stood and filled a bowl with water. After a minute he flatly stated, “She’s dead.”

“What in—”

“Muggles,” Heru said as he turned to face them, a severe look on his face. “I daresay, when they realized they could not storm the castle grounds, they did the next best thing and attacked the village we hold.”

The faces he looked at were a mixture of consternation, embarrassment, regret, and culpability. Heru didn’t feel much better. It had never occurred to him when the wards were placed around the castle and grounds that Hogsmeade should have been similarly protected, even knowing that it was to become the only wizarding village in the country.

“Oh my stars,” Helga breathed.
“I hate to say it, but Salazar will likely blame us,” said Godric.

“How much did you see, Heru?” asked Rowena.

“They came to the village openly, asking questions about the castle. When the villagers were less than helpful they left and came back later from the cover of trees to attack. From what I could glean of their minds in the vision, they were running on rumors again about how us wicked people were corrupting the minds of children better left on the lands of their parents or lords. Ethelinda happened to linger a little too long and was caught off guard. We all know that while she was powerful, she was hopeless in battle situations. It was her death that alerted the villagers so they could deal with them.”

Honoring Salazar’s wish to go alone, they immediately set about discussing the best way to protect the village from further incursions. Repellant charms, without question, were to be used, though they would need to be slightly different, as not all wizarding folk married other wizarding folk.

Heru suggested that, in addition, the protections have the subtle effect of repressing violent tendencies in any muggles that had married into the community, or something to that effect. He did not go on to suggest that the villagers be subtly directed not to marry muggles—even he thought that might be going a bit too far.

They also discussed the area to be covered, making the logical assumption that the village would grow in time. They were in the process of sketching on a piece of parchment when a house-elf appeared and announced it was time for dinner.

Of Salazar they saw nothing for several days, and his offspring were moved into Heru’s rooms to stay with Regan and his own children, and several house-elves detailed to provide additional help. He was eventually located by Godric and Heru in the room that had been set up as the primary office, hunched over the desk with his wand in one hand.

As they drew closer Heru could see that his main focus was the book laying open before him. Salazar heard them and looked up, gave them a blank stare, then back down. A few more steps allowed Heru to identify it as the Book of Souls, but with a difference. Whereas before all names had always appeared in black, they were now written in either green, red, or black. Heru glanced in confusion over at Godric, who gave him a slight shake of the head.

“Salazar,” Godric said quietly, “we had hoped you would assist us in our efforts to provide protection to the village. It is to our eternal regret and shame that none of us had the foresight to do so earlier.”

Salazar looked up and sneered. “Fine.” He slammed the book shut and stood, holstered his wand, and stalked out.

After a quick glance at the book, they followed Salazar to the kitchens, where Rowena and Helga already sat at the table containing their map. Heru and Godric took seats as Helga cried, “Where have you been, Salazar? We were quite concerned about you.”

“Were you,” Salazar drawled. “And were you ever concerned when I told you repeatedly that the muggles must not be trusted?”

“Salazar, please,” said Rowena. “We cannot undo what has happened, regardless of how much responsibility each of us holds.”

He tossed his hair back and snorted. “Fine.” He slammed the book shut and stood, holstered his wand, and stalked out.
seconds before scoffing rudely. “Those borders are ridiculous!” he practically shouted. “You don’t actually have the temerity to believe the village will never grow beyond that point do you?”

“That is a part of what we were still discussing,” Rowena replied calmly, “and part of why we wished you to assist us.”

“Double it! Triple even,” he shot back, resting a hand on Heru’s shoulder. “By the stars, woman, the farther the muggles are kept away the better.”

“We can do that,” said Godric quickly. Nobody was willing to point out that Salazar was just as guilty of not thinking ahead as they were. He had his own hand in the death of his wife.

“Then there’s no problem. The protections should go up immediately. And now that I’m here…”

Heru looked back over his shoulder and spotted an odd gleam in his brother’s eyes. Salazar’s face softened for a split second as his eyes met Heru’s, then reformed into a cold mask. Heru had to know, so he asked quietly, “What did you do to the book, brother?”

Salazar smirked and squeezed Heru’s shoulder. “Nothing special, I assure you, but sure to be quite beneficial.”

“What do you mean?” Heru asked in the same quiet tone.

“Yes, what do you mean?” echoed Helga, her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“I wished to be sure that I could identify any potentials properly,” he replied, taking a moment to examine his nails and buff them against his tunic.

“By what criteria?” asked an equally suspicious Rowena.

Salazar heaved a sigh and gave her a direct look. “I should think by now that you know I’m right and be willing to finally listen to me. I have been patient, I allow, but things have gone too far now for you to continue to hide behind the bulwark of blind optimism.”

“So, parentage,” said Godric, heaving his own sigh.

“Naturally. Surely you must agree with me now about the dangers of having muggle-borns in this school. Even half-bloods are suspect to some degree.” Salazar spoke in even, reasonable tones. Heru wondered if his brother even remembered that he was a half-blood, with a muggle-born mother.

“Salazar,” said Rowena slowly, “while I can understand what you say, do you honestly believe it is wise to let muggle-born children fend for themselves? You know as well as any that children have spontaneous occurrences of magic. They’ll end up dead at the hands of their own parents, or their neighbors.”

“What of it?” Salazar replied carelessly. “Perhaps then they’ll be too busy worrying about that to spend time persecuting us. And perhaps muggle-borns will stop being born to begin with.”

Godric groaned and dropped his head into his hands. While he was a great man for a speech or a lecture, he was hopeless at arguments, preferring to simply hex a person and be done with it. Obviously, it would not do to fling a stunning spell at Salazar, so he apparently had no idea what to do.

Helga was not much better at it, and Heru would have preferred to be anywhere but in the kitchens at that moment. It was normally Rowena and her cool use of logic that prevailed, but at the moment she
seemed a little stunned at Salazar’s casual cruelty.

“No,” she said finally, “I cannot allow that. We four began this school, and we four must agree on what is to be done.” She paused a moment to shoot an apologetic look at Heru. “We must discuss this calmly and rationally before a decision of that magnitude is made.”

“So we should sit here for days on end and discuss something I have no intention of changing my mind on? Am I to browbeat the lot of you into waking up and realizing that I am right, and have always been right on this matter? When will you cease your foolish insistence and do what must be done??”

“Perhaps we should turn our attention back to protecting the village and discuss this other matter at a later time,” suggested Helga.

“Do as you please,” Salazar snapped. “I have a wife to bury.” He pulled his hand away from Heru and pivoted, then stalked off stiffly.

The long silence that followed was broken by Rowena. “I am sorry, Heru, if that exclusion caused you any pain.”

He gave her a faint smile and shook his head.

Salazar went missing again for several more days. During that time attempts were made to restore the Book of Souls to its original state, but it resisted further alterations. Instead, they trooped down to the village and began the process of setting the new wards.

They were still at it when Salazar showed up and lent a hand. The only person for whom he had a smile was Heru, but even those were fleeting. He said nothing of his aims and no one brought them up. Each day they worked in near silence, until they had managed to enchant the entire region’s expanded borders.

Heru knew the final task was to make the modifications he’d suggested, and that it would be just as well if Salazar were absent for that. Assuming they were done, Salazar disappeared again the next day, so they made one last trip around the lake to Hogsmeade to finish up and were back at the castle for dinner.

They were having lunch when Salazar turned up next.

“Do join us,” said Godric.

“I’ve already eaten and that isn’t why I came. I want to know where we stand on this muggle-born issue.”

“I assume you have not changed your mind?” inquired Rowena.

“Correct,” Salazar said curtly.

“Then we must endeavor to do so,” she muttered, so softly that only Heru could hear. “We have not discussed it since that day,” she said more loudly.

“And why not?” he demanded. “Am I to understand that you do not see the urgency of this decision?”
“I assure you we do.”

“Then all you need do is agree. Agree to bar the muggle-borns from this school and all will be well,” he said with forced patience.

“And I think that you need to realize that barring them, and letting their own parents kill them off as abominations, will only fuel the hatred of the muggles for our kind and cause them to look harder and further than they have before.”

Heru stood and walked over to the window, keeping his back to the group.

“What are you doing?” asked his brother.

Heru glanced over his shoulder long enough to say, “I’m sorry, but I have no place in this particular discussion.” He could feel his brother’s eyes on his back, and then the sensation vanished.

“If they’re busy killing off each other they’ll have no time to persecute us,” insisted Salazar. “They are inferior beings and it doesn’t matter if they die off in droves!”

“I suggest we stop for now and meet tomorrow to continue this,” said Rowena.

“Then I suggest you do so without me, and may you have joy of it,” growled Salazar in disgust and stormed off.

“Heru?” Godric’s voice was tentative.

He turned and said, “I’m not hungry anymore,” then slowly walked back to his rooms.

No one took any special notice when Salazar did not appear again for several days. His children remained in Heru’s rooms and were cared for with the same attention that Servius and Tychon received. When a week had passed they began to get concerned.

The days continued to roll by and still Salazar was not seen. They were worried for his well-being and his state of mind. Heru wished he had the Marauder’s Map so he could see if Salazar was hiding on the grounds, but of course that was impossible. Heru also briefly considered checking the Chamber of Secrets but dismissed the idea almost immediately for two reasons.

The first was that the castle had developed an odd habit of shifting rooms around from floor to floor, or causing new ones to appear without warning. Heru couldn’t even begin to guess where the entrance was located in this time. The second was that he could in no way be certain that Salazar’s pet basilisk would not try to kill him.

When the children began arriving in Hogsmeade for the start of a new year they were resigned to his absence, and to the lack of a Potions teacher, which was in some ways a far more difficult issue. The only person left with any real talent for it was Heru—thanks to Salazar.

With no time left to acquire a replacement, Heru took on the role of professor for both Defense and Potions. Considering there were only about thirty students per year, he simply had two classes per day to deal with, rather than one. Caedryn had offered to take over one of the positions, but having only just left the school, it was considered a good idea to decline so that he would have time to actually think about what he was offering.

The school year itself began in some confusion. No one had thought to separate the new students from those returning, so it took some time to get everyone settled and the incoming year to line up to be sorted. With that dealt with and the announcements made, another year’s opening feast
With his new schedule, Heru was more often tired from the additional responsibilities—not to mention twice as many babies wailing at all hours of the night—so when Regan began to make noises about having another child he tried to put her off by reminding her they already had four under their care. She had nodded and smiled sweetly, reminded him that two of the boys were not her own issue and that she made very few demands—on his time or otherwise—then restated her request. Heru gave in and by November she was expecting again. He breathed a quiet sigh of relief on hearing her announcement, and hoped that this would be the last.

In no time at all it was August again, and with it came the birth of Heru’s third child, Anselm. He had lived in the past for seven years with nothing to indicate that he would be leaving anytime soon. Regan came out of the birth pale but happy, though two days later Heru awoke to find her as cold and silent as a tomb.

Magic had not yet advanced far enough to determine the cause of death, so they were all left wondering. Caedryn immediately abandoned the village and moved back into his father’s quarters, unwilling to pursue his own amusements in the face of this further tragedy for the family, and to take on the Potions position.

A small cemetery was designed and created between the castle and Hogsmeade, positioned alongside the east side of the lake in a stand of trees, somewhat closer to the village. A mausoleum was tucked between two elderly specimens of Alder, crafted of snowy white marble.

No one ever did figure out where Salazar had entombed his Ethelinda.

Out of morbid curiosity, Heru checked the tapestry the next time he was in his study. He was altogether out of sorts; he had been very fond of Regan and had enjoyed her company, but there wasn’t much more there in his heart. He had been sitting at his desk wondering if he shouldn’t be a great deal more torn up over the loss of his wife when the tapestry caught his attention. Ethelinda’s name was in red and the dates of her birth and death were recorded in tiny numbers beneath her name. The same was true of Regan’s. But a look at Salazar’s name showed that he must be alive, somewhere. Heru shrugged and turned away. The next day he worked on enchanting the first of the small boats intended to bring the new students across the lake.

Due to Rowena’s concerns, a concept was devised for a new group of wizarding folk. Its duty would be to keep watch on the muggle-born children, and even the half-bloods, to assure that they remained hearty and hale. Or, at the least, to assure that any deaths were not the result of scared or enraged muggles.

They selected as the core group the young people who had originally been orphaned by muggles: Melfice, Morag, Carsis, Claran and Jolin. Those five were invited up to the castle for a meal and an explanation of their intentions, then left to consider the offer after being bidden to return with their decision.

The five came back to the castle several days later and requested an audience, then accepted the job, promptly giving themselves the rather unimaginative name of the Watcher’s Council. They were provided with a complete list of the non-pure-blood names from the Book of Souls, separated into muggle-born and half-blood, and told that they would be updated directly each new name became
available. With each was the location where they could be found.

The council was enjoined to report any and all instances of potential problems, and most especially the abuse of one of the children, and remove any that was in imminent danger by any non-fatal means necessary. It went without saying that they were to clean up after themselves, but Rowena mentioned it anyway.

She finished off by telling them that any of the named children who were in danger of being maimed or killed for their magical eruptions were to be brought first to the castle, where homes would be found for them in the village once they were sure it was safe and wise to do so.

Heru though the entire plan was both enlightened and misguided. He agreed that magical children should not be punished for that innate talent and ability, but he wasn’t so sure about the kidnapping part. A firm moral stand could be made for both sides of that debate, so he remained silent. His own childhood was not a proper setting to argue from.

Heru didn’t smile a great deal over the next few years.
Heru had been wondering for a very long time. Whenever he wasn’t otherwise occupied, his tenure in the past tended to fill his thoughts. It wasn’t that he was necessarily unhappy; his life had been rewarding, despite those things that made him uncomfortable. He had four children, and two nephews who were practically his own. Still, he could not help speculate as to whether the time that passed here would translate to the years in the future. Would he return—if he did at all—to the moment of his departure, or would he find himself years ahead? He felt helpless and frustrated, and at times strangely apathetic.

Finally, he went to Rowena. She took him to a recently revealed tower, one that had appeared complete with a rooftop garden which sported a variety of flowering plants in neat little stone planters. Heru didn’t take in much of his surroundings, however, or wonder at how the castle had managed such a feat. Heru was in the middle of listening to her voice.

“I want you to accept where you are, take the time to recognize each thing around you, then put them aside as unimportant pieces of the physical world,” she said in a low, even voice. “Each thought, each memory, must be placed aside as well, because they come from inside you and are an integral part of you. When the only thing left is the sound of my voice, I want you to nod.”

She continued in the same vein for some time, until Heru eventually nodded. “Good. Very good, Heru. Now I want you to purposefully recall each time you have sent your mind to the past to see what was. I want you to recall how that made you feel, and understand by what process you achieved those visions. When you have that, please nod again.”

Had Heru been thinking independently he might have questioned Rowena’s way of handling things in comparison to Professor Trelawney. He might have even questioned how he had instinctively known how to see the death of Ethelinda by scrying in water, or to know the minds of the attackers, or even what any of this had to do with his initial question of her. But he wasn’t. And she was speaking again after his nod.

“Now, with that firmly in mind, I want you to imagine yourself as a flat stone, and there before you is a lake. See as I hold you in readiness to throw, to skip across the surface of the water, each touch like an immersion in the life of one of your line through the centuries. A vision of what will come to pass, and a family like no other…”

When Heru came back to himself, one sense at a time, and guided by the sound of her voice, he realized that even if he did not consciously understand how he did what he did, he could induce visions of the past or future with little to no effort. Something in his mind knew what to do. It was, he thought, true that all the methods he’d learned of were nothing more than tools to focus talent. It could be done without those crutches, it was just more intensive and difficult to do so.

But that didn’t answer his question. He understood there was a purpose, but had no information as to how long he would remain. He did, however, have a very good idea of how far forward and back he could see because of her instructions. After she left, pleading other obligations, he tried again, using the remembrance of her voice to return to that place that didn’t exactly exist.

He was very frustrated to realize, some time later, that he could not directly see his own future. Or, if he could, was not allowed to remember what he’d learned. He had seen one thing of interest, though, so he located some notes in his office, then hunted down his children— all six of them. When he had them comfortably situated, he began.
“There was an accident, years ago, that brought about a most fortuitous result. And I have seen something which makes me believe that some of you may likewise be affected.” The children, and Caedryn, looked understandably confused. “I refer to, of course, this,” Heru said with a smile, then morphed his appearance.

He didn’t change drastically, just his hair colour and skin tone. His audience was gratifyingly impressed. As they did not seem in any way scared, Heru changed completely and stayed in that form for a full minute, then reverted back to his normal appearance.

“Now, I want you to try. Just imagine something easy, like the colour of your hair, and concentrate on it changing,” he explained. “It’s easier than it sounds. And, use the mirrors.” Dismissing the boys from his attention briefly, Heru gestured to Caedryn to come closer.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not sure you can manage this, son. I don’t think the blood bond would have…”

“I understand, father.” Caedryn looked disappointed, but not envious.

“But,” continued Heru, “I want you to try regardless. If you cannot accomplish this, there is a way.” Caedryn perked up considerably while still managing to look largely unaffected. “The drawback is that we won’t know if it’s working until your features begin to change on their own, and it can take a while before anyone realizes it’s happening.”

“Why would they change from my normal appearance? The bond is only supposed to affect my issue.”

“Simple, son. That’s what happened to me. As I said, this ability came about by way of an accident. We realized nothing of the implications, your uncle and I, until he noticed that my face no longer matched the portrait that had been made of me to guard my rooms. Shortly after that we understood. When the changes ceased, I looked like this.”

Caedryn looked slightly awed. “And you would do this for me?”

“Of course. Perhaps we should consider it a family secret.” Heru raised his brows and smirked lightly. “You are my son.”

“Yes,” Caedryn agreed with a thoughtful expression. “I shall try, then, and we will see.”

Heru clapped him on the back and checked on the children. He was greeted by an array of wild hair colours and much laughter. “Keep at it and see what you can do,” he told them, then turned back to Caedryn. “Had it been necessary to do for them what I suspect you will need, they would not have changed.”

Caedryn nodded and closed his eyes. Several minutes later he opened them in failure. His expression remained hopeful, though.

Heru clapped his hands loudly to get the children’s attention. “Listen to me. This is a very powerful ability, so you will all understand that if I find out you’ve used it to cause trouble in any way, I will not hesitate to find suitable punishment.” Each young face presented him with a look of wide-eyed innocence. “Mmm. Go on, then, get out,” he said sternly, then pointed at the door and waited until they left.

“Right, then. Let’s you and I get down to business.” Heru checked his pocket for his notes, then led Caedryn off to one of the private labs. Before they started, Heru remembered to say one thing more. “Son, you know that your own children will not be likewise blessed. Children you father after this have a very good chance, but—well, let us simply make enough for all of you, all right?”
“And the effect on someone so young?” was Caedryn’s reasonable question.

“I do not know. I was, I think, fifteen or sixteen at the time. It is … up to you. I have no idea how long the potion will last.”

“Father, it sounds like there’s something you aren’t telling me,” Caedryn said shrewdly.

Heru sighed and dropped his eyes, massaging the back of his neck with one hand. “Yes.” Running his hand up through his hair he said, “And they’re too young. I wouldn’t even begin to know how to figure out the correct dosage. You’ll learn now how to do this, so you can do it later if I cannot.”

“But—”

“No. No arguments, Caedryn. And I want you to swear on your honor that this secret will never pass your lips, nor be written down. When the time comes you will decide to give your children this gift or not, but you will never share the making of it with anyone, even them.”

“Yes, father. I so swear. You have my word of honor that I will not betray our secret.”

“Very well. Let us begin.”

Hours later they parted, Caedryn having been both taught and dosed. Time would tell if the potion would work as it had originally.

During that year, the Watcher’s Council had delivered to the village a total of five children. Each of them was placed with a wizarding family and provided for out of the pockets of the remaining Founders, much like they had done for the orphans years ago. Their parents and neighbors, or in some cases their owners, had been obliviated. What they could not remember, they could not protest, nor go in search of.

The children were understandably upset and confused. They had been ripped from their homes and thrust into an entirely new life. It took time and a great deal of patience to make them comfortable and to relieve their fears. Once they realized they would no longer be punished for the oddities they were responsible for, they settled down. That some occasionally could be found crying over the loss of their family was not to be denied.

All in all, the year was not much different than those previous, and the children stolen from their lives did not react much differently than those before them.

Of more interest was the day that the primary office disappeared. This caused some consternation on the part of the founders considering that the Book of Souls and Sorting Hat were likewise missing. Several days following that, an exceptionally ugly stone gargoyle appeared in a hallway on the second floor.

Even if no one else understood, Heru did. He spent the better part of an hour investigating the sculpture and the wall behind it. Though once or twice he got the distinct feeling that someone was watching him, he found nothing to make him believe the changes were complete.

When he passed by a week later he found reason to smile. A distinct arch had formed behind the gargoyle, centered within the spread of its wings. “And do we have a password yet?” Heru asked. The answer he received was phoenix song. Praecino arrived in a burst of flame and came to rest on the gargoyle’s head, singing.
Rowena came, led by the song, then Godric and Helga. When they were all assembled Praecino took flight, his song modulating from a call to an entreaty. And as Heru expected, the statue leapt aside to reveal a now open entrance and a spiral stair beyond.

Leading the way, he stepped in and moved several steps up to make room, and waited until each of them joined him. The staircase moved of its own accord, twisting upward to end in a small foyer. Heru stepped aside and let his friends take the lead down the small hallway and through the door at the end, into the missing office.

“I’m not sure why this was necessary,” Helga said, “but I admit I find it rather interesting.”

“I, too,” admitted Godric.

“Perhaps,” offered Rowena, “we should consider this a gentle hint on the part of our dear castle.”

“You believe she thinks—can a castle think?—that more security is necessary for these objects?” asked Godric.

“Who can say?” Rowena shrugged. “If she could talk, I’m sure we’d know.”

“This is all very well,” said Helga, “but we can hardly expect Praecino to appear every time we need to get in here. There must be a way for the gargoyle to respond to a password.”

Godric gave her an arch look and suggested, “Why don’t you go down and whisper in its ear?”

“Maybe I just will,” she retorted with her hands on her hips. “And maybe if it works I just won’t tell you what the password is.” She turned smartly and marched off through the door, not sticking around to hear Godric’s badly muffled laughter.

And while Heru noticed more than once that Rowena would look at him thoughtfully, he offered no information and no speculation. In truth, he had no idea how the password was set, though he certainly hoped to find out, through them.

Anselm turned eleven the year Heru turned thirty-three, heralding another call for a magical portrait artist. Much as had been done for his brothers, Anselm was immortalized and the resulting picture given a place in Heru’s study. The same could not be said for Caedryn’s offspring—or at least, their painted selves did not find a home within Heru’s underlake rooms.

The following year is when things began to change.

Heru found himself in a place he had only visited once, if one could call it a visit. It was a place lacking boundaries. All he could see, in any direction, was unrelieved white. Then he woke up.

These odd snatches of dreams—or memories—began to occur on a semi-regular basis. They never lasted for more than a few subjective minutes. But as time went by Heru started to notice off-white streaks forming in the landscape, then grey, and black.

Heru wasn’t a stupid man. A tad forgetful at times, perhaps, but far from stupid. It took only a few repetitions for him to have a good idea what was going on; his time was ending. The first thing he did was call his eldest son to him, to the privacy of his rooms.
“Please, have a seat. This will be difficult to explain. And”—Heru gave his son a sad look—“you may not be very happy knowing. Nevertheless, I must tell you.”

Caedryn took a deep breath and nodded. “This is what you refused to explain before.”

“You, it is. Hard as it may be to believe, I am not from this time. I was born almost a thousand years in the future.” As he expected, Caedryn’s face betrayed his surprise and incredulity. “You can ask the others, later. I appeared here when I was fifteen, when I was in grave danger of either being killed or turned into a heartless, cold imitation of the man who had captured me. Not long after I arrived, I received a new name, and a brother, Salazar.”

Heru took a seat across from his son and resumed. “Since then I have lived here and been a part of the founding of this school, watching it change and grow, and watching as what little I knew of this time come to pass, often in ways I never expected. It was through the insistence of Salazar that I came to be married and have children. But, none of that is terribly important.”

“And what is?”

“The fact of the matter is … it is getting close to the time when I must leave you. I always assumed the day would come when I would return to my own time, and I confess, I have been here so long that the idea holds some measure of fear for me. The signs are unmistakable, Caedryn, and I cannot change it, even if I wanted to.”

“What is it you require of me, father?”

Heru was a little surprised that his son wasn’t protesting this news. “You are an adult. Your brothers and cousins are not quite there. I would ask that you watch over them, but I believe you would do so unasked.”

“Yes, I would,” agreed Caedryn.

“What may be more difficult is that I would ask you to not reveal what you know. Much like our family secret, in fact.”

Now Caedryn protested. “But, father—”

“Please. I ask you, man to man, please do not argue with me on this.” When Caedryn settled back in his chair, Heru said, “As I have provided for you, I will provide for them. I will need to speak with my friends about this as well, and they will no doubt assist you. Caedryn, I don’t know how much time I have left, but I believe it will be soon. And, when that time comes, these rooms will be sealed.”

“All right, but I will not pretend I like this.”

“I don’t expect you to. I would be saddened if you did. Do you recall how to make the potion?” he asked in an abrupt change. At Caedryn’s nod he said, “I have one other thing to say, something you should pass down to your brothers, your cousins, and your own children. There may come a day when it may conceivably be dangerous to bear the name of Slytherin. If this unhappy event should ever occur, I urge you most strongly to adopt a new name, one that is safe from immediate association with our great house.” He paused for that to sink in then said, “And, if you will wait here for a few minutes, I need to collect something.”

He turned and left the room, heading directly for his personal vault. Outside where he had left them in readiness were chests, one for each of the boys. Inside he stopped cold, astonished at how his fortune had apparently multiplied when he wasn’t looking. It came to him then that Salazar must
have visited one last time before he disappeared for good, and left another gift. The amount he had planned to use as the boys’ inheritance would be only a tiny portion of the current whole.

Shaking his surprise away, he stooped to begin filling each of the chests, levitating them back out the door after each was closed. Minutes later, his vault was sealed and the chests floated along behind him and his son as they went to speak with the founders.

They were not as surprised as Caedryn to hear what Heru had to say, but then, they had been the ones to welcome him in the first place. They agreed with every one of his requests, and with a great deal less difficulty.

“Did you want to house the children in the castle, or construct a residence in the village?” Helga asked as soon as Heru finished. At the slightly wild-eyed look he gave her, she said, “In the castle, then. The house-elves already in your service will be retained in their current capacity. The only question is … well, no. The children are old enough to be trusted to behave without an adult living right there with them. It is not much different from the dorms, after all.”

Heru nodded. “I see no reason to object. They’re good boys. And, as I mentioned to Caedryn, nothing will be said to them of what happened to me. Make something up."

“That may be harder on them, Heru, if your disappearance is left in doubt. They may feel you’ve abandoned them for some wrong they’ve committed.”

Heru winced and turned away. “Then tell them I died. Open the mausoleum long enough to inter an empty casket.”

“As you wish.”

Heru was enjoying—if you could call it that—his annual ritual. The timepiece next to his bed ticked away the minutes to midnight like a doomsday clock counting off the seconds until the end of the world, of his world.

When the moment finally arrived Heru was suffused with a sense of purpose. Like an automaton he rose from his bed and crossed to the small desk he used for times when his office didn’t seem quite right. He scratched out a note on a small piece of parchment, blew the ink dry, and rolled it into a tube after placing his seal at the bottom. A length of green ribbon served to hold it closed, and Praecino was called to deliver it to a spot on the desk in the primary office.

When that mission was complete Heru left his room and spent a few minutes talking to his entrance portraits. His first action was to remove the English password entirely. His second was to change the Parseltongue password so that only he would know of it. And, his third was to require a blood offering—his blood—in order for it to be opened again. Even if some clever soul could speak the password, they would still be denied entrance.

While he still stood in the dungeon hallway, Heru let his eyes sweep over the walls and ceiling, then came to rest on the well-worn floor. Speaking softly, barely above a whisper, he asked, “Will you remember me through all these years, fine lady, and welcome me home once again?”

Without waiting for an answer he reentered his rooms. His original wand was safe within the vault, his new wand tucked in his robes. Despite being laid out on his bed, he remained fully dressed. Praecino returned to him and perched on his ankle. Not even an hour had passed when he returned to the abyss of streaked white, and this time, he would not wake up in minutes.
Revisiting a Troubled Past

Heru woke to the sound of phoenix song. It lifted him out of the abyss and gently held him as his other senses awoke. His sight was last, but that was generally so when a person moved from sleep to awareness. When he did open his eyes, he was gratified to realize he was lying on his own bed. If he had bothered to give it any thought prior to his departure, he would have wondered where he would end up. Here? Back in the bedroom Voldemort had placed him in?

Heru assumed since he was in his underlake abode, that his age remained the same as well. A quick look in the mirror after he got out of bed confirmed the theory. Praecino trilled happily at him and flashed out of the room. As Heru looked around he laughed; the blood protection for his home had been a good idea, but he would have to exit through to the castle in order to remove it.

Perhaps it was just as well. Heru was well aware that in the past, at least, apparation had never been an issue for the founders, or for himself. People of modern times might not be aware of the exceptions built into the castle protections, but he was. He would never need to remove that extra layer of protection if he didn’t want to. And, as he could also exit via the tunnel, it was a point safety rendered moot.

One of the first things Heru did was to start a fire in the lounge and flop into an armchair to think about things. He had no idea what year it was, never mind what day. And it was pressing that he further his education to include all the intervening years between the past and present, and all those things he had not had a chance to learn in later years in present-day Hogwarts. And, he was hungry.

Satisfied that he had definite things to accomplish, he extinguished the fire and headed to his vault on the lower level to gather up a fair amount of coin. He briefly considered opening a vault at Gringotts, but could not see how his money would be any safer there, and dismissed the idea almost as soon as he thought of it. Though he couldn’t be sure without asking, he somehow doubted that Gringotts paid out interest or made loans like a muggle bank might.

It was when he had already apparated to Diagon Alley that he realized one important thing. There was no way he could have the paper delivered to his underlake flat. He sighed and scanned the alley, then ducked into the closest shop and approached an employee.

“Excuse me, dear fellow. Would there happen to be an estate agent in the area?”

The young man nodded and said, “Yes, sir. If you go up toward Gringotts, you’ll see where it splits off to either side? The left is Knockturn Alley, but the right has an estate agent a little way up on the left. You can’t miss it.”

“Very good. I appreciate your assistance.” Heru exited and followed the given directions, easily locating the establishment the clerk had mentioned. Inside the cool interior, Heru commanded immediate attention, and had a young lady going over listings with him within seconds of him expressing his need.

Even though location was not exactly an issue—he could have lived anywhere and been able to apparate to his real home—Heru felt a certain fondness for Hogsmeade. After flipping through a number of pages in a leather-bound tome, he decided on a modest little dwelling on a side street with plenty of room to expand. It did, however, require him to return to his vault to withdraw the asking price, which barely made a dent in his fortune.

The problem came when he was signing the paperwork. Maybe his mind was a little muzzy from
being transported in time, but it had not occurred to him that his name would come into the deal. But, since it was a magical contract, he was forced to sign his actual name. If the clerk had simply given him his copy and filed the original, he would have been satisfied. Unfortunately, she looked, and saw his surname.

“Sir!” she squealed.

“Is there a problem?” he asked.

“You’re—no, sir, no problem.” Her eyes had taken on a gleam he didn’t much care for. “Sir, you’ll want to keep one copy for yourself, but this other one you’ll need to drop off at the Ministry.” The smile she gave him nauseated him with what it conveyed. “While you’re there, you might want to arrange for floo service and house-elves,” she suggested.

That, at least, was helpful, he thought. It would make more sense to delay his shopping and take care of those tasks, then return and have any elves he managed to hire assist him in transporting whatever he purchased. “Yes, that would be wise,” he said, then added, “I trust you’ll be discreet, my dear girl?”

“Oh of course, sir,” she promised fervently. He didn’t believe her for a second and gave serious thought to obliterating her right at that moment. When word of his name got out, and he knew it would, he could come under close scrutiny by Voldemort’s forces, not to mention those connected to Dumbledore. Slytherin was not the safest of names to claim.

He arched a brow at her in blatant incredulity, then turned and left. Outside he realized he had no idea where the Ministry was located and cursed under his breath. His education was lacking in more than just the number of spells he could cast. He walked back down the length of the alley and into the Leaky Cauldron and used the public fireplace.

After he briefly surrendered his wand to be registered—which occasioned a very odd look from the official—and had been given a visitor’s badge, Heru checked the directory to learn where he needed to go, then boarded the lift.

When he dropped off his deed he found no cause to worry, for the clerk on duty was so bored he could barely keep himself awake. He yawned repeatedly as he took the paper and tossed it into a box to be sorted and filed later on, so Heru sauntered out and headed toward the Floo Regulation office. There he was told it could take up to two weeks for the connection to be established. He was also handed a pamphlet of regulations and information on things such as how to assign a password to his fireplace. The clerk there was more interested in his address than his name, so Heru was similarly dismissed as unimportant.

His final stop was at the Office of House-Elf Relocation to see if he could hire on at least two of the creatures. His luck at the Ministry held; there was a selection of elves to choose from who were immediately available for service. Heru walked out with two in tow after a fairly simple ceremony of binding. Their names were Flick and Guin, a mated couple, and after telling them to meet him in Diagon Alley, he apparated out.

Their first stop was for clothes. He suffered through fittings, selections of fabrics and styles, and all the things necessary to purchase a complete wardrobe, especially one that would peg him as a man of substance. After gaining an agreement for them to be delivered, the group moved on to Flourish & Blotts. There Heru needed the help of his elves as he pulled book after book off the shelves and out of stacks. After he had managed to collect a healthy amount—though by no means enough—he took them to the counter for payment and complimentary shrinking. Before he left he also took a catalogue.
He still needed things like food and wood, but decided to hold off briefly. Back at his newly-purchased home, the books were dumped into a likely room, the catalogue placed on top of one of the piles, and Heru handed Flick a pouch full of money and requested supplies from the village, then directed Guin to begin cleaning, starting with the kitchen. When they were safely occupied, he returned underlake long enough to collect Praecino, then began cleaning his new library and arranging books in the built-in bookcases.

Furniture was another matter; he had none. However, it turned out to be an easily solved problem. He went back underlake and posed a question to the castle, then waited patiently for a response of some kind. Without warning his sight clouded, then cleared to reveal a room somewhere, filled with furnishings. Heru took that as a positive sign and held that image in his head as he apparated. When he returned to his house, he carried with him enough furniture to start with, and most importantly, a bed.

When Flick had completed his shopping in Hogsmeade and put everything away, Heru sent him off to arrange for delivery of *The Daily Prophet* and several other publications while Guin helped him arrange furniture. That evening, after having made a list of things he still needed, and a delicious dinner, Heru asked his new little friends what room they would like for their own and what they would require to make themselves comfortable.

After a not unexpected period of wailing and weeping—Heru remembered Dobby quite well—things were settled, and he promised to take care of that the next day. For the time being he transfigured some odds and ends into what they needed for the night. Heru went to bed tired, but fairly happy.

The next day was more of the same, though the house-elves did the bulk of the shopping. Heru simply handed them bulging pouches of coin and the list, and reminded them to pick out uniforms for themselves that they’d enjoy. Flapping his hands at a second bout of happy wailing, he retreated underlake to check on the family tapestry and refresh his memory on warding.

The tapestry was vastly illuminating in more ways than one. The first thing he noticed was that his brother’s name was blurry. While that might not have been so odd considering its age, other names were as crisp as the day they’d appeared. Also of note was that no date of death was listed for Salazar. Heru noticed his own name was slightly blurry, and that no dates whatsoever showed.

He shrugged and began tracing the lines, which took a considerable amount of time. Several things became apparent when he was done. None of the lines terminated in Tom Marvolo Riddle. Heru speculated that it could only be connected to whatever blurred his brother’s name. Somehow Salazar had changed his identity, either by blood-bonding to someone else, or by some method Heru was not aware of, and had most likely had additional children. There was, frankly, no way to tell.

The next thing that caught his attention was that there were several present-day descendants from his own line, though only one of them was young enough to be below school age. He could tell, however, that this Mark Evans was a fully magical child, despite his parents being shown as muggle and squib. This child he resolved to keep an eye on.

There was no evidence that the Potter line or even the line that produced Lily Evans was connected to the Slytherin family. That made him feel unexpectedly better. Were he his own ancestor, he wasn’t sure his mind could have handled the knowledge.

An hour or so spent in his library gave his memory a chance to recall exactly how to set up warding that would rival that of Hogwarts itself, and it was with that that Heru returned to his home in the village. Working alone it would take him longer to accomplish, but it was well within his capabilities.
Before he began on those, he liberated a mirror from Hogwarts and set it up in the Hogsmeade house’s library, using an ancient spell to tune it so that instead of reflecting its surroundings, it showed a constant image of Mark.

Heru threw down the book in disgust. After wading through several texts he was convinced that they could indeed teach him what he needed to know, but also that they were very badly written. He would not have realized this as a boy; he would not have known enough to question how the material was presented. And half of them didn’t include things he knew of that would still be quite useful.

Scowling, he stalked into the kitchen to ask for lunch, then stayed to eat at the table. *The Daily Prophet* had an article about the Quidditch World Cup, but he didn’t find that very interesting. His younger self would be seeing it soon enough. *Witch Weekly* was filled with gossip, none of which was about him. Rolling his eyes, Heru finished his sandwich, drank the last of his cider, and set to work on his daily afternoon session of warding.

A week later he was convinced that modern texts were the next thing to worthless and had begun to seriously consider turning author. But that thought was interrupted before it had a chance to blossom fully. A chance look in the mirror showed young Mark in the company of several officials, being led to an institutional-looking building. Heru was hampered by both the lack of sound and by the view being focused on Mark’s face. While he could adjust the depth, he could not rotate the image.

Slightly frustrated, he took careful note of the boy’s surroundings and committed them to memory. Much later that evening he apparated to the place he remembered to have a look around. It didn’t take long for him to realize it was an orphanage. That was unacceptable.

Over the next few days Heru could be found in muggle institutions tracking down information on the boy and his family. Several days after that found him ushering the child away from the orphanage after bulldozing his way through a multitude of red tape with the judicious use of magic and a faked paper trail. Getting Mark home, however, would be a bit of a trick, and after thinking of and discarding half a dozen ideas in the time it took to move partway down the walk, Heru finally said the hell with it and waited until they were out of sight before stunning him and apparating them to just outside his house in Hogsmeade.

He carried the boy inside after adjusting the wards and sat him in a chair in the kitchen, then woke him up after telling the house-elves to stay out of the way for a bit. While Mark was getting his bearings, Heru said, “Hello again, Mark.”

“What happened? Where am I?” The boy’s eyes took in the kitchen, which looked remarkably muggle in nature at first glance.

“In my house, your new home. But I must say that the name I gave those wretched people is not real. I found it easier to grease a few wheels than wait months to make sure of this. I know what could happen to a child in a place like that, and you are a relative of mine, however distant the relationship may be.”

“I don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t expect you do. It may be easier for you to consider me your uncle. I certainly wouldn’t dream of trying to replace your father. Are you hungry?”

“Er, a little. But what is your name?”
“Heru. Any objections to a ham and cheese sandwich? No? Did you want butter or mustard, then?” Mark gave a tentative shrug. “Right, butter.” He pulled open the cooling box—he’d long since transfigured the exterior to more closely resemble the muggle appliance—and rooted around until he found what he needed, then pulled a loaf of bread out of the breadbox on the counter. He slapped together two sandwiches with more speed than expertise, then put the ingredients away.

He slid two plates on the table, filled two glasses with pumpkin juice and placed those as well, then sat down. “If you don’t like the juice, I have a few other things you might prefer, but give it a try.” He took a healthy sip himself to show the boy it was safe, then started on his sandwich. After Mark had been fed and watered—he wrinkled his nose at the first sip, but must have decided he liked it—Heru decided to start breaking him in as gently as possible.

“Mark, this isn’t a normal house, and the village we’re in isn’t a normal village. This is something you’d have found out about eventually, but circumstances forced me to take an active interest in your welfare. And you, Mark, are not a normal person, any more than I am.” He slipped his wand out of its holster and held it up. “Ever seen one of these?”

“Sure. Plenty of kids have something like that, for magic tricks. But it’s just a stick.”

Heru smiled indulgently. “So they say. But what if I were to do this?” He pointed his wand at one of the empty glasses and whispered, “Wingardium Leviosa.” Mark’s eyes widened to alarming proportions as the glass slowly rose into the air and hovered. “As I said, we are not normal people.” He directed the glass to rest again on the table and gave Mark a frank look. “I would let you have a go at it, but there are rules about underage children and magic.”

“Magic!?”

“Yeah. Magic. Real, honest magic. Not party tricks, not stage magicians, and not elaborate fakery. Come on, there are some people I’d like you to meet. They’ll be a bit strange, but there’s no reason to be afraid.” He stood up, tucking his wand away, and gestured for Mark to precede him out the door.

When they reached the library he indicated a chair and closed the door behind him, quietly locking it, then sat in his usual spot and propped his legs on the convenient coffee table. Then he reached out with his mind and called Praecino to him.

The phoenix arrived in a burst of flame, almost startling Mark out of his chair, and came to rest on Heru’s ankle. “This is my friend, Praecino. He’s a phoenix. Praecino, this is Mark Evans. He’s come to live with us. Something soothing might be nice,” he suggested in an offhand manner, and was rewarded by a trill of welcome, then a gentle song that sent a wave of relaxation over the room.

Looking at Mark—who calmed down almost immediately—he said, “You might have thought phoenixes were a myth, but as you can see that is incorrect. I have two others for you to meet. They are house-elves in my service, and I warn you ahead of time that they are not to be abused in any way. They are generally very gentle creatures, willing to please, and loyal to a fault. Do not be alarmed at their appearance.”

Mark gave a vague nod so Heru snapped his fingers. Flick and Guin popped in—the noise didn’t phase Mark in his relaxed state—and gave the boy a curious glance before looking to Heru. “Mark, this is Flick”—Flick bobbed a greeting—“and Guin”—she too gave a quick bow—“our house-elves. Flick, Guin, this is the young man I told you about. He’s a little unsettled at the moment, so I hope you’ll do everything you can to make sure he’s properly taken care of.”

“Of course, master,” they chorused. “Whatever the young master needs.” They turned to Mark, and
“We is pleased to be welcoming the young master. We is hoping you will be happy here,” while Guin nodded several times in agreement.

“P-leased to meet you,” Mark said.

“Oh!” exclaimed Guin, wringing her hands together and bouncing slightly. “Young master is being very kind!”

“Very kind!” affirmed Flick, twisting one of his ears happily as he hopped from foot to foot.

“We’ve already had a light lunch, so you’ll only need to worry about dinner,” Heru said in a gentle dismissal.

“Yes, master,” they said in unison, then popped out.

“Let me show you to your room.” Heru reached out to stroke Praecino’s feathers before the bird flapped over to a new perch, then stood up and made for the door to unlock it as surreptitiously as he had locked it. A glance behind him showed that Mark was just a foot away, so he opened the door and walked out.

The bedroom was on the second floor, across the hall from Heru’s. Two more bedrooms rounded out that level, unfurnished and unused. After ushering Mark in he said, “If you want to choose different colours or if there’s anything else you’d like to have, all you need to do is tell me or one of the elves. I know it’s a bit plain right now.”

Mark—outside of the influence of Praecino’s song—pinned him with a suspicious look. “This is a lot, you know. I don’t know who you are, I don’t know anything about you. For all I know that was a bunch of tricks. You’ve even said the name you used wasn’t real. How do I know you aren’t some sick person who…”

“I understand perfectly. So let’s start right in here.” Heru waved a hand at the room. “What colour walls would you like?”

“Blue. Dark blue.” Mark crossed his arms over his chest, looking a bit like a nine year old commander.

“Sure.” A few waves of his wand later, Heru had transformed the walls, much to Mark’s renewed astonishment. “How about the floor? A darker finish perhaps? Or linens in a lighter blue to go with the walls?” Mark nodded soundlessly so Heru turned the bare wood floor to a rich, dark shade, then made the sheets and blankets shades of sky blue and the duvet a mid-tone that harmonized.

“Care to take a walk around the village with me? You’ll see an entirely wizarding town. You won’t see any muggles—that is to say, no non-magic folk—anywhere. It should help to set your mind further at ease, and then we can return here for dinner.”

“All right,” Mark said softly.

“Splendid. On our way out we can stop in and tell the elves what we’d like for dinner, unless it doesn’t matter to you. They’re incapable of making a bad meal.”

“No, that’s fine.”

“Let us be off, then.” Heru holstered his wand and ushered the boy out and back down to the ground floor and out the front door. They spent several hours wandering around, stopping in at each shop so Mark could pick out a few things he’d like, and letting the boy see a multitude of wizarding folk
going about their daily lives, using magic as naturally as breathing. By the time they returned to the house, the boy was convinced his new uncle was being entirely honest.

Over dinner Heru made some further explanations. “You see, while you’ve been living as a muggle up until now, that would have changed when you turned eleven. You would have been sent a letter telling you you’ve been accepted at Hogwarts. That was the castle you saw off in the distance. Magical folk begin school then, and it lasts seven years. Hogwarts isn’t the only wizarding school, but it is the only one in Britain. But, now that you’re here with me, you won’t be returning to a muggle school. Instead I’ll give you a number of books to read so you can familiarize yourself with this new world. When you do start at Hogwarts, you won’t feel lost or ignorant like many who come from the muggle world.”

Mark nodded so Heru continued. “The first thing you need to remember is that wizards hold themselves apart from muggles. While most of us live among them, our world is kept a secret. The only exceptions are those who marry into our world, or those who learn of us because they have a child, or children, who are magical. So, never show your nature to a muggle, and never talk about it. If in doubt, say and do nothing. Here in Hogsmeade you’re safe enough. As I said, there aren’t any muggles here—muggles can’t even see this village, or the castle. Not like we can, anyway.”

“But what am I to do until then?”

“Various things. Learn history, for one. It will help you, in part, to understand why we maintain secrecy. You can also read up on wizarding customs and learn more about this world. I won’t lie and tell you there’s no such thing as prejudice or strife, because there is. Just as there are good wizards and witches, there are also bad. In that sense, we are no different from muggles, just on a smaller scale. You can also begin learning about first year spells and potions, even if you can’t actually practice.”

“Why not?”

“You aren’t allowed to have a wand until you’re eleven and ready to attend Hogwarts. And then, you aren’t allowed to use magic during the holidays. When you turn seventeen you’ll be considered an adult, and the restrictions will be removed. That’s custom and law. But there’s nothing to stop you from learning as much as you’d like, and practicing things like wand movements with a stick or a pencil, or proper pronunciation. I’ll have to check, but you might be all right working on potions since those don’t generally require any spells.”

“All right.”

“You can even help me. I’ve been going over textbooks lately and I’ve come to realize that they’re very badly written. I was thinking of writing my own versions to see if I can get published. Maybe they could replace the current texts up at the school. I think your point of view would be very helpful in making sure I remain clear and concise.”

“That sounds like it might be fun,” admitted Mark with a small smile.

“Hopefully it will be. Tomorrow we can go shopping for new clothes for you. Either here in Hogsmeade, or at Diagon Alley. In fact, it wouldn’t hurt if I were to set up a vault for you at the bank.”

“Wizards have banks?”

“Of course,” said Heru with a smile. “Practically anything a muggle can do, a wizard can do. Some things we can’t, but we can do many things they cannot. Gringotts is at Diagon Alley, a bank run by
goblins. They’re somewhat nasty creatures, but if you treat them honorably, you’ll be fine. You don’t need a vault, but I don’t see any reason not to set one up for you.”

Apparently unwilling to say either way, Mark simply nodded.

“Right, then. Let’s get you a few books for this evening, and tomorrow we’ll head out to do some shopping.”

Heru woke abruptly and completely, sitting up in bed even before he was aware he had done so. He cocked his head to the side, trying to figure out what had awakened him. Hearing nothing, he slid out of bed and padded to his door, slowly opening it and peering out into the hall. He wasn’t worried about intruders—he’d learned ward creation with the best.

A whisper of noise from across the hall caught his attention. Pressing his ear against Mark’s door he strained to hear beyond the wood. The boy was crying. Heru took a deep breath and pulled away; he should have expected this. He eased the door open and ghosted across the bare floor, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. Gently he pulled Mark up into the shelter of his arms, smoothing the hair from the boy’s forehead and crooning softly words of reassurance and comfort.

They stayed like that for what seemed like hours, until Mark slipped back into normal sleep. Heru watched over him for a few minutes longer, then went back to his own bed. The next morning neither of them mentioned the incident, though Mark’s eyes were slightly puffy and red.
Diagon Alley was full of noise, from people, animals, and odd little devices on display. Mark’s eyes were full of wonder, even more so than they had been while exploring the village. Heru took his hand and led him toward the imposing edifice of Gringotts, leaning down briefly to remind the boy in a whisper about the goblins he would shortly be seeing.

The grip on his hand tightened when Mark caught his first look of the interior and saw the beings he had been warned of, but did not protest with word or movement when Heru led him up to one of the clerks to arrange for an account to be opened. While he was there, and after Mark had been presented with a shiny new key, Heru exchanged a quantity of galleons into muggle bills for a trip into London proper.

He watched with barely veiled amusement as Mark suffered through being measured and fussed over as the ladies at Madam Malkin’s fitted him for a wizarding wardrobe, then treated his new charge to an ice cream at Fortescue’s. As they ate he pointed out the various shops Mark would eventually become familiar with, then led him to a bare brick wall.

“What’s this?” the boy asked, plainly puzzled.

“Not everything is as it appears,” he replied vaguely, then tapped several bricks with his wand.

“Brilliant,” breathed Mark as the bricks reformed into an arch, then stepped through quickly, as though afraid the wall would snap closed at any second.

Heru stepped through and said, “The Leaky Cauldron serves as a gateway between Diagon Alley and muggle London. Muggles can’t see it from the outside, and they certainly can’t get past this archway since you need a wand.”

When they arrived home several hours later, Mark went upstairs to drop off his packages before lunch, which they ate in the kitchen. They had not yet finished eating when Guin announced a visitor. Heru was far more surprised than Mark, who wouldn’t know what to expect as normal. It turned out to be a man from the Floo office, come to complete the final hookup.

He was dusty and carried himself as though he held the weight on the world on his shoulders. He spent a half an hour puttering around and making odd little gestures at the hallway fireplace, then explained everything Heru had already read in the provided pamphlet in a voice that practically oozed boredom. Heru had to stifle yawns by the time the fellow took himself off, and went ahead and set a password before his body could convince him to have a nap.

Over the next few weeks Heru busied himself in organizing a wealth of information into categories. These potions for first years, those for second, and so on. He was also compiling a complete list of ingredients along with sketches or photographs, information on their habitats—flora and fauna—smell, taste, whether or not each was poisonous, and handling instructions.

Then he began to write. Each potion was separated in sections. The first was meant to serve as material to read beforehand, and explained in detail why a particular order, and what the interactions and instructions actually accomplished, not to mention how to correct common mistakes. The second section provided a straight list of ingredients, followed by a short-form version of the instructions.
After he had written a half dozen of those for first years, Heru had Mark look over his work to see if he was losing his audience or not. When he’d made a few minor corrections in how he explained things, Mark pronounced him well on the way and went back to his own books about history.

There were incidents of wee-hour upsets, where Mark would have nightmares and cause Heru to wake up to comfort him, but they were not nightly, making Heru wonder just how close the boy had been to his parents, and how strong he was emotionally.

It was somewhere near the end of August when Mark looked up one day and asked, “So this Grindelwald fellow … the headmaster of the school defeated him?”

“Yes. Albus Dumbledore. He’s been offered the position of Minister of Magic in the past, but he’s always turned it down, preferring to remain at Hogwarts.” Seeing Mark’s curious look he said, “I think he believes he can do far more good helping with the education of so many children than to be stuck in bureaucracy and red tape.”

“Is he a nice person?”

“That depends, doesn’t it? He seems serious in the pursuit of his goals, but appears to have quite a sense of humor. However, he is no friend to dark wizards and witches. Perhaps I should say evil. Make no mistake, Mark—dark does not always mean evil.”

“So things are all right now? This was a long time ago.”

Heru exhaled and smiled at the same time, his breath coming out in a gust. “Well, not exactly. But, since you’ve read about Grindelwald, I suppose it would be best if you understood more about things today.” He moved over to crouch down next to Mark’s chair, gesturing for the book in his lap. He flipped through the pages until he found the right spot, then handed it back. “There, read that. Ask me again when you’re done.”

Eventually, Mark asked, “Is he really gone? I mean, aren’t I a muggle-born?”

“Technically, no. Nobody is certain that Voldemort is gone. And despite evidence to the contrary, you aren’t muggle-born. We are very distantly related, and you have a number of wizards in your family tree. You recall what a squib is? Good. Obviously, any wizarding family can produce a squib, though I don’t think anyone is really sure why. Maybe it’s too much inbreeding among pure-blood families, and maybe it’s just a quirk of genetics. You, however, come from a line containing squibs that intermarried with muggles and wizards. Though, I have no doubt you’d show up as muggle-born when it came time for your letter—or would have if I hadn’t come along.”

“Um…”

“Yes?”

“How do you know all that, and who exactly are you anyway? All you’ve ever told me is your given name. I’m not saying I dislike it here, but…”

“I’ve seen your family tree, of course. If you know where to look, you can find out a lot of things. As for my name—my family name—you should recognize it. It’s Slytherin. Don’t look at me like that—it’s quite legitimate.”

“And we’re related.”

“Yes.”
“And all of this has what to do with this Voldemort person?”

“Everything and nothing. You are of the Slytherin line, as am I, as is Voldemort. Voldemort claimed to be carrying on Salazar’s noble cause of denying muggle-borns entrance to Hogwarts because muggles couldn’t be trusted. And if you’ve absorbed enough history, you’ll understand why he thought that way.”

“So there may or may not be this Voldemort person running around trying to exterminate muggle-borns and muggles, among other things.”

“I’d say that just about covers it. Getting back to Albus Dumbledore, he would be opposed to someone like Voldemort, who is both dark and evil.”

“If you’re a Slytherin, how come you weren’t a part of Voldemort’s group?”

Heru coughed and blinked at Mark. “Because I don’t happen to agree with his aims, or his methods. A name doesn’t make you who you are, though it can open some doors, and close others. Believe me, if I came to the attention of Dumbledore, he would be highly suspicious of me, simply because of my surname.”

“How would he even know it was real?”

“There’s such a thing as magical identity. I could tell people my surname was anything, but if I needed to sign a magical contract, I’d be forced to use my real name. Sort of like when I purchased this house. Also, there’s a potion called veritaserum. Ever heard of sodium pentathol? Hm, well, veritaserum is a truth potion. You are incapable of lying if you’ve been dosed with it. Its use, however, is restricted by the Ministry.”

“Oh. All right. Am I in danger?”

“Not that I’m aware of, but if it becomes an issue, I’ll rethink things. I suggest you go back to where you left off at Grindelwald. The more you learn before you attend Hogwarts, the better.”

That night, Heru had his first taste of how effective the meddling of the founders had been. Something woke him, that was sure, but it wasn’t Mark having a nightmare. When Heru checked on him, the boy was sleeping peacefully. He wandered around for a while checking windows, looking in on the elves, and testing the integrity of the wards, even though he knew they couldn’t possibly be defective.

Eventually he went back to bed, still puzzled. When he was in the process of reading The Daily Prophet later that morning it struck him. Harry had had a dream, a vision, of Voldemort. Today would be the day Harry would leave Privet Drive for the Burrow.

It had become habit, a routine. Heru would work like a man possessed to produce several chapters for a text, and Mark would skim through them and make suggestions. Heru would make corrections—he wanted things to be as clear to a muggle-born as it would be to a pure-blood—then move on to the next set.

Life was quiet and calm, despite the excitement that permeated the village once news of the Triwizard Tournament got out. No one bothered them at the house, and the shopping was handled by the house-elves. Neither of them left other than to stretch their legs with a walk. Heru had no guests, as he had no friends—or at least, no friends he could expose himself to. Most people would
damn him the moment they learned his name, never bothering to give him the benefit of the doubt.

If any of that bothered Mark, he didn’t mention it. After he’d got over the disappointment of no electricity, he’d inveigled Heru into teaching him wizarding games and would often drag him into a game if he got bored of reading and there was no one in the village he wanted to visit.

When he completed the first year Potions text, Heru went back over other texts he’d purchased to make sure he had not included too much, or anything that could be considered too advanced. Satisfied, he moved straight into the second year effort. When he felt like a change of pace he worked on the compendium.

By the time the students from the competing schools arrived at Hogwarts, Heru was well into the third year text, and beginning to think about finding someone willing to publish his work. Naturally, he had no idea how to do that offhand, but the checking a few books gave him names to start with.

Mark thought it would be a bit posh to send a phoenix off with letters so they took a day off to go owl shopping, one for each of them. Heru tried not to think about Hedwig. Once that mission was accomplished, Heru sent out letters to each of the publishers on his list. Then he went right back to writing.

Mark asked him at one point why he was working so feverishly, if he was short of money. Heru sat back and ruffled his hair, then said, “Because. Current texts are horrible. If I can convince someone to publish, then convince people to buy them, that would be great. No, I don’t need money. I’m quite comfortable, actually. I do, however, need something to do with my time. As to why I’m working so hard on this, if I can get the series completed, then it might be ready for next year.”

A couple of weeks later Mark looked up from The Daily Prophet and started asking about Harry Potter. “So, this is the kid who defeated Voldemort?”

“That’s how history writes it,” Heru said vaguely. “All anyone really knows is that Voldemort failed when he tried to kill him, and no one has seen Voldemort since, though his followers are out there somewhere.”

“I wonder what he’s like. Potter, I mean.”

Heru shrugged. “You’ll no doubt have a chance to find out in a couple of years. That is, if you don’t meet him here in Hogsmeade.”

“Yeah,” Mark replied.

A week later, Heru got back responses from the publishers; only one of them was interested enough to provide a date for him to come in and talk. It was another reason for him to shrug; if it didn’t come together, he’d figure something out.

Out of pure curiosity, Heru hauled Mark with him up to the castle in order to watch the first task a few days later. The only downside to the treat was Mark’s sudden and keen interest in having a broom of his own. Heru promised to think about it.

On the last day of the month, armed with drafts of the first through third year Potions texts and a partial compendium, Heru traveled to Diagon Alley, leaving Mark in the care of Flick and Guin. He found the publisher’s office easily enough and was immediately ushered into a smaller room for his meeting.

He arrived home several hours later slightly pissed off. Things had gone quite well until the subject of his name had been raised. The publisher was more interested in digging for gossip fodder than in
discussing the actual texts. After repeated attempts to get the man back on track, Heru finally gave up and left.

He stomped down to the basement and took a good, long look. His next action was to send off a letter to a publisher, not of books, but of a paper.

The second week of December found Heru having a cozy chat with one Mr Lovegood of The Quibbler over cups of tea. Rather than obsessing over Heru’s name, Mr Lovegood was far more interested in talking about whatever came to mind; he was delighted to find someone who didn’t automatically assume he was a bit lacking.

When his guest was nice and warmed up, Mr Lovegood took Heru on a tour of his business, pointing out details large and small, and explaining just how the printing process worked from start to finish. When Heru questioned the size of the press being used, Mr Lovegood pointed out that books could be made on a much smaller one, which in turn sparked a discussion of exactly how much room would be necessary for a private press.

In the end Heru realized he could manage to convert his basement, but he wasn’t sure if he wanted to make that kind of commitment right at the start. That occasioned another cozy chat with Mr Lovegood. The agreement they finally worked out was simple. Heru would pay for all the equipment, to be set up at at The Quibbler. He and Mark would assist Mr Lovegood in producing a very small run of each text, and those would be sent out for consideration.

If things went well, Heru could either renovate his own basement and transfer the equipment, or hire on Mr Lovegood to oversee things while providing the funds for additional personnel. The only problem Heru could think of was of translation. While he was fairly fluent in French, he couldn’t say the same for any other languages. He decided not to worry; if he could convince Hogwarts to use his texts, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang could be approached. If things went badly, he’d wait a bit before deciding whether or not to sell off the equipment.

A week later found Heru and Mark getting a lesson in the art of typesetting, wizard style. Though the press had not yet arrived, they were able to begin the tedious process of setting up pages. Naturally, they took a break for Christmas. The highlight of the holiday was Mark receiving a broom—which he loved—and a kitten—which he promptly named Cooper. When Heru asked the for the logic behind the name, Mark pointed out that the cat had an odd pattern of banding that reminded him of barrels.

On the same day that Hogwarts began classes again, Heru and Mark went back to see Mr Lovegood. Together they spent the entire day running off copies of the books, including a partial compendium. While the work wasn’t difficult, it was as tedious as setting up the pages had been. It was also a lot more work overall, having to constantly change the plates out, then getting the texts properly compiled and bound. All Heru could say to himself was, Thank goodness for magic.

The following day, after sleeping in, Heru bundled up a set and sent them off to Hogwarts along with a letter of introduction and explanation. After that he went back to writing, and Mark went back to reading, convincing Heru to play the odd game with him, and flying around the quieter sections of Hogsmeade. It was approximately three weeks later when Heru received a response.

Mr Slytherin,

We would be pleased if you would come to Hogwarts to discuss the sample texts you have provided us with for consideration. As these are Potions texts, Professor Severus Snape would also be present as our resident Potions Master.
If you are agreeable, we have set aside the morning of the 6th so that we may meet. We would also be pleased if you would take the noon meal with us. We await your owl confirmation.

Sincerely,
Albus Dumbledore

“Hm.”

“What?”

“Here, have a look.” Heru handed the letter to Mark and waited for him to finish reading, drumming his fingers on the kitchen table. “I was wondering if I should ask Praecino to come along with me.”

“What for?” Mark laid the letter on the table and reached for his pumpkin juice.

“People tend to view a person with a phoenix a lot more favorably. It’s very rare for anyone to have one as a familiar because they’re so selective. If I showed up with Praecino, it might offset the name, you see?”

“I suppose so.”

Heru finished his breakfast and went to dash off a quick reply.

The walk up to the castle was pleasant enough, though quite cold. Heru was glad he’d used warming charms on his clothing before leaving the house. Rather than make Praecino endure the journey he resolved to call him once he was safely inside. And that’s exactly what he did after he was greeted by Professor McGonagall. When she offered to escort him to the headmaster’s office, he begged her patience long enough for Praecino to appear and perch on his shoulder. Other than widening her eyes, she showed no sign of surprise, and after delivering him to a very familiar office, she disappeared.

“Welcome, Mr Slytherin. I am Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of this school”—he held out his hand, which Heru shook firmly—“and this is Professor Severus Snape, our Potions Master.” Snape merely inclined his head, which was just fine with Heru, who inclined his as well. “Please, have a seat.”

Heru selected a chair directly across from the headmaster and looked around the office with adult eyes, and the eyes of a person who had witnessed the inception of the room’s use. He could feel a faint sense of welcome lingering in the air, though it did not originate from either of the two men. Finally, he returned his gaze to Dumbledore and smiled.

After the rest of the social niceties were out of the way and Heru had a cup of tea to warm his hands, he was amused to note that Praecino was busy carrying on a quiet, trilling conversation with Fawkes up on the second level. Albus, noticing the line of his gaze, was moved to comment.

“Your friend seems to be getting on well with Fawkes. He’s quite a magnificent example of a phoenix. May I ask where you got him?”

“I would not say I precisely got him, Albus. Rather, I would say he found me.”

“Oh?”
“Indeed. I was talking my customary morning walk when he flew out of the nearby forest and landed on my shoulder. I confess I did not understand quite what was happening at first, but after consulting with friends of mine, I formally accepted Praecino’s offer of companionship. I felt quite honored, and still do.”

“Ah, I feel much the same way. As I’m sure you know, it is a very rare thing.” Heru saw peripherally that Severus was watching the two birds, apparently ignoring the conversation. “I do confess, however—and you may find this to be impertinent—that I am quite curious as to how you bear the name you do.” Dumbledore’s manner was relaxed without being off-guard, a state Heru attributed to Praecino’s endorsement.

“It is simply my name,” Heru said with a casual sort of shrug. “I recall when I purchased a property in Hogsmeade this past summer that the estate agent was quite surprised, as was a publisher I spoke to, but I admit he was far more interested in dredging up items for gossip than in evaluating my work. History tells us very little about the past—most of it is quite murky—but I find it curious that there are so few of us left who bear the name.”

“Yes, I can see where you might run into certain difficulties.” Albus gazed at him over the rims of his spectacles for a moment. “But tell us, please, how you came to author these textbooks.”

“And,” cut in Snape’s resonant voice, “where you obtained some of these potion formulas.”

“Shall I be blunt?” Heru deliberately paused long enough to push up the sleeves of his jumper, exposing his bare, unmarked forearms. “I find the currently available offerings to be badly written and lacking in what I consider to be valuable information. When I considered those things, along with the fact that my own personal library contained potions that none of those texts made mention of, never mind explained, I felt it was worth trying my hand at correcting the situation. After all, failure presents no great loss to me personally, though I think it would be a loss to children at schools such as Hogwarts, especially those who do not come from a wizarding background.”

Severus was now staring at him intently.

“Interesting, very interesting. A most enlightened point of view.”

“Not to be rude, but that begs the question—do you mean to say, for a Slytherin?” Heru asked archly. “I ask, of course, because I am well aware of the reputation the name of Slytherin holds.”

“That would be the most obvious way of looking at it, yes.” Albus replied vaguely. “You have a unique way of presenting the material. I presume that you are currently at work on the remaining year texts, and the completion of the compendium?”

“Indeed. At present I am nearly finished with the fifth year text, though I can say the material is already organized for the ones beyond that. It was my intention that in later editions, each text would contain references to the compendium so that they could be more easily used in conjunction with each other. Even if they were not used as primary texts, I feel they would be an excellent addition to a student’s library.”

“Do you feel they would be complete prior to the start of the next school year?”

“I do. I began this project during the summer. I gave some thought to a separate work detailing potions which are no longer used, mainly as a historical aide to show how potions have progressed and evolved over time, but could not quite decide if there was an actual point.” His sleeves had worked their way down again, so Heru pushed them back up, as though it were a reflexive habit.
“It might prove interesting, were you to do so,” said Albus noncommittally. “I myself have no objections to the use of your texts, though I would prefer to be sure that the full set would be available in time for the new year.” Albus turned his head away and said, “Severus?”

“I would prefer to speak with our guest in more depth before making a decision.” Snape arched a brow and asked, “Would you care for a tour of the dungeons while we discussed this further?”

“Certainly. Never let it be said I turned down the opportunity to see a Master’s home territory.”

“Very well,” said Albus. “I hope to see you at lunch, then. If not, it was a pleasure to meet and talk with you.”

“Likewise. You have been a gracious host. Though, if I may ask, would it be all right if Praecino waited here? He seems to be quite happy at the moment. I can either summon him before I go, or he would return home at his leisure.”

“No trouble at all. Fawkes is delighted to have company.”

Heru stood and inclined his head in thanks, then looked to Severus, preceding him out of the office at his gesture after gathering up his cloak and folding it over his arm. When they were back in the hallway, Severus said, “This way,” and started off at a slow walk.
Severus said nothing as they made the slow walk down to the ground floor. It was not until they had descended to the dungeon level that either of them spoke, and at that, Heru was led along a series of passages first, a route that eventually led to a very familiar dead end.

“It is,” Severus said as he indicated the portrait, “quite remarkable how much you resemble this man. It seems the Slytherin look breeds true on occasion.”

“Yes, I see what you mean.” Heru tilted his head and pretended to subject the portrait to intense scrutiny.

“Unfortunate, though, that there is no given name. I have long wondered who he is.”

The portrait, which had woken at the sound of voices, squinted for a moment at them, then flashed a quick, secretive smile. A moment later it hissed, “You keep getting older, I see, unlike myself.”

Heru laughed softly and shook his head, looking over at Severus to see a fiery spark of curiosity burning in his dark eyes. “Shall we continue with the tour?”

“Of course. Follow me.” Severus led him away, back into the more common areas, pointing out various rooms as they passed them and explaining their use. Eventually Heru was led into the main classroom and through to Snape’s office. He wondered where Severus actually lived, and what, if anything, was now behind the snake-inlay door Salazar had used so long ago.

Severus settled in behind his desk, in a titular position of power, while Heru took a seat in the first chair he saw after laying his cloak over the back. Leaning back, he crossed his ankles, pushed up his sleeves, and aimed a pleasant smile at Snape.

Severus wasted no further time on social form. “Those potion formulas—you say they came from your personal library? It must be very old, or quite unique.”

“I would say both. Would I be wrong to assume that you’ve personally tried them? It seems to me to be the kind of thing a Potions Master would do.”

“A wise assumption. I would be very interested to see your collection.”

Heru arched a brow. “Perhaps. My books are stored quite carefully to ensure their near pristine condition. I might be persuaded to bring one or two by to show you. I’m quite protective of them, as you might understand.”

“As would I be, were they my own.”

“I suppose I see no reason to object. I hardly think a man of your reputation would play me for a fool. I will select a few I think might pique your interest.”

“What did the portrait say?” asked Severus abruptly. “People don’t normally laugh for no reason, or because they were hissed at.”

“You never know, dear fellow. I may be certifiable.” Heru flashed an amused smile. “But to answer your question, it appears the portrait agrees with you about the resemblance. It said it would never look as old as I do.”
“Then you are a parslemouth.”

“One might draw that conclusion. I get the distinct feeling I’m not down here so you can ask me about my work.” Severus gave him the barest of smiles, though it more closely resembled a snarl. Heru found it oddly erotic, and almost shook his head in surprise at his reaction. “Yes, I am a parslemouth. But that is allegedly quite common in the Slytherin line, is it not?”

“Undoubtedly. You seem quite comfortable with your lineage,” Severus stated.

“Shouldn’t I be? Though, with a madman like Voldemort running about it takes a very secure person to be so these days. There isn’t much one can do about masking reality in any case.”

“Indeed. Your little show isn’t fooling me, by the way. You’re quite casual about it, but I understand well what you’re not saying out loud.”

“And this means what to me?” Heru gave Severus another pleasant smile.

In return, Severus snorted. “You’ve made it very clear that you aren’t Marked. You arrived with a phoenix as your familiar. One must assume you are attempting to deflect ill will before it has a chance to manifest.”

“Aren’t we the clever fellow. That does not, however, mean I’m safe or harmless, as I’m quite sure you’re aware. But still, I must wonder what it is that you’re getting at.”

“You are … a very talented writer.”

“I appreciate your opinion, especially as you are a Potions Master and I am not, though I suppose I could take the exam.” Heru shrugged in an offhand manner. “You may call me Heru, if you wish. I certainly don’t mind.”

“So, we are supposed to come to the conclusion that you have utterly no connection to the Dark Lord,” Severus stated.

“How very odd, dear fellow. I thought it was only Death Eaters who referred to Voldemort in that fashion. Should I be worried?”

Snape’s expression congealed. Several heartbeats later he said, “You are being evasive.”

“As are you. Would that I could prove my sincerity, but I do believe a fellow such as yourself is rightfully cautious.” He cast a meaningful look at Severus, then said, “If you like, you’re more than welcome to visit my home in Hogsmeade. You can even meet my household. I’ll arrange for the books I mentioned to be available. Otherwise, I will await an owl from you with a time that is good for you that I may come back here and bring them with me. Regardless, I am far more concerned with whether or not you’ll be endorsing my textbooks. This venture is doomed to failure if you do not, and if that is the case, I’ll sell off the equipment I purchased and find another way to spend my time.”

“I have no issue with the texts. If you can complete the series prior to the start of the next school year and have them ready for order by Flourish & Blotts, then I intend to use those in the book lists.”

Heru gave Severus a genuinely pleased smile. The effect was interesting; Severus leaned forward slightly, his eyes seeming to burn black fire. “You have my sincere thanks. I will definitely continue working to the utmost of my ability on the remaining texts, starting when I return home today.”

Severus nodded and straightened. “And those books?”
“As I said—if you would prefer I return here, so be it. Otherwise you are welcome to visit me in the village. You will … have to let me know.”

“I shall inform Albus, then. And now”—Severus’s gaze focused on something behind Heru for a moment—“it is just coming on time for lunch. Will you be joining us for the meal?”

“It would be my pleasure.”

“Let us be on our way, then.” Severus stood, prompting Heru to rise, and ushered him out and up to the Great Hall. He did not introduce Heru to any of the staff, though he did give the headmaster a faint nod as they approached the head table. He steered Heru to the last seat at the end of the table and sat beside him, a buffer between Heru and other staff members. A number of curious glances were shot down the table, but out of courtesy they did not persist in such behavior throughout the meal.

It had been a distinctly peculiar feeling for Heru to sweep his eyes over the house tables and see himself as a child. Seeing Ron and Hermione almost undid him; he maintained his composure by sheer force of will. After that he mainly kept his head down, or turned toward Severus when they conversed intermittently. In consequence, he missed the blatant stares from the occupants of the Slytherin table. When the meal was over he stopped beside Albus long enough to give voice to his farewell, then allowed himself to be led to the main doors by Severus. After a parting inclination of the head, Heru stepped out and began the walk back to Hogsmeade and his home.

It was a week later that Heru received word from Severus; by then he had completed the fifth year text and sent word to Mr Lovegood regarding the felicitous decision made by the school. The letter read:

Mr Slytherin,

There are several matters we should discuss at this time. If the twentieth is convenient, please send confirmation by owl and I will stop by on that date at ten in the morning.

Severus Snape

The writing was a reminder of days gone by, inciting nostalgic feelings in Heru, perhaps only because it was not insulting. But then, Severus Snape wasn’t writing to Harry Potter. He didn’t answer right away. The letter was set aside as Heru considered the problem of Mark. He could, if pressed, prove the blood relationship with the boy; the results would show not the exact relationship, but rather only that it was quite distant without markers to denote—in this case—whether that meant upward or sideways. Despite that, Mark would be seen as inferior in the eyes of most pure-bloods.

Would the child be safer as he was, and more at risk should he agree to blood bond to Heru, or was the reverse more apt to be the case? After letting his thoughts run in circles for a half hour, Heru had Flick summon Mark to his study.

“I have a very important question to ask you,” Heru said once Mark was seated, “and I believe you’re old enough to make this decision on your own.” Mark immediately looked bewildered. Heru smiled and continued, “This may come out as a bit confusing at first, so please bear with me. You and I share a blood relationship, distant as it may be. Normally, that would be enough for me—though I have not adopted you in either the muggle or magical worlds, I am your legal guardian in the eyes of the muggle authorities, so by magical standards, that’s all that matters.”
Mark nodded uncertainly.

“What causes me to worry is that one of the professors from the school will be visiting in a week.”

“Why?” was the mystified question.

“Because there is every chance he will learn your full name, and I’m not sure how I feel about that. As it stands, you are considered a muggle-born in the eyes of the wizarding world, even living here. And though you are of the Slytherin bloodline, that perception would provide you some order of protection from the interest of Voldemort and his minions in terms of recruitment. On the other hand, it makes you more vulnerable as a target for extermination. There is good and bad on both sides of this equation.”

“I don’t think I understand what you’re trying to ask.”

“To put it simply, Mark, I have been deliberating whether or not to offer you a blood bond.”

“A what?”

“I have three options. I can leave things as they are and see how it all plays out. I can adopt you, but that won’t technically change anything except your surname. Or I can blood bond you to me, making you literally my son, blood and name. Make no mistake—no matter what you decide, I will do my utmost to assure that you grow up safely, even if it means leaving the country. You are family and I won’t abandon you.”

“So you want me to decide?” Mark squeaked.

“Yes. I feel it would be wrong to decide for you. If you choose not to decide, then I will be forced to at some point, but I think you’re mature enough to take a day to consider things and tell me what you would prefer.”

“The blood bond would mean I wasn’t Mark Evans any longer?”

“You’d still be you, but biologically speaking, you’d be a pure-blood Slytherin, as much my son as if I’d fathered you myself,” Heru explained.

“And I could be in danger either way.”

“Yes. I will always be honest with you, Mark, if I am able. I would never intentionally lie to you, though I may not be able to reveal everything I know.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Not really. It is called a blood bond for a reason, though. I must draw blood from both of us to accomplish it.”

“But don’t you plan on ever getting married and having children?”

Heru coughed and shifted uncomfortably. “I have no wish to, nor intention of, ever marrying a woman, so children are not an option. Regardless, you are family no matter what you decide.”

Mark gave him a slyly curious look, then dropped his gaze to his hands.

“I should point out that I very much doubt anyone aside from myself knows how to perform a blood bond, so I would appreciate you not speaking of it to anyone. Consider it a family secret.”
“All right,” said Mark suddenly. “I’ve decided.”

“So quickly?” Heru said in surprise.

Mark looked up and nodded. “I would prefer the blood bond. How long will it take?”

“Several days to prepare, then an hour or so for the ceremony. If you are sure, we can begin now.”

“Then let’s start.”

In the amount of time it took for Heru to stand, he idly wondered what effect this would have on the family tapestry.

Precisely at ten that morning a knock sounded at the door; Heru answered it personally. After returning Severus’s greeting, he invited the man in, asking once the door was closed if he would like anything to drink. Severus politely declined—and it was polite for Severus if Heru’s memory was anything to go by—and was subsequently guided into the lounge.

“Please make yourself at home while I fetch those books. I’ll only be a moment.” Heru inclined his head briefly and walked out of sight. Less than a minute later he apparated back into the house holding two bulky cases, which he brought to the lounge. He placed them carefully on the low table in front of Severus, then took a seat.

Severus, after a quick glance at Heru, leaned forward to open the first, then froze in place as Mark stepped into the room. Heru said, “Ah, let me present my son, Marcus. Mark, this is Professor Severus Snape of Hogwarts, the Potions Master.” He wasn’t sure if it was the revelation that he had a son, or Mark’s resemblance to himself that had arrested Severus mid-motion.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir,” offered Mark with a half bow and a disarming smile. After receiving a nod Mark turned to Heru and said, “I’m sorry to have interrupted. I wanted to know if it was all right for me to visit the shops.”

“Sure, but if you run into any trouble, summon Flick.” He then rolled his eyes and said, “Who am I kidding? If you aren’t back in time for lunch he’ll probably find you and drag you home.”

Mark giggled and raced off, the sound of the front door closing coming moments later.

Severus gave Heru a penetrating look, then opened the first case and moved the book within to his lap. He spent several moments gliding his long fingers over the cover, then flipped it open carefully. Heru settled back in his chair, prepared for a potentially long wait. And he was not disappointed in that expectation. When a half hour had gone by, he quietly stood and exited the room, stopping in at the kitchen to ask Guin for a pot of tea, and waiting until a tray was ready. He returned to the lounge and set the tray at the far end of the table, poured himself a cup, then sat down. Severus did not even appear to notice he’d been gone.

He was on his second cup when Severus replaced the book in its case and reached for the other, giving it the same odd caress before beginning to turn the pages. Heru had just poured his fourth cup when Severus looked up at him. Naturally, Heru smiled.

“I cannot believe what I’m seeing,” said Severus as he put the book back into its case. “Do you have any concept of how valuable these books are? And you have an entire library?”

Heru shrugged. “They have a lot of sentimental value for me, certainly.”
“These were written by Salazar himself.”

Heru took a sip of his tea and nodded. “So I understand.”

“Do you?” asked Severus almost rudely. “These books are priceless. How in Merlin’s name did you come by them?”

Heru blinked slowly. “They stayed in the family,” he said as if it were the most obvious answer in the world. “Some of them were written by the other founders.” Heru got the distinct impression that Severus wanted to groan. “I even have a few written by Salazar’s brother,” he added, just for shock value. He wasn’t disappointed that time either.

Severus closed his eyes briefly then said, “Brother?”

“So family lore goes.”

“And this alleged brother’s name?”

“The same as mine.”

“Heru.”

“Yeah. I looked it up once because I was curious. Apparently the alternate is Horus, the Egyptian God of Light,” Heru said cheerfully. “Interesting, eh?”

“Quite.” Severus didn’t appear to know what to do with that little tidbit of trivia. He was saved from saying more by the sound of the front door being closed, and a whirlwind called Mark blowing into the room.

“Father!” he cried. “Please say I can keep him.” Mark thrust something at Heru and deposited it in his automatically outstretched hands. Heru took a deep breath and looked down at a green snake with white banding.

“Oh. Well, I don’t know,” he temporized, angling his head to the side. “And what exactly are you?” he hissed.

The snake raised its head and gave him a beady stare. “You don’t know?” it hissed back, apparently affronted. “I am an emerald tree boa from Brazil.”

Heru looked up at Mark and asked, “They had this at the pet shop?”

Mark nodded and bounced, looking inordinately pleased with himself. “Can I keep him? He didn’t cost much ’cause he’s not venomous.” Turning to the snake he hissed, “You want to stay, don’t you?”

“If you promise to find me plenty to eat,” it replied, coiling around Heru’s arm.

Heru raised his eyes heavenward, paused, then said, “All right. But next time, please ask first. And make sure he doesn’t scare Flick or Guin. The last thing I need is a house-elf having a nervous breakdown.” He held out his arms, allowing Mark to retrieve his new pet, then flapped his hand. “Go on, then, and introduce him to Praecino as well.”

Mark nodded vigorously and dashed off. Heru dropped his head into his hands and sighed. After a moment he straightened and said, “I’m sorry. Where were we?” Severus looked a little pale, he noticed.
Severus cleared his throat. “We were about to discuss your texts. But I only have time now to inform you of how many copies should be printed in anticipation of next year.”

Heru replied, “Please, continue.”

After relating the figures, Severus rose to his feet, prompting Heru to do the same. “The rest will have to wait until another time, I’m afraid.”

“That’s fine. I’d like to thank you for coming down here.”

After a last, lingering look at the cases Severus nodded and made a move for the door. Heru walked him out, then returned his treasures to his underlake quarters.

Four days later, Heru and Mark made the trip up to the castle to watch the second task.
Heru and Mark were preparing to walk back to Hogsmeade when a rich, deep voice stopped them. Severus was approaching, so they waited for him to catch up.

“I did not expect to see the two of you here,” Severus stated when he was close enough.

Heru smiled easily. “We came to see the first task as well. An amazing bunch of kids, really. Of course, it meant Mark started nagging me for a broom once he saw the Potter boy zooming around,” he said blandly.

Severus’s eye twitched ever so slightly in response. “Indeed. As you are here, I thought I might ask if you’d be willing to show me more of your collection. I found the first two books quite informative. Even Albus was fascinated by my description of them.”

*Is that so?* thought Heru with a mental smirk. *Come closer, little fishy. I’ve got a nice baited hook for you.* He said out loud, “Sure. I don’t see why not, and you seem to be the kind of man who can appreciate them. When would be a good time?” He noted that Severus’s eyes would occasionally flick down to Mark, then back up.

“If you’d care to follow me to my office, I can check.”

“Certainly. We can spare the time for that, can’t we, Mark?”

Mark whipped his head around from where he’d been watching the departing spectators and said, “Of course, father.”

As they followed Severus to the castle and down into the dungeons, Mark’s head was nearly a blur as he tried to take in everything and nearly stumbled several times before Heru placed a hand on his shoulder to help guide him. “You’ll see a great deal more, I expect, when you come here for your own schooling,” he said in a low voice.

Mark also seemed awed at the potions classroom and Severus’s office, prompting the professor to ask if the boy was any good at potions.

“I have no idea,” confessed Heru, “though he’s been a huge help to me with the texts. But now that you mention it, I should ask if there are any laws against him working on them before he comes to Hogwarts. I know he isn’t allowed a wand just yet, but it seemed to me that potions ought not to be an issue. I’d hate to deliver him into your capable hands as a rank tyro in terms of practical work.”

Severus seemed mildly surprised at the question. “There are not. And if you are as good at teaching him as you are at writing on the subject, I would expect him to start school well in hand.”

“Splendid!” Heru began, then was interrupted by his sleeve being tugged on.

“Can we start as soon as we get home?” asked Mark excitedly.

“If you like,” Heru replied indulgently. “Now behave and let the professor check his schedule.”

Severus crossed to his desk and behind, pulling open a drawer and taking a book from inside. Flipping it open, he paged through it, then stopped to skim the contents. After a moment he looked up and said, “This Saturday morning appears to be open. Would ten suit?”
Heru nodded. “I can manage that with no problem.”

Severus grabbed a quill as he set the book down, then made a notation before putting it away. “Very well. Let me show you out then. It is easy to get lost down here.”

“Ah … do you think we could visit that portrait again before we go?” Heru asked.

If Severus thought the request was odd, he made no indication of it. He inclined his head briefly then led the way. On arrival, Heru said to Mark, “This is the portrait I told you about. Interesting, eh?”

“You’re right. It looks a lot like you, just much younger. This is really neat.”

The portrait opened its eyes and smirked. “You again?” he hissed. “One might start to think you missed me or something.”

Heru laughed as Mark’s eyes widened. “Hello,” Mark hissed. “My name is Marcus Slytherin. What’s yours?”

The portrait moved its gaze from the boy to Heru and arched a brow. “Adopting more strays?” Heru gazed innocently at the ceiling, so the portrait returned its eyes to Mark and hissed, “Is that so. My name is Heru Slytherin, but you should already know that.”

“I should?” asked Mark, turning an accusing gaze on his father.

“Hey, don’t look at me. He said it.”

“Said what?” inquired Severus smoothly.

Mark glanced over his shoulder and said, “He says his name is Heru Slytherin, and that I should have already known that, sir.”

Severus’s eyes narrowed.

“Hey now, just because we look a great deal alike is no reason a person should assume we have the same name,” protested Heru, casting a pointed look at the portrait.

“So this is Salazar’s alleged brother,” Severus stated.

The portrait gave him a snooty look and lifted its chin. “Alleged my ass,” he hissed.

Mark giggled and glanced at Severus again.

“Dare I even ask?”

“Um … it doesn’t translate directly,” said Mark with another giggle. “But he does say he’s Salazar’s brother.”

Heru had to wonder why Severus didn’t ask the obvious question, which was why the portrait refused to speak in English.

“How very interesting. It appears your family lore is correct,” said Severus redundantly. “Well, as fascinating as this is, I’m afraid there are things I need to be taking care of. May I escort you to the entrance?”

“Oh, yes. Sorry about taking up so much of your time.” Heru placed a hand on Mark’s shoulder and firmly turned him around. The journey out was short and silent, broken by a perfectly polite parting
On the walk back down to the village, Mark asked, “What did he mean about adopting strays?”

Heru resolved to have a long chat with the portraits very soon. “Family lore has it that Heru adopted a son well before he married and had children of his own,” he explained. Luckily, Mark said no more on the subject, and when they arrived at the house Heru took him downstairs for a beginning lesson on making potions.

After a late lunch, Heru warded the basement so Mark couldn’t get into any trouble while he was out, then apparated directly into his underlake rooms. There were several things he wanted to do, but he started with the portrait in his entrance hall. A lengthy discussion ensued and Heru finally got across the notion that people of this time should not be able to make a definite conclusion that the portrait Heru and the real Heru were actually the same person. He hadn’t realized what a pain in the ass he could be until now, even if it was his painted self being such a thorn in his side. He did not worry about the portraits in his study—the younger set probably thought their Heru was dead, and Caedryn and the founders knew better than to reveal anything to anyone.

Instead, Heru stood in the middle of his lounge and voiced a question to the castle. “Dear lady, are you aware of anything Caedryn might have left for me here before he died?” Several minutes later he was graced with another vision. He apparated to the room it showed and picked up a wooden crate, gave his sincere thanks, then apparated back to his home in Hogsmeade. He barricaded himself in his study and wrenched the cover off to reveal a stack of journals in near perfect condition. Each was stamped with his son’s name and a number in silver. Either Caedryn had thought ahead, or the castle had preserved them of her own volition.

Heru picked up the first and opened it.

Dear Father,

I know now that you are gone, much to my regret, and it is because of this that I have decided to keep journals in the hopes that one day you will think to ask the castle about me and my life. Obviously, if you are reading this, you did.

We told my brothers and cousins that you died as you requested, though we refused to explain the circumstances. The news hit them very hard, I’m sorry to say. It was weeks before we could get even a tiny smile out of any of them.

I was forcibly reminded of the day my own parents died, but then I recalled how you spoke with me and welcomed me into your life, how you cared for me as if I were your son from birth. Have I ever told you how much I love you, and how grateful I still am?

Heru had to stop for a moment to wipe away the tears that had begun to slide down his cheeks. Memories he had subconsciously repressed came crashing back over him, and he felt the deep and abiding pain of not having seen his children grow up into men.

I do not mean to cause you any pain, father, please believe that. I miss you very much and wish you had not had to leave us, though I understand it was ordained. I hope that your years here have given you whatever it is you need in your own time. I must believe that it has, for there is no other reason for you to have been taken from us, right?

I will record anything of interest that happens so that you may understand how our lives have gone, and the lives of those around us. I should add that Godric, Rowena, and Helga also seem quite despondent, but they are much more resilient having known from
the start. I have taken to visiting your portrait on occasion. The only people it will speak to intelligibly are me and the founders. For anyone else it stoically pretends it only speaks Parseltongue, which I find moderately amusing. For now let me say that I pray you are doing well, and that you are happy wherever you are.

With love,

Caedryn

Heru flipped the journal shut and sniffled loudly. A glance in the mirror showed that his eyes and nose were red and swollen, but he didn’t care. If he couldn’t express his loss in some fashion he might scream. Not feeling up to reading more at the moment, he placed the book back into the crate and sealed it, warding it against intrusion before shoving it under his desk. He was glad he’d thought to ask, but needed more time to get himself and his feelings under control before he attempted to see what more Caedryn had written. An hour or so later, when he could reasonably show his face again, he emerged from his study and headed for the library to go back to work on the sixth year text.

Over the next few days he alternated between instructing Mark in the art of Potions, working on the texts, and reading more of the journals. Aside from the first page, Caedryn had made no more references to his knowledge of Heru’s origins or departure, and instead wrote as though he were composing letters to his dead father. If it came to it, Heru knew he could excise that page and be able to show them to anyone if he wished.

Early Saturday morning he returned underlake and selected a book from his collection, one he had written himself regarding his and Salazar’s ability to change their appearance, though he had not gone into exactly how it was possible. That secret—Salazar’s original notes—were safely tucked away in his vault. That his handwriting had changed over the years was just as well.

So it was that when Severus arrived promptly at ten, Heru was there to usher him in and lead the way to his study. Not bothering to ask this time, he summoned a house-elf and requested tea, then picked up his selections to show to his guest.

“One of these is purportedly written by Salazar’s brother Heru and contains some rather interesting information. The other is written by Heru’s eldest son, Caedryn. You seemed quite interested in him, so I made my selection based on that.”

Severus arched a brow at him and actually smiled faintly. As he reached out to accept the books, Guin popped in with a tray and poured two cups of tea before disappearing. Heru fixed one to his liking and sat down, watching as Severus ignored the tea in favor of opening one of the books. Heru could tell by the cover that it was the one he had written.

Over the next few minutes he watched as Severus’s brows raised higher and higher with every page he turned, until finally he looked up and said, “Yes, very interesting, considering it is an account of the origins of metamorphmagi. I find it extremely intriguing that it was a potions accident, and quite disappointed that there is no record of how to recreate the circumstances.”

So that’s what they decided to call it, thought Heru. Now I don’t have to appear appallingly ignorant on the subject.” He nodded at Severus and smiled. “It seems to run in the family, much like being a parselmouth,” he confided. He was rewarded with a slight quirk at the corner of Severus’s mouth. His guest carefully closed the book and placed it on the table, then started on the journal. Heru had selected it quite deliberately, for it held an accounting of the first year after his departure and thus was full of comments about his other sons, nephews, and the remaining founders. But more importantly, it mentioned, much as the excised page had, that Heru’s portrait was quite stubborn about who it spoke to.
Eventually—it was frightfully clear that the man was a fast reader—Severus closed the book and looked at him again with those burning black eyes. “I am honored to have had the opportunity to read these,” he said. “You are fortunate to have such an intimate link to your past.”

Heru couldn’t help but smile.

“My own family was not so careful, to my eternal regret, though I know my line reaches back quite far.”

“That is unfortunate, I agree,” he said. “It is always a shame when the past becomes nothing more than a collection of myths.”

“If I may ask, how many more journals are there?”

Heru shrugged. “I'm not sure. I only just recently started reading them, and haven’t bothered to count yet.”

“I would,” said Severus, “be interested to read more of them. They provide a fascinating insight into that time period. Even Albus would be overjoyed to see these.”

Heru made a noncommittal noise. “I suppose that might be true, but I don’t feel quite the same sense of rapport with your headmaster,” he replied. “One must assume that he is quite intelligent and capable of being crafty—in the best sense of the word, that is—but I somehow doubt he shares some of the qualities you appear to possess.”

Severus responded with a look of mild incredulity and the question, “And those would be?”

Heru gave him an artless smile—it was entirely calculated for effect—and said, “You were a Slytherin as a student, were you not?” At Severus’s nod he continued, “As I understand it, Slytherins tend to be sly, ambitious, and cunning creatures who very carefully weigh their opportunities for risk versus reward. The headmaster strikes me more as the type who would sacrifice much for his desired results while remaining fairly straightforward about his motives and reasoning. As such, he would be far more caught up in thinking on a global scale rather than from a more personal point of view. All very upright and aboveboard.”

He wrested another faint smile from his guest at his carefully worded opinion. “Perhaps,” Severus said. “Are you attempting to flatter me, Mr Slytherin?”

Heru widened his eyes to falsely innocent proportions and said, “Am I? And here I thought I was simply being honest.”

Severus snorted. “Your lunch with us up at the castle raised more than a few brows. The staff were all very interested in you, as were the students of my house.”

“I have no particular interest in satisfying their curiosity about me,” Heru pointed out. “I just want to live my life, raise my son—if it’s bad, though, I’ll have to reconsider sending him to Hogwarts. I’m more than capable of teaching him everything he needs to know personally.”

“I notice you do not seem to have a wife in residence.”

Heru blinked. “That’s rather impertinent of you. Mark’s mother is deceased, and she wasn’t my wife in the first place. I would not care to repeat the experience, but I am grateful for having Mark in my life.” Never mind that he was twisting the truth like pretzel dough.

“Curious,” said Severus mildly. “I also notice you live quite simply despite having such an exalted
lineage.”

Heru was so agitated by the implications that sparks flew from his fingertips, shattering the empty cup he was still holding. Aiming a glare at Severus he said, “Are you trying to irritate me, or are you just morbidly curious?” Without waiting for a response Heru glanced down at the shards and gestured. A moment later he placed the repaired cup on the table. “If you must know,” he resumed after noting how pale Severus had become, “I don’t much see the point in flaunting anything—not my life, my power, or my lifestyle choices. I trust that answers your question adequately.”

When Severus didn’t respond after a minute Heru reached out with his power. What he ended up sensing was a feeling of awe that verged on worship, making his mood deteriorate even further. “Stop that,” he snapped. “What in Merlin’s name do you think I am, anyway? Thank the powers that blot on my family name doesn’t actually share it. I could never live down the shame if that were the case.”

Severus started and dropped his eyes, placing the book he held on the table. Slowly, very slowly, he said, “The resemblance is un—”

“Don’t you dare compare me to that pathetic excuse for a man,” Heru interrupted heatedly. “You know what? I have an idea, Mr Snape.”

Severus raised his eyes, his face blank of all expression once more.

“Let us, you and I, go on a little trip. Would you like to see a place of legend? I’m sure you do. So how about we toddle on up to the castle so I can show you what a real Slytherin accomplished, and what one bastard used for his own twisted and disgusting desires.”

Heru rose to his feet, followed by Severus. Once outside the study Heru warded the door and stalked off down the hall. By the time they had reached the castle doors Heru was much calmer, and mentally kicking himself for reacting so violently. Apparently some habits were harder to break than others. Still not speaking, he unerringly led the professor to the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, not giving a damn if his companion thought it was peculiar that he knew exactly where to go.

After slapping a set of wards on the bathroom door, he turned to the sinks and hissed, “Open up.”

When the entrance was opened he gestured sharply for Severus to precede him, then jumped into the pipe himself. At the bottom he brushed off his robes with a mild feeling of disgust and stalked off, climbing over the remains of the rockfall, past the remains of the skin the basilisk had shed, to stop in front of a solid wall carved with two entwined serpents with glittering emerald eyes.

“How’s this for family lore?” he asked sarcastically, then turned and hissed, “Open.” After the wall split he stalked through, then watched as Severus entered and began to look around. The corpse of the basilisk was still there, slowly decaying, but not yet entirely gone. Eventually Severus stood in front of the statue of Salazar, staring upward at the stone face.

Heru snorted as he saw it again, causing Severus to look back over his shoulder in confusion. “Family lore has it that Salazar looked a great deal like his brother, so this statue is a bit of a mystery to me. However, I understand that it also opens. Care to take a look inside? This is the first opportunity I’ve had myself so we can explore together.”

Severus nodded and looked back at the statue, so Heru sent out a mental call for Praecino. Moments later he appeared in a burst of flame and came to rest on his shoulder with a short trill of inquiry. Heru took a second to give the phoenix an affectionate pat, then looked up at the statue and hissed, “Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four.”
It occurred to Heru at the last moment that he was taking a huge risk. He had no way of knowing that Salazar had just the one basilisk. Fortunately, though, the only thing that happened was that the mouth smoothly swung open. “Praecino,” he asked quietly, “would you be willing to give us a lift up to that opening?”

The phoenix trilled agreement and flew over to the foot of the statue and hovered. Heru followed and grabbed Severus’s hand, then took hold of Praecino’s tail feathers. After a short but exhilarating flight they were standing inside a fairly large tunnel. Praecino perched in the opening and began to preen his feathers, so Heru forged on ahead, followed closely by Severus, eventually coming to a huge, high-ceilinged room that lit up as soon as he entered it.

“I always wondered what this place was like,” he murmured, spotting a desk and moving toward it. Laying on the surprisingly clean surface was a single sheet of parchment, which Heru picked up.

My Dearest Brother,

I can only hope that someday you will be able to read this. Perhaps I am wrong to do as I have done, but I made my decision when Ethelinda died at the hands of those muggles, realizing despite the evidence to support my arguments that the others would never be able to agree with my wishes. I’m sorry, Heru—I could make no other choice but to leave, knowing that I would always be at odds with them. My deepest regret is in leaving you and the children behind to wonder what has become of me.

I am also sorry for the things I forgot in the heat of the moment. I know the things I said must have wounded you deeply. It was truly insensitive of me, and I beg your forgiveness from the depths of my heart. You did not deserve to hear such things come from my mouth. I hope you know that I never once considered you in that light. If anything, you would have been the impetus for a change of heart, but that was not to be in the end.

I know that you have taken my sons into your home and begun to raise them with as much love as you have for your own, and for that you have my eternal thanks. And by now you will have realized that I left you one final gift in your vault. I also know that it has probably made you angry, or at least very annoyed with me. Please do not think too badly of me, Heru, and do not forget me.

All my love,

Salazar

Heru struggled with himself, trying desperately to contain his reaction to the words of his brother, knowing that Severus was somewhere in the room with him. When he heard his companion quietly clear his throat somewhere off to the side, Heru thrust the parchment out blindly, keeping his eyes firmly on the surface of the desk. As ill-conceived as the idea had been, and as much as he wished he had not brought Severus with him, Heru would not have traded in this moment for the world.

After a span of time Heru didn’t even bother to try and make sense of, Severus cleared his throat again. Heru turned around and extended his hand.

Severus hesitated, then said, “Would you mind very much if Albus were to see this?”

Heru snapped his fingers expectantly and quickly took the parchment from Severus when he offered it back. “Fine,” he said in as normal a tone as he could manage. “But this is a piece of my family’s history. I have every intention of taking it home to be properly preserved.”
“Understood. Shall we go see him now?”

Heru spun on his heel and stalked off down the tunnel to Praecino, who carried the both of them not only out of it, but back up to Myrtle’s bathroom, then disappeared in another burst of flame. Heru closed the entrance and removed his earlier work from the door, then let Severus take the lead on the short trip to Albus’s office.

When he had greeted the headmaster tersely and was seated, Heru let his mind wander a bit as Albus read the letter. His eyes focused sharply when Albus said, rather perceptively, “You seem to be somewhat strongly affected by this, Mr Slytherin.”

Heru immediately produced an easy smile. “I simply wasn’t expecting to find anything of the sort. I find it quite intriguing, not to mention vastly illuminating.”

“Yes, I see,” responded Albus. “I’m grateful you were willing to let me read it. While it does not provide complete answers, it is at least some information as to why Salazar left the school.” He handed the letter to Severus, who handed it to Heru.

Heru nodded and stood abruptly. “If you don’t mind, I will return to my home. Don’t worry, I know my way out now. I’m sure we’ll speak again.” He inclined his head and left before either of them could respond. As soon as he was home he barricaded himself in his study, and finally gave vent to his feelings.
Trading Favors

By the time another week had passed, Heru completed his work on the sixth year text and had begun the seventh. He felt confident that he could manage to finish everything in good time and had stopped in to see Mr Lovegood about the number of copies to print for the first six books, plus hand over the necessary money for the hire of workers to set the most recent text and take care of the press operations for all of them. He fully expected to have the seventh year text and the compendium done by the end of April if his current rate of progress was anything to go by.

He had taken to writing down in the basement so he could work and still keep an eye on Mark as the boy continued to make potions from the first year text. Heru would not have been surprised to find out in the end that Mark was years ahead of himself when it came time for him to attend Hogwarts, if indeed he did actually go. He even set his son homework to attend to, similar to what he remembered of his own years at Hogwarts as Harry Potter. Tests, however, he decided were too much trouble, though it did make him consider a teacher’s companion that would contain sample assignments and tests. But, knowing what he did of the Potions Master, he made the assumption that for as long as Severus was employed at Hogwarts, such a book would not be necessary, and might be construed as insulting.

When Mark arrived home from a walk around town, Heru listened absently to a scattered account of a chance sighting of Harry Potter at Gladrags, and something about socks, but other than making the odd noise or nod of the head occasionally, he didn’t much pay attention. He found it easier to distance himself from that situation, even though Mark found it all very exciting indeed. It did serve to remind him that Sirius was in town, though, but he had no earthly idea what to do with the information. As touchy as Sirius was about his family, he doubted that being approached by a Slytherin would go over well at all.

Because of that reminder, and because things were fast rushing to that key point in time, Heru began to wonder a great deal about what would actually happen when time caught up with itself. The disembodied being had given him no real reason to favor one potential outcome over another. The only thing he could be reasonably sure of was that he had been sent back not quite to that point for a purpose. That he did not know why was immaterial. He would have to have faith that he would be able to accomplish necessary things without too much thought. Then again, Fate might have kept him so long in the past out of necessity or compassion.

Heru shook his head. It didn’t bear thinking about any longer just then. Instead, he pushed aside his barely-started text and reached for a fresh sheet of parchment. He dashed off a quick note to Severus, letting him know that the sixth text was complete, work had begun on the seventh, and that all was proceeding to plan. After signing his name with a flourish, he addressed it and had it sent off.

A brisk walk through the chill air of the village served to help clear his head, though he had the distinct impression that his every step was being shadowed. It was confirmed—perhaps it was coincidence—when the sound of his own footsteps developed a faint echo as he approached home and headed down the short walk toward the front door. Considering that he had taken his own house wards one step further than most, to the point where any spells aside from his own were negated almost as soon as they were cast, he was not unduly worried.

When he did gain the entrance, he turned slowly to see who was behind him, and smiled. “Hello, Mr Snape. What a pleasant surprise.”

“My apologies for not giving you adequate warning. Are you available, or should I return at a later time?”
“Think nothing of it. I’m quite a casual fellow, don’t you know. And yes, as it happens, I’m free at the moment.” After ushering his unexpected guest inside and taking care of both their cloaks, Heru led the way into the kitchen. He could have been mistaken, but the combination of his plainly muggle clothing and the obvious similarities in the kitchen’s accouterments caused a pained expression to pass fleetingly over Severus’s face.

Though it was long past lunch and ages until dinner, Heru had every intention of making himself a snack. He whipped open the refrigerator and started to rummage around, asking in a somewhat muffled voice, “Did you want a sandwich?” as he pulled out packages of ham and cheese, along with a dish of butter, and placed them on the counter.

Severus didn’t respond, so Heru yanked out a freshly baked loaf of bread and made two sandwiches, then put everything away. Tossing the plates on the table, he said, “If you don’t eat the second one, I will, so there’s naught to worry over. Care for a drink?” Severus gave a faint nod. Heru produced two glasses of cider and sat down, sliding one of the plates over to himself.

When Severus finally availed himself of a free chair, Heru asked, “So, what’s on your mind?” then bit into his sandwich hungrily.

After a slight pause, during which Severus took a sip from his glass, he asked, “Where is your son?”

Heru angled his head curiously and replied, “In the lab. I’ve asked the elves to keep an eye on him while he works. I reckon they can contain any tendency Mark might have toward blowing the house up.”

“I see.” Severus eyed the remaining sandwich, then said, “First, let me extend my apologies for my … impertinence … during my last visit.”

Heru nodded and took another bite.

“Something happened yesterday.”

Heru raised his brows and continued to eat.

“Something that disturbed me a great deal.”

Heru sighed inwardly and wondered if Severus was ever going to get to the point. Nevertheless, he smiled, took a sip of his cider, and another bite of his sandwich.

“You see—rather, are you aware of who Igor Karkaroff is?”

Heru gave an affirmative grunt—the least rude response possible at the time aside from a nod.

“He came to me yesterday, interrupted my class.”

Then Heru remembered. After swallowing he said, “And probably showed you how his Dark Mark was becoming more and more distinct, no?”

Severus gave him a wary look. “You wonder this, why?”

Heru waved his sandwich airily. “Call me a prophet. I often get odd glimpses of the future, and sometimes the past. Karkaroff is worried that it means Voldemort is gaining strength, that he isn’t really dead. Right?”

Severus pulled the remaining sandwich closer and picked it up. “Yes,” he said shortly, then took a
“Should I then surmise that you also fear that is the case, and worry for your own sake? After all, you were, or still are, a spy, am I right?”

“Yes.”

“So let me ask you, my dear man, why are you here speaking to me about it?”

Severus lowered his sandwich and said, “Because I think you might be able to do something about it.”

Heru arched a brow. “Are you trying to tell me you trust me?”

“I don’t know. But I do think you can help.”

“I see. All right, we’ll set trust aside for the moment, though I think it’s a fairly important factor. I would like to hear why you think I have the power to help you.” Heru wolfed down the remainder of his sandwich and got up to make another.

“Isn’t that obvious?” asked Severus. “You’re … you.”

A pregnant silence ensued while Heru finished and packed everything away again before taking his seat. “I’m sorry,” he finally said, “but I don’t quite follow. What about me? Is my surname actually being Slytherin some sort of magical talisman to hold fast to as though I am automatically better, smarter, and more powerful than the family black sheep?”

Severus had the grace to look vaguely embarrassed.

“I’ll grant you, I bet I have a better grasp on what the name of Slytherin has to offer than that poor fool does. Merlin knows I didn’t come down from some wastrel cadet branch of the family, and I certainly didn’t have the hubris to create a lordly new name for myself in an attempt to intimidate people. Well, all right—I’ll give you that Slytherin is enough to manage that on its own. Salazar had very good reasons to distrust muggles, but I have it on good authority that he was as much to blame for the death of his wife as any of the other founders.”

Heru pointed his sandwich at Severus and said, “Even he made mistakes of monumental proportions. It’s a damn shame he left behind something for that Riddle boy to find, as I doubt he could have found the Chamber by accident. He’d have been better off blowing up a forest or two in anger than to do whatever it was he did. Maybe then we wouldn’t have had a war, with another one potentially looming on the horizon. And for that matter, Riddle should have pulled up his socks and made something of himself, not gone haring off to every two-bit dark arts whore to learn how to rule the world in ten easy steps after a bit of hard luck as a child.”

Heru took a swig of his cider and repeated, “So, I would like to hear why you think I have the power to help you.”

Severus’s eyes had slowly widened during the impromptu speech, but then he blinked. “I think you can undo what he did. I think you can free me.”

“Really. And suppose I can. What would your headmaster have to say?”

“I don’t really give a damn,” was Severus’s bald reply.

Heru chuckled appreciatively. “Fair enough. Again, supposing I can, what do I get out of this, Mr
Snape?” The look on Severus’s face made him laugh softly. “Come now. I’m already rich beyond the dreams of avarice, but you don’t really expect me to perform such a task out of the goodness of my heart, do you?”

“What do you want?”

“Quite frankly, I have no idea. I live a very simple life, as you know. I lack for very little, except perhaps for companionship.” Heru sat back and took a bite of his sandwich, staring at Severus with half-lidded eyes.

“It would be worth anything to be free.”

“Anything is a very vague sort of offer, my dear fellow. How about this?” Heru raised his brows and leaned forward. “You begin by using my given name, and I’ll determine if what you ask is even possible.”

“As you wish, Heru.”

He found it interesting what a bit of stature and power did to Severus. Given a figure he was convinced was so much more than he was himself, Severus seemed to relinquish the role of alpha and slide into what might almost be construed as subservient behavior—if you squinted. “There, see? That wasn’t so difficult. Small steps, Severus. Now, let us finish our snack, and then we’ll get down to business.”

A short time later they were barricaded in Heru’s study. He had called in one of the house-elves and given instructions not to interrupt them unless there was some kind of pressing reason, and to continue to keep an eye on Mark. When Guin was gone, Heru asked Severus to find a comfortable seat and bare his arm.

Whereas Heru had always before been the subject of study, he had not been entirely unaware of what was going on, and what was being done to him when the founders had investigated and modified his scar. Based on that experience, he had a pretty good idea of what to do in Severus’s case. Drawing upon that, he placed his hand on the Dark Mark, closed his eyes, and sought to unravel its mystery.

His delicate probing had the effect of causing the hairs on Severus’s arm to rise, and the professor shifted more than once as though trying to find a more comfortable position. Heru could see a twisted melange of spell threads emerging from the otherwise innocuous mark—threads that bent backward to flow up the man’s arm and split at the shoulder to travel both to his heart and his brain. Still more of them reached further down and out.

“This is a very nasty piece of work,” Heru muttered. “Did you know it is designed to either crush your heart or snap your mind like a twig on demand?” he asked conversationally. “And, oh dear, that is vile… Here’s an impertinent question for you, Severus. Had any trouble sustaining a relationship, by chance?”

Severus shifted again, almost yanking his arm out of contact.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Heru murmured, eyes still closed. “Hm, no, that’s just for pain. All right.” He opened his eyes and smiled, then stood up and brushed his shirt down, wandering over to a chair a moment later and seating himself.

Severus’s eyes were at once cold and curious.

“A very nasty piece of work, indeed. But to satisfy the curiosity I see looming in your eyes—yes, I
can get rid of it. It *might* be hideously painful, but I can remove it.”

Severus relaxed marginally, and exhaled. “I’m not sure it could hurt much worse than when it was put in place.”

“Did you start out with the intent to be a spy, or did you turn, and why?”

“I’m not sure how that matters.”

“My dear man, consider who you’re talking to. And consider—why would I want to free a person who may have turned only because he thought it was the more expedient route to take, and who would, if he thought he could get away with it, go right back to his master and continue to wreak havoc?”

Severus’s lips compressed into a thin line. Then he said, “No, I did not take the mark with the intent to spy. But it was not long before I realized what a fool I had been, and what a lie his service was. I allowed myself to be branded in exchange for fool’s gold and cheap promises. I resigned myself then to a painful death, and decided that so long as it was going to happen, I may as well do so in the service of something I could trust in, or should I say, someone.”

“That person being Albus Dumbledore.”

“Correct.”

“Well, then.” Heru gave Severus a genuinely pleased smile, and was happy to notice the same reaction he had seen weeks before. Severus leaned forward almost imperceptibly and his eyes burned black fire. “If we can come to an agreement, I see no reason why you should not be set free.” It didn’t particularly matter to Heru at that moment whether or not he trusted the headmaster, or even his childhood perceptions of the Potions Master. He was in a position to help, which he normally would have been happy to do, but he wasn’t going to appear easy.

“I don’t know what to offer you. You said you lacked for nothing.”

“Except for companionship,” Heru pointed out. If he was not mistaking the signs, it was worth a try.

“I’m not sure I’d know how to be anyone’s friend,” said Severus with a faint sneer.

Heru chuckled. “Have you ever bothered to try?”

“No.”

He suddenly felt tired and depressed, and let it show. His gaze roamed over the walls and the ceiling, eventually coming to a rest on his hands where they laid in his lap. “I don’t understand you,” he said quietly. “I’ve told you I can free you, and you quibble over such a little thing. Would you prefer I replaced it with a brand of service all my own?” He waved his hand, dismantling the wards, then snapped his fingers. When Flick appeared, he said, “Please show Mr Snape out. If he returns tomorrow, be sure to announce him.” Then he stood and apparated upstairs.

Heru was in the library working when Flick popped into the room and announced, “Mr Snape is being here to see you, master.”

“Where is Mark presently?”
“The young master is being in the basement with Guin.”

Heru yawned and nodded. “All right. Please show Mr Snape in here, and do not disturb us unless it’s an emergency.”

“Yes, master.” Flick gave a little bow and popped out.

By the time Severus appeared, Heru was tilted back in his chair with his hands behind his head. “Please have a seat,” he said tonelessly, then warded the door with a wave of his hand. “I assume you still want that mark removed,” he stated.

Severus nodded and lowered himself into a chair.

“Fine.” Heru sat up and stretched, then stood and moved to kneel next to his guest. “This will take a while,” was all he said for the next several hours of painstaking work. Each thread was carefully drawn back from its point of destination, then delicately severed from the brand, and each one shriveled like a dying thing when he tossed it onto the floor. He had no idea what Severus was seeing, if he even had his eyes open. It must have looked like a pantomime of sorts. When every spell thread had been removed, Heru concentrated on leeching out the pigment embedded in Severus’s skin, one molecule at a time.

By the time he was finished he was sweating heavily and exhausted, gratefully letting himself slip down to the floor so he could stretch out on his back and rest. Eventually he felt well enough to rise so he could move to the couch, where he promptly stretched out again and flung one arm over his eyes. He must have fallen asleep, for someone was gently shaking him and asking him to wake up. “What?” he muttered, thinking only of rolling over and dozing off again.

“Heru, it’s getting late. If I don’t return to the castle soon, Albus will start to wonder.”

“Mm. Right.” Heru absently dismantled the wards, this time using his wand. “Later.”

He heard a sigh, and then, “We have not discussed the details of what you wanted, Heru.”

“Sod that. Don’t owe me damned thing, Sev’rus. Tried, you don’t like me, s’get out. Got what you wanted.” Heru let his head loll to the side, then licked his dry lips and rolled over, absentlly fumbling his shirt down where it had risen up; the cool air against his skin didn’t feel so good.

Distantly he heard a few footsteps, then silence. A couple more were followed by the sensation of something being laid over him, then a series that faded off into nothing.

On the last Saturday of March, Heru sent another short note to Severus, letting him know the seventh year text was complete and that he expected the compendium to be finished in approximately a month. On the final Saturday of April, Heru sent another note, informing him of the completed compendium, and that he expected Severus to inform Flourish & Blotts of his selections for the upcoming year. Then he sent a package to Mr Lovegood with the final text, and a request to let him know if the expected order did not actually arrive.

He was at a complete loss for what to do with himself the next morning. Several hours in his study after breakfast had him tentatively considering a somewhat autobiographical work on his time with the founders, centering on the origins of Slytherin house. Naturally, the moment he pulled over a fresh notebook, Guin popped in to announce a visitor. “Mr Snape is being here to see you, master.”

Heru blinked and frowned, then took a deep breath. “All right. Please show him in.”
“Yes, master,” she said, before popping away. He had started a rough outline when Severus strode through the door, stopping in front of his desk.

“What can I do for you?” Heru asked politely and looked up for a moment, then as an afterthought said, “Please, make yourself comfortable.”

Severus sat. “I’ve been thinking about what you said.”

Heru wrote out another line and said, “Yes, all right.”

“I think perhaps that is exactly what I thought you meant—trading one form of servitude for another.”

Heru stopped writing and looked up from his notebook. Severus’s face was a peculiar mixture of pain and embarrassment. He let his gaze slide down for a moment and back up, then arched a brow questioningly.

“I owe you an apology.”

Heru let his brow drop. “I’m afraid I have no idea what you’re referring to. I did a favor for a friend in need. No apology is necessary.” He looked back down and started writing again, but stilled his pen when he heard a rather gusty sigh.

“Heru, I’m sorry. You treated me as you knew I would expect, and even then I was suspicious. I felt ashamed that night when you sent me away.”

Heru set his pen down and folded his hands, but did not raise his eyes.

“I’m not sure what I can do to make things right.”

Heru wasn’t sure if he should be enjoying this, or feeling a bit ashamed himself. But, he had left Severus alone to come to his own conclusions, and it was rather interesting to hear the man speak without his usual mask in place. The corner of his mouth quirked up as he thought.

“Will you say something?”

Heru flicked his gaze up to meet Severus’s. He unfolded his hands and used one to comb the hair back from his forehead, letting his fingers slide down to cradle the back of his neck, then smiled faintly. “It’ll be lunch shortly. Were you planning on staying?”
Distant Memories

Heru didn’t often use the dining room. In fact, he was surprised to remember it was actually there. He decided it was much too formal and closed the door, wandering to the lounge instead with Severus in tow. A snap brought Guin to the room. “Where, pray tell, is my son?”

“The young master is being in the lab again, master.”

Heru looked over at Severus and said, “You know, that might have been a mistake. I can’t keep him out of there.” To Guin he said, “Well, make sure he washes and comes up. Please go ahead and prepare lunch for three, to be served in here.”

“Certainly, master.” Guin bobbed and popped away.

Heru ruffled his hair and sat down. “I’m telling you, ever since that last trip to the castle practically all he’s done is make potions. I’m not sure you’ll have anything to teach him when you get your hands on him. I even started giving him assignments—essays—to try to slow him down.”

Severus looked fairly interested in the turn of events. “I must wonder what house he’ll be sorted into.”

“No idea. Though, I doubt Gryffindor. He doesn’t seem to be recklessly brave so much as endlessly curious. Ravenclaw, perhaps.”

“Not Slytherin?”

Heru shrugged and spread his hands with a smile. “You tell me.”

Severus opened his mouth slightly, hesitated, then said, “Going on the idea that we are … friends … I had a few questions.”

“Sure. I can’t promise what I’ll be able to answer, though.”

“Understood. I really would like to know why you live this simply.” Severus seemed to be holding himself as though waiting for another explosion.

“You mean without the normal trappings of wealth, fancy clothes, dozens of servants, and what not. I considered buying The Daily Prophet, you know. All very quiet and hush hush. Anyhow, I live this way because it’s comfortable. To a very tiny extent it’s calculated to disarm, but when you come right down to it, I prefer muggle clothes, a small home with only what I actually need, and very little to seduce me into an inflated sense of ego.” He paused, then asked, “What about you? Has your headmaster erupted over the removal of that mark?”

“He is … suspicious. He is considered the most powerful wizard of our time, and you have just surpassed him, managing a task that he could not even find a starting point for in attempts to remove it.”

“Well, that comes as no surprise. But is he angry with you?”

“No. His joy at seeing the mark gone was almost as keen as my own. It was after that point that he began to think about the implications of the accomplishment.”

“Albus Dumbledore need not fear me,” Heru said deprecatingly, then ruined it by saying, “Unless of
course he tries something foolish. Saying that all Slytherins are dark and/or evil is like saying all Gryffindors are paragons of virtue, and we all know that’s not the case. Even some Gryffindors are rats.”

“How very right you are,” said Severus with a touch of amusement. “I recall from that journal that the portrait of Heru only speaks Parseltongue. Do you have any idea what it guards? It seems a rather odd place for it to be hanging, after all.”

Heru temporized by saying, “I’m not sure, though I imagine there’s good reason for it being there. Have you by chance seen a wall with a subtle stone-in-stone snake inlay anywhere in the dungeons?”

“I have.”

“Hm. Perhaps some day soon you can show me.” Heru narrowed his eyes, wondering if Salazar had left anything behind there. It might well have been what a young Tom Riddle had stumbled over during his early years at Hogwarts.

“You seem very much offended by the Dark Lord,” Severus commented lightly.

Heru blinked and said, “Wouldn’t you be in my position? Though I’ll grant you, I expect he would be very much offended by me given the chance. He has used the Slytherin reputation to his advantage, no doubt ruining, or at least hurting, countless young lives in the process. That he’s sullied the name practically beyond repair is another reason to take offense.”

“Why are you curious about that inlay?” Severus backtracked.

“I saw it once. I’d like to know why it’s there.” He turned his head as Mark skipped into the room and took a seat.

“Hello, professor,” said Mark politely. To Heru he said, “I could have eaten downstairs, father.”

“Yes, and you could also have contaminated your food and nearly killed yourself.”

“I wouldn’t,” protested Mark with a scandalized expression.

“So you keep saying,” Heru replied dryly. He shot a look at Severus and said, “Can’t you get through to him?”

Severus found himself quickly in the position of having two Slytherins looking at him expectantly and coughed. “Mark, your father is entirely correct. You should not be eating in the lab.”

Mark looked down and kicked at the carpet with a sullen expression, then perked up when Flick appeared with lunch and dove right in without so much as a may I.

Because of the boy’s presence the conversation turned to a discussion of his progress, with Mark waxing enthusiastic over everything that he had accomplished and what he planned on tackling next. When Severus had caught up with his surprise he heard Mark saying in confiding tones, “Father wanted to make a companion teacher’s guide with suggested lectures, assignments and tests, but”—his expression turned sly—“he said you might be offended.”

Severus’s brow quirked up. “Indeed. And perhaps I should start coming down here at the weekends and setting you rigorous exams, or having you come up to the castle so I could do so in an actual classroom.”
Heru laughed outright when Mark nearly squirmed off his chair. “Feel free, if you like. Mark certainly seems excited about the idea.”

“Could I really?” asked Mark, his eyes shining.

Heru, knowing damn well that his son was excelling, smiled and said, “Only if the professor doesn’t mind being saddled with you.”

“I do believe something could be arranged,” affirmed Severus. “You might want to consider visiting the castle this coming Saturday. Young Mark could take some first year exams, and the both of you could stay on for the noon meal.”

“Albus wouldn’t mind?”

“I will check, though I cannot imagine why he would.”

“Sounds wonderful.” To Mark he said, “Then I suggest you hurry along back to the lab, but don’t forget to take Flick or Guin with you. And send one in here to clean up, all right?”

“Brilliant!” Mark bounced to his feet and gave Heru a quick hug, sketched a bow to Severus, then skipped back out while whistling an off-key tune. A minute later Guin appeared and swept up the trays, gave them a toothy grin, and disappeared.

“I really hope you don’t mind. He seems awfully excited about the idea. He’s also insanely curious about the school.”

“I was the one to make the offer,” Severus reminded him, then changed the subject. “About that wall—you said you saw it. Was that in some kind of vision?”

Heru wrinkled his brow and tried to decide how best to approach that. “I don’t recall exactly. But that does remind me of something. Perhaps you might be interested—we could always check it out, as I’ve said. In any case, I unearthed a bit of a treasure recently.”

“Oh?”

“A very old pensieve,” he said slowly. “Ancient, in fact.” Heru had already decided that he was willing to share certain salient parts of the historical record if it seemed harmless to do so, and if Severus had come around to seeing things more clearly. Hopeless optimism, perhaps, but it had been his main reason for considering the somewhat fictionalized autobiography.

“Then I shall assume it was not empty.”

“Far from it. It skips around a bit, but there are some fascinating scenes inside.”

“I begin to wonder if you have access to the original Heru’s vault.”

“Perhaps,” Heru said cheerfully. “Interested?”

Severus regarded him with half-lidded eyes. “How ancient?” he asked.

Heru leaned forward and said in a breathy whisper, “How would you like … to see the real Salazar Slytherin?”

“I would indeed be fascinated.”
Heru dismantled the wards on one of the cabinets in his study and removed the pensieve with a touch of dramatic reverence. Lifting it slightly for emphasis, he then placed it on his desk. “I don’t know why these particular memories were placed in here,” he lied, “but they appear to cover a number of years, culminating with when Salazar left Hogwarts. Shall we?”

The two took the plunge and emerged into the first memory, with Heru guiding the selection. Severus remained silent as the scene played out, starting with a much younger Heru arriving in the main hall to the sight and sound of a young girl screaming her head off, gasping out a warning of an attack on the grounds. Together they followed as the founders sprinted for the doors, and out toward a group of children surrounded by adults. Heru noted that Severus’s face stayed blank during the ensuing conversation and subsequent actions.

He paused things when the farmer began to drive away and said, “As I understand it, that is what prompted the founders to create the wards around the castle.” Severus nodded, so Heru guided the pensieve to play the next memory, which started with Godric crushing his hat, and ended with the beginning of the conversation on how to create the sorting hat.

Severus’s quiet comment was, “Who would have thought? What a horribly mundane way for that to have come about.”

Heru chuckled and said, “I thought so, too.”

The next memory began in the kitchens and with the arrival of a messenger from the village. Heru paid close attention to the expressions on Severus’s face as the scene unfolded, pausing it when Severus held up a hand. “Yes?”

“Heru seems to be an odd fellow considering who he was.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He advocates, not the banishment of muggles from the village, but measures to keep them docile? I also find it peculiar that he can do more than just see. He can gain far much more from divination than any person alive today can manage.”

“And yet, as I understand it,” said Heru, “muggles are deflected from Hogsmeade even as they are from the castle. Obviously the wards around the village were not constructed to suit his tastes.”

“Hm. Proceed.”

Heru released the pause and let it continue, watching as it skipped ahead under direction to the discovery of Salazar, in what was now Albus Dumbledore’s office, several days later. Severus showed particular interest in the Book of Souls, and even more in the quiet exchange between Heru and Salazar in the kitchens over it. He smirked at Salazar’s somewhat snide denunciation of the other founders, then looked thoughtful at Rowena’s form of defense. But it was Rowena’s quiet words to the young Heru that caught his attention most keenly, though he did not comment.

The final memory contained in the pensieve was the last confrontation with Salazar. When they emerged back into the normality of Heru’s study, Severus’s face was creased with thought. After several minutes of silence Heru asked, “What do you think of them?”

Without looking up Severus said, “For all that time and legend paints the founders as ten foot tall minor deities, they appear to be surprisingly normal people.” After a pause he said, “Brothers though they may have been, Salazar and Heru obviously didn’t see eye to eye on things. In fact, he purposely holds himself apart, despite being intimately involved in such things as the creation of the
wards."

Hera had no trouble following what Severus meant. “Perhaps he felt he had no right, or did not want to appear actively opposed to his brother. Something was there, some kind of subtle rift. The letter we found proves that.”

“You do look remarkably like him if you take into account the difference in age. You even sound the same.” Severus studied him carefully.

“And? Mark looks quite a bit like me, though I’ll have no idea on his voice until he gets older. He does share the other two family traits, as well. Or maybe I should say three.”

“True,” Severus agreed, then shook his head lightly. “There is no sense in dwelling on the impossible.”

Hera picked up the pensieve and returned it to the safety of the cabinet. After restoring the wards, and knowing what Severus was likely contemplating, he asked, “What do you suppose Albus’s reaction would be to seeing those?”

“He would be equally fascinated. It is a rare privilege to witness so much of the school’s origins, though I am not sure the opportunity would do much in the way of cementing happier relations, as they provide only historical value. He would, of course, be infuriatingly inquisitive as to where you find these things.”

“He can be as inquisitive as he likes. I know how to be infuriatingly reticent, so I expect we’d come out even.”

Severus unbent enough to actually grin for a moment. “Then again, I suppose it doesn’t much matter. Unless the Dark Lord were to somehow arise a second time, Albus’s opinion of you is more or less irrelevant.”

Hera frowned at what he considered to be the persistence of a bad habit on Severus’s part. “I haven’t decided if I care. Though if Voldemort did return, I expect I’d be in for a rough ride. But, no matter. Nothing short of a natural disaster could rock this place, and even then I’m not so sure.” Hera smiled cheerfully. “I’d ask, but it doesn’t seem to be aware in the same way the castle is.”

“The journals?”

“Yes. That and what I’ve sensed during my few visits.”

Severus gave him a curious look. “Now that might make a difference.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“Albus also thinks the castle holds some level of awareness, but he cannot communicate with it. He has long been frustrated by his inability to effect certain changes in the protections.”

“Such as?”

“The apparation wards. He can no more bypass them than the rest of the wizarding population.”

“I’m surprised,” Hera said honestly. “I would have expected him to be annoyed to some extent that he could not prevent Death Eaters from entering the grounds.” He already knew he could ask the castle for further exceptions any time he pleased, and was fairly sure she would be agreeable to his requests.
“Even if he could have that, it would be nothing more than a warning system. A number of the parents of children in Slytherin house are so marked, and have the same right to see them as any other parent.”

“Hm. Not my decision, I suppose.”

“Yes, well, much as I hate to appear rude, I’m afraid I really should be going. I have some work to take care of which will last most of the remainder of the day, and a student I must oversee in detention.”

Heru shook his head. “Sounds like fun,” he said insincerely.

“I will check with Albus about the visit and inform you directly.”

Heru nodded. “That would be wonderful. I’ll look forward to hearing from you.”

“I’ll be fine showing myself out. Give my regards to your son,” said Severus, then left.

Heru played with the wards that evening, intent on barring the intrusion of any Death Eaters onto the property.

A note arrived the next day just after lunch, so Heru was able to tell Mark that they would be visiting the castle at the weekend. They spent part of the afternoon in Diagon Alley as a treat, eventually arriving home with a number of frivolous things, including a third owl for some reason that escaped Heru completely. After a round of introductions—the owl seemed rather wary of the snake—Heru sent it off with a confirmation to Severus.

So it was that several days later they made the journey up to the castle and were met at the main doors by Severus, who led them down into the dungeons to his classroom. Mark practically threw himself into one of the front desks, eliciting a laugh from Heru. It seemed that Severus was of a mind to give the boy a midyear exam, both written and practical portions included. Mark had barely begun to answer the first question when Albus appeared in the doorway, then stepped in.

“Ah, Severus. There you are. And, Mr Slytherin, how nice to see you again. This must be the son I’ve heard about?”

Heru kept his sarcastic thoughts to himself, inclining his head in greeting instead. “A pleasure.” He took a few steps away, closer to Mark, and said, “This is my son, yes. Marcus, this is Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster of the school.”

Mark looked up and smiled winsomely, saying, “Good morning, professor. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“Such a charming child,” Albus murmured. “And to you, dear boy. I see you have just started, so I will let you get back to your work.” Looking at Severus he said, “I was wondering if I could borrow your guest for a little chat.”

Severus responded with a glare, which Heru could almost have predicted. “That is up to him, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Of course, dear boy. Mr Slytherin, would you care to follow? I find myself most anxious to discuss several things with you.” Albus unleashed a gently benevolent smile at Heru after patting Severus on the shoulder.
Heru considered several reactions before settling on a bland smile. “Certainly.” On his way out he glanced back over his shoulder and rolled his eyes at Severus, then let the headmaster lead him upward. When he was comfortably settled in a chair across from Albus in the headmaster’s office, he took a moment to chant a few phrases under his breath and make an obscure gesture.

Albus took his own seat and gave him another smile. “Would you care for a cup of tea before we begin?” A tap of his wand revealed a tray with a teapot and cups, ready to pour.

“That would be nice,” Heru said, “though, I think a different cup is in order.”

“I’m sorry?” Albus said, pausing with the pot hovering over the second cup.

“Unless you actually intended to dose me with veritaserum, I think a different cup is in order, don’t you?” The characteristic glow emanating from the bowl of the cup was quite visible to Heru’s eyes. He was pleased to see that Albus lost a minute portion of his composure, despite his protest of ignorance. Nevertheless, Albus banished the offending cup and summoned a new one, this time without any tricks.

Heru accepted the tea with nary a murmur and took a sip, feeling the pleasant warmth slide down his throat. A quick flick of the eyes to the side showed him that Mark was fiercely focused on the test and that Severus was sitting at his desk, apparently marking papers.

“What was it you wished to discuss?”

Albus, having been thwarted in his original plan, moved on his next. “Severus has mentioned several things in passing that I find worthy of note. And of course, I was astounded that you were able to remove the Dark Mark. I had not thought it was possible for any other than the one who placed it.”

Heru smiled in appreciation of the subtle gibe and responded with one of his own. “It all depends on what your eyes can see, Albus. And if you can see something, you can avoid it, or potentially negate it. For instance, I can tell that your spectacles allow you to see through invisibility. That must be quite useful for a man in your position.”

“I see,” said Albus vaguely, then took refuge in a sip from his cup. Heru glanced over again to see that a student he didn’t recognize had entered the classroom and was speaking to Severus too quietly for him to hear. “I must express my gratitude that you were able to free Severus. I think of him almost as a son, you see.”

Heru smiled automatically. “It was my pleasure.” The student kept shooting covert glances at Mark, and Heru wasn’t sure if he should be worried or not.

“Well, then, on to other matters,” said Albus. “I understand that you have a number of family treasures in your possession, though Severus was quite tightlipped about the exact contents. Might I inquire as to what they are that they hold his attention so dearly?”

Heru took another sip before responding. “As you know, I have a collection of books passed down through the years—those are that which provided some of the content for the texts I wrote. But that is not the extent of my holdings. To give you an example, I have a set of journals written by the eldest son of Salazar’s brother Heru, as well as a rather ancient pensieve containing some very important memories, historically speaking.”

Albus’s eyes started to twinkle, their brightness in no way disguised or distorted by his spectacles. Heru continued, “Given what I have been able to uncover, I have tentatively decided to write an entirely different kind of book. People hold such a fascination for the founders, so it might be worth
my while to attempt a written account of that time.”

“I can see why you would think that. I myself would be interested to see what you could accomplish along those lines. History is a wonderful gift, if we are able to learn from it.”

Heru nodded without comment. The student had finally left the classroom, but not without a final, lingering glance at Mark.

“I don’t suppose you would be willing to share any of it with me?” asked Albus hopefully.

“As a matter of fact, I brought a few things with me just in case,” stated Heru. “It is up to you whether you would prefer to skim through the journal first or view the memories, though. Neither appears to require much explanation, but I will say the journal was written well after the point that Salazar left the school, whereas the memories deal with that exact subject.”

Albus appeared to consider that for a moment, then said, “I think the memories first, if you are agreeable. Then the journal.”

“Certainly.” Heru set down his cup and fished in his pocket, pulling out both items and leaning forward to set them on Albus’s desk.

“Please feel free to wander around the office while I experience these. Oh, and do have a sherbet lemon if you wish. I quite enjoy them.”

Heru cast a wary eye at the mentioned sweets, blinked, and said, “Cheering charms, Albus? No, I’m quite well balanced already, thank you. I believe I shall wander around.”

“As you wish,” said Albus with no trace of repentance. A moment later he was immersed in the pensieve.

Heru turned his attention back to the classroom.

Severus sat at his desk with a seemingly permanent glare disfiguring his face, liberally scratching scarlet lines across the paper he was marking. He would occasionally glance up at Mark, or push the hair out of his eyes as it threatened to blind him, as he made presumably scathing comments on the written efforts of the students.

Mark was sitting quietly, never looking up from his task, his quill automatically dipping into the inkstand every other line as he scratched out his answers with very little pause between them.

Another boy appeared in the doorway, knocking quietly to get the professor’s attention. After being scowled at, the boy advanced to the desk and handed Severus a roll of parchment, then backed up.

“It’s about time,” Severus said. “You should have turned this in yesterday. Was that it, Theo?” The boy nodded, so Severus waved him away, saying, “Tell the others to not disturb me. I have no time for your youthful curiosities today.”

“Yes, sir,” said the boy. He, too, cast a lingering look at Mark before he disappeared, though Mark never once lifted his head during the entire exchange.

*Theo, Theo … Theodore Nott?* thought Heru. As he couldn’t very well ask Severus on the spot, he grabbed his cup of tea and stood, sipping as he examined the multitude of portraits that graced the walls. Many of them were sleeping, or pretending to be asleep, and Heru amused himself by
checking each name he could see before moving on to the next. He was not exactly surprised to realize that there were no portraits of the founders within the office.

He quickly became bored of that and stopped at Fawkes’s perch to admire him, then ask if he would like the company of a fellow phoenix. When the bird trilled an affirmative, Heru was happy to summon Praecino and conjure up a temporary perch for him so the two birds could converse comfortably.

Heru didn’t think it wise to go so far as to open any cupboards or cabinets, regardless of his curiosity, and eventually ended up back in the chair he’d started in with a fresh cup of tea. Shortly after that, Albus emerged from the pensieve with a thoughtful look on his face. After giving Heru a vague nod, he picked up the journal. He, too, was a quick reader, and it wasn’t long before he replaced the book on his desk. Heru reached over and retrieved his belongings and stowed them in his pocket.
“Fascinating, and rather curious,” said Albus. “I quite see now why Salazar left, though I cannot say I agree with his reasoning. It seems to me that he was as much to blame as his friends for what happened.”

Heru nodded, even though it looked as though Albus was speaking to himself more than anything.

“The journal is also illuminating. A revealing account of normal life, though with a great deal of sadness woven into it.” Albus fixed his bright gaze on Heru and said, “Tell me, if you will, are you able to see the wards here?”

“If I exert myself, yes.”

“Are they comprehensible to you?”

Heru blinked slowly. “I would have to spend a great deal more time examining them,” he lied, “for that to be the case.” Movement to the side caught his attention; Mark was beginning the practical portion of his exam.

“Yes, yes. I suppose that makes sense,” said Albus, stroking his beard. “Would you be willing to do so?”

“For what purpose?” countered Heru.

“It is my belief that the castle is sentient, and that the wards are a part of it in some obscure way. What I have read in the journal only confirms that belief.” Albus adjusted his spectacles and resumed, “While I do not possess your particular talent, it seems to me that one who understood the protections we enjoy might also be able to modify them to our advantage.”

“In what way?”

“I believe this came up in conversation with Severus, actually. It would be preferable if certain people were able to apparate in and out of the castle at will, while all others remained restricted to the more normal methods of conveyance.”

“You think it’s wise to tamper with the wards in that fashion, possibly allowing for the inclusion to the exceptions of a traitor?”

“I’m not sure I follow. A traitor?”

“I know more history than you might think, headmaster,” Heru said stiltedly. “Imagine if a rat were given free and easy access to the grain silo.”

Albus blinked and sat back.

“Not to mention, if I were able to do as you ask, you must realize I could easily include myself in that list of exceptions, and I don’t think you trust me.” Mark opened his mouth to speak, so Heru held up his hand in a quelling motion so he could pay attention.

“Professor?”

“Yes, Mark?”
“Mr Slytherin—”

“Heru,” he said absently.

“What do you think of father?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because he likes you.”

Heru choked at almost the same moment Severus did.

“Heru, what are you doing?”

Heru flapped his hand and said, “Shush.”

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“He likes you, so I want to know if you like him too.” Mark looked down and added some diced frog livers to his potion and stirred it carefully.

Severus waved his wand at the classroom door, closing it and locking it. “I think your father is an intelligent, talented person.”

“That’s not what I meant, sir.”

Heru ignored the fact that Albus was staring at him intently.

“Aren’t you a little young to be asking questions like this?”

“If I’m old enough for it to come to mind, then I’m old enough to ask, right? So do you?”

“Don’t you think that is a topic better discussed between your father and me?”

“Of course, sir. But I don’t think he’d ever come right out and ask you.”

“Damn kid,” muttered Heru.

“Then isn’t that an indication that he doesn’t wish to?”

“I don’t see why, sir. He doesn’t have any friends. You make him smile, though, and I see the way he looks at you.” Mark gave Severus an ingenuous look.

Severus covered his eyes with one hand as though weary. “Mark, please return your attention to the potion, or I’m afraid I might have to mark you down for messing about.”

“Awwww. If you say so.” Mark produced a sullen pout, which had no appreciable effect on Severus, and dropped his eyes.

“Dear Merlin,” breathed Heru. “I really need to have a talk with him.” He blinked and looked up at Albus. “Sorry, what were you saying?”

“If I may ask, what was that all about?” Albus asked patiently.

“Oh. That was about my son being too nosy for his own good and me needing to set him straight on a few issues.”
“How do you know he was being nosy?”

“Because I’m watching him, of course. What else?”

“I feel much like we’re standing on opposite sides of a great chasm, Mr Slytherin—Heru. How are you watching your son?”

Heru squinted at Albus. “A spell. It can be a little distracting at times, I admit, but I occasionally find it useful, especially when both of the house-elves are out on errands.” Albus steepled his hands in front of him, the twinkle in his eyes back at full force. “Anyway, we were talking about the wards, I believe, and how I think you don’t trust me in the first place.”

“Yes, of course.” The brightness of his eyes dimmed slightly, and Albus sat back. “It is true that I have no particular reason to trust you. That you have freed Severus could be for your own designs, and showing me a bit of the past is also of no real value except perhaps to a devoted historian.”

“But?”

“But I do believe that Severus is, generally speaking, a very good judge of character. I would appreciate if you would consider the matter of becoming familiar with the wards at Hogwarts, and let me know if you are willing.”

“Sure. I’ll consider it.” He glanced off to the side for a moment before saying, “But as it seems Mark is finishing up, I wonder if you would escort me back to the classroom? I’d hate to get lost.”

“Certainly.”

Heru stood up and checked his pocket, then called out, “You come home whenever you’re done talking, Praecino. I’m not sure when that’ll be for me.” He turned back to Albus and smiled, then allowed himself to be led back to Severus’s classroom. Thankfully, the journey was mostly silent. Heru didn’t dismiss the spell until after he had knocked on the door and saw Severus coming to open it. On the way down he had decided to leave well enough alone and not chastise Mark, so when he was admitted, he merely ruffled his son’s hair in greeting.

“It appears I have excellent timing,” Heru said, casting a pointed look at Albus, who smiled and excused himself. He could only hope that the headmaster would play along, lest Severus come to find out that Heru had been keeping an eye on things. That Albus had no idea what Heru had witnessed was beside the point; if he mentioned it to Severus, Severus would figure it out, and the potential for embarrassment was high all around.

“As it is not quite time for lunch, would you care to check out that inlay?”

“Inlay?” Mark repeated.

“Yes, inlay. And yes, I would very much like to see it.”

Severus finished locking Mark’s efforts away in one of his desk drawers, then led through a maze of corridors to the serpents Heru remembered from years ago.

“Hey, that’s neat,” cried Mark. He reached out to trace the inlay, jerking back in surprise when one of the snakes moved to avoid his hand.

“Stop that,” it hissed. “It tickles.”

Mark bent over giggling and Heru chuckled. Severus looked perplexed.
“If we promise not to tickle you, will you open up?” hissed Heru.

“It has been many years since one of your kind has come,” it hissed as its companion nodded. “We will open for you.”

A moment later the wall sank back and shifted to the side. Heru stepped through, followed by Severus and Mark. In truth, the room was quite bare. The shelves were empty, as was the desk. Aside from the furniture, the room contained nothing of interest. Heru stepped back out, gesturing to his companions, and focused on the serpents when they reappeared.

“When was the last time one of my kind was here—do you remember?”

The snakes exchanged a stony glance. One hissed, “Decades ago—”

“Five perhaps,” hissed the other.

“—there was a young boy. He came for several years. We never saw him again after that."

“Who?” hissed Mark.

“He did not tell us his name.”

Severus cleared his throat. “We should get going.”

“Oh, right.” Heru hissed, “Thank you for the information.”

The serpents nodded and went still. They arrived at the Great Hall via the adjacent room at the back. An extra chair had been placed at the end of the table on the side Severus usually sat at. Heru took the last seat with Severus to his left, facing the house tables, and Mark took the one at the end, ending up with a view all the way down to where Hagrid customarily sat. Heru very carefully hid his amusement at Mark’s wonder, especially when the food appeared, knowing that even though the child had become quite comfortable living in the wizarding world, it was still quite a lot to experience the school’s atmosphere, muggle-raised or not. And while his son busied himself with the food and all the things available to look at, Heru conversed quietly with Severus.

“To fill you in, the serpents knew only that a boy used the room for several years back about five decades or so. They never knew his name, but I think it’s safe to assume it was Riddle.”

Severus nodded, then sat up sharply and glared down at the Slytherin table. After a moment he murmured, “You’d think the little blighters had never been introduced to the concept of discretion.” When he relaxed again he said, “It is at times like these that I wish I were a parselmouth.”

Heru didn’t know what to say to that, so he took another bite of his meal.

“Too bad it isn’t easy to give as some things are, or to take away,” was the next murmured comment.

Heru thought about that for a moment and said, “Next you’ll be wanting me to produce working notes on the metamorphmagus potions accident.” Then, “Hey, hang on a minute. That was bloody hard work, what I did.”

“Yes, and I am eternally grateful for your efforts. I’m also feeling a little envious at the moment, if you don’t mind. Stop spoiling my fun.”

Heru chorted, causing Mark to look over with wide eyes. “It’s nothing, Mark. Just a joke. There’s plenty more if you’re still hungry.” Having successfully distracted his son, he murmured to Severus,
“Sorry.”

“Your son was born with the ability, I presume?”

Hera paused in the middle of forking a carrot. “Yes, of course.”

“A pity.”

But it did make Hera wonder. He hadn’t been born with it, or so Albus said. He couldn’t very well make a family tapestry for Harry Potter—not without a great deal of trouble—but could he possibly make one for Voldemort to prove that Tom Riddle and Harry Potter shared no common ancestor? And could he prove that the ability was not always genetic?

A nudge brought his wandering thoughts back in time to hear, “Were you going to eat that, or did you just plan on stabbing it to death?”

Hera looked down and realized his carrot was in pieces and flushed. “You brought up a very interesting point, is all.”

“Yes?”

“We both know of someone who was not born with the ability, or so it is believed. It makes me wonder.”

Severus flicked his eyes toward the Gryffindor table and sneered. “Your point?”

“If it can be done once… It might prove to be a curious experiment, even if only for my own satisfaction.” At that moment, Harry looked up from the Gryffindor table and locked eyes with him, then quickly looked away. Hera felt an odd weakness sweep through his body, followed by a sense of foreboding he couldn’t explain. “Poor kid. I’d hate to be in his shoes right now.”

“Why, because he flaunts himself where you do not? Because he parades around as though he has the right to own the world?”

“No,” said Hera softly. “I’ve got the strangest feeling something bad is going to happen to that kid soon.”

“Surely you jest.”

Hera angled his head to the left so he could stare directly at Severus. “No,” he said, shaking his head slightly. “One look in his eyes and I felt—I’m not sure, and it doesn’t feel good.”

“You have the same eyes—did you know?”

Hera smiled and looked away. “I wasn’t aware you’d noticed them, Severus. In any case, you’ve given me a neat little problem to poke at.”

“If it turns out it can be done, I shan’t mind you spoiling my fun, then.”

Hera chuckled and said, “I’m not sure why you’d want it. Serpents aren’t the best conversationalists.”

“Perhaps. But not all desires are rational.”
Mark was thrilled to be a guinea pig, especially when it didn’t require much effort on his part. Heru took to studying him constantly over the next few days, feeling much like he was trying to separate individual stands of spaghetti with chopsticks fashioned from tree limbs as he sorted through the many threads of magic that ran through the boy’s body. In the end, he derived a simple solution for finding what he wasn’t sure he was looking for to begin with.

He asked Mark to speak to him using Parseltongue. When the boy complied, Heru could see a change in the weave of his magic. After having Mark babble whatever came to mind for several hours straight, Heru thought he had a very good idea of what ought to be where and why. Of course, Mark was a natural parselmouth. Heru sent a note to Severus at the castle, asking if it would be possible to sit in on a class invisibly. Specifically, a double period with Harry Potter in it.

Severus sent back a note inviting him up on Friday and giving him the time. He wanted to know if Heru could find his way alone or if he would need an escort. Heru sent back a note a few minutes later to let Severus know he’d be fine on his own.

When he did arrive, he was already invisible, and didn’t bother to walk the entire distance. He apparated into the castle at the serpent inlay, arriving a minute later at the classroom door and slipping through without anyone being the wiser. After sliding a bit of parchment on the desk behind Severus’s back, he found an advantageous spot and began his study of Harry.

He did notice at one point that Severus had found the note and looked around, but had then quickly gone back to stalking up and down the aisles looking for an excuse to yell at someone. By the time the class was over, Heru had noted several interesting differences between Mark’s and Harry’s ability. Apparently, Albus was correct. And without being able to study Voldemort, or himself, that was as good as it got.

He slipped out just as deftly as he had slipped in, found the inlay again, then apparated to underlake and faded back into view. After another bracing chat with the portraits of himself, he apparated home to consider things.

The next morning Severus was admitted and shown into the library. Before Guin had a chance to pop out, he handed her a sheaf of parchment for Mark, then found a seat across from Heru.

“How did he do?”

“Quite well. Nearly perfect, in fact.”

“Nearly? Hm. I don’t know if I could stand the shame of an imperfect score from my son in Potions.” Heru rolled his eyes and snorted. “He’ll be quite pleased, then, as am I.”

“Care to tell me about that little note?”

Heru braced his elbows on his knees and placed his chin in his hands. “I spent quite a while studying Mark, but he’s a natural-born parselmouth. I thought it would be wise to also study a person who purportedly was given the ability, so I could compare.”

“And?”

“They are different, and I could take that to mean it is in fact because of the presumed difference. Unfortunately, I know of no way to study myself, or any other natural parselmouth, so I can’t be sure.”

“Do you think it can be replicated?”
“I don’t know. I could try, but I’m not sure of the end result. Nothing might happen. I could end up with a new parslemouth. Or it might have unexpected consequences.”

“Let me rephrase—do you think you are able to try?”

“Yes.”

“Will you?”

“You could end up a squib for all I know, Severus, or dead.”

“Will you?”

“Only if you absolutely insist.”

“How long do you estimate it would take?”

“Today, possibly tomorrow. I’d want to put you under for the duration.”

“May I use your owl?”

Heru winced. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes.”

“All right, then.”

Mark was curled up in a chair, sleeping. He’d spent most of the day reading quietly once his initial interest in the proceedings had worn off, playing template. Heru used what he saw in Mark, combined with what he had learned from the study of his younger self, to decide what threads to move and what threads to create and insert. He also remembered what Albus had said—two years ago or twenty-two, depending on your point of view—about the transference of power.

He spun strands of pure magic from his fingertips and carefully wove them into place within Severus’s body and his existing magic. It was tiring at first, then exhausting, so Heru had been taking frequent, short breaks throughout the day, giving himself a chance to rest and replenish his own energy, but without taking a great deal of time away from the process. It was nearing midnight when Heru felt he had completed his task. A comparison of Mark to Severus showed that everything looked the same, at least, insofar as the weave for that particular ability. Heru was starting to have grandiose notions of playing God when he sat back and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

But he wasn’t really done. All of it would be wasted effort if the threads unraveled or shriveled in place. The worst case scenario would be them shriveling away, taking Severus’s original magic with them, like some cancer that traveled at light speed. He remained awake through the night, drinking frequent cups of coffee and checking often to see if his work remained stable and whole. By the time the first light of morning crept over the sill, Heru wanted to sleep for a week. Mark eventually woke and padded off, yawning hugely, so Heru summoned an elf.

“This will be a peculiar request, but I want you to check in here every half hour until I tell you to stop. If I’m asleep, wake me up, so I can see how Severus is doing. All right?”

“Yes, master.”
“For now, some breakfast would be nice, and more coffee.”

“Right away, master.”

After he ate he checked again; things looked all right. Heru leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. By noon, things still looked fine, so he told the elves they could stop checking in and woke Severus from his induced sleep.

“How do you feel?” he asked, then yawned.

Severus visibly took stock, then said, “I don’t feel any different.”

“Mm. Listen. Gonna lay down. Stay here, wake me for anything odd. No spells. Wards’ll stop you.” Heru flopped onto the couch and stretched out. “Might want to call for something to eat.” And then he was out.

He swam up from the depths of sleep to the sensation of someone brushing his hair back from his forehead with their fingers. The corners of his mouth curled up slightly and the movement stilled, only to start again a few seconds later. He enjoyed it for a few moments longer, then realized he had a thundering headache and whimpered in pain. He heard a faint snap, followed by a pop, then a deep voice ask, “Pain potion?”

Heru frowned and shifted in irritation at the noise. The fingers shifted with him and continued their soothing motions. Several minutes later—he had almost decided the pain was worth it if Severus would keep doing that—he heard the click of glass against wood. The hand moved away—Heru frowned again—and slipped under his neck to raise and support his head.

“Come on,” coaxed Severus. “You need to drink this.”

Heru batted a feeble hand at the air.

“Heru,” said Severus sternly. “Don’t make me hold your nose closed.”

He sighed, and when he felt a vial against his lips, opened his mouth to let the potion trickle in. He swallowed and grimaced immediately at the taste.

“There we go. You’ll be feeling better in no time.”

“Tired.”

“I realize that, Heru. But I do need to return to the castle, and I think you ought to come with me.” Heru considered speaking, but settled on a puzzled frown instead.

“You need to be able to check easily if I remain well over the next few days, and while you’re there, you can consider learning more about the wards in case you decide to help Albus. Mark is also welcome.”

“Mm.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Severus lowered Heru’s head to the couch and began stroking the hair back from his forehead again, until he fell asleep.
The next time he woke up he was in a strange bed in a strange room. There was an odd, though pleasant scent in the air, something his mind eventually identified as patchouli. It faintly perfumed the linens with its rich odor—enough to tantalize without being overpowering. A murmur of voices sounded from somewhere nearby, making him pull himself up and blink his eyes open. The room was pitch black but for a faint outline around what he presumed was the door—it was the right shape, anyway.

After that peculiar, internal twist of his senses, Heru gazed around the room and spotted his wand glimmering on the nightstand. He threw back the covers and pivoted, then stood up; someone had undressed him before putting him to bed. Heru shrugged and looked around until he spied his clothes, then picked them up and shook them out gently, grabbing his wand to perform a quick cleansing charm before pulling on his jeans and T-shirt. He shoved the wand behind his ear and made for the door, opening it slowly against the difference in light levels.

That didn’t stop him from blinking repeatedly when he stepped out, though he was able to see Severus and Mark sitting on opposite sides of a low table playing a game of wizard’s chess. He sank to the floor at the end of the table and squinted at the board.

“You all right, father?”

“Mm.” Heru blinked slowly a few times.

“He tends to be grumpy when he wakes up,” Mark said in confiding tones to Severus.

Heru gave Mark a halfhearted glare and went back to looking at the board.

Severus moved one of his pieces, taking a pawn.

Heru slung an elbow onto the table so he could support his head against his palm and looked at Severus. Everything still looked fine.

After a moment, Severus met his gaze and asked, “Are you hungry?”

Heru furrowed his brow. Maybe it was all that coffee, but he wasn’t sure.

Severus stood gracefully and walked to the fireplace to call in an order to the kitchens, then resumed his place at the board. Mark, being a fundamentally honest child, had not taken advantage of the situation, and waited until Severus was seated again before making his move. They played in silence until a house-elf popped in, whereupon Severus directed it to set up next to Heru, then went back to his contemplation of the board.

After a few minutes of breathing in the smell of freshly baked bread, Heru was moved to take a slice, spread it with butter, and begin to nibble. Shortly after that he felt energetic enough to have some soup and a few sips of pumpkin juice. He let his eyes wander around until he spotted a clock, which informed him it was seven in the evening. Heru turned back to the meal and slowly worked his way through it. Then, feeling quite full, he began to yawn.

Severus stood up and moved the tray out of the way, then held out a hand to help him to his feet. Heru ignored the sounds of mirth from his son, and allowed himself to be led back into the bedroom. Severus lighted a single candle and pointed at a second door. “The bathroom,” he said. Heru shuffled off and was back several minutes later.
“Now, strip.”

Heru sat on the edge of the bed, staring at nothing for a moment, then slipped his wand out from behind his ear and placed it back onto the nightstand. After another pause to yawn, he pulled the shirt over his head and tossed it to the side. Severus tsk’d and stooped, picking up the shirt and laying it on the same chair Heru had taken it from a short time earlier. Heru finally managed to get his jeans off, though he was nice enough to hold them out instead of flinging them wherever, and Severus placed those on top of the shirt.

A second later he advanced, pushing Heru back against the bed and getting his legs into place, then pulling up the covers. “Sleep,” Severus commanded, passing his hand over Heru’s eyes to make them close, then brushing the hair gently out of his face. And so he did.

He woke up feeling refreshed and alert, though momentarily disoriented. When his memory had caught up with him, he sat up and stretched, then slipped out of bed and into the adjoining bathroom. On returning he located his clothing and got dressed, tucking his wand behind his ear, and exited into the lounge. He stopped dead when he saw Severus asleep on the couch and realized that he had taken the man’s bed. Mark was nowhere to be seen and the clock read 6.45 in the morning.

Another close look after he sat down in a chair revealed that nothing had changed insofar as the alterations he had made to Severus. Now that he was awake, he noticed a number of doors leading off the room aside from the one into the bedroom, but he felt no pressing urge to explore. Instead, he slipped a book off a shelf at random and sat back down to read. A half hour later Severus abruptly opened his eyes and sat up.

“Good morning,” said Heru, feeling absurdly perky. He hated perky, though, and thought morning people should be taken out and bludgeoned, repeatedly if necessary. “Still feeling all right?”

“Yes. I assume you’ve already checked?”

It was disgusting the way Severus went directly from asleep to awake. “Yup,” he said cheerfully. “Nothing has changed, so you appear to be fine.”

Severus gave him an intent look, then said, “I thought you were grumpy on waking.”

“I am,” agreed Heru with a smile. “I have no idea what’s come over me.”

“I see. I’ll return in a few minutes.” Severus stood up and headed for the bedroom, disappearing within.

The moment Severus was out of sight, Heru felt like someone had wrapped a warm blanket around him. He glanced upward, startled, then laughed softly. “Good morning, dear lady,” he murmured. “I haven’t slept within your walls in ages.” He felt a sense of agreement greet his words, and a touch of petulance. Casting a quick glance at the bedroom door he murmured, “I’ll be here a few days, so that’s good for both of us.” He felt a pleasant sensation tingle down his spine and squirmed. “Now you behave, or Severus is going to come back out here and think I’m insane.”

A tendril of curiosity touched him and he tilted his head to the side. “You know who I mean. I assume Mark is around here somewhere?” A light appeared in the short hallway at the back, then vanished. Heru nodded. “You’ll keep an eye on him while we’re here?” Assent brushed against his ear almost like a sound. “That’s comforting. He can be overly curious. But I suppose that’s no surprise to you.” A feeling of mirth made him smile.

“I—” Sounds from the next room had him choke off what he’d been about to say. Keeping his eyes
on the door he whispered, “We’ll talk a bit later, all right?” He looked back down at the book he was holding as he received the equivalent of a hug from the castle, only to look up a moment later as Severus emerged and sat down.

“Unfortunately, it is customary for staff to eat in the Great Hall, but I will be stopping in as time permits. I know I’ve used the excuse of you examining the wards to explain your presence, but you need not feel compelled to do so.”

Heru shrugged and said, “I may as well. What I find is another story.”

Severus nodded. “Obviously, you have the run of the castle in that capacity, though you can use the fireplace for calls to the kitchen and various other places, such as Albus’s office. The password for these rooms is currently set to ‘Lycompodium’. I have already informed Mark.”

“Er, how exactly did I get here, anyway?”

“I sent to the school for a carriage. Mark packed up a few things he thought you would each need, and told your servants where you’d be. The only difficult part was getting you out to the carriage, and then down here once we’d arrived.”

“Why did you give me your bed? I’d have been perfectly fine on the couch, or Mark would have. I never meant to put you out.”

Severus arched a brow and said, “It was convenient at the time.” After a pause he continued. “Mark can wander around the castle, but he will very probably get lost in the process. I’m afraid he may find it a bit boring here for the time being. I would suggest the services of a house-elf in case he would like a guide.”

“That sounds like it might work,” Heru said agreeably. “It would probably be far less intrusive if Mark and I were to eat in here. I think we’ve stirred enough fires of curiosity already during visits.”

“How long do you think it will be before you can be sure the alterations are in no danger of reverting, or worse?”

“A couple of days, I suppose. Perhaps later on today we can visit the inlay for a little comprehension test, or the portrait. If they stuck through that, I’d be more reassured that I’ve done nothing to harm you.”

“That sounds reasonable.” Severus glanced at the clock and rose. “I must be off. The earliest I will likely see you is at four.”

“I hope you have a pleasant day, Severus.”

“That depends on how many students screw up,” Severus replied, then left.

Heru shook his head and glanced at his book, prepared to wait until after the normal start of breakfast for the usual inhabitants of the castle before he requested anything for himself. When the clock pinged the hour, Heru continued to read for another ten minutes, then set down the book and firecalled the kitchens with an order for two. He had a good feeling that when it had been delivered the smells would draw Mark out, if he wasn’t already up. And so it was, with Mark appearing sleepy-eyed not more than five minutes after Heru tucked in.

Afterward, Heru said, “Severus says you can wander around the castle if you like, though it would be better for you to have a guide. Did you want to do that, or would you prefer to stay down here?”
“Today,” Mark said with a yawn, “wander.”

“Go get cleaned up, then, and dressed.”

Still yawning, Mark headed off down the hallway.

Heru firecalled the kitchens again, figuring that was the most logical place to start. He told the elf who answered that the trays could be removed whenever it was convenient, and requested a guide for his son. A minute later two elves popped into the room, one of which went straight for the trays to clean up and disappear. The other, however, came to stand before him, hands clasped in front.

“Your name?” Heru asked, even though he already knew the answer.

“Dobby is being my name, sir.”

“Well, Dobby, it is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Oh! Sir is being so kind! Sir is being—” Dobby stopped in mid-wail and asked, “Sir is being who?”

“Heru Slytherin, a guest of Professor Snape for the next few days.”

“Dobby is being happy to meet sir,” Dobby said with a little bounce followed up by a wide, toothy grin. “What is sir wanting Dobby to do?”

“My son is here with me and I was hoping you would be kind enough to accompany him as he wanders around the castle and grounds. You see, I’m afraid he might get lost, or inadvertently get into trouble.”

“Dobby is being happy to be of service to sir and sir’s son.”

“Why don’t you take a seat until he comes out,” Heru suggested. That set off another round of happy wailing, though Dobby did sit down, dangling his legs above the floor like a child. When Mark reentered the room and spotted the elf, he smiled and looked to his father.

“Mark, this is Dobby. He’ll make sure you don’t get lost today.”

“Hello, Dobby. I’m happy to meet you.” When Dobby let loose with another round of wails, Mark said in an aside to his father, “I wondered what all the ruckus was about.” Dobby eventually calmed down and hopped off the chair. “Young sir is coming with me. Dobby will show young sir the castle.”

“Stay out of trouble, all right? And if Dobby says you’re not to go someplace, don’t argue.”

“Yes, father.” Mark nodded to Dobby and the two of them took off, leaving Heru alone.

Heru got up and moved to the couch to stretch out and close his eyes. “So, dear lady, will you give me fair warning if Severus or Mark return?”

The castle agreed readily.

“What do you think of Albus Dumbledore?”

She was a touch ambivalent in her response.

“Hm. Do you think he’s trustworthy?”
"In what sense?" she seemed to ask.

"Do you know what he wants me to do?"

"Yes."

"I’m not sure that I should, you know? The wards were put in place for a reason, and I don’t think the founders ever thought past themselves as exceptions."

"I don’t know."

Heru sighed. "Assuming he is trustworthy, that doesn’t mean everyone he would want to allow apparation rights to is."

"I agree."

"Let me ask you this, then. If someone were allowed, and you noticed them doing something you thought was alarming or potentially harmful, would you revoke their right?"

"Yes."

After a few minutes of thought he asked, "What do you think of Severus?"

"I like him."

What Heru actually got for a response was a warm, fuzzy feeling that made him smile.

"So do I. I never thought I would, but I do. Do you think he’s trustworthy?"

"Yes."

"Is there anyone here you think is untrustworthy?" A confused welter of images flashed across the canvas of his mind, disorienting him. "Whoa," he said, relieved when things went black. "Never mind. That was a silly question, I suppose."

"Yes."

"Maybe what’s bothering me most is that if Albus gets one thing he wants, he may start to ask for more."

"That’s possible."

"And if that happened—well, I could just refuse, and so could you."

"Yes."

"Am I the only one who can talk to you—who understands you?"

"I don’t know."

"Albus has tried and failed, though."

"Yes."

"That’s so odd. He’s always seemed so powerful."

She shrugged. Considering that she communicated with feelings and images, Heru was having a remarkably easy time interpreting what she wanted to say.
“Well, here’s a thought. Is Mark in a reasonably safe place?”

<Yes.>

“Now, I think you know what I mean when I say nobody around here knows the whole story about me.”

<I do.>

“And it would be a very difficult to explain if they did find out.”

<I agree.>

“So, with that in mind, want to have a little fun?”

<What do you want to do?>

“Try to communicate with Mark and see how he reacts?”

After a short pause, an image formed in his head of Mark doubled over with a case of the giggles, a perplexed Dobby looking on.

“It worked.”

<Yes.>

“That’s pretty neat. I wonder if it’s a bloodline thing, or just chance.”

<I don’t know.>

“I guess it doesn’t matter for the moment, though I can explain later on to Mark what happened to him. Getting back to the actual subject, now that we’ve had our fun, I suppose we could give Albus what he wants on a case-by-case basis, reserving your right to revoke the privilege if you think it’s necessary.”

<I agree.>

“I don’t think I’ll say anything to him for a few days, though, else I won’t have an excuse to be here so openly.”

She laughed.

They continued to talk about whatever came to mind until she flashed him an image of Mark walking down a dungeon corridor. After he and Mark had lunch, the boy went off to explore again with Dobby. Severus returned shortly past four p.m., so the two of them left his quarters for the portrait after leaving a note in plain sight in case Mark should come back before they did.

Heru cleared his throat and the portrait opened its eyes. Heru kept his gaze on Severus, though, when he hissed, “Hello again. We’re trying a little experiment.” Something definitely triggered, though he wasn’t certain what it meant until Severus spoke.

“Why are you using English?”

The portrait gave Severus a superior look and snickered. “He wasn’t, you daft idiot.”

“It worked? It worked.”
Heru didn’t respond; he continued to watch Severus’s magic.

“What worked? You currently resemble a landed fish, by the way. Very attractive, I’m sure. Somebody has been tinkering, since you obviously understand me now,” hissed the portrait accusingly.

Severus looked over at Heru, then back at the portrait. “Amazing.”

Heru thought so, too. Just as had happened with him, Severus didn’t realize he was hearing and speaking a different language until someone pointed it out to him. Heru, at least, had gained the control to know which was which, and chose which language to speak in consciously. Glancing at the portrait he hissed, “Thanks. You’ve been very helpful.”

“Any time.”

Heru placed a hand on Severus’s shoulder and firmly guided him toward his quarters. When they were back inside, Severus sat down and stared at him for a moment. “Why not just speak to me yourself? Why use the portrait?”

“I could have. But I can watch more easily if I’m not involved in the conversation. Obviously it worked, except that you don’t yet know which language you’re using, though that will come in time. I still want to check over the next few days to make sure nothing decides to spring loose or go haywire.”

“Of course.”

“I’m sure I can find ways to amuse myself during the time when you’re occupied with meals or classes.”

“There’s plenty here to read.”

Heru gave Severus an arch look and said, “You do realize the portrait insulted you, right?”

“Did it?”

Heru laughed and shook his head. “Never mind. It has an odd sense of humor, I’ve noticed. Still, it occurs to me that it might be wiser not to mention this particular new ability, aside from the obvious fact that it might not last.”

Severus angled his head in thought, then nodded. “What people don’t know is to my advantage.”

“Yeah. I also think it would be beneficial to have the three of us converse in Parseltongue this evening, and the next few. You’ll get a better handle on how it feels, and I’ll be able to spend a lot more time watching things in action. I’d suggest you get a snake, but that would be like waving a red flag in front of Albus and saying, ‘Look here, I’ve got a secret’.”

Severus smiled normally for the first time Heru had ever seen and it made his breath hitch for a second. The way the man’s eyes lit up was incredible. After clearing his throat he said, “I’m not saying Albus isn’t trustworthy, but I am reserving judgment for the time being.”

“Yes, I understand.”

Three days later Severus was still fine and nothing had gone haywire, so Heru decided it was time for another chat with Albus. He had already gone to the trouble of ascertaining whether or not he needed to speak out loud for the castle to hear him, and discovered he could remain silent if he
chose, though it made things more difficult. He left Severus and Mark hissing away at each other and made the walk to the headmaster’s office alone, not breaking stride when he came to the gargoyle, which glanced around quickly before leaping out of the way without a word being spoken. Inside the office, Heru accepted a cup of tea—it was not drugged—and a seat—it was nice and squashy.

“A pleasure to see you, dear boy. What can I do for you?”

Heru wondered occasionally if Albus fell back on that appellation so as to not have to remember anyone’s name. “I have considered your request. Do you happen to have a list of names for those you would like to be able to bypass the apparation wards?”

“I do, actually, though I confess I thought I was getting rather ahead of myself to even write them down at this point.” Albus pulled open a drawer and fished around for a moment, then produced a sheet of parchment and handed it over. “You have already tested this?”

“I have,” lied Heru with a faint smile. “On myself.”

“Splendid, dear boy.”

Heru glanced over the list, noting that Albus’s name was prominently written at the top. Curiously, or not, Sirius Black was not one of the names. He looked up and said, “Shall we begin with you?”

“I would be delighted.”

If a star could twinkle any brighter than Albus’s eyes, Heru wasn’t sure he had ever seen one. He nodded, took a sip of his tea, then silently formed the request in his mind. Several seconds later he noticed Albus’s eyes widen slightly, then felt the castle’s affirmation.

Heru took another sip of tea, then said, “I’m sure you’re dying to try it, so don’t mind me. I’ll wait right here.” Albus looked both skeptical and hopeful as he stood. Heru had a sudden image flash through his mind of the headmaster anxiously biting his nails, and almost laughed.

“Yes, yes. One moment, then.” Albus disappeared with a faint crack and was back within thirty seconds, a blooming smile on his face. He clapped his hands in delight and reached for a sherbet lemon, popping it into his mouth before sitting back down. “Marvelous!”

Heru smiled indulgently and said, “Just to clarify—you did feel something when the wards shifted, correct?” When Albus nodded he continued, “Then I believe each person needs to be within the castle walls during the attempt. I don’t think it would work otherwise.”

Albus dimmed for a moment, a faint glimpse of hesitation and something calculated flashing across his face before it returned to a cheerful expression. Heru thought it a good idea at that point to be open to extra information, and extended his senses. Being able to tell truth from falsehood by looking a person in the eye was all very well, but there were times when one wanted that little extra something.

Apparently coming to some kind of a decision, Albus said, “Tell me, please, how much you know about Voldemort’s defeat.”

Heru chuckled. “Are we going to discuss rats again? Nasty creatures, I’ve always thought.”

Albus chuckled as well and said, “You did warn me, I admit.” Heru felt the man’s relaxation more than he saw it. “How about we discuss dogs, then?”

“I’m always up for a good, grim tale,” Heru replied archly. The tension level dropped another notch.
Albus rose and said, “One moment, please.”
Albus returned a few minutes later accompanied by a large black dog. The headmaster had not even sat down properly when Heru said calmly, “Good evening, Mr Black. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

It bared its teeth and growled at him.

Heru chuckled and began forming the request in his mind. The castle was more than happy to comply, managing to startle a yelp out of the dog.

Albus gave the dog a curious look and said, “Dear boy, whatever was that for? Sirius, please meet Heru Slytherin. If I’m not mistaken”—Albus glanced over at Heru, who nodded—“Heru has just shifted the wards to allow you to apparate in and out of the castle.”

The dog let out a skeptical bark, cast a beady-eyed look at Heru, then changed back into human form. “Are you out of your mind, Albus?” he grated.

Heru gazed up at the ceiling and remarked, “Something tells me you didn’t bother to let Mr Black know who was down here.”

Albus twinkled at him and confided, “I didn’t think he’d come with me if I had.”

“Now I know you’ve lost it! An actual Slytherin? Aren’t all you people dead yet?”

“Now, Sirius—”

“Don’t worry, Albus. I don’t mind. You were suspicious yourself, not so long ago. It comes with the territory.”

“Hm, yes. Quite true. Sirius, as I already said, you are now able to apparate in and out of Hogwarts.”

Sirius folded his arms across his chest in blatant rejection of the idea, his expression quite clearly saying that Albus had finally gone round the bend.

“Give it a try. If I am being delusional, nothing will happen. And if it is true, you can go, and be back here in less than a minute.”

“Fine, I’ll humor you in your dotage.” Sirius snarled and disappeared. Moments later he was back with a slightly dazed look on his face. “I don’t believe it,” he breathed, then hooked a chair over with his foot and sat down.

“But you just did it,” pointed out Albus cheerfully. “Isn’t it marvelous?”

Sirius gave Heru a suspicious look. “How do you know he didn’t just break the damn wards?”

“That is a very good question. Heru, would you object if I called in Minerva for a test?”

“Of course not. But I would counsel caution on one point.”

“Oh?”

“I cannot control the castle, only request. She may not feel … comfortable, I suppose, would be a good word … doing this for certain people. So I would not warn anyone ahead of time of what we’re trying to do. For that matter, considering rats have been at the grain in the past, you might do
well to explain things only to those who … pass. You see?"

“Ah, yes. I do see your point.” Albus scratched out a quick note and rose to give it to Fawkes, then returned to his seat.

“You,” said Sirius slowly, “are a Slytherin? A real one?”

“I am.”

“I don’t believe this. Albus, how can you trust this man?”

Albus heaved a patient sigh. Before he could summon up a response, Heru said, “One would do as well to ask how anyone could trust a man who springs from the noble and most ancient house of Black. Your family has quite a reputation, too, if I’m not mistaken.”

Sirius rounded on him with a snarl, but did not rise.

“Now, boys,” said Albus.

“Just pointing out the hypocrisy, Albus. I shall say no more on it, rest assured.”

The tension level had risen sharply, so it was perhaps fortunate that Minerva chose that moment to enter the office, blink at what she saw, and close the door behind her. “Albus. Sirius. Mr Slytherin.”

Heru felt Sirius relax marginally when Minerva seemed to take the situation in stride. Apparently he thought she was a bit less batty than the headmaster. Albus smiled and said, “I was hoping you would help us with a little experiment, Minerva.”

“Of course, Albus. What do you need?”

“Now, we all know I’m a tad”—he made a circling motion with one finger at his temple—“but I would like you to try apparating down to Hogsmeade from here. There is some question about the integrity of the wards.”

“Oh dear. All right, Albus.” She adjusted her spectacles, paused, and went nowhere. “Nothing,” she said. “They appear to be fine to me.”

“Very good. If you will wait for one moment…” Albus flicked his eyes toward Heru, who made the request. A moment later Minerva acted as though she’d been goosed if her suddenly severe expression was anything to judge by. “Could you try again, please, Minerva? And, of course, return if it should be necessary.”

She disappeared with a crack, returning with the same dazed expression Sirius had worn. Heru took the time to ask the castle if only the people she approved of would feel anything, or if they all would. The castle relayed back that only those approved would, so Heru was satisfied.

“Albus, what just happened?”

“Do have a seat, Minerva. It is time I let you in on a little secret, much as I just have to Sirius. Thanks to Heru’s efforts and particular talents, we are able to modify the apparation wards selectively, with an eye toward letting key people, such as yourselves, bypass the restriction.”

Heru let Albus blather on while he looked over the list again. Lupin was on it, and Moody, Arthur and Molly Weasley along with several of their children, and a host of other names he did not recognize offhand. As his eyes wandered over each name, he got faint feelings of approval or
rejection from the castle.

“—Slytherin. Heru?”

Heru looked up quickly and said, “I’m sorry, what? My mind was elsewhere for a moment.”

“I said, I believe I have adequately explained the situation to Minerva. You looked distressed, however. Is something the matter?”

“Sort of.” He glanced down at the list again for a moment. “Some of these names—it won’t work, but I have no idea why. Reading them over, I could sense which was which.”

Albus looked mildly surprised. “If I may ask, who?”

Heru shrugged and said, “Professor Moody and Percy Weasley to start. Isn’t the Weasley boy rather young?”

“Some of the names are of a potential nature. I should not have included those, perhaps. But Professor Moody is a surprise. You are unable to tell why, you said?”

Heru asked about the man again, and got back a confused set of images. The best he could translate it was to say, “No, not really. All I get is a sense of duplicity. I strongly suggest you not mention any of this to him until there is more information.”

“Yes, well, I think then that with one or two exceptions, you should hold off with any of the other names until I have arranged for a secure location within the castle for use as an apparation point. I will have to send Remus a note.”

“And the other?” Heru asked, raising his brow.

“Severus, of course.”

“Severus!” screeched Sirius. “You can’t mean that. He’s nothing but a lousy, back-stabbing, sniveling little Death Eater just waiting to kill the lot of us in our sleep!”

“It is not up for discussion, Sirius.”

“Albus—”

“No. Please desist, Sirius.” To Heru he said, “When Remus does arrive, I will send word to you, but for now I believe we’re done.”

“You can have this back for the time being, then.” Heru rose and placed the list on the desk. After a perfectly polite, “Good evening, everyone,” Heru left the office and returned to the dungeons. He wasn’t even curious enough to spy on the trio at that point. One thing was clear: Sirius would have reacted badly to him either way, as a Slytherin or as a friend to Severus, but it was really nothing personal.

He walked through the door into Severus’s quarters. He and Mark were playing another game of chess and conversing in Parseltongue, but both paused and looked up when he took a seat. “Severus, brace yourself for a moment, all right?”

Seconds later he showed no more of an obvious reaction than Albus had. “What, dare I ask, was that?”

“You being keyed into the apparation wards.”
The next morning Heru and Mark returned to Hogsmeade, and that evening as he tried to get to sleep Heru realized he missed the scent of patchouli. He dropped off almost as soon as he decided to track down some of the oil for himself. The next few weeks went by quietly and Severus was a frequent visitor, which pleased Heru to no end, and apparently Mark as well. During that time, Severus could occasionally be caught laughing openly, though the sound was rare if he happened to be on the ground floor of Heru’s house. He had also developed a tendency to sit on the couches after Heru had displayed a marked preference for them over his usual chairs.

Remus Lupin had still not arrived, so Heru spent most of his time roughing out ideas, annoying the house-elves by cooking for himself, and generally being lazy. He did receive a letter from Mr Lovegood letting him know that not only had the order come in, but that the entire shipment had gone out the same day. That was reason enough in Heru’s eyes to pay out bonuses to the people hired on before letting them go until the next time they were needed.

The days grew warmer as spring tried its best to cozy up to summer, and Heru knew that very soon things would become rather nasty, not to mention vastly confusing. With that unhappy event looming on the horizon, Heru seriously considered asking the castle to squirrel away Harry’s belongings once he went to begin the third task, but eventually decided that he could well come under suspicion if he did. Albus and a handful of others knew he had some way to communicate with the castle, and might look to him first if Harry’s things were to disappear.

He became increasingly nervy as the twenty-fourth of June approached and tried very hard not to let it show. Knowing that one Harry Potter was going to vanish into the mists of time was not the whole story, and Heru knew it. Along with his anxiety came the question of whether or not that was the case. Would Harry simply disappear, never to be seen again, or did Fate have something else in store—something more final.

After a great deal of thought—Mark and the house-elves would no longer even step in the room with him if he was pacing—he told everyone he was going out, then apparated underlake. While he could not see his own future, what he wanted to know technically lay in his past, or his original self’s future, so it was both and neither at the same time. And when he did get an answer—it had worked—he was not sure if it could be construed as good or bad for all parties involved. Either way, he had every intention of being in the stands when the third task started.

And so he was, sitting with Severus to one side and Mark to the other, in full view of Albus Dumbledore and his deputy. He waited through it—it was devilishly hard to see anything clearly with the hedge walls so high—experiencing things with a kind of double vision as he recalled his passage through all those years ago. When it finally became clear that something was horribly wrong Heru remained seated, keeping Mark with him. Chaos erupted as Cedric Diggory’s corpse was discovered holding the cup, his wand at his side. Albus was the first to reach the body, unsurprisingly.

It wasn’t until the body was being levitated away that Dumbledore turned and stared up into the stands. At that moment Heru rose, nudged his companions, and said, “We should probably go inside.” Though they had to be careful—other people in the stands were practically trying to stampede their way out—they eventually gained the main entrance to the castle and stepped through the huge doors.

Albus appeared almost instantly, looking extremely agitated. “All of you, come with me.”

Up in his office he made a quick show of social form, then got right down to business, pulling Heru
off to the side. “That day, when you revealed to me you could watch a person from a distance—can you manage that with Harry Potter?”

Heru had half been expecting the question, but furrowed his brow and said, “I can but try.” He stepped back a pace, ignoring the odd looks coming from Severus and Mark, and chanted several phrases under his breath, finishing off with a peculiar gesture. A heartbeat later he could see, off to the side, Harry sound asleep in a very familiar room. He exhaled and looked over at Albus. “He is alive.”

“Is there anyway I could see what you do?”

Heru blinked slowly and appeared to consider. “I don’t suppose you have a large mirror handy so I could try something?” Albus produced one quickly, shoving it into position against one of the walls. Heru stepped over and tuned it to display Harry Potter. Then he turned, stepped away, and gestured at the image, releasing his other spell at the same time. “I wasn’t sure it would work,” he confessed.

Severus stepped up, rubbing his chin, with a calculating expression on his face. “This is a pretty picture indeed. That is not a natural sleep, Albus. The boy is either drugged into somnolence, or stunned out of his wits, assuming he had any to begin with.”

“I tend to agree,” Albus said vaguely, absently pushing Mark back when he tried to look. “Heru, is there any way to adjust this image?”

“Only to a certain extent. It’s designed to follow the target. So, I can only zoom in and out. As the boy moves, so will the image, but I can’t, say, adjust it out past the room itself, as the focus range is finite.”

Albus’s face fell, and after looking at Heru’s own expression, did not ask if there was any other spell that could be used. Eventually, they all became quite bored; there was nothing exciting about watching a child sleep, after all. Mark curled up in a chair to sleep himself while the adults, joined by Minerva and a furious Sirius, began a discussion on ways to find Harry and get him back.

Sirius was in the midst of another raging hissy fit when Heru went still and said, “Shut up. Look.” He pointed at the mirror. Harry was just waking up and reaching for his glasses. After a great deal of looking around and shrugging, Harry sat down at a desk, sighed as a meal appeared, and started to eat. They continued to watch as he entered the bathroom (averting their eyes politely most of the time, though it was noted that Harry was unharmed), then again as he found a book in the desk and started to write.

Everyone but Heru cursed as they tried to read upside down. Severus, apparently, was better at it than some, for Heru noticed a decided smirk when Harry scratched out a sentence beginning with his name. Though he kept his own face carefully blank, he was privately amused at the rapid changes of emotion that flitted across his friend’s face as Harry continued to write, and Severus continued to decipher. He seemed particularly aghast when Harry wrote about the sorting hat. On and on Harry wrote, until there was nothing more he wanted to say.

Things became boring again at that point, especially since Harry persisted in lying in bed half awake, half asleep, eventually drifting off. All of them but Heru had drawn, white faces with identical expressions of disbelief. In her distress, Minerva made the particularly inane comment of, “Well, Harry certainly is well spoken.” They talked, and discussed, and argued, until one of them finally noticed that Heru had been silent the entire time. He hadn’t said a word since “look.”

When asked about it, Heru said, “I never knew him, so I don’t understand your reactions. I’m sorry. This is really none of my business, and my son is sleeping in a chair at the moment instead of a bed
as he should be. The mirror image won’t fade, trust me. Would it be all right if I took Mark someplace nicer to rest?”

Albus quickly assured him that would be fine, and Severus leaned over to whisper the most current password to his quarters into Heru’s ear. After he stood Heru said, “I would attempt to set up some kind of alarm so one of you was alerted when the boy moved, but it would go off every time he shifted in his sleep, making it useless.”

Albus assured him that was all right as well, and that they’d discuss things in the morning. Heru nodded to everyone, gathered Mark up in his arms, and exited the office, getting far enough past the door that they wouldn’t hear the sound of him apparating directly into Severus’s quarters. Mark was placed in the spare room, and Heru went to sleep on the couch.

It was several days before anything of particular interest happened, unless you counted an apathetic Harry writing in a book. And by then it was well known that Moody hadn’t been Moody at all. The real Moody had been found locked in his own trunk, his hair hacked to bits for the impostor’s alleged use in polyjuice potion. As Heru had pointed out, “Now we know why the castle didn’t like him.”

When Voldemort appeared they were all present, but unable to see much. Heru adjusted the focus out as far as it would go to reveal the Dark Lord sitting at the desk flipping through what Harry had written. It was just barely possible to see the edges of Voldemort’s varying expression as he read. Heru found it interesting to see his reactions, though they didn’t especially surprise him.

The routine continued and Albus was often seen with a lost, and sometimes hurt look on his face when he wasn’t trying various methods in an attempt to locate Harry. Not having seen any of what happened after the two boys had disappeared, nobody had any clue where Harry could be, and none of the locating spells were useful. Everything they tried either fizzled out or hared off on a wild tangent.

Heru and Mark spent quite a bit of time up at the castle during July, often sleeping over in Severus’s rooms and taking their meals there as well. Mark had been placed under the watchful eye of a house-elf and left to tinker with potions while everyone else huddled in the headmaster’s office, watching or experimenting further. Heru made sure he was present on his birthday. He had only vaguely seen what was to happen; he wanted to see it more clearly.

And so it was that Harry Potter fell asleep the night of 30 July, just as he had every night for the past month. One watcher was left at the mirror while the rest went to their own beds. They all converged before the boy’s usual waking time, prepared to see if the new day brought anything of interest, or any clues. What they did see—and were totally unprepared for—was Harry Potter laying in bed when the lights came up, or at least, pieces of him. Streams of blood splattered the walls and oozed downward, still glistening as though it had only just happened. His glasses were shattered beyond repair, shards sticking out of his unrecognizable eyes, and the rest of Harry wasn’t too well connected anymore, either; his limbs had been hacked off and stacked like kindling at the foot of the bed.

They were all still staring in mute horror when the door opened and Voldemort stepped in, took one look, and proceeded to blast the room half apart in anger. Heru took a moment to reflect on things. He couldn’t decide if he should be impressed at the sheer destruction that had been done to his body—or disgusted by the lengths Fate had gone to. Either way, it was quite plain that Harry could not have done these things to himself.

Voldemort eventually calmed down into a seething tower of quiet rage and stormed over to the desk he hadn’t yet destroyed. Yanking the drawer completely out of its tracks, he then stooped down to retrieve the journal and stare at it.
“So,” he said. “Do I deliver you along with the pitiful wreck of your master’s corpse to the wizarding world, or do I just keep you? Do I let those fools like Dumbledore see just how much damage they did to you before you ended up dead anyway? Perhaps if I were able to see the looks on their faces when they read through your pages it might be worth it.”

Voldemort lowered the journal and turned to look at Harry. “And you, you pathetic little brat. How dare you die on me!? That was my right! My decision! You would have made a lovely pet for me, Harry. A lovely little minion, obeying only me, begging and pleading to do my bidding. Can’t you imagine the faces of your adoring public when that came to light? I even came here today to try and talk some sense into you. But no, you had to go and get yourself killed under my very nose. How dare you!?”

Voldemort flung the journal at the bed, smirking slightly as it lodged somewhere in Harry’s chest cavity. “Oh well, you shan’t be missed. I’ll decide where to deliver you once I’ve had a chance to get creative with my followers. And by the way, thanks for reminding me about my dear, traitorous Severus. I’ll have to think of something special for him. He was one of my favorites, you know. But he’s already been replaced. Did you realize that your dear Professor Moody was an impostor all year? I’ll bet you never had a clue. Barty Crouch is back safe and sound, and I don’t have to worry about him betraying me. And then there’s that other fellow. We shall see about him.”

Voldemort turned away and moved to the door, then paused. “Before I go, Harry, did you have any last requests? No? Hm. Tirrah, luv.” He stepped out and pulled the door closed quietly behind him, and they could hear his high-pitched laughter trailing away.

Minerva, always one to remain calm in a crisis, promptly averted her face from the image still displayed in the mirror and sickered all over Albus’s carpet.

Two days later a corpse was discovered on the outskirts of Hogsmeade, its limbs sewn back on with what looked oddly like fishing line, carefully cradling a book in what was left of its chest.
Ordered Actions

Harry’s body was removed almost as soon as it had been found and placed in a room provided by the castle after Albus had asked Heru to see what he could do. It went almost without saying that the wards on that section of the castle were more stringent than most; the hordes of reporters crowding the main doors were continually being turned away, but one never knew just how enterprising some of them might be.

The journal was cause for much fighting, breast beating, and recrimination—and not all of it spared the victim, Harry. Each person had a chance to read it in full, and often passed it on with an expression that said very little of what they were feeling. It eventually was passed to Heru, who affected a look of surprise at the offer.

“I’m not sure I understand,” he said. “I’ll read it, but other than helping out on a few things I’m not sure what value there is in me reading it.”

“That will become more clear, I think, a bit later on,” said Albus. “You have indeed been very generous with your time and ability, something I believe we ought to discuss further once we have all had a chance to assimilate this material.”

Heru shrugged and set to reading, even though he could still remember most of what he’d written. Part way through he suddenly looked up and said, “The castle says Remus Lupin is here,” then went back to the journal. He absently noticed that one of their number left immediately, and by the time he had finished and handed it back to Albus they had returned with Remus in tow.

“Before we go any further,” said Albus, “would you be so kind as to take care of Remus, Heru?”

It took him a moment to understand what the headmaster meant, but when he did recall, he asked the castle for her assistance, and she made the necessary changes. Albus pulled Remus off to the side, presumably to explain what had just happened, and to hand him the journal.

Albus was the worst hit by what Harry had written, but that was on a personal level, Heru noticed. He was apt at defending himself during the ensuing discussion, often stating that a child, however precocious, could not possibly understand the entirety of the decisions Albus had been forced to make. Heru found it both amusing and sad, but he could afford to; it had been his life, and time and distance had a way of softening even the roughest of edges.

Remus had a tendency to bemoan the fact that he hadn’t spent more time with Harry that one year, and that he had, until the very end, withheld so much more than he had given. Sirius was beside himself, often cursing that he’d had so little time with Harry, and even envious of Remus for having had that year. He felt he had totally failed in his desire to keep Harry safe, despite knowing he could not have done much more than he had.

Severus displayed a curious mixture of reactions, though Heru doubted that anyone would notice them through his habitual stony expression, which tended to vary only in how intense his glare or scowl was—assuming he showed an expression at all. He seemed profoundly disturbed that Harry had almost been sorted into Slytherin house, and Heru considered asking him about it later, in private. Severus also seemed quite angry over some of the things Harry had written, especially as much of what he had done was designed to protect him. Heru noticed more than one faintly quizzical look directed at him by Severus.

Minerva simply seemed bewildered. She had not been so close to Harry. Albus had always been the
parental figure in Harry’s life. Arthur was in a similar state. It was Molly who would often begin wailing over the loss of her “son” and generally acting as though she’d birthed him herself. She was eventually hauled off to the infirmary and sedated for hysteria.

It was then that Albus came to a decision. “We have proof enough that Voldemort has returned. Therefore, I am reconvening the Order of the Phoenix. All of you here, with the exception of Heru, know what that means. Now, aside from the obvious task of informing all the original members, we must look to recruitment of new people. Heru would possibly be the first of those.”

Sirius sat up immediately with a fierce scowl, then subsided. Remus, who had no real idea who Heru was, or why Sirius would be so opposed to the idea, glanced at both of them, then back to Albus.

“Does anyone here object if I explain to Heru what the Order is about?” Sirius retained his mulish expression, but said nothing, and neither did Arthur. Nobody did. “Splendid. Heru, to put it simply, the Order of the Phoenix was created at the time of Voldemort’s first rise as a dedicated group of individuals intent on his defeat. Unfortunately, there was a traitor among our number—you recall to whom I refer—that led to the deaths of Harry’s parents and ultimately to Voldemort’s first defeat. Now that he is back, we will begin again.”

“And you would like me to join?”

“That is the idea.”

“Just so that we’re all clear on the obvious—don’t you think just being who I am will cause problems?”

“Ah, Albus?” interrupted Remus, casting a quick, apologetic look at Heru. “Could someone tell me what they haven’t been telling me? I’m a little lost here.”

“My apologies, Remus. The problem Heru is referring to is that he is Heru Slytherin, and as such, subject to a tide of ingrained distrust and suspicion.”

Remus’s brows shot up and he cast another look at Heru, who smiled pleasantly in return.

“In any case, there are always problems with integrating various people, Heru, as I’m sure you understand. The obvious in your case may be a bit more to get past, but I don’t see why it should be an issue in light of the larger picture.”

“Then I reckon it would depend on what this all entailed. I had every intention of living a simple life, but I suppose that was a foolish hope.” Heru shrugged and pulled his hair into a tail to twist around his fingers.

“I try to match people with tasks which suit their abilities. As it stands, you are our only link with the castle itself, and are admirably suited for spying from a distance, it seems. Different people serve in different ways.”

“That sounds fine so far, but I would have to say I’d strongly object to anything that put me directly in harm’s way. While I am not the only one, I do have a son who expects me to be around for a while longer. I think you’re already well aware that I will not be dealt with lightly, based on … truth.” Heru arched a brow at the headmaster on the last word for even more emphasis.

Albus broke into a briefly amused smile and nodded. “Yes, indeed. I think we understand each other then.” Both of them ignored the confused looks they were getting. “Very well. Minerva, I would ask you to send out word after we are done here.”
“Yes, Albus.”

Albus sighed heavily at that point and said, “We must decide where poor Harry is to be laid to rest. I confess, I am greatly worried that if his location becomes known, his remains will be disinterred almost before we have a chance to take care of things.”

After a number of unworkable suggestions, Heru hesitantly spoke up. “Er, there is … as I’ve learned … a place at Hogwarts itself.”

“Pardon?”

“On the grounds, along the east side of the lake, is a graveyard of sorts. If I recall correctly, Salazar’s brother and sister-in-law were laid to rest there, in a mausoleum. I would assume it still exists.”

“I have never come across such a thing,” said Albus, frowning. “I suppose one of us could go look.”

“I might have a faster way of being sure,” said Heru. “It cannot hurt for me to try.” Albus nodded, so Heru closed his eyes and silently asked the castle if it still existed.

<Yes.>

When he asked why no one seemed to know about it, she flashed him several images. He understood after several moments of thought that the castle had purposely hidden it from prying eyes sometime after his departure from the past. As it was technically on the grounds, she had that much control over it, but she was willing to relax the protection she had assigned to it enough to allow for this new proposed addition.

Heru smiled and opened his eyes. “It’s there. It was hidden purposely. I get the feeling that at some point after Salazar’s brother died and was placed there that attempts were made to break into it. Apparently the castle has a soft spot for some people.”

“Perhaps, then, you would be willing to go down and see what might be done for Harry?”

Heru nodded, privately wondering if it was wrong to feel amused that he was preparing for his own grave in the same spot he was supposedly already buried at.

“Then I believe we are done for the moment. Minerva, I think Saturday morning at ten would be suitable.”

Severus joined Heru on the walk down to the site, remaining silent until well after they had exited the castle. “As I recall, you said you felt something bad was going to happen to Potter. How right you were.”

“Things aren’t usually so vague. Nobody deserves to die like that, though.”

“As much as I detested the little brat, I must agree.”

“You seemed really upset, Severus, at some of the things he wrote.”

“He said I gave him special treatment! I treated him no worse than I did any other non-Slytherin student. And I saved his precious little hide on more than one occasion.”

“Do you even have to do that now? You are not a Death Eater, Severus.”
Severus kicked at a flower as they passed it and said, “I allow I am mortally tired of the façade. And now, I have no doubt that the Dark Lord is sure of my betrayal and will seek to revenge himself on me. No, I do not need to any longer.”

“Will you continue it anyway?” Heru touched Severus’s arm briefly, smiled, and continued, “I’d hate to think of Mark getting into a house other than Slytherin and facing you in class if you did.”

“Oh, well, for his sake I shall consider being the sweetest person alive and none shall fault my manners or treatment of the bright young things that come here to learn with eager attention and hearts full to bursting with the desire to better themselves.”

Heru snickered. “As you say.”

“He is a likable little brat. He does you credit.”

“Thank you, Severus. And you do have an entire year to practice, should you choose to.”

Severus glared at him halfheartedly, then smiled. “For practical reasons, I must be stern in the classroom. Some students are far more concerned with attempting pranks than they are in learning.”

“True enough,” Heru said, and stopped. “There. Within those trees.” The ground was dappled with sunlight and the air was sweet with the scent of flowers. Heru was glad in some ways that Regan had been entombed in stone, for she had not become food for nature’s whimsy, but also sad, because she could not return to the earth from which she had ultimately sprung.

The individual trees may have changed, but the mausoleum was still surrounded by alders, and Heru breathed a silent sigh at the sight. It had become an idyllic little glade if you could ignore what it actually contained. It was clear, though, that Harry’s body could be placed within its confines after a new structure had been created and enjoy the same privacy. Heru was quite sure the castle would see to it.

They discussed positioning for a few minutes, finally, though tentatively, deciding on a mausoleum that would stand a short distance from the original and at a slight angle. It depended a great deal on whether or not Albus was of a mind to transfer the remains of Harry’s parents there or leave them wherever they currently rested. After several minutes of silence, Heru turned to Severus, feeling a bit hesitant to speak his mind, and at the other’s look of inquiry, he plunged ahead.

“Severus, this is probably so wildly inappropriate that I would not blame you for being disgusted with me, but—this place of death, the depression it makes me feel, it makes me all that much more keen to live life and experience the things I’ve yearned for and not dared to go after. I want—I would like to be a great deal closer to you, if you would let me.”

“Closer,” Severus repeated. “I recall once telling you that I wasn’t sure I knew how to be a friend.”

“Yes, you did,” Heru agreed softly.

“I would li—I will deny ever saying this should you repeat it to others, you understand. I would like to think I’ve learned differently since then.” Severus took a step forward. “I would like to think I have as much courage as you show at this moment to be honest.” He took another step closer. “I would like to think you are not referring merely to friendship.”

Heru closed the remaining gap and said, “I would like to think that if I were to kiss you at this moment, that you would return it.” He leaned in slowly, so that Severus could still step away if he wanted, and touched his lips to Severus’s. A heartbeat later he pulled back slightly and saw the brightness of Severus’s eyes, then leaned in again, snaking one hand around the nape of Severus’s
When their lips touched this time, it was not in innocence, but with full intent of exploration. Moments later they were tangled together, completely oblivious to their surroundings, and totally forgetful of why they had come in the first place. It was, perhaps, ten minutes later when reality intruded on the pleasurable haze in Heru’s mind and he gently disengaged, slightly out of breath.

“I don’t want to stop, but I think…”

“We must not do this here,” Severus agreed.

As one they turned and left the glade, walking back to the castle rather a little more closer to each other than normal. They reported to Albus that the site would be quite suitable for their needs, then retired to Severus’s quarters for lunch. That night they shared Severus’s bed, though they did no more than they already had. It was enough for the moment to simply be close. And they continued to share the same bed, much to Mark’s quiet amusement.

Saturday dawned fair and sunny, which some took as a kind of insult given the prevailing mood. There were two issues for the day: Harry’s funeral and the Order meeting.

Those few who had been invited, mostly those who had been close to Harry, gathered on the front steps and were led down to the glade as a group. During the intervening days Heru had constructed a mausoleum for himself, unable to prevent that same sense of morbid amusement from rearing its head as he did so. He had, in fact, volunteered for the job, having explained that it was a member of his own family responsible for the tragedy, and that he would feel obscurely better for having been the one to accomplish this particular task, especially as the only people buried there were, again, among his family.

Molly was quite patently under the influence of a calming potion as she did no more than let silent tears slip down her face, clutching tightly to her husband’s arm. Ginny had been left at home, though Ron had been allowed to come. Hermione was also present, having been fetched by several Order members, and her face was deathly white and drawn. She stood very close to her remaining best friend, who watched the entire proceeding with a bemused look of denial, occasionally shaking his head.

When the door to the structure closed, it capped the sense of finality, and Hermione finally burst into loud, racking sobs. Molly, whose motherly tendencies kicked into gear, immediately pulled her into a sideways hug and led her away, back to the castle. After a brief moment of silence they all returned, gathering in the Great Hall for a very quiet, very somber lunch. When it came time for the Order to meet, Mark was introduced to the two students, who eyed him with as much suspicion as they could manage under the circumstances. Albus made it a point to be very firm on the subject of manners, then swept away with the adults in tow.

Heru, of course, immediately set up a watch on his son, ignoring the knowing look Albus shot him. The first order of business was to make introductions. Most of the members were as clueless as Remus and the Weasleys had been over Heru’s identity. Suspicion and distrust softened slightly when Albus explained much of what Heru had done for them, though it did not completely disappear. Moody—the real Moody—was especially paranoid about having him included.

After that, Albus dropped a bombshell. “There is,” he said, “something I have not fully told anyone, not in all these years. I felt that it was of paramount importance that the exact details should not be
revealed, lest they somehow be betrayed, whether by guile, force, or an inadvertent slip of the tongue. As it turns out, my decision was probably wise given that we were betrayed, but at this point in time, it may no longer matter. Therefore, I will reveal now what I would not in the past.”

He took a pensieve out of a nearby cabinet and moved it to his desk, tapping it before taking a seat. Everyone watched as Trelawney appeared, slowly rotating above the silvery substance within, and intoned her prophecy. Albus played it a second time before saying, “Now you will understand why James and Lily Potter were placed under the fidelius charm. Even, possibly, why Voldemort was defeated the first time.”

“The Longbottoms were also placed under protection at that time. Are you saying it could have been their boy?” asked someone in the back.

“Yes. Both boys were born near the end of July. As it stands, it was Harry who was attacked, and Harry who was marked. That he is dead bodes very badly for us. If this prophecy is true in its entirety, we may be lost, unless the interpretation is wrong.”

“There is some room for argument, Albus,” said Moody. “I have a hard time believing any child is capable of defeating Voldemort. I don’t care how talented he is. And for all we know, this is telling us that both die. Come on now, ‘Neither can live while the other survives’? They were both alive at the same time if what I’ve heard is accurate, and it isn’t even clear that it was Voldemort who killed Harry. This other could be referring to a third party.”

“Those are very good points, Alastor. For the benefit of everyone, I will show my memory of that moment.” He tapped the pensieve again, this time to display the morning they had seen Harry’s mutilated body, and Voldemort’s subsequent entry, speech, and exit. “I agree. It is not clear whether or not it was Voldemort who personally killed Harry. I cannot speculate as to his state of mind at the time, or guess with any accuracy if he was experiencing a type of denial or amnesia. Of course, it could well be that a third party is responsible.”

“Harry is dead and all you two can do is quibble over semantics?” Molly shrieked in disbelief.

“Molly, please.” Albus peered at her over the rims of his spectacles. “Regardless, I cannot stress strongly enough that I believe the contents of the prophecy should go no further than this room. To let Voldemort know of the actual wording, even if it is useless to us now, would give him an advantage I do not want him to have. I show it to you to drive home the utter seriousness of our situation. Am I understood?”

Murmurs of agreement sounded all over the room, so Albus continued. “There is one more thing I must show you. It arrived early this morning along with a note, which I will share with you now.” Opening one of the drawers of his desk, Albus produced a second pensieve and a piece of paper. After clearing his throat he read:

I thought this might pique your interest even though I’ve already sent you one present this week. What can I say—I’m feeling exceptionally generous, so enjoy it while you can. I hope you liked the first one. I certainly did. Now, enjoy this, and watch your mistakes in action, come to fruition like weeds in a neglected garden. Too bad most of it will be beyond your understanding, old man.

“As you might guess, it was signed ‘Lord Voldemort’. ” Albus dropped the note back in the drawer and set the pensieve down, pushing his to the side. Then he tapped it, letting the memory of the night in the graveyard appear, starting just before the duel that wasn’t.

The only people who understood all of it, predictably, were Heru and Severus, though Severus
pretended not to. At length, Albus turned to Heru and said, “You were able to follow that?”

“Yes, of course,” he responded. “He was ranting, all right, but it wasn’t much different from what was contained in the journal. He dared Voldemort to kill him and get it over with so he could rejoin his parents. I think that’s why Voldemort didn’t. As he said, it was too easy, and if the boy was that disaffected, he probably had hopes of turning him at that point. It makes sense, especially given what we saw in that room. If you want, I can work on an exact transcript, but I’m not sure what use it would be.”

Numerous people had turned in Heru’s direction, looks of fear and loathing on their faces. He could only presume it was because he was a parselmouth, though why that should bother them more than his name was beyond his reasoning. He flipped his hair back in a nonchalant manner and kept his eyes on Albus.

“If you think there’s no point, perhaps not. Let me think on it. There are a few other, somewhat mundane, things to be brought up. Harry’s trunk was brought to my office as soon as possible after we realized he had been taken. There is a rather peculiar, rather large piece of parchment I’ve been wondering about…” He paused to peer over his rims again. “And also Harry’s invisibility cloak, which will go into the common Order possessions for use on missions. I think Ron and Hermione might have an idea how to apportion his remaining items of any value, though I fear there are precious few.” Albus sighed and added, “I do not think … Harry would have minded.”

Albus took a moment to return Voldemort’s pensieve to his desk, and his own to its normal location. After sitting down again he said, “The next thing we need to discuss is where we shall be holding meetings in the future. I do not think it particularly wise to use Hogwarts in this capacity. Cornelius Fudge has been obstructionary in the past, and I have no doubt that he will continue to be so. I very much doubt he will listen to reason, even with evidence of Voldemort’s return. I have been removed as Headmaster once already, though that was due to Lucius Malfoy’s efforts, but it is common knowledge that Cornelius greatly respects Mr Malfoy’s opinion and guidance where he will no longer listen to mine. Does anyone have any suggestions?”

Nobody said anything for a moment. People craned their necks to look around at each other or half rose from their seats so as to better see, but no one volunteered anything until Sirius stood, catching everyone’s attention.

“The family townhouse,” he said flatly, with a sneer curling his lip. “It is mine by right. I don’t particularly want to ever see the place again, but it is in London, and already fairly well warded. As private property, Fudge couldn’t do a thing.”

“Are you sure, Sirius?”

Sirius gave a sharp nod and sat down.

“Very well. Unless there are any objections, or other suggestions, that is what we will do.” After a pause he said, “No? Then it is settled. Sirius, please see me after the meeting to discuss that further. Next, let us discuss the possibility of new members…”
Grimmauld Place

Heru had been keeping one eye on Mark during the entire meeting. Now that they had begun a discussion on likely new members, he gave more of his attention to his son. For whatever reason—and Heru had not been able to follow things precisely—Hermione and Ron had chosen to stay in Mark’s company while the meeting was in progress rather than wandering off on their own. He was pleased to note that they were actually talking to each other, and that Mark was able to provide somewhat of a distraction for their grief.

“They didn’t let me see anything, so I can’t tell you. I reckon it was pretty bad, though,” he said with a sniff. “I don’t think you would have wanted to see.”

Ron grunted. He’d been staring at the ceiling for some time, and didn’t look to be done with it anytime soon.

“I suppose so,” admitted Hermione. “None of it seems real. I feel like it was just yesterday that we talked. I can’t believe—never mind. I suppose it doesn’t matter.” She averted her face for a moment, then looked back with a determined expression. “You didn’t really explain how you and your father came to be here, Mark.”

Mark shrugged and lifted his brows. “Father decided he wanted to live in a wizarding town, so he bought a house in Hogsmeade. But…” He scrunched up his face, looking as though he were trying to remember something. “Yes, it was because Father decided to write new Potions texts that he ever really came to Hogwarts.”

“Potions texts?”

Mark nodded vigorously. “He even had me help! He said the current ones were just awful and thought he could do better, so he did. Anyway, he sent samples up here and got invited for a meeting to discuss them.” Mark smiled proudly and said, “They’ll be used from now on, too. Professor Snape was quite impressed.”

A vaguely disgusted noise issued from Ron. Hermione cuffed him lightly and said, “Your father must be quite happy.”

“Oh, he is! He—”

Heru blinked as he felt a nudge at his side. He turned to look at Severus in confusion.

“What are you doing?” Severus whispered after leaning closer.

“Keeping an eye on Mark. He’s with those two kids and I wanted to make sure nothing got out of hand. Besides, I have no idea who these people are they’re discussing in here.”

“Fine, if anything you can help with comes up or the meeting ends, I’ll get your attention.”

Heru nodded and checked back on his son.

“—haven’t said where you lived before Hogsmeade,” Hermione was saying.

Mark scrunched his face up again, this time looking pained. “I … don’t really like to talk about that. My—mum died, see, and….”
“I understand. I’m sorry, Mark. You’ll be coming to Hogwarts, then?”

“Yeah, but I’m not old enough yet. Well, I hope I will. Father is a bit worried about that.”

“Your … name?” She looked slightly apologetic.

“Yeah. He’s worried that I might get hurt because of it, I think. The other kids might, you know … But, I’d really like to. Father thinks I might get into Ravenclaw.”

Ron choked in apparent disbelief; Hermione ignored him.

“He says he doesn’t care, so long as I’m happy. Getting into Slytherin might be kind of strange, though.”

Hermione didn’t wait; she cuffed Ron before he could react. “Why is that?”

“It’d be”—Mark shivered—“creepy if people were fawning over me because of my name. Like how people did with the Po—sorry. I don’t know, it just would be,” he finished lamely.

“So I take it you really like Potions?” she asked.

“Yeah! I’m already—”

Severus nudged him again, so Heru focused on what was around him instead.

“I think that covers things for the time being,” Albus said. “You will all be getting word shortly. Those of you I asked to stay behind, please do. The rest of you may go.” As people started to file out of the room, Albus appeared at Heru’s side and said, “I would like you and Severus to stay as well, if you don’t mind.”

They began vanishing the extra chairs, and when the room was cleared, sat down again to see what Albus wanted.

“I think we should confess,” said Remus after a glance at Sirius, who gave a slight nod.

“To?”

“That parchment? Could we see it, please?” Albus produced it from a drawer and laid it out. Remus activated it, drawing a pleased smile from Albus once he realized what it was. Severus, obviously recognizing it, scowled.

“I see. Yes, this could be quite useful,” said Albus, twinkling again momentarily.

Remus wiped it clean, then stepped back a pace and sat down.

“Sirius?”

“Right. I don’t care what you do to the place, Albus. Though, I think Kreacher has got to go. I don’t trust the little blighter any further than I can kick him. He was entirely mother’s servant, and babbles her nonsense every chance he gets. Technically he belongs to me now, and I can’t stand to look at him.”

Albus nodded and said, “As you know, most of the members of the Order are employed—now don’t look at me like that—but I think it would be unreasonable to ask that you and Remus take care of
getting the house into shape so quickly by yourselves. Would you object to some additional assistance?"

Sirius narrowed his eyes. “Who?”

“I was thinking of Heru, I admit.” He shot a quick look at Heru, who shrugged lightly. “It isn’t the most enjoyable of tasks, but more people means less work done faster.”

Heru cleared his throat; all eyes turned to him. “Albus, I have to say that Mark and I have been spending most of our time here for the past month, so I don’t see any reason why I can’t temporarily close up my own home and bring along my house-elves to assist if Mr Black does not object to our help. As it is, they’re perishing for lack of anything productive to do, and nothing short of a natural disaster is going to get through my wards.”

Albus peered at Sirius hopefully. Sirius tried to look anywhere but back, and finally sighed. “Sure. Why not. Invite the Weird Sisters for all I care.”

“I do believe they’re already booked, Sirius. I suggest you two spend the night here. In the morning, on your way to Grimmauld Place, you can stop long enough in Hogsmeade for Heru to make arrangements and then floo to London. Heru, I don’t see any reason why you can’t take Mark with you. It is your choice. You might feel better if he stayed here at the castle with Severus. I trust you three will keep me updated.”

Heru took that as a dismissal. After nodding he turned and left; the others weren’t far behind him. Out in the hallway he paused to ask, “Do either of you mind if Mark did come along?” Sirius and Remus shook their heads, so Heru said, “I’ll talk to him about it this evening. Tomorrow, then, gentlemen.”

Severus was clearly not happy with the temporary arrangement, prompting Heru to start asking a few questions after dinner. And while he knew most of the answers already, it would be harder to explain his intimate knowledge of the subject if he slipped up. It was easier to purposely cover the material again. He also wanted to hear from Severus directly on certain matters.

After seeing that Mark was safely occupied elsewhere, he said, “There’s a few things I think I need to know more about, and I was hoping you could clue me in. I have enough of an understanding of events to get by, but…”

“What things, precisely?”

“Well, a rundown from your point of view of the first rise of Voldemort, along with what actually happened here at Hogwarts over the past four years. And, I’m rather curious about why you and that Sirius fellow snarl at each other so much.”

“I was hoping for something simple,” Severus replied with a scowl. “Fine. You may as well get comfortable. This will take some time.”

Eventually they got around to discussing Mark. Heru was perfectly happy to leave him at the castle as company for Severus, or to bring him along. Severus, who had grown far more fond of the boy than he was likely to admit, favored keeping him at Hogwarts. After wrangling over it for a while, Heru suggested a compromise. If Mark wanted to go he could, but for only a few days, at which point Heru would take a break and bring him back to the castle. Severus wasn’t happy with that, either, but agreed. Heru did not point out that he found Severus’s attachment to the boy endearing, or that they were discussing him as though he were their son, not just Heru’s.
The next morning after breakfast Heru, Mark, Sirius, and Remus left for Hogsmeade. At Heru’s house they waited in the lounge while he explained to Flick and Guin what he wanted them to do, then took the time to further modify the wards to prevent any and all access that was not himself, Mark, Severus, or one of the two elves. Heru had already made a quick stop in at his vault for a supply of coin, so once he was finished they left and used a public floo to go to Diagon Alley, outside which they caught a taxi to № 12 Grimmauld Place.

The moment they stepped through the door the screaming and screeching started, startling Mark nearly out of his wits. Sirius showed everyone down to the kitchen with a resigned air about him that managed to surpass the blackness of the scowl etched on his face. They had barely entered the room when a house-elf crept in, mumbling to itself about blood traitors and disgraced sons. It was a strange echo of the cries from the ground floor, though with the door closed the female voice was muffled.

After listening the creature’s filthy mouthings for all of thirty seconds, and seeing the look of intense disgust on Sirius’s face, Heru turned to Remus with a pleasant smile and said, “Mr Lupin, I was wondering if I might ask you for a favor?”

“What is it?” Remus asked guardedly.

“I don’t suppose you would be willing to escort Mark above stairs and perhaps help him pick out a room for us for our stay?” His eyes flicked over to the elf, presumably Kreacher, then back to Remus.

Remus nodded and placed a hand on Mark’s shoulder. “That sounds like a good idea. Shall we?”

The moment they were out the door Sirius started in on the elf, telling it to shut up before he cut its throat, right then and there. Heru, finding himself rather agreeable, cleared his throat. Sirius stopped mid-sentence and looked at him. “What?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Heru continued calmly, “if it would manage to behead itself if you asked it to, though I think it would be a poor addition to the existing décor.”

Sirius blinked.

“Sorry?”

“I think dismissal is too cruel. The creature is obviously insane. It would be kinder in the long run to simply kill it, not to mention be expedient.”

Sirius smiled for a second and said, “You really mean that, don’t you?”

“Absolutely. It would be like putting down an animal too wounded to live properly. A humane act, if you will.”

Kreacher had stopped his muttering and was instead looking back and forth between Sirius and Heru.

After a moment of consideration, Sirius turned to Kreacher and said, “You would rather be beheaded and stuck on the wall than serve me, wouldn’t you. Don’t mind me if that’s what you want. Go right ahead. Of course, if you don’t mind taking orders from a blood traitor and a disgrace to the family, so be it. Your first task will be getting that portrait off the wall so I can start a bonfire with it, though.”
Kreacher, reacting as though he’d been slapped on hearing Sirius’s plans, headed straight for one of the kitchen’s drawers and pulled out a wicked-looking knife, then offed himself in one swift movement. It took but a moment to clean up the mess, after which Sirius flashed another brief smile. It faded when the sounds from the portrait upstairs filtered back in.

“Dare I ask?”

“Don’t think I trust you or anything,” said Sirius, “or even expect someone like you to understand.”

“All right.”

“That bitch is my mother, or was. Her and her pure-blood fanaticism, always bellowing about me being such a disappointment and how I was nothing like the rest of the family. Her ways got my idiot of a brother killed in Voldemort’s service. If I could shut her up I would, but I think she used a permanent sticking charm on that portrait. I swear, she did it just to make this house uninhabitable.”

“Have you tried removing the wall?”

“Wha—no, actually.” Sirius trotted off out the door with a focused look on his face.

Heru pulled out a dusty chair and sat down, closing his eyes. While he waited he made a close examination of the wards that surrounded the property. It was fairly well protected, though he suspected most of the things included were considered standard fare for paranoid pure-bloods. When no one had bothered him for several minutes, and the noise level from the ground floor had risen to alarming proportions, he opened his eyes and stood, then headed out the door and up the stairs.

Sirius was using his wand to trace a fiery line around the portrait at a fair distance to each side. His mother’s visage was spewing forth vile obscenities at her only living son, and not doing a very good job of convincing him that he was making the wrong decision. Heru stayed well off to the side, and when Sirius managed to connect his lines, he too stepped aside, then punched his fist through the wall and yanked. The entire section toppled forward, twisting and cracking around his hand, then fell to the floor with a resounding thud. The portrait’s voice was decidedly muffled at that point, though no less vehement.

It might have been the noise that drew them, or simply that they were done choosing up rooms—Remus and Mark appeared on the top of the stairs and approached, looking curiously at the section of wall on the floor and the gaping hole left behind.

“I see you’ve started to clean house,” commented Remus mildly.

“Damn right,” replied Sirius, savagely kicking the piece on the floor. “Now I just need to find a good place to set it on fire and be done with it. And if that doesn’t work, I’ll figure something out. Whatever it takes.”

Flick and Guin chose that moment to arrive, popping into the narrow entryway very close to Heru. After a brief look around with wide eyes, both of them assumed scandalized expressions at the condition of what little they could see, and looked to Heru for instructions.

He in turn looked at Sirius, who shrugged and said, “Whatever they feel comfortable doing is fine. This place needs a lot of work. Maybe the kitchen, so we can have lunch in a bit without feeling like spiders are going to drop into our food at the slightest provocation.”

Heru nodded and gestured to his elves, then descended the stairs. He asked them to please clean the room and get it ready for safe and serviceable meals, and handed Flick a pouch of coin in case he needed it for any additional food or supplies. “I figure by the time noon rolls around you’ll be able to
have one ready, and one of you can let us know.”

He went back out and up to the others in time to see Sirius and Remus attempting to hack the portrait and attached wall to bits, and getting only as far as chipping things off around the edges, much to the frustration of Sirius in particular. Not wanting to interfere further in what was obviously a family matter, Heru gave both men a nod and asked Mark to show him the room he’d chosen.

When lunch rolled around they gathered in the kitchen to eat. The space was as clean as it could get, though it persisted in looking worse for wear. Still, no one was worried that the food was contaminated.

“I wonder if I could get my hands on a really strong solvent,” Sirius said thoughtfully.

“She can’t bother us in the attic,” pointed out Remus.

“I know that,” Sirius said testily. “I want that thing destroyed.” He stabbed at his food viciously, then looked at Heru with a calculating expression. “Do you have any more bright ideas?”

“I’ll go up and see what I can do,” he said lightly. “Is it all right if Flick and Guin get a head start on cleaning once they’ve cleared away lunch? They can begin with the bedrooms and work their way out from there.”

“Yeah. Anything that they don’t know what to do with or looks suspicious they can put in the attic for now.”

Heru nodded and glanced over at the elves, giving them permission with a tilt of his head. They spent the remainder of lunch discussing the probable needs of the Order, and what could be done to the house in order to achieve those aims. Sirius was in favor of gutting the place and starting over, but Remus objected to the unnecessary waste of time and money. Heru didn’t care either way; he was there only to assist, and to try to establish some kind of tentative relationship with the two people he considered to be family in this time period aside from the obvious.

The next few days were fairly uneventful. Flick and Guin swept through the house like a hurricane, cleaning everything in sight and hauling loads of odd objects up to the attic for someone to later go over. Heru spent time up there with the portrait of Sirius’s mother, carefully unweaving the magic that made it what it was and what protected it. In the end he had a plain painted canvas that could be easily shredded and disposed of, though he left the actual destruction to Sirius feeling that he would get some sense of satisfaction out of the experience. Remus and Sirius spent most of their time deciding what rooms were to be used for which purposes and what things needed to be brought in.

On Wednesday afternoon, Heru bid the two men a temporary good-bye, saying he would return the following morning, and took Mark back to Hogwarts. He apprised Albus of the current situation, then spent the evening with Severus, cozily tucked up together on the couch in front of the fire. And, for all that Mark had wanted to go with his father to see someplace new, the novelty had worn off quickly and he was relieved to be back in a place where he had a lot more space to roam around and play with potions if he felt like it.

That night, in the privacy of the bedroom they shared, Heru took one more step toward showing Severus how he felt. When he was done and Severus had recovered, he found himself being repaid in kind, and he finally had an inkling of what it was he’d been missing those years with Regan.

The next morning he returned to № 12 Grimmauld Place and helped Sirius and Remus renovate the rooms. Flick and Guin were detailed to strip down the walls in preparation of a coat of paint—they were in such bad shape that spells would have had little effect—and remove any lingering unpleasant
things at Sirius’s direction. Once the first space had been prepared, the elves moved to the next while
the men moved in suitable furnishings for a meeting room. Between the five of them, the house was
more or less ready by that weekend, so they summoned Albus.

After a close examination and a few questions, Albus pronounced the place imminently suitable and
proceeded to place the entire structure under the protection of the fidelius charm. Already being
within its confines, Heru, Remus, and Sirius did not need to be told anything, though Albus would
have to inform each member of the Order of its location and that it was ready for use. Flick and Guin
were left to watch over things for the time being, and everyone returned to Hogwarts. Heru had seen
one thing, though, that made him remember a thought he’d had some time ago.
Mark was thrilled to see his father again even though it had been only a few days. Heru supposed it was possible that the boy held some lingering anxiety from the death of his natural parents and, as he had more or less not been apart from Heru for any length of time since he had been brought to Hogsmeade, any absence was troubling. He was happy to show his affection and keep Mark close by his side for the remainder of the day, even though it meant he could not discuss certain things he had on his mind with Severus, or anyone else.

By the next morning, however, Mark seemed quite himself again, and was happy to wander off on his own rather than being clingy. So it was that Heru was able to share his idea with Severus and get his opinion.

“I believe it’s worth a try. The question is if you would like to come and help me, and if you think the memory we saw is enough for you to be able to apparate there.”

Severus clearly had his doubts about the idea as shown by his expression, but he agreed to assist. Heru asked the castle to keep an eye on Mark while they were gone, then they apparated straight to the graveyard while it was still daylight. A careful examination of the area revealed nothing and no one to worry about, so they began checking the headstones.

Eventually they found the right one and cast a few spells to disguise what they were about to do. Shortly thereafter, they apparated back to Hogwarts with the remains of Tom Riddle’s father. Heru had been honest with Severus—he wasn’t sure if his idea would work, but he intended to find out and now he could.

The first thing he declared after examining the remains—there wasn’t much to examine—was that Tom’s father had definitely been a muggle, or so far down a line of squibs that it made no difference. When Severus asked how he could tell, Heru explained that magic warped the body in characteristic ways and left signs behind. “If he had died recently I wouldn’t even have to examine him. I could tell just by looking, and gauge his respective power level by the amount of residual magic remaining.”

At that point Heru pulled what he could from the remains and set about spell-weaving a new tapestry.

The next day the Order met at headquarters. As Heru had heard that Molly was unwilling to let her children out of her sight and was bringing them along, he took Mark with him after getting Albus to clue the boy in, so to speak. It was, perhaps, unfortunate that Hermione would not be present to provide a buffer against half a tribe of Weasley children.

They arrived a bit early and were sitting in the kitchen hearing all about what Flick and Guin had been up to the previous day when the Weasley clan walked in. Molly immediately bustled over to Mark, saying how much he looked like his father, and asking him if he’d been eating properly. She was either heavily in denial, or managing to recover her more normal personality.

“You’re too thin,” she said, hands on her hips.

“But I eat plenty, Mrs Weasley,” Mark protested, shooting a rather desperate look at his father and getting no sympathy.

“Just like Ron and the twins, I swear. Eating people out of house and home and you’d never be able to tell it by the look of you. Now, why don’t you introduce me to these two fine elves and I’ll see
what they have to say about it,” she said, and gently but resolutely prodded Mark off ahead of her.

Heru noted that her own children had varying expressions of disbelief and resignation on their faces, and even a little relief that she was off mothering someone else for a change. Heru chuckled softly and averted his face.

Several minutes later she dragged Mark back over to the others and addressed her children. “Now you listen here. Mark is a very nice young boy and I don’t want to hear even a whisper that you’ve been giving him any trouble.” She eyed the twins significantly. “And he could probably give you quite a run at chess, Ron, so you might want to play a game or two while the meeting is going on.”

Heru almost laughed out loud at the amount of information she’d got from his son in so little time. Sounds from above alerted everyone that more people were arriving, so Heru stood and pulled Mark off to the side for a moment. “While I don’t expect any trouble, I’d like to remind you that you can call Flick or Guin if you need them, all right?” he whispered.

Mark’s eyes widened slightly, then he nodded. “Right.”

“Good. The same goes for you, by the way. Behave yourself, but I expect you’d do that anyway.” He ruffled Mark’s hair, causing him to duck away in embarrassment.

The meeting wasn’t actually very lengthy. It was mainly to introduce everyone to their new headquarters and the new recruits. Everyone was invited to wander around the house to familiarize themselves, barring the attic level, and meet whoever they didn’t already know. Anyone who wanted to stay for lunch was welcome to.

Heru found Mark engaged in a game of chess with Ron and carefully didn’t smile, and from the looks of the board it was a fairly even match. After placing a hand briefly on Mark’s shoulder to let him know the meeting was over, and getting a preoccupied smile in return, Heru wandered off to see if anyone dared to speak to him aside from Severus, Albus, and a few select others.

What aroused his interest most keenly was one of the new recruits he found chatting with the twins and Ginny. He watched her change her features for their amusement for several minutes before he sought out Severus, who happened to be speaking with Albus about the open Defense Against the Dark Arts position.

“No, Albus, I don’t want the damned spot for myself. I just want to know if you’re going to hire another mass murderer this year,” he said with considerable sarcasm.

Albus stroked his beard and said, “That is difficult to answer, dear boy. Apparently, the Ministry has decided to involve themselves in affairs at Hogwarts, possibly because I tried to make Cornelius accept that Voldemort has risen again.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Ministry has created a new educational decree giving itself the right to appoint someone of its own choice if I am unable to fill a position.”

“Bollocks. You know damn well they’d saddle us with someone who’d be following the Ministry’s idea of what is appropriate for young minds to learn, and not necessarily what they need to.”

“Yes, I agree. I have been trying to convince Remus to take back the position, but he is being rather difficult about the whole thing. He keeps insisting that the parents would never stand for it. He is quite wrong on that score, however.”
“There must be somebody else you can ask, Albus, or twist around your finger and persuade to take it on. Even Heru could do it for Merlin’s sake.”

Heru’s eyes widened in alarm and he stepped back, seriously considering the idea of bolting. Severus latched on to his arm and held him in place as Heru cursed softly under his breath.

“I had considered the idea,” Albus said with a touch of amusement, “but I did not wish to make things any more difficult when Heru has a son below school age. It would also make him that much more visible to the general public, and I’m not sure that’s wise.”

“Don’t be an idiot, Albus. Half the Slytherin students, or more, have already informed their parents that he’s been at the castle. They’ve also received their book lists by now, and know that he exists.”

“Could you two not talk about me like I’m not here?” Heru asked plaintively. Severus gave him an impatient look while Albus twinkled. “While I wouldn’t mind filling in while Remus was, ah, indisposed, I’m not sure that…”

“I have every intention of convincing Remus, and your offer is appreciated, Heru. I’m sure we could find other things for you to do as well that would not take too much of your time away from Mark, but allow you to remain at the castle if you wished. Still, that does not mean the Ministry won’t come up with something else in an attempt to gain more control.”

“I suppose that means Black will be roaming around the castle as Lupin’s little pet,” Severus said snidely.

Albus gave him a patient look. “I do believe it is time for lunch,” he said and wandered off.

Heru turned to Severus and said, “I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry.”

That afternoon and evening Heru worked on the new tapestry. A week later he was finished, but it had been an almost wasted effort. It showed only a handful of generations, and Heru needed it to go back centuries. Then he remembered seeing the new girl at headquarters and went to see Albus.

“I can do that, but why?”

“Call it a personal quirk of mine. She’s obviously a metamorphmagus, and that is a trait of the Slytherin bloodline. I would like to get blood samples to see if I can fit her into the family tree somewhere, or determine if the ability has sprung up in more than one family.”

“I don’t see any harm in it, though I’m not sure why you’re asking me.”

“It isn’t as though you can walk up to a stranger and ask them to let you collect blood samples, Albus. I was hoping you would send her a letter, and she could contact me if she was willing. Coming from you, she would be more likely to at least consider it.”

“All right. I will send her—” Albus cut off at a soft knock, then called out, “Come in, Remus.”

The door opened, revealing Lupin, who stepped in and closed the door, then realized Heru was present with a tiny start of surprise. “I’m sorry, Albus. Should I come back later?”

“Oh, no, not at all,” said Albus cheerfully. “In fact, it is just as well that Heru was here when you arrived. Do sit down, Remus.” When Lupin had Albus said, “Remus, I simply must insist that you return as Defense professor. I already sent you copies of the letters I received after you resigned, so you are well aware that your condition is not at issue here. Also, Heru has graciously offered to fill in for you when you are indisposed.”
Remus let out a resigned sigh, then said, “And what about Sirius? You don’t really think he’ll be happy stuck at Grimmauld Place by himself. There are too many bad memories there for him. I also doubt that Severus would be very happy having to make wolfsbane potion again for me every month.”

Albus cast a speculative look at Heru. Heru responded by saying, “I am aware of a certain enmity—well, let me just say I have no reason to share it. Wolfsbane will not be an issue, I assure you.” He shrugged.

“As far as Sirius is concerned,” continued Albus, “he is free to apparate in whenever he likes, though obviously he must not be seen, even in his animagus form. It is possible that Peter made sure Voldemort was aware of it, and some of the students would no doubt report a large black dog to their parents as a matter of curiosity even if they had not already been warned to look for one specifically.”

“All right, fine. You win, Albus, as always.” Then Remus turned to Heru and said, “You have my thanks for being willing to assist.”

Heru inclined his head in acknowledgment.

“I am sure once you have made out a lesson plan you will forward a copy to Heru, Remus, though you may still have the one from before. I am sure under these circumstances that none of the … misunderstandings … which happened the last time will occur.”

“Of course.”

“Splendid. There is one other matter I would like to raise before you leave. As you know, Hagrid is on a mission with Madame Maxime to try to sway the giants to our cause. That leaves the Care of Magical Creatures position empty until his return. I did ask to see if Professor Kettleburn would be able to return temporarily, but he was unwilling to risk any more of his limbs, even for such a short period of time. He did, however, send along a set of his old lesson plans and a fruitcake.”

Albus paused for a moment, then said, “I do believe he was trying to tell me something. Well, no matter. By now I’m sure you are wondering what this has to do with either of you. I was hoping that you, Heru, would fill in for Hagrid. I very much doubt it would be for longer than a month.”

Heru frowned in consternation, then turned to Remus. “Should I assume it is much easier to just agree and get it over with, rather than waste the time to bring up all the reasons why I ought to refuse?”

Remus flashed a wry smile at him.

Albus chimed in with, “It goes without saying that Mark would live here as well, so that is not a concern.”

Heru sighed and rubbed his forehead. “You’ll send that letter?”

“Of course.”

“All right.”

“Excellent. Oh, and, if you do not wish to sit at the head table, I will not object. I realize that you may prefer to have meals with your son privately rather than trying to place him at one of the house tables during the interim.”
Heru returned to Severus’s quarters feeling rather outmaneuvered, though he could have refused the request. However, the threat of the Ministry had weighed in his decision and made him feel at least a tiny bit better at having agreed to take on a class that he had never taught before. He wondered, though, what the Ministry would do in response once it became clear that Dumbledore had in fact filled the openings. He assumed that Albus had changed his mind about offering him a position after hearing Severus’s argument that not doing so would not make him any less visible.

It did not surprise him in the least that Severus was pleased with the news, despite it being a position—even if temporary—for a subject that he normally disdained. While he certainly cared about the ingredients one might be able to obtain from magical creatures, for him the creature was a means to an end for the most part. He had always been careful to treat Praecino well, though. And, as no one had mentioned anything about assigning Heru his own quarters, he planned on continuing to use Severus’s. His lover found that to be equally pleasing.

The next day Heru received a letter from Tonks. She was agreeable enough and said she would come by the castle that day. If that was not suitable, Heru should send word. She arrived shortly after lunch and was announced by a house-elf, who informed Heru that she was waiting in the potions classroom. He immediately went to meet with her, shadowed by Severus and Mark.

Once the introductions were handled, and Heru had got over the lurid pink of her hair, Tonks said, “I don’t actually understand what it is you want—Albus was rather vague—but I reckoned that if he thought it was all right, there was no reason to refuse. Could you maybe explain what you’re trying to do that calls for me?”

“Yes, of course.” Heru placed the tapestry he had brought with him on one of the student tables and unrolled it, then weighted down the corners. “I found it very interesting that you are a metamorphmagus, as previously I had understood the ability to be solely within the Slytherin blood line. This tapestry was an attempt on my part to trace back at least part of Voldemort’s blood lines, but it wasn’t very successful given that I was using, er, very old material.”

“Eh?”

“I liberated the remains of his muggle father.”

“Oh.” She looked a bit disturbed by that revelation.

“In any case, my tapestries are best created using the blood of a living person. Now, as you undeniably possess the ability, I want to trace your line back to see if this is simply a case of it randomly springing up, or if there is some obscure connection. If you do not object, I would like to collect a few blood samples from you to make another.”

Tonks looked at him curiously, then at Mark. “I did know you had to be born with it. You two have it as well, then?”

Heru nodded and concentrated for a moment, turning his hair a fiery shade of red and giving himself a healthy tan. A few moments later he reverted, being careful to not reveal the scar he had kept hidden for so many years. When she turned to look at Mark, she was greeted by a set of grotesque fangs and wickedly arched brows, along with a set of hideously long, pointed fingernails. Then Mark giggled and reverted back to his usual appearance.

She grinned broadly at him and winked, then asked Heru, “How much blood?”
“Several small vials. Seven, actually. One for each day it takes me to create the tapestry. Not even as much as one might donate in the muggle world. And, you are welcome to have the resulting tapestry once I have had a chance to study it.”

That seemed to decide her, as she nodded firmly. Severus stepped up at that point to commence the bloodletting, and shortly thereafter they were done. Tonks, thrilled to have met more people with the same ability, asked if she could steal Mark for a while, and after a brief exchange with the castle, Heru agreed. Once they were away, he and Severus returned to their quarters so Heru could start the new tapestry.

Another week had gone by when Heru finished his new effort. Tracing back the lines, however, was a process requiring extreme patience. Heru could have simply assumed that something obvious would appear at the top of the tree, but that would not tell if Voldemort was related in any way to Tonks. There were other factors at work, as well. The Riddle tapestry had been easily dealt with because so few generations had appeared. In the case of Tonks, it was an entirely different matter, as the tapestry could not immediately display the entirety of the picture.

It had not been an issue with Heru’s tapestry; it updated itself as children were born or people married into the blood line. For the Tonks tapestry, Heru had to check each day to see how much had appeared. Of course, since the tree went up, rather than in every direction, there was no guarantee of seeing Voldemort appear at all. It was much more likely that Heru would find a starting point centuries in the past, so at that, he might still need to find another way to get what he wanted. So it was that the tapestry was not even close to completion when the school year began.

It had been decided that Heru would sit at the head table for dinner on the day the students arrived. After that it would be optional, unless Mark decided he would like to sit at a house table if he was able to become friendly with anyone. For that night he would be tucked in between Severus and Heru.

Heru noticed that a number of the students were eyeing them curiously as they took their seats and after. He had no doubt that some of them remembered the day the year before when he and Mark had eaten at the head table. But their attention was pulled away, briefly at least, when Minerva led in a long line of first years and had them assemble for the sorting ceremony. It was both interesting and boring for Heru, but Mark appeared to be fascinated by how each child’s house was determined, and how the other students reacted when the hat would call out the name.

Afterward, Albus rose to make his usual start of term announcements, which included his customary warning about the dark forest.

“In addition, I am pleased to introduce two new staff members. Mr Lupin has returned as our Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. I’m sure many of you remember him and will welcome him back.” Albus paused for the student reaction. “And, as our Care of Magical Creatures professor is currently away from the castle, Mr Slytherin will be taking his place until Hagrid returns. I am sure you will all give him a warm welcome.”

Heru almost snorted at the looks on the faces of most students, and it depended a great deal which house they were in as to what they expressed. Predictably, it was the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff students who looked the most alarmed or upset. The Ravenclaws looked reflective, and the Slytherin students displayed a mixture of awe and calculation, not to mention sly hope and pride.

Still, many of the students looked equally puzzled, given that anyone taking Potions well knew that their new books were written by a man named Slytherin, published under the name of Slytherin Press. The applause for him was noticeably less than it had been for Remus, but that was only to be expected.
“I should also point out that Professor Slytherin’s son will be staying at the castle during that time, so you will most likely see him around. Now, let us welcome in the new year with a feast!”

Severus turned to Heru and smirked; he had not missed the faces of those in his house, nor those of the Gryffindors.
Heru had already faced down a number of students, but the second day of the term would bring a class of fifth years after lunch. Specifically, a combined class of Gryffindors and Slytherins. He ate in Severus’s quarters with Mark, gave him a hug good-bye because he couldn’t stay, and headed out onto the grounds a bit early to prepare. When the students arrived he could see that the reactions were again mixed.

Following the plan he had been given, he had set up a display of bowtruckles for them and had every intention of having them do the suggested work, as it would keep them out of his hair for most of the lesson even though he thought it was a stupid assignment. Once they had settled down, he began.

“Good afternoon. Who would like to tell me what these creatures are?”

Hermione’s hand shot up immediately, along with a few others. As she had been first, Heru pointed to her.

“Bowtruckles. They’re tree guardians and usually live in those that are used in wand making.”

“Very good. Five points to Gryffindor. Now, perhaps someone else would like to tell me what they eat.” He ignored it when Hermione’s hand shot up again, choosing instead a Slytherin boy named Nott.

“Normally wood lice, though they will eat fairy eggs if available,” said Nott in a bored tone.

Heru nodded. “Five points to Slytherin. These creatures may not appear dangerous, and generally speaking they are not, but you can expect that any person approaching a tree which houses bowtruckles should be carrying a distraction such as wood lice. Otherwise, they might find their eyes scratched out. For today, you will each make a sketch of one and label all its parts by the end of the lesson. There is a supply of wood lice in that box over there for you to use. If you have any questions, I’ll be right over there.”

Seeing that no one was yet brave enough to approach him, he wandered several feet away and leaned against a tree, crossing his arms over his chest and propping one foot against the rough bark, trying to block out the squealing that some of the Gryffindor girls were doing. He was not surprised when Hermione was the first student to finish and approach him.

“I’m done, professor,” she said, holding out her sketch for him to take.

“Assuming it is of top quality, I’ll award another five points to Gryffindor for such speedy completion.” Heru pulled a pencil out from behind his ear and made a notation in the corner, then tucked it back, slipping the parchment into the folder he was holding.

“Sir?” she said hesitantly.

“Yes, Miss Granger?”

“Do you … know anything about Hagrid, sir? I mean, is he all right?”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I have no idea,” he said. “Was there anything else I could try to help you with?”

She bit her lip and looked away for a moment, then shook her head. “No, that was all, professor.”
“You can either rejoin the class or run along,” he told her. “You needn’t stay when you’ve already handed in the assignment.”

She nodded, took a step back, then turned and walked a short way off from the bulk of the Gryffindors. She sat down on the grass and pulled out a book to read, presumably to wait for Ron, who was currently snarling at his uncooperative specimen.

He was forced to intervene at one point, which annoyed him, for it was Draco Malfoy causing trouble by launching the creatures at unsuspecting Gryffindor girls. When he walked over, Malfoy sensed his presence and turned with a smirk on his face.

“Five points from Slytherin for this disruption and five points for potentially harming not only the creatures, but fellow students,” said Heru flatly.

Malfoy’s expression went momentarily blank, then he drew himself up and said, “Do you have any idea who I am?”

“Another five points for disrespect. Now, would you care to actually do the assignment, or would you prefer a detention?”

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed and his face took on a spiteful cast. He turned abruptly and stalked away muttering, his two cronies trailing after him. Heru returned to his lazy position at the tree and considered giving everyone an outstanding simply for finishing such a ridiculous assignment, but he knew he would likely get in trouble for it. He also wished he could chuck the folder into the nearest fire, but realized that some students would be very upset when they did not receive them back.

Eventually they all came up to him and handed over their drawings and were told they could go. After storing the bowtruckles and their food supply away, he strode back up to the castle with the intention of getting them evaluated and marked as quickly as possible. By that evening more names had appeared on the tapestry, but not nearly enough.

When Friday evening rolled around the tapestry had branched out far enough for Heru to have some basis for exploration. He spent the majority of the weekend searching through the names once he had located the approximate time period, starting at one side and slowly working his way across, adjusting the visible text sideways as he went along. His eyes were so tired by the time Sunday dinner approached that he almost missed a very curious thing.

One of the upward male lines terminated abruptly, even though other names of that period continued on further back into the past. When he looked more closely—he had to squint to focus properly—he realized that not only was the name blurry, but there was no date of birth. Knowing that it was not enough to call it proof of anything, Heru noted down the name for later and kept scrolling sideways, looking for other discrepancies.

Severus came in a short while later and interrupted, asking him caustically if he intended to ignore his son for much longer, especially as Heru had already skipped lunch. Feeling rather ashamed of himself, Heru rolled up the tapestry and stored it, then thanked Severus for his intervention and went to find Mark to spend the remainder of the evening with him, talking with him after dinner as he started the wolfsbane potion for Remus, and letting Mark help with the preparation of ingredients.

At breakfast, Heru was given a slightly rude awakening. The Daily Prophet reported that the Ministry had appointed one Dolores Umbridge to head a special investigation into the quality of education being received at Hogwarts. She would be visiting the school several times each week to audit classes, and speak to staff and students alike. And, she was due to arrive at the castle the next morning. Heru wondered if Albus had been given any more notice than this, and if so, why he had
neglected to inform the staff.

It was clear to him that this was Fudge’s response to not having been able to appoint someone loyal to him into the school’s staff, and even possibly a way to investigate the knowledge that one of the people Albus had hired bore the name of Slytherin. Heru would not have put it past Cornelius to accuse Albus of openly conspiring with the enemy in this case if he could get even a smidgen of something that could be construed as proof. With Albus having stated that Voldemort was back, Fudge might well be looking to discredit him in any way possible, and put his own man in as headmaster.

He talked about it with Mark that afternoon, after he’d brought Remus the completed wolfsbane potion, asking if the boy would mind terribly having his meals alone on those days so that he could be sitting at the head table in the Great Hall along with the rest of the staff. Mark wasn’t especially thrilled with the idea, but agreed, probably because it was his father doing the asking.

There was a brief meeting among the staff that evening about Umbridge. Albus did not reveal any of the suspicions he may have held, but the Order members on the staff felt they had reason to be anxious about this new move on the Ministry’s part. Heru could only assume a note would have gone off to Sirius warning him to be exceptionally careful when popping into Remus’s quarters to visit.

So it was that the next morning Heru was already ensconced at the high table next to Severus, the chair to his left remaining empty as Remus was recovering from his bout with the full moon, when Albus arrived at the Great Hall with Dolores Umbridge at his side. She looked, Heru thought, like a woman who had attempted to do an animagus transformation into some kind of amphibian, and had failed part way through, locking herself into a state where she strongly resembled a squat little frog or toad.

That she was dressed, not in the more customary robes, but with a fuzzy pink cardigan wrapping around the bulk of her upper body and an astonishingly lime green bow perched in her hair told Heru that she either dressed in some kind of denial of her appearance, or dressed to make the grotesque first impression of her appearance even more horrifying. She had a sickly sweet smile on her wide mouth as the two approached the head table, and Heru was appalled to realize she would be sitting in the empty chair next to him for the time being.

He gave her an excruciatingly polite welcome and resolved silently not to say another word during the meal, hoping she would pester the person to her other side and that he would not have to deal with her directly for some time. It was to his great misfortune that Heru was audited not once that day, but twice, Umbridge having appeared at both the Defense and Magical Creatures classes he was teaching.

It was, perhaps, fortunate that Defense came first, for he was undeniably comfortable teaching that subject. After introducing herself again in a sickly sweet manner that spoke of coy flirtation, she took a seat up near the professor’s desk and set about taking notes as whim—or purpose—struck her. Heru did his best to ignore her, giving the class a short lecture and demonstration, then had them divide up into pairs in order to practice the new spell. It was then that she appeared at his side, ready to intervene or correct students as necessary.

“I understand you are not the normal Defense professor,” she said, a smile that might have been pleasant on anyone else stretching her mouth to alarmingly wide proportions.

He glanced at her for a second before returning his eyes to the students. “No, Professor Lupin is ill at the moment so I am taking his classes for him while he recovers,” he said, then surged forward to prevent one of the more boisterous students from aiming not at his partner, but at the back of another
When he had stepped back again she said, “I see. And are you aware of the nature of Professor Lupin’s illness?”

“Sorry, no. I didn’t ask,” he said, then stepped forward again to correct the wand movements of a girl who was almost, but not quite, getting it correct.

“Do you think that teaching the students these types of spells in a practical setting, rather than giving them a sound grounding in defensive theory, is like giving them a false impression of the world and what they should expect to find in it once they move on into adulthood?” she asked.

“I’m not sure I follow your reasoning,” Heru replied calmly. “I believe if a student is expected to be able to perform up to standard on mandatory official testing at the end of their fifth and seventh years, that they should have a firm grasp on not only theory, but the practical aspects as well.”

He gave her another quick look, then said, “While I, or anyone else I imagine, would hope that these children never need to use this knowledge, having it is not the same as telling them that they must find an excuse to employ it in everyday life. It is, in some respects, a cautionary aspect of a rounded education, just like our history teaches us many things we would prefer not to accept, but must, as we cannot deny they happened. Understanding and prevention is the aim, I would say, not reaction.”

“How very interesting,” she managed to say, before Heru turned to face her fully and unleashed a dazzling smile at her.

“Much as it pains me to interrupt, I must move on to the next phase of this lesson. Please excuse me,” he said, then moved forward before she could respond. Then he called everyone to a halt and began the second half of his lecture, explaining the common problems he had noted and the best ways to correct those issues. Sometime during the process he noticed that Dolores had disappeared and heaved a quiet sigh of relief.

After lunch he had the Gryffindor and Slytherin fifth years, and another visit from Umbridge. This set of students appeared to be avidly curious as she stepped daintily across the lawn in a pair of high heeled, pointy toed shoes that were totally inappropriate. Heru held back a groan and wondered if it had been her idea or Albus’s to torture him twice in one day. As she drew closer Heru handed out the sketches he had graded the week before, and by then she had reached the group.

While the students were examining their papers, she said, “I understand you are also not the normal teacher for this class.”

Heru gave her a determinedly pleasant smile and said, “I am not. The headmaster asked if I would be willing to fill in while Professor Hagrid was away on leave, as he would not be getting back until several weeks into the term.”

“I see,” she said and flashed another wide smile. “And I understand that you claim to be a member of the Slytherin family.”

“Oh, dear lady,” he said with another dazzling smile, “I claim nothing. But, I wonder if I might ask you a question, for I can see that you are quite intelligent and must be very well versed in Ministry affairs, and indeed, magical ones in general.”

She gave him a slightly uncertain nod, raising her brows curiously.

“Would you say that it is impossible to forge a magical contract?”
“Why, yes, of course,” she replied, looking faintly confused.

“Ah, now, that is a relief. I wanted the verification of someone such as yourself, you see, because I recall that when I purchased a home not too long ago that the officials at the Ministry seemed quite taken aback when I dropped off a copy of the deed. I had the feeling they thought the document was not valid. But”—he smiled warmly at her—“as you have made it quite clear just now, it must be, so I need not have any lingering worries on the subject. I had thought for a moment that there must have been some kind of error at the estate agent, but now I see that could not possibly have been the case.”

She took a half step back, a thoughtful look on her face. Then she shook her head slightly, gave a simpering smile, and said, “Are you aware of the reason for Professor Hagrid’s leave of absence? Information on that is quite vague.”

“Would that I could assist you, dear lady.” Heru arranged his expression to show sadness and remorse. “I’m afraid I do not know, though I would surely tell you if I did. However, I was quite happy to agree to fill in, even if only for a short length of time. The children”—he swept his hand expansively off toward the now waiting students—“are our future, after all, and one could scarcely turn down the opportunity to see them learn and grow.”

She gave him another simpering smile. Either she thought he was mocking her and responding in kind, or she had been given enough food for thought for the moment and was responding to his flattery. “Though, it does appear the children have finished examining their papers. Would you be terribly put out if I began the lesson, dear lady?”

“Oh, no. Do go right ahead,” she said. “I shall be wandering through the class and speaking with some of the students. You won’t even notice me.”

Heru inclined his head and turned to face the class, launching into a lecture about kneazles once he had their attention, and showing them several varieties, including a few that were crossbred with non-magical domestic cats. Once he was able to assign the homework he stood and watched over them, keeping a close, but not obvious eye on the Umbridge woman.

She was roaming around, stopping from time to time at a knot of students to ask questions. When she arrived at Malfoy’s little crowd he noticed that the boy was smirking more obviously than usual as she started to speak. She carried her clipboard along, making copious notes, though Heru had a feeling that he was not the target this time. Hagrid was.

Severus informed him later that evening in the privacy of their quarters that Umbridge had seemed quite interested in the fact that all the Potions texts were written by Heru, and had questioned his suitability for teaching subjects outside that field. She had gone on to question the texts themselves, and Severus’s opinion of their worth.

“I confess,” Severus said, “that I was more interested in dissecting the woman to see if she shared any other characteristics with toads than in answering her questions. However, I would not have approved the texts for use if not for their obvious value and superiority, and so was able to be quite firm on that matter. As for your teaching skills, I told her I had seen you instruct on a variety of subjects and was quite unconcerned given the results.”

“She came to your first class?” asked Heru, getting a nod in response. “That might explain a little.” He briefly summarized his own two experiences with her, finishing up by saying he thought he might have been disarming enough for her to lose interest and leave him alone. Though, he did not doubt she would be checking the files for the deed he had mentioned, to verify that he was who he professed to be.
Over the next few weeks her inspections continued, though she never dropped in on one of his classes again. Heru often quietly apparated to London to visit № 12 Grimmauld Place to check up on his house-elves and see that they were not suffering unduly from their change of assignment. Apparently they were getting on splendidly with Sirius, though they did report that they had more than once seen him sitting in a chair with tears running down his cheeks and staring morosely into the fire.

Heru had finished his examination of the Tonks tapestry and written down any names that caught his eye as being odd or different. After arranging to meet with the young woman he brought it to headquarters. When she arrived he showed her how to adjust what text appeared on the surface and made sure she was able to do so. Then, he spent a few minutes twisting its function in the other direction so that it would now begin to record forward from that point. If she married and had children, those names would appear, and would continue to do so through her line. She was quite pleased with the results and gave him an exuberant hug, then bounced off cheerfully, the rolled tapestry tucked under her arm.

When Heru returned to the castle he felt immediately that something was not right. The castle provided him with two images—one of Hagrid in his cottage, and one of Professor Trelawney and Dolores Umbridge. Heru took the first to mean that his sojourn as Magical Creatures professor was over. The second he wasn’t so sure about. On his way up to find Albus he stopped dead in the main hall. Albus was certainly there, but so were a number of people, among which was Trelawney with a bottle clutched in her hand, and Umbridge with a poisonous smile etching her wide mouth.

“You can’t do this to me!” wailed Sibyll tragically, waving her bottle around and splashing the contents on several of the students who had got too close.

“Oh, but I can.” Dolores held up a roll of parchment and shook it. “This gives me the right. I’m afraid that you are by no means a competent teacher. This educational decree gives me the power on behalf of the Ministry to fire you from your position and have you replaced.”

Sibyll collapsed into a sobbing heap on the floor as Albus stepped forward. “Might I see that?” he asked, and took the parchment when she thrust it out.

As he began to read Dolores said, “So you and your things need to be out of the castle post-haste. Tonight if possible.”

“But this is my home!” wailed Sibyll, then tossed back her head and took a swig from the bottle she was holding.

“Not anymore,” Dolores said coolly, then turned to Albus, who looked up for a moment. “And if you cannot find a replacement by tomorrow, the Ministry will appoint one for you. Classes must continue despite this unfortunate occurrence.”

Heru didn’t think she looked the slightest bit as though this was unfortunate, and wondered what it was she saw in Cornelius Fudge that she was so willing to be loyal to his aims and goals. As he was standing off at an angle he was able to catch Albus’s eye when the man finished reading.

Albus handed the decree back to Umbridge and said in a voice that carried, “Students, you will continue on to lunch immediately.” Knowing that the show was over, and not wanting to bring the headmaster’s wrath down on them, the students hastily complied. Albus then said in a much lower voice, “Have no fear, Dolores. The Ministry will receive word tomorrow as to the name of the new Professor so that their files might be properly updated.”

Albus then strode over to a still sobbing Sibyll and pulled her to her feet. After whispering something...
in her ear, he gave Heru a tiny nod and left to head up the main staircase. Heru followed, catching up with him quickly, but remained silent until they were safely in Albus’s office. “What did you say to Trelawney?” he asked curiously.

“That despite her loss of position, Hogwarts will be her home for as long as she wishes,” Albus said. “She is totally unaware of the true predictions she has given us. I would not release her into the world unaware and at risk when Hogwarts can keep her in comfortable safety. She would not know what to do with herself if she were forced out.”

Heru nodded, smiling. “I came to find you originally because I knew Hagrid was back and assumed he would be resuming his duties.”

Albus appeared surprised, but said merely, “I shall have to go see him.”

“I’m amazed that you already have a replacement for Trelawney picked out, though I suppose I shouldn’t be. Umbridge seemed to be far too interested in her for it to be coincidence.”

Albus twinkled at him, making Heru instantly suspicious. “I did have one or two candidates in mind, I confess. I had spoken to one of the more helpful centaurs in the dark forest as they are known to be great diviners. But, they are a strongly insular community, and I feared that him taking on the position would mean his expulsion from their society. They use their talent to guide themselves, and not for the benefit of humans.”

Heru shot him a narrow-eyed look.

“On the other hand, there is you,” said Albus airily.

“Me.”

“Dare I hope that you are as gifted as your ancestor was? You do have extraordinary talents. It would not surprise me if divinatory sight or ability was one of them. Though, if you do not, I will speak again with Firenze, hoping that he will agree to his banishment from his own kind. Mind you, it has become quite clear that Dolores holds a strong dislike of part-humans, so that may drive her to find other ways to be a thorn in our sides.”

Heru thought that while guilt was an effective method of persuasion, he did not appreciate that the tactic was being used on him. Nevertheless, he did possess the talent, and sighed in consequence.

“Fine. Send me a schedule.”
Albus announced the change at breakfast the next morning, or so Heru heard. A schedule had been delivered, and Heru was relieved to note that Divination was even less popular than Care of Magical Creatures was; he would have more time to himself or to spend with Mark. He would not have been surprised, however, if someone had confided in him that an entire generation of children had been warning their siblings, cousins, and friends about the crazy old bat who lived in one of the tallest towers of the castle, advising them to avoid the class.

Heru had spent a little time wondering why there appeared to have been no word on Voldemort’s activities, and why it seemed that the Order was perfectly content with that. Did they assume that Voldemort, only just reborn to corporeal state, was lying in wait and recuperating to regain his strength? He was slightly ashamed to admit to himself that he felt rather blasé and disconnected from events. Time had a way of making things seem so less urgent, and it was easy to get caught up in the day-to-day happenings directly around him.

Heru shook his head as though clearing cobwebs from his mind, then smiled at his son and explained the new schedule.

“That’s wicked, father. But…”

“What’s wrong, Mark? Is it still too much?”

“No, it’s not that,” Mark protested. “It’s—well, I used to have the whole house and village to roam around in, and there was Flick and Guin. I do have my snake, and Cooper, and Dobby is always happy to come visit, but it’s not the same. It’s so cramped here, even with having a whole castle. I don’t have room for my things, you know? Or…”

Heru wrinkled his brow. “I don’t like the idea of leaving you at the house all day alone, Mark. But if you have some suggestions on how to help make you happier here at the castle, I’m all ears.”

“Can’t we have more or bigger rooms?”

“I could ask Albus for bigger quarters, but that would mean you wouldn’t be able to see Severus as easily.”

“I meant right here. You can talk to the castle—can’t you ask her to rearrange things a little?”

“Well, yes. But don’t you think you should ask Severus first before I start making requests?”

Mark bounced in his seat. “I think he’d say yes, don’t you?”

“He would,” broke in Severus’s voice from the doorway. Mark squealed and bounced off his chair, running over to engulf Severus in a hug. Severus bore it patiently, even returning it, before looking at Heru to say, “Now what did I just agree to?”

Mark had let go and dragged Severus over to the table before Heru spoke. “Mark is feeling a bit claustrophobic and wanted to know if you’d object to me asking the castle to try to add a few extra rooms to these quarters.” He barely had the words out of his mouth when he felt a warm, misty hug envelop him. “And apparently, the castle says she can.”

“Then by all means. I suppose we are a bit cramped in here.”
“Yay!” Mark cried. “I’m going to go tell Selthis!” He dashed off to go find his snake as Severus took a seat.

“Then I assume I needn’t expect to find the two of you in quarters halfway up the castle as soon as I turn around.”

Heru shook his head. “She seems quite confident, and happy to expand yours. Both Mark and I would prefer to stay here anyway.”

Severus flashed a brief smile and asked, “Any idea how long it would take?”

After a moment Heru said, “No, she won’t answer me. She just keeps humming.” He shrugged helplessly and grinned.

The next day, Heru had his first Divination class. He did with them what he intended to do with each of his classes until they had all been introduced to the new order of things. His classroom was not up in Trelawney’s tower, but rather in the dungeons. He had arbitrarily taken over a large unused room not far from the stairs to the ground floor and had Dobby post messages as to the change in all house common rooms, and help him clean the place up and get it ready.

It in no way resembled Sibyll’s tea room atmosphere, and there were no clouds of incense fouling the air or making the inhabitants sleepy. Each station for two was set up so that under each table was storage for a selection of divination instruments along with copies of the books Trelawney had been so fond of passing around for her classes. When the students were all settled in after lunch, he began.

“I do not know firsthand what kind of teacher Professor Trelawney was, nor do I care to know. As such, comparisons are unwelcome. If you feel the need to make them, do so on your own time and do not waste mine or that of your classmates while here. With that out of the way, I would like to say there are three kinds of people. Those with true sight, those who are able to get glimpses of the future and sometimes the past, and those with no ability whatsoever. Which one of those each of you is will determine how things are done in here. Obviously, if you do not possess the ability, practice will not make you any more likely to succeed.”

Heru moved to the front of his desk and conjured up a stool, placing it a foot or so before him. “So, the very first thing we’re going to do is find that out. I will call you up one by one, check, and make the appropriate notation. Once that is out of the way, I may ask that you swap seats around into a more efficient arrangement.”

The students all looked a little shocked at his words, and a few looked worried. Others looked quite pleased, possibly thinking that it meant vindication of the talent they had always professed to hold. Heru pulled out his class list and called the first name, gesturing for the girl, Lavender Brown, to sit on the stool. After a minute of intense focus, he made a note next to her name and sent her back to her seat.

When he had checked all of them he was surprised once again to realize that Ron Weasley actually had talent. Remembering back through two years of class with him was a reliable indication that while Trelawney did have the power to spout off a prophecy every decade or two, she had no real idea how to teach.

He spent the remainder of the class rearranging their seating, trying to put a person with no ability with someone who did, without stating explicitly which person was which. Even if a person could not predict or interpret the signs, they could learn properly what methods there were, and how a seer used them to focus their talent. He let them go that time with an admonishment to remember the new seating for their next class.
When that same group arrived Wednesday morning, they did remember. Completely disdaining the syllabus for the class, he decided to use tea leaf reading as an example.

“This is redundant information, I realize, but I want all of you to understand how this really works. Each of you will go ahead and prepare a cup while thinking about a question you have, then give it to your partner. Once the cup has drained, you will each write down what you think you see the leaves forming. And by that, I mean for you to write down all interpretations of the images, in order of what you believe is most likely that it represents. Don’t worry about looking anything up in your books just yet. I’ll be coming around to talk with each of you, so after you’re done writing down your observations, just wait and talk quietly.”

The first twosome he approached was Ron and Neville, and he started with Neville. He picked up the cup the boy had been reading and interpreted the results, raising his brows slightly when he realized that Ron would eventually become the Gryffindor quidditch captain. Then he turned to Neville.

“All right, let’s go over these.” He turned the cup so that both boys could see the clumps of tea and pointed to one. “What did you see for this, Mr Longbottom?” Neville had apparently written down the first thing that came to mind for all of them, and even admitted so. That his interpretations were completely off was no surprise to Heru. Neville had no idea what any of it meant overall.

He repeated the process with Ron, taking the cup and looking inside, then nodding and asking of the boy’s interpretation. Ron had the vague idea that Neville’s question had something to do with his wand, but aside from that he wasn’t sure.

Heru smiled. “Mr Weasley, judging from the cup you prepared, you had the quidditch captaincy on your mind”—Ron blinked—“and you, Mr Longbottom, were wondering if your ability at magic has anything to do with the fact that your wand is not one that chose you.”

Neville gave him a wide-eyed look, so Heru said, “I can see by your faces that I am correct in those assessments. I am going to mark which images are which, and let you two get on with using the book to interpret. You might want to discuss why you chose as you did and what prompted you to do so. It will help you, perhaps, to get a better understanding of the process, and to know that sometimes thinking too hard about what it may be is a deterrent to seeing what’s actually there.”

After taking a moment to put checks next to the correct guesses, Heru moved on to the next twosome. When he came around for the second pass he was in time to hear Ron saying, “I don’t know. I just felt like it had to be a father figure, even though it’s really more like a blob.”

Heru smiled and said, “Exactly so, Mr Weasley. You felt, you had an unexplained urge. Interpretation is not exact. You will not see the leaves do you a favor and arrange themselves just so into picture perfect images. If you have talent, they will spark something in your magic that produces a response, even if it seems silly. That is a father. This is a club. That is … whatever.” He waved his hand like a magician on stage.

“Once you start to trust those feelings, and come to learn what the results mean in terms of an overall interpretation, you’ll be able to look in a cup and realize an answer almost immediately, as I do. Now, let me see what you’ve made for conclusions.”

A few moments later he said, “Mr Longbottom, you’ve done a good job with this, though I can see you would not have arrived at the correct conclusion, nor known exactly what Mr Weasley’s question was.” At Neville’s downcast look he said, “Do not worry. Not everyone has this talent. I am far more concerned with you learning why things work. These tools are just that—tools that focus a seer’s talent so they can produce an answer rather than a wild guess. The same is true for
crystal balls, palmistry, and any number of methods. Ron can help you to learn, and you can help Ron to learn by getting him to voice what he’s sensing and to point out things from how you see them.”

Neville gave him a slightly more encouraged look, so Heru moved on to Ron. “You have also done a good job with this. You were more or less on in your original interpretations, and your conclusion is fairly close to the correct answer.”

He paused long enough to shoot a quelling stare at two of the girls for bursting out into loud giggles. “I think with time things will start to come together. Since this group will be taking the OWLs at the end of the year, I’ll be reviewing much of what you’ve gone over the past two years. But I will warn you—how well you do depends entirely on how much effort you put into this, Mr Weasley. You might want to consider keeping a serious dream diary, even if none of them make any sense to you.”

He paused again, this time to gather his thoughts. “I think the two of you get on well enough to be a great help to each other with this. There’s time enough left in class so that you can try again with a new question if you like.” He straightened and moved on to the next group.

When the students shuffled out at the end of class, Heru realized that none of them seemed particularly disturbed that he was a Slytherin any longer, and that made him smile. And, while Umbridge was still visiting the castle and making inspections, she had not yet bothered him in his new capacity.

That weekend was the first Hogsmeade weekend of the year, and Heru had every intention of taking advantage of it. So it was that he, Mark, and Severus went down to the village to spend the day in idle pursuits like shopping for things they didn’t need in the first place. They were walking down the main thoroughfare toward the book shop when two white-blond males rounded a corner and approached. Severus stiffened slightly at his side at the sight of them. When they were but a few steps from the shop they were hailed, or at least, Severus was.

“Ah, Severus. How lovely to see you again,” said Lucius Malfoy with smiling insincerity. “I trust things are going well.”

“Lucius,” Severus said shortly.

“You simply must introduce me to your friends, Severus,” Lucius said, placing a hand on Draco’s shoulder.

Mark looked up at his father in mild confusion, apparently not having missed the undercurrent of seriousness. Heru responded by tilting his head toward the shop and saying, “Go ahead and look. I’ll be in shortly.” Mark nodded and took off, disappearing within a second later.

“Lucius, this is Heru Slytherin. Heru, this is Lucius Malfoy.”

“And the boy?” Lucius persisted.

“My son,” Heru said in clipped tones.

“So,” Lucius said, pausing to give Heru a once-over, “you are the professor my Draco has told me about, and a Slytherin. How very interesting. You have quite a fan in Dolores Umbridge, I hear.”

“I’m flattered.”

“I also hear you’ve become the new Divination professor. Such a curious choice, I think, though rumor has it that you’ve managed to inspire new interest in your students for the subject.”
“Was there something in particular you wanted?” asked Severus.

“Severus, really, you forget your manners. I merely wished to greet an old friend and perhaps meet a new one. I have some business opportunities I might consider discussing with you at a later date.” He bared his teeth in a parody of a smile. “However, we must move along for the time being. Have a good day, gentlemen. Draco, come along.” After inclining his head, Lucius continued on past them with his son in tow.

Heru exchanged a glance with Severus, then chanted a few phrases under his breath and made a peculiar gesture. Then they entered the shop to see what Mark was up to. When they did return to the castle, Severus went in search of Albus while Heru took a seat in their quarters to pay closer attention to what Lucius was up to.

“What is it, Lucius?” asked Voldemort.

“I thought you might be interested to know that I ran into Severus today, my lord. With him was the Slytherin man and his son. They seemed quite comfortable together, those three.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“I thought it might be possible, my lord, that Severus is not so far out of your grasp as we thought. While I cannot be in any way sure, I found it interesting that Severus had taken up with someone from your family. It makes me wonder if he sensed an opportunity on your behalf, even though the previous evidence supports his betrayal of you.”

“My family,” said Voldemort, clenching the arm of his chair so tightly that the wood splintered. “How is it that this man can appear out of nowhere with such a name and have it be genuine? Severus indeed showed his betrayal by helping to keep that Potter brat alive while I was trying to regain my body.”

“It is possible, my lord, he was only doing so to keep from arousing Dumbledore’s suspicions as to his loyalty. I would not be surprised if the old man keeps a very close eye on him and his activities even now. Severus has always been steadfastly pro-Slytherin, almost to the point of obsession.”

“I hear a lot of ambiguity there, Lucius.”

“I’m sorry, my lord. I cannot be sure, and only raise the issue so that you might consider what it means.”

“And what have you learned of this man so far?”

“He nominally resides in Hogsmeade, my lord, with his son, and there is no evidence of a wife. He was originally hired at the castle to teach during the half giant’s absence, and to cover for the werewolf after full moons, but has since taken over the divination position on the dismissal of the Trelawney woman. Dolores Umbridge from the Ministry seems to be quite fond of him for some reason, which I find surprising given that she is a pawn of Fudge.”

He paused a moment and resumed, “He wrote new textbooks for all seven years of Potions, which are currently being used at Hogwarts, and spent a great deal of time at the castle over the summer months, though I have been unable to determine why. He
has two house-elves in his service and is purportedly a parselmouth, as is his son. The
students have apparently gotten over their shock and distrust of him as well, and have
come to view him for the most part as a knowledgeable and fair-minded professor who
will tolerate no fooling about in his classes. If Draco is correct, Slytherin appears to
reside at the castle with Severus, and his classroom is in the dungeons.”

When Lucius finally ran out of things to say, Voldemort adopted a thoughtful mien.
Several minutes later he murmured, “Then perhaps I should summon Severus. If he fails
to appear, I shall know that his betrayal is complete. And if he does come to me, I shall
question him most closely on his knowledge of the situation.”

Heru took the time to reach out down the link he had with Voldemort and connected with his mind a
moment later, causing him to experience a dizzying sense of double-vision.

Voldemort gestured and said simply, “Lucius.” Lucius knelt and bared his arm, then
extended it. Voldemort touched his finger to the Dark Mark and concentrated. A
moment later he frowned.

Heru could feel the confusion in the man’s mind. His attempt to summon Severus had resulted in
what felt like trying to grasp hold of fog. He watched from two viewpoints as Voldemort tried
several more times, causing Lucius no small amount of pain in the process. Voldemort tried one last
time, targeting someone he knew was not Marked as being in his service, Draco Malfoy. The
sensation was the same.

“What is this madness?” he finally snarled in frustration, withdrawing his hand and
letting Lucius stand.

“My lord?”

“Either Severus has died since you saw him earlier, or he has somehow managed to
remove the Dark Mark. And if he were dead, I should have at least felt an echo. This is
impossible. No one holds that power but me!”

Lucius wisely remained silent as Voldemort continued to mutter to himself.

“Dumbledore could not have, I am sure of it. Slytherin? Is this some bid to show me his
strength as a courting gesture, or a signal that he has decided to show his opposition by
stealing one of my servants?”

Eventually he seemed to realize that Lucius was still standing there and ceased his
musing. “You will find out everything about this man. Speak to Fudge as well. If this is
a bid for my attention, I want proof. And send Peter to the castle to spy in animagus
form. He can at least attempt to be useful for something other than making me nauseous.
Get to it!”

“As you command, my lord,” said Lucius immediately, bowing deeply before hastening
off.

Heru jumped to his feet and severed the link, then grabbed a spare pensieve from a cupboard to tuck
into his pocket and exited their quarters to the hallway. He had not yet reached the stairs when
Severus came into view, so he grabbed his lover by the arm and turned him around, and continued
walking toward Albus’s office.

Once there—the gargoyle had again jumped out of the way at the sight of him—he held his wand to
his temple, drawing out a copy of what he had just witnessed and placing it in the pensieve. That object was placed on the desk before he asked Fawkes to find his master. Albus arrived a few minutes later with the phoenix on his shoulder, wondering what the fuss was about. Heru pointed to the pensieve, then entered the memory with Albus and Severus behind him. When they emerged, expressions were equally grim.

“Are you able to tune a mirror to focus on Voldemort?” Albus finally asked.

“No. Something about him prevents my attempts.”

“Can you tune more than one, so that we might keep an eye on both Lucius and Peter?”

“That I can do, easily. But who will watch them?”

“I had thought Sirius, but perhaps it is unwise to expose him to Peter. He may attempt to do something foolish. Alastor, perhaps. He is retired, and may be willing to move into Grimmauld Place for the duration to keep an eye on him while Sirius watches Lucius. Fawkes could go over daily for progress reports…”

“And our little spy?” asked Heru.

“As tempting as it is to use him to pass on disinformation, I would prefer to capture him so that we would be able to prove Sirius’s innocence. Amelia Bones is the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and she is a reasonable woman, despite what Cornelius might have to say on the matter.”

“Then I will ask the castle to alert me when he arrives.”

Before Heru and Severus left, two mirrors had been tuned, though only one would be delivered for the time being. If Peter were to be caught promptly the second would be useless, and with just the one remaining, Sirius and Alastor could watch in shifts. The castle promised to report when Peter arrived, even if it meant waking Heru up, so he was able to retire that evening without undue worry.

The next morning they discovered that the short hallway in Severus’s quarters had lengthened overnight, revealing several more doors to be investigated. Part of the day was spent transporting more belongings from Heru’s Hogsmeade home to the castle, and Mark was delighted to be able to fly around outside on his broom, pretending he was in the midst of a ferocious quidditch game out at the pitch.

Heru had purchased a practice snitch some time ago with the intent of giving it to his son at Christmas, but decided that now was as good a time as any to hand it over. So it was that he and Severus were watching the boy play when an image formed in his head out of the blue. Somewhere nearby, Peter was lurking. The castle continued to provide him with images until he was able to pin down the man’s location, at which point Heru rose for the ostensible reason of giving Mark some pointers.

On his return to where Severus was seated, he casually let his wand drop down into his hand and cast a lightning quick spell. A minute later, he had himself his very own pet rat, complete with a charmed cage to hold him in. The gleam of the bars matched perfectly with the little silver paw the rodent was sporting.
Unwilling Confessions

They stayed to watch Mark fly around until the sky began to darken, at which point Heru called the boy down after he caught the snitch one last time. Once inside the castle Mark was sent off to their rooms to clean up while Heru and Severus headed for Albus’s office with their prize. Albus was delighted at how quickly Peter had been captured, though there was some discussion as to how exactly they would deal with the situation.

They could have delivered Peter immediately to the Ministry, but it was possible that Cornelius would interfere, so Albus went directly to the next best source, as he had stated he might earlier, and invited Amelia Bones to the castle. Peter waited on Albus’s desk during lunch, guarded by a rather curious Fawkes, though Heru had no doubts as to the soundness of the cage he had wrought. Amelia arrived shortly thereafter and Albus, she, Heru, and Severus repaired to a more secure room in the castle. They were joined by Minerva and Remus within a few minutes, and then by Alastor Moody, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Tonks.

In that space Heru was able to create a much larger cage. That one had a fine, strong mesh between the bars that would shock anyone who tried to touch it, so even if Peter transformed back into a rat once inside, he would have no way to get past it or climb it. Inside the cage he placed a simple chair with arms. After stunning the rat a second time—he had long since woken up and had been squeaking incessantly—Peter was forced to transform back to human and planted in the chair.

Severus went ahead and administered veritaserum, then backed out and sealed the door. When Peter came around Albus began his questions, mainly designed to establish for Amelia the severity of the situation. His name, participation in the events of the first war, and his current knowledge of Voldemort. Amelia agreed that a trial should be called for as quickly as possible by Albus in his capacity as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. Unfortunately, as they would want the testimony of at least three of the professors, it would have to wait until the next weekend, with the call to the members of the Wizengamot going out on fairly short notice.

It would, on the other hand, provide Albus and Amelia plenty of time to prepare a list of questions to be asked during the trial. Peter was stunned and returned to the original cage, where he would reside for the next week and be fed grain and water as befit his appearance. Classes went on, and Heru used palmistry for his example with the OWL-level students, hoping to get through at least one per week up through where they should have stopped at the end of the prior year so he could begin moving ahead. One thing he had agreed with was the keeping of a dream diary for all students who took Divination, even for those with no ability.

A notice went out late Thursday night from Albus to every member of the Wizengamot, and on Saturday morning the trial commenced. It had given Fudge very little time to take any action, though it was obvious he had talked, as Lucius was sitting in the stands as a spectator. Severus had remained at the castle to not only watch over Mark, but to keep an eye on the school as well. And, as Mark could communicate with the castle, she could let him know if there was anything to pass on to Severus. Peter was brought in, still in his cage, and deposited in front of Albus for the time being. The first witness up was Heru.

“Please state your full name,” said the official.

“Heru Servius Tychon Anselm Slytherin,” replied Heru.

“Please state your profession.”
“Divination professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

The official stepped back and nodded to Albus.

“Mr Slytherin, could you please tell us the circumstances under which you captured this specimen?”

“I was on the quidditch pitch watching my son play. On my way back to sit down after giving him some pointers I noticed something odd, a rat with a silver paw. I stunned it, then conjured up a cage to hold it in to bring to the headmaster.”

“You did not think it was simply someone’s familiar?”

“I thought it would be exceedingly peculiar for a familiar to have a metal body part. I believed it would be wise to investigate such an oddity, rather than simply let it pass.”

“And after you had delivered the rat?”

“There was some speculation that it might be an animagus, and when tested, that proved to be correct.”

“Were you aware of the identity of the animagus?”

“No, I was not.”

“You are excused, Mr Slytherin.”

The official opened the gate and Heru rose and stepped out, crossing the floor to take a seat in the lower ranks of the spectator area. Before he actually turned so he could sit, he noted that Lucius had a very thoughtful look on his face. Heru unobtrusively set up a watch on the man. The official opened a door off to the side and admitted Minerva, seated her in the box, then ran through the same two questions.

“Madame McGonagall, are you able to identify the person Mr Slytherin captured?”

“Yes, his name is Peter Pettigrew.”

A loud murmur of disbelief rose from the spectators, causing Albus to bang his gavel and call for order. “Are you absolutely certain of this?”

“Yes. I taught him for seven years. Though I do not understand how it is that he’s alive, that is definitely him.”

After a few minutes she was dismissed as well, and Remus was called in and run through the same kind of questions as Minerva had been.

When he was dismissed, the rat was stunned in its cage, then released. After being forced to transform—another loud disturbance rose from the crowd—he was placed in the chair at the center of the room and strapped in, then given veritaserum. Before he was ennervated an anti-animagi field was brought into play.

“Please state your full name.”

“Peter Charles Pettigrew.”

Albus banged his gavel several times at the noise and said, “If you cannot remain quiet, the silencing field will be used.” Then he looked back at the official and nodded.
“Please state your profession.”

“Death Eater.”

Albus employed the silencing field, not even bothering to call for quiet. Flash bulbs started going off from the media’s portion of the spectator seating. “When did you become a Death Eater, Mr Pettigrew?”

“Shortly after I left Hogwarts.”

“Why, Mr Pettigrew?”

“I was being heavily pressured. The Dark Lord was threatening to kill me if I did not submit to him.”

“Are you aware of the reason why?”

“He said that I was very close to important people on the other side and that as meek and unassuming as I was, they would never suspect I could betray them.”

“And what primary duties did you perform for Voldemort?”

“I passed on information to him from the organization created to oppose him.”

“Were you involved in the deaths of James and Lily Potter?”

“Yes.”

“In what way, Mr Pettigrew?”

“I was their Secret Keeper and used that position to betray their location to my master so he could deal with them.”

“The wizarding world has always understood that it was Sirius Black who was the Potter’s Secret Keeper. But it was you?”

“Yes.”

“How did that come to pass?”

“Everyone was suspicious of everyone else as someone—me—was leaking information to the Dark Lord. James and Lily wanted to use Sirius, but Sirius thought that was too obvious and convinced them to use me instead. He said no one would believe it to be me, and Sirius could draw off anyone seeking to make him talk so that I and they would be safe. So I became their Secret Keeper, and immediately informed my master of their location.”

“Who else knew you were the Potter’s Secret Keeper?”

“No one. Just me, Sirius, James and Lily, and my master.”

“Were you present when Voldemort went to kill the Potters?”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“I didn’t see much. My master told me to wait downstairs. I heard James die, and Lily’s scream.
Then I heard Harry’s crying. After a few minutes, when my master had not returned, I crept upstairs to see Harry alive with an odd cut on his forehead and my master’s wand on the floor. He was nowhere to be seen, so I grabbed the wand and fled.”

H eru could see off to the side that Lucius’s face was a cold mask of indifference. The people around him weren’t even bothering to try to speak any more; their faces expressed everything they felt and thought.

“Everyone has believed that Sirius Black killed you the next day. What actually happened when he confronted you?”

“I knew he wanted revenge for what I had done and I needed to escape. I cast a spell that killed the muggles nearby and severed my finger while Sirius was distracted. Then I transformed into my animagus form and escaped through a nearby grate and into the sewers.”

“So, you are the reason James and Lily Potter died, not Sirius Black. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

H eru could just hear a faint surprised mutter from Fudge of, “I’ll be damned.”

“Let us clarify something a little more recent, then. Were you able to reunite with Voldemort?”

“Yes.”

“How is that possible—it was thought that Voldemort was defeated, destroyed, the night he tried to kill Harry Potter as a baby.”

“He did not die, he lost his physical body. I helped him to regain it.”

“Please explain how, Mr Pettigrew.”

“When Harry was transported to the graveyard I—”

“Stop. Let us back up. How was Harry Potter transported to this graveyard you speak of?”

“Barty Crouch Jr had been posing as Alastor Moody all year for our master, using his position to help Harry win the tournament indirectly. He made the Triwizard Cup into a portkey to transport Harry to the graveyard at Little Hangleton when he won so that my master could be reborn.”

“How is it possible that Barty Crouch Jr was even still alive? He supposedly died in Azkaban.”

“That was his mother. She was already ill and dying, so they switched places on a visit using polyjuice potion at her insistence. Barty Crouch Sr could not deny her request. My master eventually found out he was still alive and being controlled with the imperius curse by his father, and took care of things, releasing his servant and giving him his instructions to impersonate the ex-auror.”

“What happened to Barty Crouch Sr?”

“He is dead, killed by his son when he attempted to gain the grounds of Hogwarts to warn people.”

“All right. What happened in the graveyard the—this was the night of the third task of the Triwizard Tournament?”

“Yes.”
“What happened that night in the graveyard?”

“When Harry and the Diggory boy were transported in, my master had me kill the spare with his wand, and Harry was captured and tied to a headstone. My master had unearthed an obscure ritual to give him back his body, and we did so.”

“What did that entail?”

“The bones of his father, the flesh of his servant, and the blood of his enemy. My hand was sacrificed, and some of Harry’s blood. Thus was my master reborn, in all his glory.”

Heru noted that many of the faces around Lucius had become paper white.

“Is this how you came to have the silver hand?”

“Yes. My master was generous enough to give it to me for my service to him.”

“Why Harry’s blood specifically?”

“My master thought that whatever blood protection the boy had against him would pass on to him in the process, rendering Harry more vulnerable.”

“Where was Harry Potter taken?”

“To my master’s estate in—”

“Stop. How did Cedric Diggory return to Hogwarts?”

“My master bade me make sure he did, so I laid his wand on his chest and levitated his hand back onto the portkey cup to force his return.”

“Do you know who killed Harry Potter?”

“No.”

“Does Voldemort know who killed Harry Potter?”

“I don’t know. My master is confused about that.”

“Voldemort is now alive, correct?”

“Yes, but my master was never dead.”

“Voldemort now has corporeal form, correct?”

“Yes.”

Albus turned away. “Amelia, do you have anything to add?”

“Not in a public forum, no,” she replied calmly.

“Then as I see it, we have several decisions to make here. Guard, please administer the antidote, but leave Mr Pettigrew where he is. We will resume our questioning at a later time.”

A minute later Albus said, “Based on the testimony you have heard today, specifically that of one Peter Charles Pettigrew under the influence of veritaserum, members of the Wizengamot will now vote on his innocence or guilt on the charges of the betrayal of the Potters and ultimately causing
their deaths, the deaths of thirteen innocent muggles during his escape from Sirius Black, the death of Cedric Diggory, and various other questionable activities under the leadership of Voldemort. What say you?"

A resounding cry of guilty rang out from that side of the auditorium. Peter’s eyes bulged and his face took on a look of desperation and abject fear. Lucius sneered.

“Based on the same testimony, members of the Wizengamot will now vote on the innocence or guilt of Sirius Black for the same charges. What say you?”

A resounding cry of innocent arose and Heru’s breath hitched in his chest.

“Will the members of the Wizengamot vote to pardon Sirius Black for his crime of escaping the fortress prison Azkaban based on the years already served? Yea or nay?”

“Yea!”

“I am sure we can work out some form of reparation for his wrongful imprisonment. A statement will be issued shortly as to the exact disposition of Peter Pettigrew. For the time being, this courtroom is to be cleared of all media and spectators.” Albus banged his gavel three times sharply.

No one had actually told Sirius that Peter had been captured. But, that evening a special edition of The Daily Prophet had been issued. The front page was splashed with a number of article lead-ins, among them the trial of Peter Pettigrew (giving credit to Heru for his capture), the innocence and exoneration of Sirius Black, and the second rise of Voldemort (though they used ‘You Know Who’). As soon as Remus had his hands on a copy he disappeared, presumably to headquarters to show Sirius the good news.

All in all, it felt like a very good day. Perhaps best was the fact that Albus reported via Fawkes that Cornelius had become an avid supporter of his once again and had left everything in Albus’s hands once the courtroom had been cleared, taking himself off so he could devise a speech to give to the press. That also meant that Fudge heard nothing of any additional interest that he could pass on to his friend Lucius, such as the second round of questions Peter endured from a much smaller section of the Wizengamot. Heru had the feeling that Fudge would stop making such ridiculous attempts to take control at Hogwarts now that Albus had established his credibility beyond question.

Severus, of course, wasn’t quite so pleased with the news. His reaction was mixed. But, as Mark had developed a slight fondness for both Sirius and Remus, he tempered his responses—around the boy, at least. They had just finished dinner—Severus had disdained the Great Hall for once, especially as Albus was not yet back from the Ministry—when a knock sounded at the door. Confused, Severus got up to see who it was, and shortly thereafter admitted Ron and Hermione. How they knew where Severus’s living quarters were was beyond anyone.

“We’re so sorry to bother you,” said Hermione breathlessly, “but we simply had to come and thank you, Professor Slytherin!”

Heru gave them a blank look.

“You caught Peter!” she cried while Ron nodded. “Sirius is our friend, and he’s free now because of you.”

Severus rolled his eyes out of their line of vision. Heru shifted uncomfortably—not that he really felt
that way—and said, “You’re welcome, but a note would have been fine, really.”

“Oh no, sir,” Hermione protested. “We had to come personally. A note would have been horribly rude.”

Heru shifted again. “How did you know where to find me, anyway?”

Hermione bit her lip as Ron gave her a slightly resigned look. Then he looked back at Heru and said, “She convinced Professor Lupin to tell us, sir. He said Sirius would be along in a few minutes, so we were just headed back after we came here.”

Mark crawled halfway over the back of the couch and said, “May I go, too, Father?”

Heru’s brows rose. “Only if these two don’t mind.”

“That’s fine, sir,” said Ron.

Heru’s brows rose higher. The next thing he knew Mark would be sitting at the Gryffindor table. “All right, but don’t stay too late, and don’t outstay your welcome.”

“Of course, Father!” Mark slid back down and bounced to his feet, then raced around the side of the couch toward the door.

Ron and Hermione followed a moment later after she said, “Thank you, sir, again. And thank you, Professor Snape, for letting us come in.”

Once they were out the door Heru looked at Severus and said, “Well. Remind me to think up a prank to play on Remus for letting those two know where we live.”

They discussed the trial, and more importantly, Heru’s brief testimony and Lucius’s reaction to it.

“I think you managed to strike the right balance,” said Severus after some thought. “If Lucius reacted as you say, he will not know if it was simply coincidence that you captured Peter, owing to his exceptionally poor skills at spying, one presumes. Voldemort may still think he has a chance to sway you to his side. But, do you really want that? You did say you wished for nothing that would put you directly in harm’s way.”

“Yes, I did. But there is a difference between being ordered or asked to do something, and coming up with my own ideas. No, I don’t want to die and leave Mark alone, or you. But as a Slytherin, I may have no choice but to be the one to handle my little black sheep.”

“And that prophecy?”

“I have no idea.” Heru wound his hair around his fingers absently. “But I’ll do what I think is right. Even if I had been the one to speak it, I doubt I would know exactly what it meant aside from the obvious. Prophecies don’t work that way. They only tend to make sense after the fact, or just prior to an event they reference. For all I know, I am the other it speaks of.”

He paused, frowned, then said, “Well, except that makes it sound like I killed the boy, and that isn’t possible. Not unless I’m damn good at sleepwalking my way to a place I can’t even find, past Voldemort and his Death Eaters, and get back here without you or anyone else noticing.”

Severus chuckled. “I hardly think that is what occurred.”

“I wonder, though…”
“Yes?”

“If Voldemort still can’t tell which side I’m actually on, he might approach me through a proxy, like Lucius.”

“What of it? And that’s assuming that the Wizengamot didn’t interrogate Peter as to the names of all Death Eaters currently in Voldemort’s control. For all we know, there could be notices of arrest in the morning paper. Lucius took a huge chance showing up at the trial.”

“Well, true. Though, he was probably ordered to go after Fudge leaked the information to him. I assume that’s how he found out. Then again, it may not matter. They may prefer to catch people in the act and bring them to trial then rather than haul them in for questioning on the word of another Death Eater, veritaserum or not. Speaking of which, I’m sure by now that Lucius has informed Voldemort that Peter was about to reveal where their headquarters is. I expect they’ve moved, or are in the process right now, assuming that is their main location.”

“We never really knew to begin with. We simply went where we were summoned to,” Severus offered.

Heru flipped his hair back over his shoulder and sighed. “Anyway, if Lucius were to approach me, perhaps I could work that to my advantage.”

“How so?”

“Part of it is my personal quirk. I badly want to know what rock Voldemort sprung up from under. Don’t you think it would be a reasonable delaying tactic to request proof of his heritage?”

“Being a parslemouth isn’t enough?”

“Harry Potter wasn’t a Slytherin and he was a parslemouth. In fact, sappy romantics would have you believe he was only able to use Godric’s sword because he was from that bloodline.”

Severus raised his eyes heavenward for a moment.

“I’m not saying it’s logical, Severus. I should think I’m being properly suspicious.”

“And let’s say you get what you want—what then? You play a dangerous and twisted game of cat and mouse with him?”

“I’m sorry, Severus. I just don’t know. But there must be a way to get rid of him, and his people.”

“I could pretend to go back to him,” Severus said slowly.
“Over my dead body,” was Heru’s immediate, fierce response. “Are you out of your mind!? I didn’t save you just to turn around and watch you die the second he decided veritaserum was a good choice and you were forced to spill your guts.” He reached out and grabbed Severus by the shoulders and shook him. “I love you, you idiot! I want to marry you. Don’t you dare make suggestions like that. Don’t even think it, or I swear I’ll—”

He stopped and let go. “Well, I don’t know. But I would!” he insisted. “Please don’t say things like that. If I died you’d be the only father Mark had left. You’re already in my damn will, Severus! I can’t believe you could possib—”

He was cut off when a hand slapped over his mouth, and blinked when Severus said quite clearly, “Shut up. Now, I’m going to remove my hand, and you’re going to stay quiet. Right?”

Heru gave a grudging nod.

“Good.” Severus drew back, then placed a hand on each of Heru’s shoulders and shook him lightly with each word. “And I. Love. You.” After releasing him Severus continued, “So perhaps you can understand why what you’ve been saying is so alarming to me?”

Heru dropped his eyes, feeling a bit sullen despite the fact that his declaration had been returned. Eventually his gaze crept back to see that Severus was waiting patiently. He managed a small, sheepish smile that sparked amusement in his lover’s eyes. “All right. That’s fair,” he admitted. “I’m glad to see you can be taught to see reason,” Severus stated smugly.

“You’re awfully brave for a man who knows I could probably snap you like a twig.”

“Ah, but you wouldn’t. You see, you love me. And besides, it would upset Mark.”

“What the hell do you come off being all rational and logical?”

“When you start displaying reckless, brash behavior that positively reeks of those insufferable Gryffindors.”

Heru opened his mouth to retort, then snapped it shut. Severus was entirely right. He thought he had lost that part of himself years ago, but apparently it still lingered around the edges. The realization actually scared him a little. He looked back at Severus and said, “I’ll make you a deal, then—something for something. You stop making such ridiculous offers that are likely to get you killed quicker than I can say Salazar, and I’ll try to curb my tendency to think that because it’s my family that’s the problem that I have to be the one to deal with it.”

“Agreed.”

“Fine. I’m glad that’s settled.”

“Now, about that other thing…”

“What … other … thing?”

Severus gave him a sly look. “When do you suppose our Mark will be back?”

Heru’s eyes widened slightly.
Some time later, after Mark had returned and gone to sleep, Heru and Severus had another kind of talk in their room. Several times, with silencing charms.

Heru woke up the next morning feeling absurdly perky, but at least this time he knew why. He had never quite realized before how hard it was to smile and yawn at the same time. He rolled over onto his side and propped his head on one hand so he could look at Severus’s sleeping face. The corners of his lover’s mouth were quirked up faintly, something Heru had not witnessed before. It was far more the usual thing to see him relaxed, but blank of expression, or more rarely, somewhat pained. Heru reached out to carefully guide the strands of hair back that had fallen across Severus’s face, not really wishing to disturb him, then rolled away and off the bed to land on his feet and pad into the bathroom.

He had only been in the shower for a few minutes when he felt Severus enfold him from behind with his arms and bite his neck. “Do you feel as disgustingly happy this morning as I do?” Severus asked lazily, then bit him again, making Heru arch his neck back and tilt his head to the side to offer better access. Heru really wanted to answer, but it didn’t come out that way. Severus bit him again where his neck curved into his shoulder, then laved the abused flesh with his tongue.

Heru didn’t protest at all when several minutes later Severus guided his arms out to press against the shower wall for support and gently toed his feet apart. He didn’t protest anything Severus did for the next space of time, and indeed, encouraged him enthusiastically in as many ways he could think of without losing his balance or interrupting the flow of their bodies as they moved together under the water’s caress.

It wasn’t until they were dressed and sitting at the table eating breakfast that Heru said, “To answer your question, yes, I do.”

Severus gave him a funny little smile and replied, “I gathered that, but I liked the way you answered earlier better.”

Heru might have said more, but Mark bounced in looking rumpled and ready to eat. Heru struggled very hard, telling himself sternly to act like an adult and to stop grinning like a loon, and eventually succeeded in repressing the worst of his urges to light up like a Christmas tree every time he tried to raise his eyes. Eventually he was able to look up from his plate with a fairly calm expression.

“So, how did your visit with Remus and Sirius go?” he asked Mark.

“Oh, fine. It was kind of hard to get a word in edgewise, but it was nice to see them looking so happy. We didn’t stay very long, actually. Ron and Hermione invited me up to their tower for a visit.”

Heru suddenly had no trouble keeping a straight face. “They did?”

“Yup! We played chess again. Nobody seemed to mind that I was up there. They all just sort of said hello and left me alone. I don’t see why Hermione is in Gryffindor, though. Seems to me she should be a Ravenclaw. That would have been neat since I still think that’s the house I’d like to get into, and I’d have already known someone in it.”

Heru relaxed minutely.

“Well, Slytherin would be okay and all, but I still think those kids might treat me funny.”
“Yes, well, that remains to be seen, I suppose.”

Mark shrugged, unconcerned. “So long as it’s not Hufflepuff or Gryffindor, I reckon. The one’s too boring and the others don’t seem to think all that much before they act.”

Heru raised his eyes and sent up a silent prayer, then realized Severus seemed to be doing the same thing. He blinked and said, “I’m sure Ravenclaw is just fine. They have a reputation for weighing things carefully before they act, and don’t seem to get bogged down in surface details.”

Mark nodded vaguely as he scooped more eggs into his mouth.

Later that morning Heru and Severus stopped by to see Albus.

“You might be interested to know,” said Albus with a twinkle, “that I received word this morning that Dolores Umbridge will no longer be gracing us with her presence.”

Heru heaved a sigh of relief and flopped into a chair. “Blessed be.”

“Apparently, Cornelius is now much too busy with the problem of Voldemort to send her off to find fault with us, and professes to need her with him during this difficult time.”

“What is the situation on Lucius?” asked Severus.

“Ah, yes. Thank you for reminding me, dear boy. Alastor reports that he was called to Voldemort not long after the evening edition of the paper was sent out. He has graciously included a copy of his memory of that encounter, for us to view.” Albus rooted around in his desk for a moment and produced a pensieve. “I really should buy more of these. They’re coming in quite handy all of a sudden.”

Heru gave the headmaster a patient look. “Is it better to display, or should we immerse ourselves?”

“Alastor did not say, so we shall just have to jump in, won’t we?”

Heru rose and stepped up to the desk, Severus coming to stand at his side. A moment later, they were inside the memory. The perspective was a little odd, but not nearly as much so as when Heru had shared his memory after using his distance spell.

“Well?” demanded Voldemort.

“My lord, though Peter’s answers were occasionally cut off, I am quite sure they asked him a great deal more once the gallery was cleared. One of those questions involved the location of where the Potter boy was taken—Peter was able to mention that you had an estate before he was stopped. Fudge was not present after the initial questioning, so I am not sure what else they might have asked, but it would be reasonable to assume they interrogated him for additional names aside from Barty Crouch Jr.”

“What of Slytherin?”

“They did not use veritaserum on anyone but Peter, my lord. Slytherin appeared to have no idea what he’d done. He claims to have simply noticed Peter while watching his son playing at quidditch, saw the silver paw, and stunned him for capture as an oddity. It was not until he brought it to Dumbledore that Slytherin learned who it was.”

“So it is possible he was not telling the entire truth of the matter.”
“Yes, my lord.”

“If so, he is a very clever man to keep his options open. Either way, he has managed to steal another minion from my service. Have you found nothing else out about him?”

“I have been trying, my lord. He has covered his tracks exceedingly well.”

“I didn’t ask for excuses, Lucius. I asked for results. Crucio!”

Lucius managed to hold himself upright against the debilitating effects of the spell, and to keep from voicing his pain. When he started to crumble, though, Voldemort lifted the curse. “It pains me when you force me to do this to you, Lucius,” he said with patent insincerity and mock regret. “You were doing quite splendidly, and then you go and tell me things like you were merely trying. I do wish you’d buck up and make me happy.”

“I live only to serve you, my lord,” Lucius rasped.

“Of course you do, Lucius. You’re one of my most loyal pure-bloods, aren’t you? And I’m very fond of you. Really, I am. But if you make failure a habit, I might not find it so easy to forgive you.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“That’s my good man. Now, you’re going to draft out a letter to Slytherin. Something subtle, I think. Something to see if we can determine which side of this conflict he leans toward. After all, one would think that as a fellow Slytherin of the blood he would be inclined to think as our ancestor did, despite what he currently allows the world to see. If indeed he is trying to court my attention with what he has done to Severus, he is wise to appear enamored of the Light so as to dispel suspicion. Yes, I think that will serve for the moment, Lucius. See to it.”

“As you command, my lord.”

Heru found himself abruptly back in Albus’s office, and promptly sat down and grimaced.

“We can,” Albus said after a pause, “always come up with a suitably ambiguous response to whatever it is Lucius sends you, Heru.”

Heru flipped the envelope over in his hands restlessly. He didn’t particularly want to open it. He had, of course, already checked it for any magic and knew it was quite safe, if you discounted what was written inside. He had been playing with it for perhaps ten minutes before Severus’s curiosity got the better of him and he snatched it from Heru’s hands, giving a quiet snort as he broke the seal and tipped out the contents. A second later he slapped it down in front of Heru and stared pointedly.

Mr Slytherin,

I trust this greeting finds you in good health. I must say, I was quite intrigued by our short encounter not so long ago. One could almost say you were the very twin of our dear Salazar if the existing portraits are anything to go by. Have you, by chance, a portrait of him in your chamber?

I have decided, after much careful consideration, to extend to you one of the business
opportunities I mentioned in passing. And, of course, by proxy to Severus, who has always been steadfast in his appreciation of all that Slytherin has had to offer.

I speak, naturally, of your particular talents. It had occurred to me that it might be a wise venture for me to back your next book, or series of books. Several topics came to mind when I considered the idea, though the one that stood out was an analysis of our population, showing the breakdown of pure-blood, half-blood, muggle-born, and squib, as well as potential cause and effect factors.

I appreciate that you are busy with your position as Professor of Divination, so I know that it might take you a few days to think the matter over and respond.

Cordially,

Lucius Malfoy

“He calls this subtle?” Heru passed the letter back to Severus to read. “He just about comes out and asks if we’re on board, or stupid. I’m still not sure which.”

Severus shushed him and continued to skim the contents, then dropped it to the table and looked up. “I see what you mean. How do you plan to answer?”

“Well, for one thing, I don’t need anyone to back me up with wealth. I’ve quite enough of my own, thank you very much. I didn’t exactly lose money on the Potions texts either. So why, exactly, would I cut someone else in on the deal that I didn’t even trust, never mind want to get to know.”

“And?”

“Actually, I’d already thought of doing a book on why squibs were born, but what he’s asking for is ridiculous. I would have to be stupid, or naïve, or in agreement with his aims to consider writing that kind of work.”

“That doesn’t say how you plan to answer.”

“No. I’ll have to draft something out and let you read it over. Possibly Albus, as he is quite a master at being infuriatingly vague.”

Severus grunted and stood up long enough to return with writing supplies. “Then you may as well get started, hm?”

Mr Malfoy,

Your greeting found me in good health, and I trust you are also well. I would extend that to your son, but of course I see him most every day here at Hogwarts and know that he is fine. While I am not sure what you found so intriguing during our encounter, I am nonetheless flattered at your interest.

I do, actually, own a portrait of our dear Salazar, it having been passed down through the generations by my family, though I must say, I do not have a chamber set aside strictly for such things. I have seen some very fine examples, however, one of which displayed a number of objects which typified my family’s interests.

On the matter of my writing, I am currently in the middle of a rather more thorough version of the events during the Founding of Hogwarts, though I do have notes somewhere for a work on the morality of power, having often thought it was a shame
that no one has had the courage to sit down and write a rousing treatise on when power is its own justification, and at which point morality, or at least a common code of behavior, must step in to assist in setting the rules under which we live as a society. And, of course, enforcers of those rules.

Your offer of backing is quite appreciated, but I’m afraid I must decline. The equipment I use is already paid for, and the modest profits from my first venture will serve well to accommodate the cost of temporary employees in the future when the need again arises.

You see, I feel I would be doing you a disservice, as I do not anticipate any meaningful returns on my efforts for some time. In any case, I am quite comfortable, and had not even considered bringing in outside funding until you mentioned it. It is something I will keep in mind for the future of Slytherin Press, especially if other authors flock to that banner to seek to publish their work.

The subject of your idea is interesting, bringing to mind that I had considered a statistical analysis of squibs born into pure-blood families, wondering greatly why such an event occurs. At the moment, though, the sheer breadth of your concept is more than I wish to undertake given the workload I am currently under. As it is, I am relieved that the genealogy I was creating for an acquaintance of mine is finally complete and delivered.

In closing, let me state that should you come across a different venture you believe I might entertain interest in, I would be pleased to hear you out.

Regards,
Heru Slytherin

Severus read over his response with a slight smile on his face. “I think you’ve done a fine job in each section of playing both sides of the fence, not to mention slapping him down once or twice. Several things you’ve said could go either way, but I think in the end this comes out as ambiguous as you could wish for. And it even hints at something you want.”

“Should I even bother to show it to Albus?”

“I don’t see why, but he might get that look if you don’t.”

Heru shrugged. “Then I’ll make a copy of both and send them up with Praecino. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind visiting with Fawkes. Albus can let me know what he thinks, and I can send out the response sometime this week.”

The letter went out on Wednesday, sent in an envelope sealed with the Slytherin family crest. By that Sunday another had arrived. Heru was tempted to just let Severus deal with it, but knew he’d never be let off the hook. And by then, Mark was occasionally eating at the Gryffindor table, sitting next to Ron. Heru could only imagine it had something to do with chess, or quidditch. So it was that he was sitting at the head table that morning when Lucius’s second missive appeared. After showing Severus the crest, he schooled his face to blankness and read.

Mr Slytherin,

I find myself curious as to what it is that you consider as being typical of your family’s interests. With such a heritage as your own, one would imagine there is a great deal of speculation surrounding you and your son. However, I can clearly see that your interests are wide and varied.
I would never have guessed you dabbled in genealogy for the sake of others, though I can appreciate your relief at the project’s end as I expect it would take a great deal of time to do such research with the unfortunately incomplete records we so often hold at this time.

On your other current ventures, I must say they are impressive in scope. Indeed, I am somewhat shocked that you did not mention plans for new textbooks on divination. I have taken the time to browse through some of what you have published for potions and am amazed at the time and care you must have taken. That there are formulas included that even I have never before seen is unexpected and welcome.

Your brief description on the morality of power sounds fascinating and I urge you to consider locating the notes you speak of. There are many who would be interested to see the results of such an undertaking. I also imagine that you must hold a great deal in the way of family history at your fingertips to be able to tackle a project such as the Founding.

In closing, it occurs to me that your son must nearly be of age for school himself. If you have not yet commissioned a portrait of him, I would be happy to recommend the services of someone reputable.

Cordially,

Lucius Malfoy

Heru casually laid the letter flat on the table next to his plate so that Severus could eye it as he ate, then began to eat himself. A glance up to check on Mark revealed that his son was fine, though when his gaze came back around he noticed Draco eyeing him. After several minutes he said in a low tone, “Is he always this obsequious?”

“You will remember, Heru, that you are suspected of being the one who can remove his master’s mark of service. That makes you as powerful, or more so, than the Dark Lord in his eyes.”

Heru snorted softly. “So I suddenly deserve to be fawned over?”

Severus looked over with an arched brow. “No, just respected.”

“You do notice he’s picked up on every likely reference but one and ignored the rest.”

“Of course. He seeks to guide the flow in a particular direction.”

“I suppose it would be no harm to confirm I am a parselmouth. I’m most interested in tweaking the bit on genealogy though. You know what I’m after. And, I wonder what the younger Malfoy will be reporting to his father this evening.”

“Were you planning on taking Lucius up on his offer?”

“What, the portrait? I don’t know. I can’t imagine he’d recommend someone without talent, but I would expect it to be a sympathizer at the very least. Could be useful, maybe not. But if I did, I sure as hell wouldn’t let Mark sit alone.”

“And yet, by doing so, you might make him more of a target then he may already be. Assuming, of course, that a portrait artist would spend time questioning his subject.”

“It wouldn’t matter. I don’t have any intention of letting Mark sit for a complete stranger whether it’s
Lucius or I who chose the artist. I would be there.”

“I’m not criticizing, Heru, just pointing out possibilities.”

“I understand that, and at one point I had every intention of leaving the country if necessary to keep Mark safely out of politics.”

“But not now.”

“No. Not now.”
As a change of subject Severus asked, “Have you even gone any further with the book on the Founding?”

“No, but the material is there, sort of. Frankly, I’m finding that it’s singularly dry. I can only spend so much time recounting a list of things in chronological order, and it’s not very interesting.”

“Then why not use that information, what you have of it, as an introduction to something else?”

“Sorry?”

“Establish a timeline, assuming those people ever wrote down any dates”—Severus flicked his eyes up briefly—“as an introduction into Slytherin family history. You do have those journals of Caedryn’s. And Salazar’s letter.”

“Don’t you think that’s a bit like airing the family’s dirty laundry in public?”

“What’s there to air? They lived a very long time ago. And it might serve to show that the reputation of Slytherin house as we see it today is not what it was. What I’ve read in those journals—and I would like to see more, by the way—is a detailed account of life during that age by someone who lived it.”

“I suppose so,” said Heru doubtfully. In point of fact, he could write an account from his own perspective, detailing the slowly deteriorating relationship between the founders and the breech between brothers. For him, though, Caedryn’s journals were a bit of a sore point. To Severus, his eldest son was long since dead and dust. To Heru, he’d only just seen him a little over a year ago.

Heru brought his eyes back to rest on Severus. “Have you ever wondered? Why is it that Voldemort does so little? Was he always like that?”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“Always so … laid back. No, let me explain. It seems as though, and again, maybe it has always been this way, that he rules his people through a combination of power and fear. He doesn’t actually do much of anything personally aside from torture or kill when he’s angered. It’s his people who go out on raids.”

“Why expend his own energy when he has people who believe in his aims enough to do so for him? And with the structure of the Dark Mark as you described it, anyone marked would do well to obey lest they be killed. In any case, there has been so very little activity since his rebirth that a comparison lacks evidence to work with.”

“Yes, but what if he can’t? He couldn’t even be reborn without the help of his people.”

“Are you trying to suggest that he’s holding things together with the appearance of power—not substance?”

“Perhaps. I suppose we’ll know more as time goes on. The fact that he can kill on whim based on what he set up years ago…” Heru shrugged. “All he would need is enough power to create more Marks, cast a few unforgivables here and there—and those depend a lot on emotion and will—and sit back and enjoy things as his people scurry around. Fear and intimidation are powerful allies, but that does not mean you are powerful.”
“I don’t know. But as breakfast is ending, the subject is better continued at another time.” Severus pushed back his chair and rose.

Heru snatched up the letter and folded it, tucked it back into the envelope, and got up as well. He ignored it for several days before even thinking of writing a response. Lucius had gotten back to him much too quickly as it was. The last thing he wanted was to be writing to Lucius several times a week for however long it lasted, as though they were pen pals. And as yet, Moody and Sirius had not reported anything untoward about Lucius’s activities.

Friday breakfast brought about the beginning of the close to that week, and an article in The Daily Prophet that certain people found to be of some interest. It was reported that a fellow by the name of Broderick Bode had been found wandering aimlessly around the Ministry, though the exact location within the building was not specified. He had been taken to St Mungo’s when it became apparent that not only did he seem confused, he could not speak properly, either, resorting to primitive grunts and nonsensical hand gestures.

That evening Albus called in some of the key people within the Order. Nothing much was accomplished aside from people learning that Albus was quite curious as to why Bode was in the condition he was. And, as no one had any bright ideas they were willing to share on how to find out, the meeting broke up within a half hour.

The next morning Heru went on a little trip. After he arrived at Diagon Alley—and, incidentally, changed his appearance completely—he stopped in at one of the shops for a small trinket, then floo’d to St Mungo’s and asked after the Bode man. He was directed to the fourth floor’s Janus Thickey ward. He stayed only for five minutes, dropping off the get well gift he had purchased as an excuse, then left and apparated back to Hogwarts, correcting his appearance the second he arrived.

A minute later, his son swept through to drag him off to the Gryffindor/Slytherin quidditch match; Slytherin won, though not by much. Mark babbled about the game incessantly up to and right through lunch, going over every play he could remember while it was all still fresh in his mind. Seeing the game had given Heru tip-of-the-tongue syndrome, though. There was something he ought to remember, but couldn’t.

When lunch was consumed, and Mark had run off to find some of the people he had become friendly with, Heru grabbed a scrying bowl and filled it with water. Severus found him some minutes later, staring intently into its depths. Heru eventually looked up, and noticed Severus was there.

“Interesting. We should go see Albus.”

Albus was actually present, causing the idle thought in Heru’s mind of whether Albus was always present unless he was asleep, eating, or in transit. “You were curious about that Bode fellow,” Heru said.

“Yes. Have you managed to uncover something?”

“I paid him a little visit to get a better sense of who he is, then did some scrying. He was being controlled with the imperius curse.” Heru nodded when Albus sat forward. “He was sent to get at the prophecy you showed us.”

“Potter is already dead. Why go after it?”

“Voldemort only knows the beginning of the prophecy, enough to identify what month the child was born in. His spy was discovered before they could hear the entirety. Obviously, he wishes to know it all,” said Albus. “It exists, that is the only justification he needs.”
“Well, you don’t want him to know,” said Heru. “You’ve considered this possibility?”

“No,” said Albus in a tired voice, “I had not.”

“Isn’t there some way you can have it replaced?”

“There are only certain people who can touch the sphere held in the Department of Mysteries. Harry Potter, Voldemort, and one of the keepers. One is dead, one would be very unlikely to appear himself, and the keepers—I do not know if the Ministry would be willing to cooperate. And, as there are a number of leaks within, Voldemort would probably know of the switch almost as soon as it was made.”

“So it was touching it that made Bode … unbalanced.”

“If that is what he did, then yes. Simply a part of the protections. The spheres can only be removed from the archive by those named on it, and the keepers. I shall have to think on this. Thank you for informing me of your discovery.”

Heru took that as a dismissal and left to return with Severus to their quarters. Once inside he paced around the room restlessly. He could remove it, or thought he could. He wasn’t actually certain, having bonded into another family. He had no idea how Albus would react to the suggestion either.

He came to an abrupt halt and looked up in surprise when Severus stepped in front of him. “You’ve been very clever, you know. I admit that it took me quite a while to put the pieces together and finally see the truth.”

“Severus, what are you talking about?”

“It was all there. Tiny bits scattered all around. I’m surprised I didn’t realize it sooner. I’m not usually so dense.”

Heru was really perplexed, though whatever it was that Severus meant he didn’t seem upset, just slightly annoyed with himself.

“Shall I explain?” Severus offered.

“Please,” Heru said, spreading his hands in the air.

“Let me think of where to begin. You arrived here seemingly out of nowhere, bearing the true name of Slytherin. You never went to Hogwarts—I don’t have to check to know that—and I sincerely doubt you attended Beauxbatons or Durmstrang, either. You are undeniably a parselmouth. You had a surprisingly good grasp on many aspects of the situation we were in for having popped out from under a cabbage leaf.”

“There is such a thing as being home-schooled, Severus,” Heru pointed out.

“Indeed. However, the portrait of Salazar’s brother apparently knew you, and intimated as much to your son. Granted, the latter could be explained away by the multitude of Slytherin family treasures you seem to keep revealing.”

“Ever heard of Gringotts?”

“Of course, but you do not have a vault there. Only your son does. And, speaking of Mark, he also raises questions. You see, while I have no doubt he is of the Slytherin blood line, I do not believe he is your natural son.”
“I can’t imagine why.”

“You said once that his mother was not your wife, and that you didn’t care much for the experience. At the time I accepted the obvious meaning, but it could have referred to several things. Curious, I did a little checking. Were you aware that in the Book of Souls there is a male child’s name that is blurred out? A child named Mark? And that Marcus Slytherin appears now where he had not before. I know that must be true, as Minerva goes over the entries every year in preparation of sending out letters, and she would have mentioned seeing him listed. I think you already know that children listed in the book who die are lined out, not blurred.”

Heru was getting very uncomfortable, edging away slightly.

“How exactly he now appears as Marcus Slytherin I am not sure, but I would be willing to bet that in a likewise manner, Heru Slytherin is not your original name. You knew the way to the Chamber of Secrets as though you had been there before. You were deeply affected by the letter we found there as well.

“You had an ancestor,” Severus continued mercilessly, “who very conveniently placed specific memories in a pensieve for the generations ahead, and whose eldest son made sure to leave behind a record to his supposedly dead father, almost as though he knew those words would be read. You know magic so ancient that no one else alive today understands it or has even heard of it, and you can talk to the castle and understand her.”

“Severus, I don’t understand the point of all this. What you’re implying is impossible.”

“Is it? I also find it interesting that your middle names, Servius Tycho Anselm, are also those of the original Heru’s sons, aside from his eldest, Caedryn. Your family must have quite a tradition for you to end up with that particular mix.”

“Severus, I really don’t want to talk about this. It’s a waste of time. We have more important things to worry about.”

“Oh, but I do want to talk about it—Harry.”

Heru sat down abruptly. “No. That’s not my name. That’s not who I am.”

“I agree. It is not who you are—now. Do not misunderstand me, Heru. I am neither angry or upset, nor do I harbor feelings of being betrayed, used, or mocked. The sorting hat was more right about you than anyone could have possibly imagined. How this is possible I don’t know, but it is obvious to me that whatever we entombed in the glade was some kind of poppet. Your scrying earlier was the last piece I needed to be convinced to confront you on this.”

Severus moved forward to stand directly in front of him and cupped Heru’s face gently with his hands. “I’m not going to tell anyone. I just want to know what happened.”

“You didn’t even like Harry,” Heru protested inanely.

“No, I did not. That is currently beside the point. I do like you a great deal.”

Heru spent what felt like minutes looking into Severus’s eyes searchingly, trying to come to a decision. Finally he sighed heavily and dropped his gaze. “I’m not going to tell anyone. I just want to know what happened.”

“You didn’t even like Harry,” Heru protested inanely.

“No, I did not. That is currently beside the point. I do like you a great deal.”

Heru spent what felt like minutes looking into Severus’s eyes searchingly, trying to come to a decision. Finally he sighed heavily and dropped his gaze. “All right. Come with me.” When Severus released his face and stepped back, Heru stood and led the way back to his portrait. He hesitated, then used his wand to slash his palm open. He placed his hand against the portrait, hissed the password, then gestured for Severus to enter before him.
“Dear Merlin,” Severus breathed, taking a good look around.

After a quick conversation with the portrait guardian on that side, Heru grabbed Severus’s arm and led him off to his study. He sat down behind his desk and hunched over, burying his face in his hands. “All right. It is true. I was Harry Potter, and Mark is not my son by birth.” When he looked back up he saw Severus examining the portraits hung on the walls with great interest, though they were currently sleeping. “Yes, that’s everyone,” Heru said. “Godric, Rowena, Helga, my brother Salazar, and all my children. And, my wife Regan.”

Severus looked back over his shoulder at him, then moved to sit down. “I have no doubt there is a fascinating explanation, if you wish to share it.”

Heru closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, then said, “Yes, rather. Fascinating would be the right word, I suppose. Well, as you probably already realize, it started the night of the third task and ended, or perhaps I mean began for real, when I turned fifteen.” Heru gave Severus a summary of what had happened to him, and where he had found himself awakening next. From there, he skimmed over his years during the time of the founders, and when he had finally realized he would be returning to the present.

Severus seemed particularly interested in the concept of blood bonding and that Heru still knew how to give a person the metamorphmagus ability, but overall he listened with rapt attention to every word Heru said. Part way through the portraits had woken up, and all of them were nodding through most of the recitation and throwing in comments of their own. He also explained to Severus why Mark had become his son, and gestured at the tapestry he had made years ago to illustrate.

“So that’s why you’ve been so insistent on tracing back the blood line.”

“Yeah. I wanted to know who Salazar must have become since Tom Riddle and Tonks didn’t appear on my own, and his portrait wasn’t willing to say anything about it, or couldn’t.”

“This is almost too fantastical to believe, but I understand why you’ve never told anyone these secrets.”

“Severus, it’s difficult enough being a Slytherin in this age without people finding out by some odd twist of fate that I’m their dead hero as well.” Heru managed to produce a smile finally.

“I shall enjoy being one up on Albus,” Severus said with a sly expression of pleasure.

“I considered telling you, Severus,” he said with a rather hangdog expression, “but…”

“Naturally you worried that I would react poorly.”

“You might say that, yes. But you would have been my only choice. I see most things a lot differently now. I had plenty of time to think, and a lot of experiences to assimilate. Harry would never have received that chance had he lived. Er, I mean—”

Severus held up a hand to stop him. “I understand. And I’ve had my own opportunity to see things differently. That makes it possible for me to be almost delighted that you fooled me for so long, given the results.”

“So, are we still … us?”

“I have one question.”

Heru nodded.
“Were we to bond, to marry, would it be possible for Mark to be bonded to me as his other father, as he was to you?”

Godric answered before Heru could speak. “Of course! Heru might not know how without disturbing the existing bond, but we do.” He flashed a wide, pleased smile. “In fact, we could do a real marriage bond if you liked, not whatever tosh it is you people do then. Now. Whatever.” He flapped his hand in dismissal of a minor detail.

Heru twisted around to look at the portraits, vaguely surprised that none of them seemed unduly upset over the fact that his marriage to Regan had been more of a sham than anything, and that his heart belonged to another man. The ladies, perhaps, he could understand, but the others? They noticed his expression and simply smiled. Obviously his children had been brought up to speed well after the fact, as had Regan.

“Er, right,” he said when he turned back to face Severus.

“Even without, we would still be us, as you put it.”

“Well, then, care to see the rest of my real home?” Heru offered, feeling vastly relieved on several accounts.

“I would love to.”

Heru showed him everything, though the library of carefully preserved books from the past was what Severus found most enticing, ending up in the lounge some time later. “You realize, of course, that if we did things Godric’s way, you’d end up as Severus Slytherin.”

“Indeed.”

“You also realize that—actually, maybe I didn’t explain that part. I’m not saying this to dissuade you, either. If Mark is bonded to the both of us as his parents, we’ll have to keep a close eye on his appearance. It’d probably start changing and we’d have to remind him to stick with what he looks like now.”

Severus arched a brow and said, “Have you even spoken to him about us?”

“No, but I think he’s made it pretty clear he approves. Severus, I’m worried about you. If someone had forced you to speak the truth prior to this, they’d have only encountered a suspicion and thought you were crazy. Now you know the truth.”

“The same could be said for you.”

“Yes, I know, but I never planned on—”

“The key word being planned.”

Heru glared at him.

“My dear Heru, are you trying to tell me that you are somehow miraculously immune to veritaserum? Or that the possibility does not exist that you could be interrogated? You are displaying those distressingly Gryffindor tendencies again.”

“Oh, shut up. I thought I’d buried that part of myself years ago. And no, I’m not immune that I know of, but I can see it when my drink is spiked, as Albus found out to his chagrin. They’d have to knock me out cold to dose me properly. I can unweave spells, remember? And I don’t need a wand.”
That wiped the smirk right off Severus’s face. “You win that round. So, does any of this explain your pacing earlier?”

Heru shrugged. “I was him. Does it still count enough for me to remove or replace that sphere? Or would I have to weave something else to hold back the existing protections or remove them?”

“Considering that magically speaking you are not him any longer, I would not care to see you risk your mind in the attempt.”

“Magically speaking, his name is Tom Riddle, not Lord Voldemort. You tell me the odds that it has his real name on it.”

“Then I suggest we wait to see what Albus dreams up. In the meantime, perhaps you should answer that blasted letter from Lucius before he charges up to the school to visit his son?”

When they did leave, had they bothered to check, they would have seen no trace of blood on the portrait. It had been absorbed, exactly as designed.

Mr Malfoy,

I should think that would be self evident. Potions have always been one of the primary interests of the Slytherin family, though I would have to say it vies with serpents. Then again, that can hardly be a wonder considering our tendency toward being born as parselmouths. It is always much more the thing to obtain venom supplies from willing subjects, and snakes can be quite amusing creatures to speak with. I have often found myself convulsed with laughter listening to runespoors, for example. Though, it may be possible that I am overgeneralizing.

As for genealogy, I’m afraid I do not have the time nor patience to spend countless hours sifting through musty old books in search of marriage, birth, and death records. I employ a far more sophisticated method of creating a family tapestry, though I admit they go only backward or forward, and do not fill in the lateral gaps.

I have considered textbooks for divination, especially if I end up staying on at Hogwarts. The current selection, though no doubt written by gifted seers, is not to my personal tastes, much like the potions texts were not. I find them obscure and misleading, if I may be so blunt as to say so, very often leading the aspirant into the grey fog of failure if they are without a capable hand to guide them.

Only some of my knowledge comes by way of my family’s historical treasures, but there is certainly enough from ancient times for me to undertake certain projects. Indeed, they are no doubt the source of the potions you were were unfamiliar with. My thoughts on the morality of power come from a much broader range of source material, however.

As I understand, you were in Slytherin house during your years here at Hogwarts, so perhaps you will share your opinion with me on something. It was recently pointed out to me that as I hold a number of journals written by our dear Salazar’s nephew, I should consider publishing them. I remain undecided on this matter.

Regarding portraiture, my son is coming up on the age when I would consider having one done, though I have not yet begun looking for an skilled artisan. If you have a recommendation, I would be happy to hear it.
Regards,
Heru Slytherin
When Heru and Severus apperated back to their quarters, Mark was nowhere to be found and it was just about time for dinner. A quick check with the castle revealed the boy to be headed for the Great Hall, so Heru joined Severus at the head table, finally spotting his son sitting at the Ravenclaw table with a bunch of first years. And, when the meal was over, Heru made sure to collect his son and bring him back to their quarters, and into Mark’s room.

“There’s something I wanted to talk to you about,” Heru said.

“Okay.”

“What do you think of Severus?”

“I think he’s great,” said Mark, taking a seat on his bed.

Heru rubbed the back of his neck. “Yes, but—all right, how do you feel about him?”

“Oh!” Mark grinned. “How do you feel about him, father?”

“If your behavior is anything to go by, I think you already know the answer to that question,” Heru temporized.

“Isn’t the same true for you?” Mark countered.

Heru narrowed his eyes and frowned. “Are you happy living here with him? Would you miss him if we were to move elsewhere?”

Mark’s eyes widened. “You aren’t thinking of leaving, are you? I don’t want to go! I won’t!”

“So your answers to the questions would be…”

Mark scowled and banged his heel against the bed frame.

“I’m waiting.”

“Yes and yes.”

“And how you feel about him…”

“You never let me have any fun,” Mark whined. “He’s like another father to me, all right?”

“Would you like him to be that for real?”

Mark immediately brightened back up. “Really?”

“Yes, really. I take it you think that’s a good idea, then.”

“Of course I do!”

“Even though he can be very strict?”

Mark dropped his eyes for a moment. “He hasn’t been, though.”

“He can be, Mark. Don’t ever doubt that. And he isn’t the most demonstrative of people.”
"But I know he cares. Does he want to be my other father?"

"Yes, he does. And I mean in the same sense as I am."

"So you two really are…"

Heru nodded. "Just like before, I’m giving you a choice, and I want you to make it knowing that if done, it cannot be undone. I would very much like to marry Severus, but if you’re unhappy about any of this, I would wait until you were an adult."

"No! I want to."

"You don’t want any time to think about it first?"

Mark shook his head vigorously. "Can we go tell him?"

"Sure."

Mark bounced off the bed and whipped the door open, racing off. Heru followed at a slightly more sedate pace, but was in time to see his son fling himself onto a rather startled Severus, who was sitting on the couch. Heru leaned against the wall and waited.

"So what would I call you?" demanded Mark.

Severus glanced over at Heru and arched a brow, then said, "That would depend. Since he”—he pointed at Heru—"already lays claim to ‘Father’, I suppose it would have to be ‘Dad’. I absolutely refuse to have anyone calling me ‘Pops’ or ‘Pa’.

He gave a slight shudder, and Heru could not decide if it was the thought of being called ‘Dad’ as opposed to ‘Father’, or just a reaction to the even less dignified terms.

Mark grinned, then twisted around to look at Heru. "I thought I wasn’t supposed to talk about that. So how come…?"

"You still aren’t. It’s a family secret."

"When?" Mark asked.

Heru inhaled with a hiss. "That’s a good question. But, Mark, for the time being, you won’t mention any of this to anyone. You remember what I told you when I bonded you in the first place. Some things just aren’t safe to talk about. Until it is, I’d rather you keep quiet on these changes."

"All right, Father. When are you getting married? You did ask already, didn’t you?"

Heru exchanged a look with Severus. "Um, sort of…"

"I suggest," said Severus, "that you double-check your source before we decide on the timing of both issues."

"Mm. Yes, let me go do that.” Heru apparated to his study and tapped on Godric’s portrait until he woke up.

"Hello, Heru!"

"I had a question for you, about the bondings,”
“Certainly.”

“Would it be better for me to bond Severus to me first? Or Mark to Severus?”

Godric furrowed his brow, then said, “It wouldn’t matter. But if you were going for the preferred order, I’d say Severus to you first.”

“All right. How long would that take? I already know Mark to Severus is about a week.”

“The same amount of time, really. You could prepare for both and do them back to back.”

“You really … aren’t upset?”

“Why should I be? You did your duty, Heru. And I must say, your sons turned out to be fine men. Now you can do as your heart requires.”

“Would you refresh my memory on how the bonding ceremony works for marriage, then?”

“Well, first…”

Heru returned to Severus and Mark when Godric was finished and took a seat on the couch. “Both take the same amount of time, a week. It is preferable to do the marriage first.”

Severus nodded. “Would we need to be any particular place?”

“Er, yes, actually.” He paused and frowned. “Well, no. I could get around that little detail. It’s not like I used a permanent sticking charm.” Noticing Mark’s confused look he waved a hand in dismissal. “Nothing to be concerned about. He’s just going to guide us through things,” he said vaguely.

“Then what do we need to do to get started?”

Albus called an Order meeting for the next afternoon, and Heru brought Mark with him so he could visit with Flick and Guin. In point of fact, he wasn’t comfortable leaving his son at the castle when both he and Severus were elsewhere. That it wasn’t entirely rational he discounted.

“It has come to my attention that Bode was sent in, controlled by the imperius curse, to obtain the prophecy sphere regarding Voldemort and Harry Potter. If Voldemort were to succeed in getting his hands on it, it is possible that he too may come to one of the conclusions we did, that being the potential for an unknown third party. On the other hand, he might well conclude that he has already won. I am opening the floor to suggestions as to how to react to this event.”

“Set guards!”

“Remove it!”

“Replace it!”

“He’d never dare go after it directly!”

The suggestions and arguments went on for some time before Albus called things to order.

“We could set guards, though it would mean most of you would need to stand duty overnight in rotation, keeping watch on the entrance to the Department of Mysteries. If Voldemort did in fact
personally appear to obtain the sphere, we would only know that he had, as I would not expect any of you to risk your lives dueling him alone.”

He peered over the rims of his spectacles. “But consider that in doing so, if he were to realize our actions it would make him that much more intent on getting it. As to removal or replacement, only one of the archive keepers has the power to handle those spheres while they reside under the protection of the Ministry. So, if we cannot manage one of those, keeping watch would mean simply that, with no attempts at bravery.”

“We can get a list of Unspeakables—isn’t there any way to figure out which ones are keepers, and then which one might be open to a little side job?”

“Possibly,” Albus replied. “But it would need to be a person who would not speak of what he or she had done. If one of you is able to discreetly obtain a list, I shall see what can be done.”

When the meeting broke up, Albus held back Heru for a minute before they returned to the school. “If a list were made available, would you be able to divine anything from it, even not knowing the actual people?”

Heru shrugged. “The limitations of each type of divination are peculiar. In the case of Bode, I had to at least meet him because of the method I used. However, that shouldn’t be necessary for the information you’re after. All I can say is, get me a copy of the list and I’ll do all that I can to pinpoint a likely candidate.”

Albus nodded. “We shall see, then.”

Saturday brought about many things. A new letter arrived from Lucius, which Heru promptly ignored in favor of other activities. A list arrived from Albus of Unspeakables, which Heru also promptly ignored in favor of other activities. Once breakfast was over and he, Severus, and Mark had retired to the privacy of their quarters, Heru took a few minutes to fetch the portrait of Godric from his study and hang it in Severus’s lounge.

Godric was in an exceptionally good mood, despite having been reminded again not to reveal anything to Mark. Before they started Heru quipped to Severus, “Just try not to sign any magical contracts for a while, eh?”

An hour later, Severus had become Severus Rhys Marcus Snape Slytherin, bonded mate of Heru. His comment after the fact was, “This isn’t done much differently in this time period as I understand it, though the process has been puffed up a great deal with nonsense. Of course, blood is not usually a component, nor are modern ceremonies designed to be permanent in quite the same sense.”

“Blood magic isn’t normally practiced in this day,” Heru pointed out. “I expect it’s on the list of forbidden magic, or at least categorized as dark. I never bothered to check.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it unless you’ve got a twisted, perverted mind,” interjected Godric huffily.

“I know, Godric,” Heru reassured him, “and we aren’t that kind of people. Severus, the main difference is that you gain my gifts, at least in potential, and I gain yours. Assuming we were male and female, our children would have a much better chance of being born with them active.”

Severus nodded his understanding and said “Shall we move on to the next bonding?”
“Give it a half hour,” said Godric. “Have a drink or a snack, exchange gifts! You need a short rest, trust me.”

“Speaking of gifts—I have something for you, Severus.” Heru disappeared for a minute and returned with a small sealed vial.

“Is that what I think it is?”

“Yeah. But don’t take it yet. Wait until after we’re done, if you would.”

Severus nodded and took the vial, placing it carefully into a pocket and giving it a gentle pat. Though his mouth stayed straight, his eyes were bright.

“Mark, there might be a side effect of the bonding I should mention. Now, this didn’t really happen with us because we already looked so much alike, so—”

“What do you mean?”

“Be patient, I’m getting to it. Because you’re a metamorphmagus, when we add Severus to our bond as your second father, your appearance may begin to change to reflect both of us. That’s another thing we need to keep under wraps for the time being, so if you notice anything like that happening, I want you to keep focused on your current appearance, all right?” said Heru.

“Oh, okay. I can do that.”

“Good. Why don’t you scare us up a snack like Godric suggested, and after we’ve rested a little bit longer, we’ll proceed.”

Mark jumped up to go firecall the kitchens. They shortly had a selection of nibblies and some drinks, and spent the next twenty minutes talking about potions. Mark in particular wanted to be able to sit in during some of Severus’s first year classes, but that sort of decision rested with Albus.

Godric, who had been staring up at the top of his frame in boredom, eventually cleared his throat loudly and said, “Right! Let us move along.”

An hour after that suggestion, Severus had been inserted into the father-son bond that Heru and Mark shared, tying the three of them together as blood family. And as a family, they repaired to the Great Hall for lunch.

Afterward, Heru addressed his other two pressing projects for the day. As he opened the letter from Lucius, Severus knocked back the contents of the vial he had kept in his pocket. Heru pretended not to notice the absolutely hideous face Severus pulled in response to the taste.

Mr Slytherin,

Your brief account of your genealogical methods sounds quite interesting, though I expect it is, in its own way, tedious and painstaking as a process. Do you often take on commissions for such work? I might know of someone who would be greatly interested in such a prize for their own family. Indeed, I myself may be interested. I trust that your work is conducted with the utmost regard for personal privacy.

I am sometimes reminded of the maxim, “Those who can’t, teach,” but it appears in your case that you are well equipped to do both when it comes to a number of subjects. Quite the Renaissance man, I would say. Should I take your comments on divination to
mean that you are in fact gifted?

On the subject of the journals, I suppose that would depend on what you would hope to accomplish by publishing them. If it is merely to expose one man’s accounting of that time period, I should think that a great many people would be interested in what they would reveal. If you had some other goal in mind, it would depend entirely on what they contained, correct?

I have enclosed a card for a reputable portrait artist, and taken the liberty of sending him a short introduction in case you should decide to engage his services.

Cordially,
Lucius Malfoy

Severus took the letter when Heru was done and scanned it, snorting once or twice as his eyes flicked over the words. “I see we’re getting down to the cauldron lining,” he commented. “I confess to being curious on whether the identity of the mysterious person he mentions is who we might expect.”

“I dare hope that it would be Voldemort, but I have to wonder if Lucius has mentioned any of this yet. Moody and Sirius either haven’t seen anything of interest, or Albus hasn’t passed reports along for being irrelevant.” Heru got a fresh sheet of parchment and laid it atop Lucius’s letter, then created a copy of the text. A second sheet of parchment served as a note asking about any results of the interaction. After he had folded both and shoved them into an envelope, he asked Praecino to deliver them to Albus’s desk.

Then he sighed.

“What is it?”

“This isn’t what I wanted to be doing today,” Heru replied.

“I am tempted to tell you that whining is best left to people who have nothing better to do. However, as today is a bit of a special occasion, perhaps we should take a breather, and return to these tasks in an hour or so, or after dinner.”

Heru arched a brow at his mate, then smiled slowly.

That evening Heru attacked the list of Unspeakables; fortunately it was not long. After doing readings for each name he reordered them on a new sheet, putting the most likely candidate at the top, and lining out those at the bottom who would either categorically refuse any kind of requests regarding their work, or were not archive keepers. He also put a rough percentage next to each candidate, indicating the chances of success as he saw things. That too was delivered up to Albus’s desk thanks to Praecino, along with the almost forgotten question as to whether Mark could attend some of Severus’s first year Potions classes.

“Lucius can wait until tomorrow,” Heru said. “I don’t feel like dancing around any subjects right now. I just want to relax.”

Severus, who had been reading a copy of Potions Monthly, laid it aside for a moment to pull Heru down onto the couch so that his mate’s head rested in his lap. Then he picked up his publication again to read as he ran his fingers through Heru’s hair rhythmically.

Heru had just reached that state of drowsy relaxation where dreams began and reality started to
recede into sleep when Praecino flashed into the room in a burst of flame, then dropped a note on Heru’s chest. He cursed under his breath and lifted his head so he could read it, then cursed again and shoved it at Severus.

With a gesture he conjured a mirror to sit on the low table in front of them, then tuned it to Lucius Malfoy. “Famous last words, right?” he said in disgust, then gave his attention to the scene.

“Well, Lucius?”

“My lord, the Slytherin man should have received my latest letter this morning, so I expect to receive a reply shortly, as before. Thus far he confirmed several things about himself, but much of what he says is maddeningly vague as to direction. I have brought you his letters.” Lucius held out a thin packet.

Several minutes later Voldemort said, “I see. And this genealogy he mentions—how did you respond to it?”

“I intimated that I knew of someone who might wish for such a thing, my lord, and that I myself might be interested, under the assumption that his work was kept private. I thought that I could see exactly what it is that he requires, then commission one for my own family, so that we might see the results.”

“And divination—what is this about?”

“I suspect given the reports that come to me through Draco that he is gifted, my lord. Assuming he were to ally himself with you, it could be of great value to have such skills at your disposal. I saw no harm in trying to confirm that suspicion.”

Voldemort nodded, but remained silent for the moment.

“As you can see, nearly everything he says is fraught with double meaning, my lord. He is either unwittingly clever, or very particular in what he says in reply. One moment he sounds like a fitting person to stand at your side, and the next like someone mired in neutrality.”

“Yes, but that in itself is encouraging. Continue the correspondence. Now, what of Severus?”

“He continues to act in the same manner as always in his classes, favoring Slytherin students over all else, my lord. A seat is reserved at the head table next to him for the Slytherin man, though it is not always used. When it is, they converse steadily throughout the meal, though in far too low tones for any of the students at the Slytherin table to overhear. Aside from his interactions with that man and his son, Severus does not appear to have changed.”

“It is a shame that it is not you who holds the Defense position, Lucius.”

“And deal with dozens of brats every hour, my lord?” Lucius looked positively disgusted with the idea.

“You would do what I told you to do and be grateful for the opportunity to please me, Lucius.”

“Of course, my lord,” he said hastily.
“However, there is no way that could happen unless the werewolf were dead or incapacitated and Dumbledore was unable to find a replacement. Though, I expect that Fudge might yet be willing to back your appointment to the position were you to sweeten the pot for him.”

Lucius didn’t seem to think that required a reply.

“Fine. You have done well for the time being. If Slytherin is willing—and you had better pray he is—give him a commission and bring me the results directly you have them. If they prove out, I may consider one for myself as proof of my heritage. You may go.”

Lucius bowed deeply and departed.

Heru flipped the mirror up for the time being and laid his head back on Severus’s lap. If there is even the slightest chance, he thought, then closed his eyes and addressed the castle, asking her if she would alert him if Remus were in danger while within her confines.

<Of course. Or Severus.>

“What?” he said aloud, his eyes opening. “What do you mean Severus?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Heru shook his head at his mate and pointed up.

<Wait.> After a moment she said, <I like Severus, and you changed him today. He can hear me now.>

“So it is a family thing?” he asked, noting that Severus had a sudden, focused look on his face.

<Perhaps. I don’t know. But I can warn him, too.>

“I don’t see why not. Thank you. Also, since you can selectively modify the apparition wards, do you think it would be possible to narrow that down even further for a specific area?”

<What do you mean?>

Heru lifted his head and glanced around quickly; Mark was nowhere to be seen or heard.

<Mark is with his Ravenclaw friends.>

“I mean underlake. Is it possible to restrict that to just me and Severus for apparition rights?”

<I can do that.>

“Thank you, dear lady. As always, I appreciate your help.”

<You’re welcome.>

Heru said to Severus, “Were you able to follow all of that?”

“That has got to be the most peculiar conversation I have ever listened to,” replied Severus with a blink. “Yes, I was. What did you originally ask?”

“I wanted to see if she would keep an eye out on Remus and warn me if he were in danger.”
Severus nodded in understanding of the underlying reason. “You weren’t thinking of telling those two anything, were you?”

Heru snorted. “I’ll firecall Remus and tell him to be on his guard and why, but aside from that? I already told you I’d planned on telling nobody. If I form any kind of relationship with them, it will be as I am now. That’s all. Trust me, the temptation has not surfaced just because you were a bit too curious for your own good.”

Severus sneered and said, “Fine. So go warn the werewolf now and get back here. I was enjoying myself before that damn note arrived.”

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**Mr Malfoy,**

You are correct in assuming a number of things.

Creating a family tapestry as I have been taught is indeed a tedious and painstaking process, but one well worth the effort in my opinion. And I do not feel that it is even my own business what appears on them—once I have completed one it is rolled up to await the owner’s arrival so that I may give them a briefing on its use and what to expect from it.

They are certainly superior to other tapestries I have seen, which must be updated manually and depend on an actual person to remember to do so, and even then one is more apt to use a book. In any case, discretion is both a virtue and a responsibility. So long as I am supplied with the necessary materials and am adequately compensated when finished, that is all I need or want to know.

If you wished to commission one we would need to discuss the price and the requirements. I feel that would best be done in person, preferably here at the castle.

In regard to your other question, I think I would be a poor teacher of divination if I possessed no ability at it, so I shall say my current success speaks for itself. You have my gratitude for both your opinion on the journals and for the recommendation.

**Regards,**

**Heru Slytherin**
Bad Faith

Heru made sure that Mark would safely be off with friends on the day Lucius was to arrive. He and his mate were sitting in Severus’s office engaged in an idle discussion of the most recent issue of *Potions Advancements* when the time came and a knock sounded at the open door. Lucius strolled through a moment later, his white-blond hair loose down his back in sharp contrast to the deep black of his cloak.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” he said, coming to a stop a few steps into the room.

“Lucius.”

“Mr Malfoy. Would you care for some refreshment?” asked Heru, slipping off the edge of the desk.

“Very kind of you. Perhaps some tea.” Lucius stripped off his gloves and tucked them into his pocket.

Heru summoned a house-elf. “Would you be so kind as to prepare a tea tray for three?”

“Oh, of course, sir. Krell is being right back with sir’s tea.” After a quick look at Lucius, the elf popped out.

Heru arranged a chair for himself so that it was angled, then gestured to the other for Lucius to sit in. Severus was already seated behind his desk. Heru sat down, then helped himself to a cup of tea after Krell popped back in a moment later and he had thanked the elf.

“Let me explain a few things about these tapestries, if I may,” began Heru, continuing at a nod from Lucius. “The price is somewhat negotiable depending on the client, though I never go above five hundred galleons. I fear anything more would be wretched excess on my part.” He paused to smile and take a sip from his cup. “The actual creation process spans seven days at which point, as I believe I mentioned, I store it until it can be picked up. After completion it will begin to update itself on a daily basis until the construct can no longer determine the proper connections.”

“What, exactly, do you require in the way of materials?”

“Aside from a huge quantity of silk thread, which is no trouble for me to obtain, each tapestry requires fourteen vials of blood from the intended owner. I can process two per day, each taking two hours to incorporate into the weave,” Heru explained untruthfully.

“This is blood magic.”

“Of course.” Heru tilted his head to the side and looked at Lucius curiously. “That is not an issue for you, is it?” *And if it is, I'll eat my dressing gown.*

“Indeed not,” replied Lucius smoothly. “I had not thought to encounter anyone brave enough to practice such magic in today’s current climate.”

Heru let out a soft laugh and said, “Brave? I’m afraid I don’t pay a lot of attention to what fools think, Mr Malfoy, so I’m sure you’ll understand as a fellow man of the world that such petty distinctions as blood magic—even the most harmless of it—being classified as dark or illegal are not something I bother myself with.”

A faint smile turned up the corners of Lucius’s mouth. “Do call me Lucius,” he said.
“Of course, but only if you will call me Heru. I would be glad to dispense with what can be, at times, somewhat tedious formality.”

“You said fourteen vials—how large might those be?”

“Severus?” Heru turned and accepted a vial, then held it up. “Nothing much. Number tens, actually. If you decide to go ahead with this, the blood could be drawn and I could begin today.” He placed the vial on the desk and smiled again.

“I don’t see why not. I am here already, after all, and find myself quite curious as to the results.”

“Then let us begin.”

While the vials were being filled—in a room they had set aside for the project—Lucius asked, “Would it be troublesome if I were to watch for a few minutes while you begin work?”

“No, not at all. I’m not sure how interesting it would be, but you’re welcome to see how it starts out if you can spare the time, Lucius,” Heru assured him. Given that most of the work was only visible to someone with Heru’s particular type of Sight, he wasn’t the least bit worried that Lucius would have any clue what he was doing aside from using magic to weave the strands. The only difference from his normal routine would be the appearance of using his wand and his speed. “I doubt I will hear you if you speak to me, though.”

“I would not recommend watching for long,” interjected Severus as he prepared to fill another vial. “It becomes either tediously boring or hypnotically entrancing.”

“You’ve seen Heru at work on one, then?”

“Assuredly. And just as assuredly I would end up marking papers or reading.”

“Forgive me for not asking sooner, Heru. I trust your son is well?”

Heru looked up from laying out strands of silk and said, “He is, and I thank you for asking. Your Draco seems to be in fine health, though of course I only see him at meals, and sometimes during days I take Defense.”

“Draco tells me he’s often spotted your son at the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor tables during meals.”

“Mm. He likes to play chess.”

If Lucius thought that was an odd answer, he did not comment.

“That’s the last of them,” said Severus, clearing away his equipment. Two of the vials were placed on the table Heru was using and the rest went into a padded box with angled inserts. That was stored in a cabinet under the table. Heru took one of the vials and secured it in a loop on the front of his robes.

Then, leaving only a small percentage of his attention on Severus and Lucius—enough so that he could hear and comprehend anything they said—Heru opened the second vial and began to work, remembering to pull his wand out from behind his ear before beginning. Strands of silk began to slowly pull together, forming a tiny square at one corner of the large table.

“I cannot hear him incanting,” said Lucius quietly.

“You won’t,” Severus replied. “But you can see that he is. I don’t recommend getting close enough
to hear it, though. He tends to be very unpleasant when interrupted.”

“Speaking from personal experience, Severus?”

“I have seen what happens when he becomes vexed, Lucius.”

“And just how did you come to meet him? The texts he authored?”

“Naturally. He sent first runs of the then completed texts for our consideration. When we realized the quality of the work, he was invited for a meeting to discuss them. As he was able to promise the completion of the entire set plus the compendium in time for the following year, we decided to go ahead with them.”

“We?”

“You do not actually think Dumbledore would leave the decision entirely in my hands, Lucius.”

“I suppose not. Dumbledore is far too suspicious of anything connected to Slytherin to not have the final word, which makes me curious as to why he agreed to meet with Heru in the first place.”

“To ascertain the potential threat? To assure the claim to such a prestigious and honorable name? Or maybe he’s just a doddering old fool who wished to find a new person to urge his never-ending supply of sherbet lemons on who would not be expecting the assault.”

Lucius chuckled. “I see your point. What exactly is the blood used for, then? I see nothing more happening than weaving.”

“Were you to wait long enough, you would no doubt notice the amount in the vial steadily decreases as he weaves. In fact, if you look closely enough, you will see it has already decreased a minute portion.”

“Ah, indeed you are correct. He appears to have a rather unusual wand.”

“I’m sure he is an unusual person.”

“And his son? The boy appears to be quite seemly, despite his distressing tendency to sit at the Gryffindor table on occasion.”

“The boy likes to play chess almost as much as he adores Potions. Despite being as hampered here by the general reputation of Slytherin as any of us, he has managed to find a few unlikely partners. I presume that Heru says nothing so as not to appear other than neutral.”

“I’m surprised you do not play the boy yourself, Severus.”

“I do. It is one way to teach the young strategy.”

“And his name?” Heru absently noted a hint of an edge to Lucius’s voice.

“I assumed you already knew, Lucius. It is Marcus.”

“His mother?”

“Deceased,” said Severus flatly.

“I see. How unfortunate. I don’t suppose you happen to know why Dolores Umbridge is so fond of Heru?”
Severus let out a snort of mirthless laughter. “Because she is an easily charmed toad of a woman. While I was contemplating dissecting her, Heru was busy flashing his dazzling smile and making her coo and bask in his perceived warmth. She fell for it hook, line, and sinker. She wouldn’t hear another word against him after that, and went off crusading against others.”

Lucius chuckled and said, “Quite cunning. Well, I do believe I’ve seen enough for one day. I shall check up on Draco and return when the tapestry is complete. Please give Heru my regards, Severus.”

A moment later Heru could hear the door opening and closing. When Severus confirmed that Lucius had gone, Heru spared a second to sigh in relief, then tucked his wand behind his ear and continued his work at a normal pace, rather than the half speed he had been progressing at.

An unanticipated result of the encounter was an accusation on the part of Moody and Sirius as to Heru’s dangerous and illegal activities within the very walls of Hogwarts. Albus gave them a brief explanation of the situation and reminded them of the exchange of letters, assured them that he was fully aware of the singular application of blood magic that Heru employed, and essentially told them to let it rest. While it did nothing for Heru’s reputation with those two men, it didn’t exactly damage it, either, as both were inclined to believe the worst of him already. The only thing that upset Heru specifically was that he had not thought about the fact that one of them would be watching.

Lucius arrived on Saturday morning after the breakfast hour a week later to pick up the completed tapestry. He was led to the same room by Heru and Severus and ushered in after Heru hissed the Parseltongue password. Inside, Heru pulled a huge roll of woven silk from a stand along one wall, revealing that it had been edged with a darker border and a wooden pole run through a pocket at the top for hanging.

He placed it into hooks on the wall and pulled the ties to let it unroll so that Lucius could see it, and so that he could explain how it functioned.

“As you can see, not very much has filled in since I finished it last evening, but that will change every day. In any case, I need to explain how this works. If you touch a name, it will come to the forefront. The only point of that is if you have poor vision.” Heru shrugged. “However, if you touch a portion that is blank and glide your finger in any direction, the focus will change, like so…”

He demonstrated, even though there were so few names showing that very little changed. “Obviously, this will be more applicable as time goes by. When it stops updating—I’d say about ten days to a fortnight—you can bring it back to me if you’d like it to be reversed.”

“Reversed?”

“Yes. As you can see here, neither your wife nor son are listed. If the tapestry’s function were reversed, they would both appear, as would any new children you had. From there it would continue downward, updating to include your son’s marriage and issue, and so on. It is up to you if that is done, and it’s already included in the price.”

“How many of these have you completed?”

Heru produced a quirky little smile. “I prefer not to say. My clients generally do not share their treasures with others, and I work on a somewhat selective basis, as I’m sure you can understand.”

“Of course. I shall probably see you in several weeks, then, for I believe I would wish the reversal.” Lucius reached into his cloak while Heru took care of re-rolling the tapestry and securing the ties.
After he had slipped it into a waterproof case and turned back to Lucius, he was presented with a slip of ornately decorated parchment.

They exchanged the two, and Heru glanced at the parchment long enough to see that it was a bank draft from Gringotts for five hundred galleons. They shook hands, and Lucius took his leave.

Heru turned to Severus and said, “What the hell do I do with this? Open a vault?”

Severus smirked. “What the hell did you expect—a bag with coins in it? Can you just imagine Lucius Malfoy clinking all the way here? You could donate it to the Order, though I expect you might wish to open a vault anyway, just for the sake of appearance.”

“How honestly.” Heru made strangling motions at Severus, then allowed himself to be prodded back to their quarters by his highly amused mate.

Another week had passed, and several developments occurred. An Unspeakable from the list had agreed to a little side work. He had, in some respects, a rather casual sense of ethics. As he was adamantly opposed to Voldemort and saw no particular harm in the substitution, he agreed to switch the prophecy sphere for a fake that Albus had created. The original sphere’s label was placed on the fake, and it received a new one with nonsensical names. Had Albus requested that the original be removed entirely from the Department of Mysteries, then the man would have balked, but the compromise would do.

Heru had tuned a mirror to the man, having been present at the discussion of the specifics—not that the man knew he was there—and they watched as he did exactly as requested with no one else the wiser. The Order decided to go ahead with the rotational watch, simply to show that they had suspicions about Bode’s hospitalization, and that they suspected the sphere was in danger. Each person on the duty roster was warned again that they should not interfere in any way if Voldemort himself should appear to go after it, unless their own life were in danger. They merely needed to report incursions.

And, Lucius had taken his partially filled tapestry to Voldemort.

“Lucius.”

“My lord, I bring you the tapestry that Slytherin created,” Lucius said after he conjured up two hooks and stuck them to the wall so he could display it. “It has perhaps another week to go before it stops updating, or so he tells me.”

“And how is it created?”

“That is the interesting part, my lord. This is created through blood magic.”

Voldemort arched a brow.

“When I delicately questioned that, he laughed it off. He said he doesn’t pay attention to fools who dismiss blood magic as being dark or illegal, my lord. And when I asked if I could watch him begin, he had no issue with that, so I stayed to watch him work for a while and spoke with Severus.”

“How very interesting.” Voldemort bestowed a smile on Lucius before asking, “What did our dear Severus have to say?”
“To start, my lord, while I could see Slytherin working on the tapestry, and even eventually see that the blood was being incorporated into it, I could not hear anything of what he was incanting. Severus says that is usual, and that it is unwise for anyone to interrupt the man. Apparently he has quite a temper when provoked. They met because of the potions texts the man authored, when he was invited up to the castle—Severus was not allowed to make the decision on his own. Dumbledore wanted to vet the man himself before he’d permit it. Severus seemed as derogatory as usual about the headmaster.”

Lucius paused to collect his thoughts and continued, “He has a very unusual wand, my lord. Two different types of wood, though I could not get close enough once he began using it to determine which. The boy, his son, is called Marcus, and appears to have found partners in both Ravenclaw and Gryffindor for chess games. Severus’s comments on that indicated that Slytherin preferred to say nothing so as to appear neutral. The mother is dead, unknown causes. And, according to Severus, the Umbridge woman is fond of Slytherin simply because he set out to charm her and succeeded.”

“How does this tapestry function?”

Lucius gave a quick demonstration, then said, “I will bring it back in a week to have it reversed. It will then update to include Narcissa and Draco, and continue down from there as things change.”

“It appears that Slytherin is not so neutral as he appears on paper, Lucius. How did he strike you?”

“On our first encounter, quite guarded, my lord. But these past two times he was relaxed and quite charming. I had no sense of deception while conversing with him, though I admit I do not share your talent at such. Even Severus seemed more relaxed. Well, as much as he ever has been.” Lucius frowned slightly. “Slytherin seemed quite at ease around me.”

Voldemort smirked at that. “What did you need to provide for the tapestry?”

“Severus took fourteen number ten size vials of blood, my lord. The cost was five hundred galleons. I should mention that he claims not to look at the tapestries once completed. They are stored until they are picked up, at which point he explains the usage. When he explained it to me, he appeared to be totally uninterested in what was displayed.”

Voldemort nodded. “Very well. You have a week before you return. Send him another letter. This time ask if he is willing to take on another commission without knowing who the recipient is. You will provide the vials if he agrees on the day you have your own—reversed, did you call it?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Fine. See to it. I will have my proof.”

Heru considered dancing around after Lucius left and things quickly became boring to watch, but restrained himself. He was mildly surprised that either of them had agreed to having a tapestry made considering what interesting things could be done with a person’s blood. Granted, Lucius had been ordered to do it, but apparently the things Heru had said had paved the way for his own personal goal to be realized.
“Today we’ll be going over psychometry. This is one of the odder abilities that falls under the umbrella of divination. Even someone with true sight may not be able to get anywhere with this method. Odds are, if you can, you’re already aware of it. In converse, a person may have this ability, but not be able to get anywhere with any other method. It depends.”

Heru sat on the edge of his desk and crossed his ankles. “In brief, psychometry is getting impressions from an object, usually something small like a ring or a watch, though plenty of things apply. Impressions can come in the form of images, emotions, or even one of your senses like sound, taste, or smell. I have here a box of items—I’m going to pass it around and I want each group to take one thing.”

Heru twisted enough to pick up a small box, then said, “Each of you will hold the item and write down your impressions, if any, then let your partner do the same. When you’re both done, set the object at the front and I’ll come talk to you.” He hopped off the desk and handed the box to Neville, and collected it back a few minutes later from the last group. Heru only had rudimentary skill at psychometry, but he knew the history of each item well enough to know what to expect for impressions should anyone be gifted.

Most of the students came up blank. The only person who seemed to have the ability was Lavender Brown, who wore a rather smug little smile on her face as Heru approached her and Parvati. They had chosen a quill from the box. Seeing that Parvati had written down nothing, Heru said, “All right, Miss Brown, what did you sense?”

“I saw a man, dark haired, pale, sitting at a desk using the quill. I couldn’t really see his face that well, though.”

“Anything else?”

“Sadness, I think. It was very faint, sir.”

Heru nodded. Considering that the quill had belonged to Salazar, he suspected that she had sensed things accurately, if vaguely. “Very good. I encourage you to spend some time each day handling objects—with permission, of course—to see what impressions you can get. The more you use this ability, the stronger and more accurate it may become. Though, not everything will give you a reaction, keep that in mind.”

“All right, professor.”

Heru collected the quill from her and placed the box back on his desk. “Since we have some time left today, I’ll review mirror and crystal scrying, and we can give that a try next class.” He sat down again and leaned back on his arms. “For mirrors, it is preferable to use round or oval for shape, with a silver frame. Obsidian is the material of choice, though a normal mirror can be used, or glass that has been painted black on one side instead of the normal silvering process.”

“The mirror should be laid flat,” he continued, “with you gazing at an angle so that you are not reflected. The same tends to hold true for water, by the way. If you are successful, you’ll probably first notice that the mirror, or its depths, appears to turn grey or that colours will come and go. Visions can appear either within the glass or around or outside of it, and may come in the form of still or moving images. Rather like the difference between muggle photographs and wizarding ones.”

Heru slipped off the desk and paced lightly back and forth. “You can see the past and future this way, depending on your ability. How far in either direction depends on the strength of your talent.
Crystal scrying is similar, and best done in a near dark room so that nothing reflects. You want to gaze into the center of the sphere, not the surface…”
Heru received a letter from Lucius that evening and responded immediately with an affirmative, giving the impression that he couldn’t care less who it was for so long as he got paid for the work. So it was that when Lucius arrived that weekend, Heru was prepared to begin another tapestry.

Severus was not present this time; Heru escorted Lucius into his workshop and accepted first the fourteen vials the man had brought with him. They went into the same padded case used earlier, though of course the extra vials of blood had been removed and stored elsewhere in stasis. Lucius next handed him another bank draft, apparently having decided that as the first had come out as promised, there was no point in waiting to pay for this one. Heru wondered as he tucked it away who had actually provided the funds.

Heru took Lucius’s tapestry and hung it long enough to twist its function to the reverse, then re-rolled it and slipped it into its case to give back. Then he said, “To be doubly sure on this one, as I do not know the owner, if you would like I can arrange to be finishing up at a specific time. That way you could come and pick it up as soon as it is complete rather than waiting until the next day.”

“Oh?”

Heru nodded. “Given that I have no students on Friday afternoons, I could have it ready by five. Otherwise, I would say noon on Saturday, or five. Whatever is most convenient for you.”

“That is most thoughtful of you. Friday would suit nicely if you’re sure it isn’t extra trouble for you, Heru.”

“No, no trouble at all, I assure you. I can schedule a break long enough to let Severus in when his classes are done, then finish things up by the time you arrive.”

“In that focused of a state?”

“Oh, sure. I’ll just tell myself to snap out of it at a specific time, let Severus in, then continue.” Heru shrugged.

“Have you come to a decision on the journals you mentioned?”

Heru tilted his head to the side. “They’re an accounting of life, personal thoughts. Rather like letters to the man’s dead father. I’m not sure if there would be a point aside from sharing history. I have the feeling they would—people might be disinclined to believe them, considering that we’re talking about a member of the Slytherin family, Salazar’s nephew, and they are not filled with anything remotely resembling agreement with Salazar’s views on muggle-borns. People might take them to be romanticized fiction, essentially.”

Lucius narrowed his eyes slightly. “And have you anything from Salazar himself?”

“Certainly, but those are more in the way of instructional texts. I’d have to dig a lot deeper to see if there was something more personal. The only thing I do have offhand is a letter to his brother, and I’m not sure if I’d want to release that. That, too, would bring mixed reactions, I expect.”

Lucius really looked curious at that bland statement. Heru spoke again before Lucius could ask to see it.

“Basically it’s an apology to his brother for leaving due to his wife’s death at the hands of muggles.
The other founders would not agree with his insistence that muggle-borns be denied the school, so Salazar opted to leave. He left his two sons in the care of his brother as well, knowing that they would be all right under his guidance. Of course, as I understand it, the brother died when Salazar’s boys were around eleven or twelve, so the eldest nephew took over—that would be the author of the journals. If I recall correctly, Salazar was all for letting the muggles kill their own children if they turned out to be magical, assuming that if they were busy enough exterminating each other, they’d have no time to go after pure-bloods.”

Lucius smirked. “I imagine he might well have been correct in that assessment.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it. The point is, the material I am aware of paints a rather mixed picture of Salazar, and Slytherins in general. So you can see why I’m hesitant to publish any of it.”

“Yes, indeed. Perhaps it would be wiser to refrain. It would not do for your family’s reputation to be tarnished.”

Heru smiled easily. “I agree,” he said, though his meaning was the opposite of what Lucius would assume. “It would be a less than desirable outcome.”

“I’m sure you’d like to get started, so I shan’t take up any more of your time at present, Heru. I will return on Friday at five. Give my regards to Severus and your son.”

It wasn’t until several minutes later that either of them realized he was even in the room, and Severus looked vaguely embarrassed to be caught in such a compromising position. Heru responded with an amused smile and caught Mark in a hug when their son bounced across the intervening space to greet him.

Acting as though he had been doing absolutely nothing out of the ordinary, Severus said, “I assume you’re now able to get started on the next project?”

Heru gave a quick nod, then looked down to see why Mark was tugging his sleeve. “Dad says that the headmaster gave permission for me to sit in on some of his classes!”

“Oh? And have you already discussed which ones?” Heru hadn’t missed the slightly bemused look that crossed Severus’s face at being referred to as ‘Dad’.

Mark nodded, his eyes bright.

“He can sit in with the Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff first years, though I have already warned him he may find it boring. He has already covered material into the second year,” said Severus.

“But not ’til after the holiday.” Mark’s face lost some of its excitement. “Are you sure I can’t start sooner?” he asked hopefully.

“Perhaps you should consider it the headmaster’s Christmas gift to you,” Heru said, “and be properly thankful.”

Mark evidently recognized that deceptively casual tone, for he immediately said, “Of course,
Father!

“I need to stop by Diagon Alley today. I thought perhaps you two might like to join me and we could have lunch while we were out.”

“He paid in advance?” Severus asked.

“Yeah. Kind of surprised me, actually. I’ll get started on the tapestry this afternoon.”

“Aww, another one?” whined Mark.

“Hush. Hopefully it’s the last time for a while, so quit pouting.”

“Go get ready, Mark,” said Severus. Once their son had disappeared into his room Severus said, “He gave you no trouble?”

Heru shook his head. “Not really. I will need you to stop in after classes are done Friday so you’ll be there to let Lucius in. He’s due at five. I told him I thought it would be better that way, as he’d be right there when I finished and I wouldn’t have the chance to really see any names forming.”

Severus smirked. “Of course. Though I wonder what will happen if the tapestry does not reveal Salazar as one of the names.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. I could force it, I suppose, but I haven’t decided if that’s wise or not. On the one hand, not seeing it could be a bit of a crushing blow. After all, he is seeking proof beyond simply being a parslemouth. It might cause enough confusion to create delays in his plans. On the other hand, it might make him assume something went wrong, or that I’d deliberately mucked it up, suspecting who it was for.”

“Perhaps a compromise?” Severus suggested, then abruptly stood up when Mark appeared. “I’ll get your cloak while you write a quick note to let Albus know we’ve left the castle.”

On arrival at The Leaky Cauldron, they exited into the alley itself and headed for Gringotts. Heru had opened an account for himself in order to cash the first draft, so it took only a moment for him to deposit the latest one. Since it was not yet noon they took the time to wander in and out of shops as they walked back along the length of the narrow street. And though they did spot Lucius at one point, the man did not stop or approach; he paused for a heartbeat, then continued on his way to wherever it was he was headed.

The three of them had a lazy lunch at one of the finer restaurants available, then returned to Hogwarts sated and a bit tired. Mark ran off to find some of his friends and Severus resumed from where he had left off earlier.

“As I was saying, perhaps a compromise. Perhaps you could force Salazar’s name to appear, but not clearly.”

“As though there were some doubt, or problem the magic couldn’t quite resolve properly?”

“Yes. I expect you already have a likely candidate from the Tonks tapestry.”

“Mm, yes. Only one of the questionable names lacked a birth date. It has to be him. I could do it that way, I suppose—tamper with it enough that the name is forced to Salazar Slytherin, but everything else remains the same. It shouldn’t even be that difficult, and our copy would be unmodified. I’ll do the one in the workroom and the other in private.”
It was shortly after lunch the next day when a knock sounded at the door. Confused—it was extremely rare that anyone visited—Heru cast a revealing charm on the door to see who it was. Draco Malfoy was standing outside. Heru quickly looked to Praecino and asked him to make himself scarce for a while, then banished the phoenix’s perch to the bedroom before answering the door.

“Mr Malfoy. What can I do for you?”

“I was hoping Professor Snape was here, sir,” the boy said politely, though the corner of his mouth was quirked up.

“Mm. Do come in and have a seat.” Heru stepped back to admit him, waited until Draco had taken a spot on the couch, then went into the room they had set aside as a small library to tell Severus he had a visitor. When he returned to the lounge, Draco was examining a picture of Mark on the mantelpiece. He cleared his throat just as Severus arrived, causing Draco to whip around to face them.

“Uncle Sev!”

Heru stopped breathing for a second, then watched as Severus advanced into the room toward the boy. “Draco. What brings you here?”

“I wanted to know if you’d be willing to give me some extra credit work for the holiday,” Draco explained as Heru scanned the room for anything odd.

“You already have the highest marks in your class,” Severus pointed out. “And why couldn’t you have asked me this af—”

“Father! Selthis says he’s going to squeeze Cooper until—” Mark tumbled into the room and came to a dead stop. “Sorry.” He sidled over to Heru and stared openly at Draco, absently batting the snake’s head out of his line of vision.

Draco stared back for a few moments, then addressed Severus. “I thought it would be better to ask you privately, Uncle Sev. Other students might consider it favoritism if they were to overhear.”

“Interesting. Especially as that would not have bothered you in the past. Fine. Stay behind next lesson. Now, is there a fire raging out of control in your common room? No? Flood? Tornado? Volcanic eruption? Then I suggest you take yourself off and put in a little work on Care of Magical Creatures. Your father would not have wanted you to take it without reason.”

Draco’s eyes narrowed slightly, but he said respectfully enough, “Yes, Uncle Sev.” He made the barest inclination of his head toward Heru and Mark, then backed up, reversed, and slipped out through the door.

Severus turned around and said, “No.”

“Then what?” asked Heru.

“Courtesy title, nothing more. Mark, come here.” After the boy approached he said, “Listen closely. Be very careful around Draco. I do not care how friendly he might seem to be, don’t let anything important slip. The second you have your back turned he’ll report everything to his father. If you have any doubts about something, avoid the subject or just don’t speak about it. Understood?”

“Yes, Dad.” Then he frowned and said anxiously, “Will you please tell Selthis he isn’t allowed to crush Cooper for playing with his tail? He doesn’t want to listen to me!”
Heru and Severus were marking papers when a qualified warning came. Heru’s response was to conjure up a mirror and tune it to Mark to see what was happening. Severus appeared at his side as soon as he realized he would also be able to watch.

Mark was walking down one of the many corridors of the castle with Ron Weasley and a first year girl from Ravenclaw named Glendale. Draco Malfoy was approaching the trio from behind with a supercilious sneer twisting his mouth.

“Slytherin!” Draco called when he neared. “Interesting companions you have. You really ought to choose your company more carefully.”

The trio stopped and turned and Mark said, “Is there a problem?” Ron’s fists were clenched and the girl simply looked confused.

“They might be pure-bloods, Slytherin, but are you sure your father would want you to be seen with this lot? They’re blood traitors you know, hardly the sort of people someone of your family ought to be associating with.”

Severus clamped a hand on Heru’s arm. “Keep watch. I am the brat’s Head of House, so I will take care of this.” He let go and stalked off scowling.

Mark turned to Ron and said, “Is there some obscure rule about chess partners you never mentioned?”

“Like he would know,” sneered Draco. “He can barely play Keeper properly, never mind understand how real pure-bloods live and comport themselves.”

“Ron,” said Mark in a very low tone, “you know as well as I do that if you use your wand…” To Draco he said, “I thank you for your concern, but I don’t think it’s necessary at the moment.”

“Not necessary?” retorted Draco. “Have you any idea what kind of foul diseases you could catch from Weasel and his disgusting little mudblood girlfriend?”

Ron pushed Mark to the side and brandished his wand.

Draco laughed. “What are you going to do, Weasel? Curse yourself again for my amusement? What’s the matter—missing Potty so much that you’ll suck up to the next big name available? Are you hoping he’ll make you rich for Christmas?”

“Ron, don’t do it,” said Mark quietly as the girl turned and ran.

“That’s right, Weasel. Listen to Slytherin. He already knows you couldn’t possibly win against me.”

Mark scowled. “I don’t see what business it is of yours who I speak with or play against. Who died and put you in charge, anyway?”

“Maybe Potty wouldn’t have died if he’d taken my advice and stayed away from this pathetic excuse for a pure-blood.”

Mark’s eyes widened, as did Ron’s. A second later the clearing of a throat could be heard, then, “What, may I ask, is going on here?”
“Weasley tried to attack me, sir!”

“Is that so,” commented Severus. “Mr Slytherin, would you care to explain?”

“Of course, professor. I was returning from a chess meeting with Ron and Margaret when Malfoy stopped us to share his poor opinion on my choice of companions.”

“Mr Slytherin, Mr Weasley, I suggest you return to your rooms immediately.”

“Yes, professor,” they chorused.

Heru re-tuned the mirror to focus on Severus as the two boys left.

“Draco, what were you thinking?” Severus demanded.

“Why is he hanging around that filthy trash? Nothing good can come of it.”

“You foolish boy! Has it ever occurred to you that Professor Slytherin must play a part of his own? You’re interfering in things you don’t understand. If you alienate that child or—”

“But Father told me to learn more about him!”

“And you proposed to do that by insulting him, I presume? If you muck things up I wouldn’t be surprised if your father shipped you off to Durmstrang, and then you wouldn’t have me to straighten out or smooth over your indiscretions! Has it occurred to you that the child may have been asked to be nice to certain people so that he might learn things?”

Mark burst into the lounge saying, “Father! You’ll never guess—” He closed his mouth and went over to see what Heru was staring at, then said accusingly, “Hey! That’s—”

“Shush. We’ll talk in a moment.”

“You are not the only child here keeping his eyes and ears open, and if you continue to blunder about with all the finesse of a bull in a china shop, you might not be able to at all. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I will be speaking to your father about this. Now get back to your common room and think about how you could have handled the request differently.”

Severus whirled and stalked away.

Heru broke the connection and turned to his son. “The castle warned us you might be in danger,” he explained.

“And Dad came to make sure nothing bad happened?”

“That’s right. He did warn you about Draco, though I don’t expect he thought the boy would be so antagonistic. What would you have done if Severus hadn’t appeared?”

“I was getting ready to call Dobby. I didn’t think Ron would be able to stop himself from retaliating for much longer, and I thought if we turned away to leave, Draco might attack.”
“Very good. You thought about the safety of both of you and came up with a plan that probably would have worked. I’m proud of you for keeping a clear head and urging caution, and thinking about what help you could call on.”

Mark squirmed and flushed slightly, then said, “But what did Dad mean by what he said?”

“Draco’s father asked him to learn more about you.”

“Oh,” replied Mark quietly. “Then…”

“Yes. So I’ll warn you again. I don’t want you caught up in any of this if possible, so avoid what you can of it. Try to make sure you aren’t ever alone with Draco for one thing.”

“And,” said an arriving Severus, “the same goes for any number of students in Slytherin house, unfortunately. While not all of them have Death Eaters for parents or are from sympathetic families, many of them are connected in some way.”

“Does that mean I should stop playing chess with some people?” asked Mark somewhat nervously.

“No, it does not. You make friends with whomever you want. I believe Severus made a few comments to Draco that will make him rethink just exactly what it is you’re up to.”

“Draco is currently laboring under the impression that you have been asked by your father to pretend to be nice to certain people so as to gather information, Mark. It will probably be enough to make him back off on any further accusations as to your fidelity to the family name.”

“I don’t like this,” said Mark. “Can’t we just go?”

Heru pulled his son closer and said, “Mark, you know that Voldemort is supposedly a member of our family, and that’s part of what I’ve been trying to prove or disprove. If it is true, don’t you think your dad and I ought to be here to help stop him?”

“But—”

“And if he isn’t, don’t you think it would be churlish to abandon your friends to him? I promised you once, Mark, that I would keep you safe, and I will, even if it means placing you at Grimmauld Place with Sirius. I wouldn’t like it anymore than you did, but you’d be safe and you’d have Flick and Guin to watch over you.”

“No! I don’t want that!” Mark pulled himself away and ran off to his room, slamming the door behind him.

Heru buried his face in his hands and mumbled, “I knew this might happen. That stupid, wretched boy…” He looked up at Severus and asked, “What were you planning on saying to Lucius?”

Severus sat down next to Heru and said dryly, “I thought I’d compliment him on raising such a consistently moronic son.”

Heru chuckled and leaned his head against his lover’s shoulder. “I hate that Mark is getting dragged into this.”

“And yet, you cannot prevent it unless you place him in a gilded little cage, which I do not recommend. He’s a very sweet, honest boy, and that works against him right now. He will need to develop some measure of Slytherin cunning of his own, even as you have.”
Heru made a noncommittal noise in response. They stayed like that for some time in silence before the sound of a door being opened filtered in. A minute later Mark was standing nearby, fidgeting. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled.”

“Scared?” asked Heru softly.

“I’m not scared!” said Mark vehemently, then looked slightly ashamed of himself.

“No, of course not. If you had been scared earlier, you wouldn’t have been able to think about calling Dobby. Worried, perhaps, then?”

Mark nodded and came closer, close enough for Heru to reach out and yank the boy onto their laps and make him squeal.

“Well, that’s fine,” Heru said once he had an arm around their son’s shoulders to support him. “I’m a bit worried, too. But yelling at each other won’t help. You know that, right?”

“I know.”

“Then let’s try not to do that again. Maybe you and I will have to sit down and see if you can do any of the tricks I can. Then you’d have a little more to work with if you get in a tight spot.”

“Do you think I could?” asked Mark, looking altogether less upset.

“I have no idea, but we can check.”

“That’s great!” Mark wriggled off their laps and leaned in to give them both a hug, then ran off back to his room, this time closing the door quietly.

“Disaster averted, for the moment,” Severus commented.
Sins of the Father

Two days later Lucius arrived promptly at five and was let into the workroom by Severus. Heru had not timed it quite that exactly, so there was still abit to go at the bottom. He kept one ear open as he worked, just in case.

“So good to see you again, Severus.”

“Lucius. I believe you and I ought to speak about Draco.”

“Whatever for?"

“You may already know of it. I happened upon him being rather indiscreet and had words with him. Apparently he wanted to know more about Heru’s son, but chose to do so by way of provoking a fight over the boy’s choice of companions at the time. In short, I have no doubt he was insulting. In fact, if I recall the conversation correctly, he made a distinct comparison between the health of Heru’s son and that of the Potter brat’s on the basis of neither having appeared to be willing to listen to his advice. And, while we may be grateful that the latter is dead…”

“I see.” Heru absently noted a hint of nervousness in Lucius’s voice.

Several minutes later Heru stepped back from the table and placed his hands on his hips. Then he nodded, shoved his wand behind his ear, and opened one of the cabinets under the table to pull out already prepared edging pieces. After he positioned them properly and recovered his wand, he took a minute to spell them into place.

He was just about to look around for the pole when Severus stepped up and eased it through the pocket at the upper end. Heru smiled as Severus rolled and secured the tapestry, then slipped it into a waiting case. Just to drive the point home, when Heru turned to Lucius he arched a brow and said, “I hate to be a bore, but I heard a rather odd story, Lucius, involving—”

Lucius held up a hand and nodded. “Severus has informed me. You may be sure I will be speaking with my son regarding the matter.”

“Ah, splendid. Then I expect I need not concern myself further, will I?” He bared his teeth in a quasi-smile and tapped the table with his wand in an absentminded manner. “I should so hate to become annoyed. Things have an odd way of getting broken when that happens.”

“Indeed you will not, you have my assurances and my apology.”

Heru tucked his wand away—looking for all the world as though he had forgotten he was holding it —and took the case from Severus, then smiled normally and stepped forward to offer it. “I trust your friend will find this enlightening. If a reversal is needed after the usual amount of time, just let me know. I’d be happy to do so.”

“I will be sure to inform him,” Lucius replied smoothly.

As Heru couldn’t imagine for a moment that Voldemort had ever had issue—at least not without having found a woman who thought power was so intoxicating as to disregard his appearance—he wasn’t particularly concerned about having to come through on that aspect. But, one never knew.

“Well, then, I allow that I am a bit tired, so I shall bid you good-bye knowing that you will take care of pending matters from here,” Heru said pleasantly.
“Of course.”

Severus ushered Lucius out, then he and Heru returned to their quarters. “You know,” Heru said, “it’s almost fun toying with him. I’m beginning to see why Voldemort finds him so amusing.”

“Don’t get too enthusiastic,” said Severus warningly.

“I’m just commenting. You know I’m not like that. But it was still fun to see him get nervous, and I bet he has harsh words with Draco about what he’s done. It’s his own fault—he’s the one who told Draco to learn more without bothering to remember what kind of trouble that boy gets into almost as easily as breathing.”

Severus gave him a sharp look, then said, “I have every expectation that were Draco to become a Death Eater, Voldemort would keep him around just so he could slap him down when his ego grew too large.”

Heru beamed—Severus had said ‘Voldemort’.

“What are you smiling about?” Severus asked suspiciously.

“Nothing important,” Heru said breezily, then kissed his mate in a serious kind of way. Things were just starting to get really interesting when someone pounded on the door.

Severus pulled away, cursing, and stalked over to the door to open it. “What!?”

“Professor Snape, the seventh years have gone crazy! They’re cursing anyone who dares to speak! They’re—”

“Desist! Let us go see.” Severus pushed the student forward and left.

Heru, standing in the middle of the lounge, sighed.

Because he was bored, and because Severus hadn’t returned yet, Heru decided to spy on Lucius. As it turned out, it was a wise choice, even if only for the amusement factor. He set up two mirrors so he could tinker with one while the other was left alone.

“So Lucius,” said Voldemort silkily. “How thrilling to see you. I have heard a very interesting report just now. And strangely enough, it involves you.”

“My lord?”

“Yes, indeed. You. Tell me, Lucius, does your son always screw things up so abysmally?”

Lucius’s face went carefully blank.

“Perhaps you should be more careful when speaking to him. Then again, if you had allowed reason to rule you this time, you would not have been overheard, and I might not have been informed of what occurred. As I understand it, our dear Draco treated the Slytherin boy as he would have treated the Potter brat. Don’t you think that’s a tad unwise, Lucius?”

“Yes, my lord. I was very harsh with him.”
“Of course you were, Lucius. After all, you are his father, and the one primarily responsible for his behavior, isn’t that right? So if your son is acting like a complete fool —tell me, whose fault is that?”

“Mine, my lord,” Lucius said slowly.

“Very good, Lucius! And do you know what that means?”

Lucius nodded.

“Of course you do,” Voldemort said in a kindly tone. Then, “Crucio!”

Severus arrived and sat down next to Heru. “Dare I ask?”

“Someone clued Voldemort in about Lucius’s chat with Draco,” Heru explained, then went back to tinkering with the extra mirror.

Voldemort lifted the curse and clucked his tongue. “Lucius, really. Now if the Potter boy’s journal held any truth in it I know that you alone tried to restore me to my body. That is why you are currently my favorite. But I cannot allow that to sway my judgment forever, not when you have a son you cannot seem to control. Now why don’t you tell me what caused you to have this little chat with Draco.”

“My lord, when I arrived to pick up your tapestry, Severus made mention of finding Draco with the Slytherin boy. He told me that Draco all but threatened the child with the same fate as Potter. Slytherin started to mention it when the tapestry was complete, but stopped when he knew Severus had already spoken. He threatened me with his displeasure over the incident. When I extended an apology and said I would be speaking with Draco, he backed off the subject.”

“How very interesting. And did Slytherin scare you, Lucius?”

“Yes, my lord,” came a response so low it was almost a whisper.

“And why is that?”

“Something about his manner, my lord, and his eyes.”

“Ha!” exclaimed Heru triumphantly.

“What?”

“Look here.” Heru nudged the frame of the second mirror a few times, showing Severus that the viewpoint was no longer fixed.

Severus whistled appreciatively and watched that one instead.

“You know, Lucius, perhaps it would be best if our dear Draco were to have a special visit once he was home for the holiday. Now, why don’t you be a good man and hang up that tapestry for me. Then you may go.”

Lucius hastened to comply, ducking down to retrieve the case where he had dropped it earlier. After he finished and was ready to depart, Voldemort stopped him by saying, “Oh, Lucius. This is but a taste of what your son will soon feel. Crucio!”
Something had woken him. Heru looked over and saw that Severus was sleeping peacefully, so he slipped out of bed and checked on Mark, who was also sleeping peacefully. Heru stumped out to the lounge and flopped on the couch, puzzled, and irritated that his rest had been disturbed for no apparent reason.

The only thing that ever tended to cause that was Voldemort. Whatever the founders had done, it had not completely severed that side of the link. Heru heaved a sigh and reached out only to find that Voldemort was nowhere interesting, though he was excited about something—something to do with the prophecy.

Heru got up and asked Praecino—the phoenix was fairly mild in his reaction to being woken in the middle of the night—to please wake Albus as he would be going up as soon as he was dressed. Praecino flashed out, so Heru returned to his bedroom and started rummaging up clothing. He half considered leaving Severus to his own rest, but the decision was made for him when his mate propped himself up.

“What are you doing?”

“Something is wrong. I’m about to head up to Albus’s office. I couldn’t decide whether to wake you or not.”

“You have no idea what it is?”

“Just something about the prophecy.”

“Fine. I’m coming with. And next time don’t be so damn nice.”

Heru had a brief chat with the castle while Severus pulled his clothes on, asking her to let Mark know where they had gone should he wake up and find them missing. Then they apparated directly into the short entry leading to Albus’s office, not wanting to be seen out and about by anyone wandering the halls.

Severus pushed the door open without bothering to knock, waiting until Heru had passed through before kicking it shut with his heel and taking a seat.

“What brings you here at this hour, dear boys?” asked a tired and rumpled Albus.

“Something is wrong,” Heru repeated. “I sometimes get prophetic dreams, but I don’t usually remember them. Something is definitely wrong, though. Who is on duty tonight at the Ministry?”

“I see,” said Albus, though it was clear he did not. “Arthur is scheduled.”

“Fine.” Heru conjured up a standing mirror and set it to Arthur Weasley, then levitated it over so that all three of them could view.

Though the mirror was tuned, all they could see was an empty hallway. Arthur must have been using one of the Order’s invisibility cloaks. They watched for a time, yawning occasionally, and were almost ready to give it up as being a false alarm when an odd sound reached their ears. It was like something inching across the floor in measured movements with an oddly metallic flavor to it.

Heru adjusted the image outward to reveal a huge snake slithering down the hallway a foot or so at a time.
“Nagini,” said Albus and Severus together.

As she slithered closer they heard something that sounded suspiciously like a snore crossed with a snort, and the cloak was verified as it drifted down a ways to reveal a man sitting against the wall. He stretched and yawned, then took a look down the hallway and started. The cloak dropped away completely as he leapt to his feet and brandished his wand.

“Oh dear,” said Albus absently as Nagini struck, then again, and a third time. “Everard!” he called sharply.

“What?” said one of the portraits, that of a sallow-faced wizard with a short black fringe, who then yawned insolently.

“Go immediately to the Ministry and sound the alarm. The man has red hair and glasses. Make sure the right sort of people find him. Hurry!”

Everard disappeared sideways out of his frame. By now most of the portraits were listening in, though many of them pretended to still be sleeping, taking peeks every so often when they thought no one was looking. “Oh dear,” repeated Albus with a shake of his head. “I had not thought it would come to this. It will be a few minutes before—what news on the tapestry?”

“It’s complete,” said Heru. “I just need to wait for it to finish updating so I can find the connection.”

“You finessed the one you gave to Lucius?”

Heru nodded. “For what good it will do. Which reminds me—I was able to save enough of the blood to attempt to use it to tune a mirror to its owner.” Albus’s brows shot up and Heru could see Severus shift in his peripheral vision. “Assuming it is Voldemort’s, I may be able to get around whatever prevented me before.”

“That is exception—” He switched focus when several people rushed down the hallway to collect Arthur. One of them paused long enough to vanish the pool of blood and grab the cloak, then dashed off after the others. “They seem to have things well in hand. That is exceptional news,” he said, eyes still on the mirror. “It would be a priceless feat if you can manage it. Ah, there he goes. It is as well that the students are released tomorrow—today, actually.”

Albus scratched out a short note and rose, giving it to Fawkes and asking him to deliver it to Minerva. Fawkes flashed out and Albus resumed his seat. “I shall send the Weasley children to Grimmauld Place now, rather than waiting.”

They watched as Arthur was rushed through St Mungo’s and into a bed, several healers fussing over him to stem the flow of blood and repair his cracked ribs where Nagini’s fangs had struck. As soon as footsteps were heard in the outer room Heru banished the mirror up to the second level. Minerva arrived a moment later with the four Weasley children in tow; all of them looked frightened and confused.

“Oh, Minerva, thank you for being so prompt. Arthur Weasley has been attacked and taken to St Mungo’s. You four will be going to Sirius’s home as it is closer to your father than the Burrow. Your mother will no doubt be joining you shortly.”

They stared at him blankly.

“Minerva, you can arrange for their things to be packed up for transfer tomorrow morning. Heru, I would ask that you go now to warn Sirius of their arrival and to help keep an eye on things.”
Heru started to protest, then subsided. Instead he leaned over to Severus and whispered, “Get Mark and bring him over?” Severus nodded and rose, leaving without another word. “All right,” Heru said, then rose as well, getting far enough past the door before apparating directly to headquarters.

Flick appeared a second later, wondering who was visiting at that hour, and smiling toothily when he saw Heru.

“Flick, could you please wake Sirius for me and ask him to come to the kitchen?”

“Flick is being happy to, master.” He popped out, so Heru trotted down the stairs to the kitchen and took a seat. Guin arrived and immediately set about making tea, having time enough to serve him a cup before Sirius pushed through the door and gave him an irritated look.

“Arthur Weasley was attacked,” Heru stated calmly. “He’s badly hurt and has been taken to St Mungo’s. His children are coming here shortly.”

Sirius’s expression changed to worry. Heru called Praecino to him and handed him a note he had prepared while waiting, and the phoenix flashed out obligingly.

“I was asked to come warn you and to help keep an eye on things.”

“Yes, of course.” Sirius sat down and blindly took the cup Guin plunked down in front of him.

Seconds later four children appeared in a tangle of sleepy limbs, then sorted themselves out. Guin picked up the blackened tea kettle Albus had used as a portkey with her fingertips and carried it off cautiously, only to appear a few seconds later and pour out more tea.

The children were no sooner settled when Severus pushed through the door and came to a stop at Heru’s side. “Mark is already upstairs, having shown me the room he used previously.”

“Thank you, Severus. Are you able to stay?”

Guin paused in the act of getting another cup. “No, I must be on hand for when the Slytherin students leave tomorrow. Albus has sent for Molly.” He turned and left as abruptly as he had come.

“Why are we sitting here?” cried Ginny, now shaking a bit. “We should be at St Mungo’s!”

“Yeah!” chorused the twins.

“No,” said Heru. “You will remain here. There is nothing you can do at St Mungo’s that you cannot do here for the moment.”

“What?”

“He’s right,” said Sirius unexpectedly, ignoring—or perhaps not seeing—the incredulous looks on the faces of the children. “Your mother will be on her way by now to see what’s happening. There is no point in going when you’ll likely be shoved into a waiting room and told nothing.”

“But, Sirius—”

“No. Have some tea and try to calm down. Unless you’re hungry, that is.”

Nobody spoke up. A short time later a flash of light startled everyone. Praecino dropped down to perch on Heru’s shoulder and offer a roll of parchment. When he looked at it he saw it was for the children and handed it to the closest of them.
“Mum says she’s on her way to St Mungo’s now and for us to stay put. We’re supposed to sleep if we can.” The twin laughed mirthlessly and dropped the parchment, burying his face in his hands.

Things were quiet again after that. Guin noiselessly provided more tea as necessary, casting worried little looks at everyone, until eventually Molly Weasley arrived looking very tired, but relieved. The only one of her children who had managed to stay awake was Ron, who stood up and was swept into a hug by his mother.

“She’s fine,” she assured him. “We can go see him later today.” She released him and pushed him back down into a chair, then gave each of the others a hug, waking them from where they were sprawled over the table and repeating the news.

Then she turned to Heru and managed a grateful smile. “He might be dead if it wasn’t for your intervention. Albus explained,” she said cryptically.

“What’re you on about, Mum?” demanded Ron.

“Never you mind the details. Your father is fine and that’s what matters. You lot should go get some sleep.”

“Can’t,” yawned one of the twins. “Hungry now.”

Heru nodded at Guin and rose. “I’ll just go check in on Mark, then, and see all of you later on today. I’m a bit short on sleep myself.”

Heru did not go to St Mungo’s. He spent the time after he woke up playing chess with Mark and explaining what had happened. The Weasleys had not yet returned when Severus arrived, trailed by an anxious looking Hermione Granger. Mark’s face lit up with a welcoming smile, but it was perhaps just as well that one couldn’t be sure for whom it was intended.

Cooper wound out from behind a chair to sniff at the carrier Hermione held, meowing curiously. She hastily set it down and released her cat, Crookshanks. They immediately set off to get to know one another and investigate the house, and Hermione sat down.

“I thought you were going skiing,” said Mark as Severus took a seat as well.

“I was, but then—Professor Snape was kind enough to escort me here. Mum and Dad will be disappointed, but…”

“I know where Ginny’s room is,” offered Mark. “Want me to show you?”

“Sure,” she said a bit listlessly.

Mark bounced to his feet, paused long enough to make a move on the board, then left with Hermione.

“Just what I always wanted,” Heru said facetiously. “A holiday in someone else’s home.”

“Some things must be endured,” said Severus. “But, as Molly is now here—I assume Lupin will also be arriving—perhaps we can return to Hogwarts. There are other Order members who would suit as well, or better.”

“Hm.” Heru got up and grabbed some supplies, then scratched out a short letter. A moment later Praecino appeared and was sent off with it. “Though if it comes down to a choice as to where to spend Christmas day, I’m not sure which I’d choose.”
“It isn’t as though you’d have to eat in the Great Hall,” Severus said.

“Oh? In that case…”

Praecino flashed back in and Heru took the note he was holding. “Albus says we can return as soon as Remus arrives.” He crumpled the parchment and shoved it in his pocket. “I don’t know where Moody got off to, but he should be here as well.”

“He’s probably off investigating dustbins for subversive activity,” was the snide response.

The Weasleys returned a short time later and Molly passed on another round of thanks to Heru on Arthur’s behalf. Tonks had a sly wink for him and confided that she had found a very strange name on her tapestry. Heru told her vaguely that he was looking into that and would get back to her, hopefully within the next week or so. Moody arrived with Remus, his magical eye swiveling all around as children moved back and forth, though his normal one stared fixedly at Heru with undiluted suspicion.

Heru captured his son when he appeared and pulled him off to the side. “We can go back to Hogwarts now,” he said. “If you want to stay here for the holiday that’s fine. Otherwise you and I and Severus will return to the castle after dinner.”

Mark gave him a wary look, no doubt remembering his father’s pronouncements about his safety. “Hogwarts,” he said firmly.

Heru nodded. “Have fun while we’re here, then, and be ready to go after we eat.” Mark scampered off quickly, so Heru went to go join Severus, stopping part way there when Sirius intercepted him.

“I … should have said this earlier, but I didn’t. Thank you for capturing Peter.”

Heru smiled faintly. “It was the least I could do. You’re quite welcome.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you aren’t completely untrustworthy.”

Heru’s smile broadened. “Perhaps. We will be leaving after dinner, by the way.”

“Huh. Good, then Snivellus won’t be around to sour the atmosphere.”

Heru’s smile vanished and was replaced by a sneer. “You would do well to guard your tongue, Mr Black.”

“Why do you even defend him? He’s nothing but a loathsome, turncoat Death Eater.”

“Let me ask you a question or two, Mr Black. Did you think you could live with yourself if your little prank had been successful that night? When you used the nature of one of your best friends against himself, and Severus? And would you have been able to live with yourself when Remus was put down like a dog with rabies after killing someone you despised, or was sent to Azkaban as a murderer? Did it make you feel good to play God with people’s lives, deciding who should live and who should die? Some sick, twisted pleasure we would have expected to come from Voldemort or one of his people—dare I say it, your mother? Has it ever occurred to you that your actions, along with those of your friends over the years, helped push Severus into the decision to become a Death Eater?”

Heru snorted derisively. “There was a time when you defended Peter, I assume because you couldn’t trust your friend Remus any more than he could find it within himself to trust you under the circumstances—there were only so many people to point the finger at, after all. And look how that
turned out.” He didn’t bother to mask his sarcasm. “Severus, on the other hand, spent that time betraying Voldemort to you and yours so that you’d all have a fighting chance, working on your behalf despite not being able to stand the sight of you. Who do you think is the better bet, hm? I’ll thank you to be civil in my presence, especially when you think to disparage my house and by proxy my name and reputation.”

“Your house?”

“Is it not? It was begun by Salazar and I am a Slytherin of the blood. If you want to quibble over semantics and ignore the real issues here, be my guest.”

“No one forced him to become a Death Eater,” Sirius protested faintly.

“And no one forced you to be a complete jackass during your school years. If you’d left each other alone, I expect we wouldn’t be having this conversation. But you know, I will continue to do what I can to assist the Order, as will Severus, but you can be damn sure it won’t be for your sake if you persist in this foolishness. It will be for those of everyone involved, and certainly for a very dead young boy who cannot do much of anything now but rot.” Heru turned on his heel and stalked off to Severus, muttering under his breath.

“You do realize you’re emitting sparks—” murmured his mate.

“What?”

“—and judging by the shell-shocked look on Black’s face, your little show has given him something to think about. What did he want, anyway?”

Heru ran a hand through his hair in agitation and sighed. “To thank me, sort of, for capturing Peter.”

Severus arched a brow.

“Then he called you a rude name—I refuse to repeat it—and I got a bit annoyed.”

“My gallant hero,” Severus said breathily, raising a hand to his chest.

“Oh, shut up. I called him on a few points, is all. Maybe he’ll feel guilty enough to consider what I’ve said.”

“I hope you aren’t entertaining some fantasy of Black and I becoming friends, Heru.”

“Bite your tongue. I’m not completely deluded. I’d settle for insincere civility and a cessation of overt hostility.”

A snicker not far off made them both turn their heads; Remus had evidently been listening in, and hastily took off as soon as they noticed him.

Dinner was announced a few minutes later, and when that was finally over Mark ran upstairs to grab the overnight bag Severus had packed for him while Heru tracked down Cooper. Molly appeared to see them out, and when Mark came back downstairs the three of them left headquarters.
The next morning Heru was in a better mood. It had felt good in a perverse sort of way to say those things to Sirius. His godfather had been so intent on disassociating himself from his family’s ways that he had gone completely overboard in despising what they stood for. He had never really matured, either, and Azkaban certainly hadn’t helped the situation. As much as Heru wished he could feel about Sirius the way he had as a child, his adult perspective wouldn’t allow for it.

He knew that Sirius was not entirely to blame; Severus had added his own caustic nature into the mix and made things much worse. Heru would never know the whole of it, though, not unless he was able to view the entire progression of events from an unbiased point of view. That being exceedingly unlikely, he was willing to set aside the issue of who started what.

Severus had continued to temper his actions, waiting until it was only Heru or Albus before launching into snide remarks and underhanded digs. Maybe it had started with an eye toward Mark’s feelings, and maybe it had been reinforced when Severus learned the truth of who Heru had been, but he was trying, at least in public.

Heru hadn’t been lying, though. He had absolutely no expectations of Severus and Sirius ever becoming friends. That would have required a miracle of the highest order. He pushed aside his thoughts with a purely mental sigh and started to roll out of bed, reversing himself when Severus snaked out an arm and latched onto him with a sleepy murmur. Consequently, it was much later than he had planned when he did rise, shower, and seek breakfast.

He found Mark reading quietly in his room a short time after and asked him if he wanted to try out a few things. Mark responded by flipping the book onto the bed and leaping to his feet, the picture of eagerness, so they moved out to the lounge and got comfortable.

“Now, some of what I’m going to ask you to do may sound really silly, but bear with me.” When his son nodded, Heru said, “Good. Close your eyes, then.” He pulled his wand out from behind his ear and held it up in front of Mark’s face.

“I want you to try to imagine what you’d be seeing if your eyes were open. Try that for a bit, take your time, and tell me if you notice anything odd, okay?”

Mark nodded and furrowed his brow. After a few minutes the furrow became more pronounced. “I want you to try to imagine what you’d be seeing if your eyes were open. Try that for a bit, take your time, and tell me if you notice anything odd, okay?”

Mark nodded and furrowed his brow. After a few minutes the furrow became more pronounced. “Why am I seeing a thin glowing line?”

“Where is it, and how is it positioned?”

“Right in front of my face, and it’s perpendicular to the floor, about a foot long.”

“Open your eyes.”

Mark did and jerked back almost immediately. “Wow.”

“That’s one test, then. When we are done here you’re going to start practicing, trying to identify all the magical objects in a room with your eyes closed, and verify when you think you have everything, all right?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Eventually, if you have enough of the Sight, you can do it with your eyes open. But for now, let’s
try something else. See that piece of paper over there? Try to call it to you. Don’t speak, just call it with your mind and imagine it coming to your hand.”

“Won’t I get in trouble if it works for being underage?”

Heru shook his head. “You aren’t using a wand, for one thing. And with the magical ambiance being what it is here, I doubt anyone will even notice.”

Mark shot him a suspicious look, then concentrated. After a minute of effort the paper slid an inch across the table it was on, then stopped.

“Not bad,” Heru said with a smile. “That’s something else for you to practice, but only here in our quarters, understand? Start out with small, light objects. If you can master those, you can try something with a little more weight. Actually, that’s enough for right now. Two is enough to begin with. When you get tired of practicing, or bored, I want you to write me up a list of ways you could use these two to your advantage.”

“All right.”

“And don’t forget lunch, either.”

Mark nodded and ran off, possibly so that Heru couldn’t give any more instructions. Heru set about finding something he could transform into a real mirror rather than conjuring one. He was actually a little surprised that his temporary ones had lasted as long as they had. He did not want the one he tried to use as a mirror for Voldemort to vanish unexpectedly, not when he only had a minute portion of blood to work with.

The castle interrupted at that point with a vision, so Heru apparated to the location she specified and returned with a magnificent example of a standing mirror. Severus wandered out of the bedroom just as Heru was preparing to move the mirror to a less trafficked spot in their quarters and headed straight for the fireplace. Heru moved the mirror into their library, then came back.

After pouring himself a cup of tea, he sat down across from Severus and smiled. “I tried a few things this morning.”

“Mm?”

“Mark can apparently see magic and has some ability at wandless magic.”

Severus managed to look more interested. He was strangely out of it for a man who usually passed from sleeping to waking in a heartbeat.

“I have no idea yet how strong he’ll be at them, though.”

“I thought you said you could tell power levels just by looking.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t exactly apply here. For example, I had to work to find the parselmouth ability. If I had sat down in the past and made … a map, I suppose you could say … then I would know better now how to judge. And, I cannot study myself. Anyway, Mark is practicing right now. Later on I or you can see if he can determine what an object is by its magical signature rather that simply being able to tell that it’s magical.”

“The mirror?”

Heru nodded. “The library. I’ll start work in a bit to see if I can tune it to Voldemort. I’d be a lot
happier if it works knowing I wouldn’t have to keep reaching out. Still, it’s only sight and sound, not a look into his mind.”

“The less you’re in there, the better. Then, I’ll be marking papers today, getting them out of my hair. The sooner those are done, the more time I’ll have to relax.” Severus squinted at the clock. “I can get plenty done before lunch.”

Heru and Severus separated shortly after. Heru had a number of things he wanted to check into and try, the first of which was to study in detail the mirrors he’d already been tuning. A lot of time had been spent teaching him how to do certain things, but not much on why or how they worked. He used conjured, transfigured, and normal mirrors, all tuned to the same person, to determine the differences and how much effect they had on the spell, if any, as well as how the spell related to the target. He also experimented with obsidian, but that tended to lose the spell almost as soon as he had placed it.

That, and Severus working with Mark on honing his newfound abilities, took them right through to Christmas day. They opted to remain in their quarters until noon, at which point they took lunch in the Great Hall to be sociable. Very few students had stayed over during the break so it was not a huge gathering. As soon as everyone had finished eating Mark ran off with a friend who had remained, and Heru and Severus retired to cozy up on the couch in front of a crackling fire. Heru hadn’t bothered to spy on the people at № 12 Grimmauld Place, despite having arranged for gifts for each of them—anonymously, of course.

Two days later the tapestry had finally filled out enough to be useful. After a great deal of scrolling Heru found the name he was looking for and began tracing it down to Tom Riddle’s. What he found was a little shocking, and Severus felt much the same when Heru showed it to him. Heru decided to contact Tonks to see if she would be willing to bring her tapestry by so he could do a little comparing. She was, and stopped by that afternoon. This time she was led to their quarters.

Tonks chattered away brightly at a mostly silent Severus as Heru traced through her tapestry; he found the same peculiar results. Heru waited until she paused for breath and interrupted.

“Tonks, I’m not quite sure if this is good news or bad news,” he said. Severus gained new interest in the conversation and straightened.

“What? Is it that odd name?”

“Yes,” he said gravely. “I very strongly suspect that the ancients had a way of becoming another person, so to speak. And if my suspicions are correct, that odd name was actually an alias, a new identity, of Salazar Slytherin after he left Hogwarts.”

“But that would mean—I’m not even a parselmouth!”

“No, but I think I have a good idea why. Look here.” He indicated a spot on the tapestry and began tracing it down. “If you notice, it is not your mother in the direct line. It’s your supposedly muggle-born father who carries Slytherin blood. If you look at the colours of the names as we go along, you’ll see that he descends from a line of squibs. I cannot tell from this if one of them left the wizarding world to live as a muggle or not. The point is, the potential was always there, and when your father married your mother, a pure-blood, it resulted in you, with the metamorphmagus ability.”

“Auntie Tonks?” she said, making the vague connection.

“If you like.” Heru smiled warmly. “I’m sure Mark will be thrilled, actually, though I wouldn’t be very open with this information if I were you.”
Her face dimmed for a moment. “Yes, of course.”

“It gets more interesting, though, and this is where you make the obvious, and not so good connection.”

“Eh? Voldemort?”

“Yes. Look at this one—we’ll start with the same name. You’ll notice that there is a different son born to Yshan, not the one that leads to you.” She nodded, so he continued with, “If we trace this down, we lead to Voldemort’s muggle father.”

Tonks let out a merry laugh. “I bet that would get his knickers in a twist, wouldn’t it?”

“I expect so. Now keep in mind, I have yet to prove that this Yshan is actually Salazar, but it seems frighteningly likely. There are a couple of other suspect names on your tapestry, but none of them appear on this one.”

“How did you—”

“Guile and deceit, my dear Tonks.”

She grinned broadly. Heru thought she was taking the news far better than he had hoped for; she must have an extraordinary sense of self to be so relaxed. “Well, I suppose it comes with the territory for metamorphmagi, eh?” she pointed out shrewdly, giving him an exaggerated wink, then laughing again.

“But this is great,” she continued. “I actually have more wizarding relations who aren’t supporters of the pure-blood manifesto!”

“Would you like to stay for dinner? I’m sure Mark would like to see you again, also.”

She stopped bouncing and dimmed. “Can’t,” she said with a sigh. “I’m on duty in a bit. I planned on grabbing some takeout on the way into the Ministry for my shift. Another night?”

“Sure. You’re an auror, correct?”

“That’s right. A ruddy bore over a holiday, too. Most people end up at St Mungo’s over a family argument. But still, we need to be available in case something comes up. Do you need that for another day or so?” She pointed at her tapestry. “I know you might want to show Albus or something. I can just pop round on my next free day to collect it, and maybe have lunch?”

“That would be very helpful, thanks,” said Heru.

“Right! I need to be off, then.” She bounced over to give him a quick hug, started to do the same to Severus, but paused, remembering who he was, and instead gave him a cheerful wave, then left.

Severus turned to him and slowly said, “I am related to her.”

“Yup! ’Fraid so.”

“I may never recover.”

“Don’t be such a baby. She’s a nice girl.”

Severus pinned him with a frosty look. “She has enough energy to make a five year old tired just watching her. I suggest we take these tapestries and go see Albus. I’m sure he will be equally thrilled
with the news.”

“Just imagine how Voldemort will feel.” They each packed up a tapestry and apparated to the entry, then continued on in to Albus’s office.

The next day a letter arrived at breakfast. Heru checked it over for magic before opening it, as he always did with anything not delivered by phoenix, and shook out the contents. Rather than a normal letter, it was revealed as a rectangular piece of thick, stiff paper. Fancy black script wrote out a message, and the first letter of each line was edged in gilt.

Heru hadn’t even read it yet and he was already suspicious.

You are cordially invited to dinner at Malfoy Manor on the evening of 8th January, with cocktails to begin at 7pm. Please RSVP to let Narcissa and myself know if your son will be joining you and Severus on this occasion.

It was signed ‘Lucius Malfoy’ and embossed with the Malfoy family crest in the lower right corner. Not having received a formal invitation for anything before, Heru had no idea if this was the proper way of doing things. After staring at it for a minute he flipped it over to Severus, who skimmed it and snorted.

“How utterly delightful. Mark is not going,” Severus said firmly.

“No, he is not. I also note that he seems to assume we will not decline the invitation. What do you know about Malfoy Manor?”

“I’ve been there numerous times. Prepare yourself for understated elegance, a quarry’s worth of marble, the usual. No apparation wards that I’m aware of. I doubt we’d see anything out of the ordinary.”

“Except, perhaps, other guests?”

“That may be. And while I think Lucius would never dare tamper with the food, it would be unwise to assume he might not.”

“That’s not a problem. I suppose we should go see Albus again.”

Tonks arrived shortly before noon two days later and announced herself by banging on their door several times. When Heru opened it—the castle had flashed him her image before he could check who was on the other side—she was gazing up at the corridor ceiling, whistling, and bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet. She gave a theatrical start, then grinned slightly when he appeared.

“How come you live with Severus, anyway?” she asked.

“It was convenient originally, and temporary,” he said as he stepped back to allow her entrance, “and it seemed silly to change things after a while.” He shrugged with apparent indifference. “Severus does not mind, and he is of Slytherin House.”

“I suppose that makes sense.” She bounced into the middle of the lounge and looked around with bright eyes.
Heru crossed the room to indicate her tapestry, neatly contained in a waterproof case. “Don’t forget to take that when you leave, of course,” he said, then moved to sit down. “I’ve been sent a dinner invitation from Lucius Malfoy, by the way. I do believe that my efforts are beginning to pay off in some obscure way.”

She dropped onto the couch and grinned. “Better you than me!”

“Yes, well…” Heru shrugged and smiled back. “That remains to be seen. Listen, are you free on the eighth?”

She raised her brows and shifted her gaze down, her eyes going a bit wide. Then she blinked and looked up. “Sure am. Why?”

“It is rather short notice, but I thought perhaps you might wish to spend that evening with Mark. And, incidentally, keep an eye on him at the same time. Severus will be going with me, you see, and quite frankly, I am loathe to leave my son in the hands of certain people while we’re away from the castle. You, however, are family.”

“I can do that, sure! It would be fun,” she assured him.

“We will be leaving here at around seven, but you are certainly welcome to arrive earlier than that.” He looked away as Severus arrived, and their son.

Lunch went well enough. Mark was pleased to hear that Tonks was a member of the family and took to the idea immediately. That her energy level was a match for his was just as well. Severus was almost sociable, though it was clear to Heru that he found the girl to be excessively wearying. The concept of a family comprised of—essentially—nice people might be new to him, but he was handling the adjustment well enough, disdaining his usual sarcasm for something a bit more restrained and mellifluous.

Heru smiled frequently during the meal, though he was careful not to aim it at his mate too often. And eventually, Tonks wandered off, taking her tapestry with her, promising to return on the eighth. No one was foolish enough to refer to it as keeping an eye on him to Mark, though.

They arrived shortly after seven, Severus having assured Heru that it was never the done thing to show up on time. A house-elf answered the door and admitted them, then took their travel cloaks and showed them into a lounge. Three people rose to greet them; Draco was nowhere in sight. Two were white-blond, naturally. The third, a man, had light brown hair and hazel eyes, with the kind of face that was easily forgettable.

“Ah, Heru and Severus,” said Lucius. “How delightful to see you again. We’re so glad you could come. Narcissa, dear, let me introduce Heru Slytherin. Heru, this is my lovely wife, Narcissa.”

She extended a porcelain white hand and Heru captured it in his own, placing a butterfly kiss on the back before releasing it. She nodded to Severus by way of greeting, then stepped back and settled in the chair she had vacated.

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“Heru, Severus, this is a recent acquaintance of ours, Xavier Chaldren. Xavier, Heru Slytherin and Severus Snape.” As they exchanged a round of hand shakes Lucius said in a supposed aside to Xavier, “They are both professors at Hogwarts.” To them he said, “Would you care for a drink to start with?”
Heru glanced over at the selection carefully and determined it was safe. “Beaujolais?”

“Certainly. Severus?”

“The same, if you please.”

“Of course. Please, make yourselves comfortable.”

They took seats in matching chairs, and Heru took the time while Lucius was pouring to briefly study Xavier while Severus engaged the man in a meaningless query about his work. Heru saw what he expected to see, a glamour. Beneath the layer of magic obscuring his real features was a stretched-smooth, pasty-white face with slits for nostrils like a snake and eyes that matched.

Xavier professed to be in the import business. Heru held back his disbelief; everyone knew that was a commonly used euphemism for underhanded activities. Lucius arrived with two glasses and Heru rechecked them; neither had been tampered with. The next fifteen minutes were spent in an excruciatingly boring round of social pleasantries, and he was hard pressed to keep the smile on his face. So, it was something of a relief when a cowed looking elf popped in to announce that dinner was served.
Once they were seated—Xavier ended up directly across from Heru—the soup course appeared. The utensils looked fine, the soup looked fine, so Heru tapped the top of Severus’s foot with his under the table a single time. He used his soup spoon in the properly prescribed manner, moving it away from himself to fill it, and had taken a sip—without any noise, of course—when Xavier opened the conversation.

“I understand that you are the creator of the tapestry, Heru, that Lucius arranged for me.”

Heru smiled and nodded. “I trust you were pleased with the results.”

“Quite. One wonders where you learned such an accomplishment.”

Heru paused to have more of the soup—he detested it, actually, and thought that cold soups were an affectation of the wealthy—then said vaguely, “Oh, here and there. One finds all manner of interesting things during life’s journey.”

“Is it the sort of thing anyone could learn to do?”

Heru allowed one corner of his mouth to quirk up. “Fortunately for me, no, I’m afraid not.” He turned to Narcissa and said, “This is quite good. My compliments.” She gave him a wintry smile and he took another spoonful.

“A shame,” said Xavier, “but I can see why you do not take on many commissions given the amount of work that goes into one.”

“Yes, they are somewhat fatiguing,” Heru agreed.

“I did have the odd question or two about them if you didn’t mind.”

Heru shook his head and reached for his glass to try to banish the soup’s taste from his mouth.

“I noticed that the names only go so far back—why would that be?”

“If you think of magic as a living thing, a thing that can be passed down from person to person—in part—like genetics, just as certain abilities are passed down from father to son, and so on, then you can imagine that part of that magic contains information on a person’s ancestors.”

Xavier nodded, so Heru continued, “The process taps into that information, taken from the person’s blood and extrapolating from it the magical signatures of the people in a person’s direct line—going backward, at least. However, there is a finite amount that can be maintained. After a certain point the information becomes vague or incomplete, and the magic of the tapestry can no longer accurately divine the names, so it stops updating. The process forward is understandably different, as the tapestry updates in real time as each change occurs. A completely different situation, really.”

“I see,” said Xavier, then paused as their bowls disappeared and the next course appeared. “Then what might be the cause of names that appear to be blurry, or other such oddities?”

Heru noticed immediately that the dressing on the salad was tainted, at least for his plate and Severus’s, and tapped his mate’s shoe twice. He plastered a thoughtful expression on his face, as though thinking deeply about the question, and set about unweaving the magic that permeated their food. When he was done he tapped Severus’s shoe again, once. “Well,” he said slowly, “that can be
caused by a number of things.”

He picked up the correct fork and poised it over his salad. “For instance, the magic could be vague for that name. Because the odds of it being correct are so high, it gets placed on the tapestry, but what you actually see is blurred, or some of the information is missing, such as a birth date.” Then he delicately forked some of the greens and took a bite, not missing the slight smirk on Lucius’s face as he did so. Then he wondered how it was that people at dinner parties ever came away feeling full if the portions were always so small.

“I see, yes. It makes a great deal of sense when you put it that way.”

“Was there anything else that brought to mind a question once you had a chance to look over the updated tapestry?”

“There was one thing, now that I think about it. One of the names—a very old one—almost looked as though another name was underneath it. Why do you suppose that might be?”

Heru shrugged and looked Xavier in the eye. “I have a theory on that. I strongly suspect there is a lost art from ancient times, a method whereby a person could change their identity. I speculate that if a person were to do so, their magical signature would retain some vestige of their original identity. So, when something like a tapestry is created, the magic used becomes confused and attempts to place both names. But, I have no way of proving my suspicions.”

Xavier remained silent for a minute, long enough for the salad plates to disappear and be replaced with the main course. Heru wondered if Lucius or Narcissa had a little button or something under the table that they pressed to signal the house-elves in the kitchen.

He took that opportunity to check the food, tapping his mate’s foot twice before disabling the carrots, then once. He also wondered if any of them thought he or Severus were that stupid as to take this dinner at face value. Surely they did not normally consist of two people talking while the rest listened politely and affected rapt attention.

“I can see why you’re a professor, Heru,” Xavier finally said with an engaging smile. “You certainly have a way with words. And, for more than one subject I hear.”

Heru responded with a charming smile of his own and said, “How very flattering. I have taught more than one subject, yes. If one knows the material and can interact with children on a level they understand, almost anything is possible.”

“And your wife—does she also teach?”

“No, she doesn’t do much of anything except lay about all hours of the day and night. She’s dead, you see,” Heru said callously. “A rather unfortunate accident involving a niffler and some diamonds. I don’t really like to talk about it. I’m sure you understand.”

“Yes, of course.” Xavier pushed right on with, “I’m surprised you’ve not remarried. Surely a man of your talent and good name would be sought after by any number of ladies of good family.”

Heru shrugged. “One was enough for me. I got what I wanted out of it.”

“Ah heir, I presume?” asked Xavier.

Heru smirked and said, “No, the title of Widower. The heir was just a bonus.”

“What if something should happen to your heir?” Xavier persisted.
Heru laughed softly and forked a carrot. “I’m not a Divination professor for nothing. I wasn’t hired for my good looks, after all. It’s amazing what someone with talent can find out if they just put their mind to it.” He turned to Narcissa and smiled warmly. “These carrots are prepared so exquisitely. You simply must send the recipe over so I can have my house-elves replicate it.”

Conversation was rather stilted after that, and Lucius and Severus finally joined in. Narcissa remained silent, acting as nothing more than an aesthetically pleasing manikin who had faultless table manners. The subject rolled back around to divination, which afforded Heru an opportunity when Xavier gave him another thinly disguised compliment.

“Ah,” Heru said with a dazzling smile, “since you have expressed such interest, you shall be my subject in this.” He had chosen his words very carefully, knowing that the implication would be something to make Xavier itch. “Would you be so kind as to extend your hand?”

As the man did so, the plates disappeared. This time they were not replaced with the expected sweet course, perhaps in deference to the little show Heru was about to put on. Heru took Xavier’s hand in one of his own, brushing it open, palm up, with his other. It was, perhaps, slightly awkward as they were sitting across the table from each other, but Heru did not let that get in the way. He was sure to make Xavier be the one to make more of an effort.

He affected a very thoughtful look as he studied the palm carefully, then pulled his head back to consider the overall shape of Xavier’s hand, and consider the relation between the palm and fingers. Then, in a truly rude move, Heru released the hand and snapped his fingers, ending up so that his index finger was pointed at Xavier’s other hand, then flipped his hand over and crooked his finger.

After a slightly shocked moment of silence, he was able to study the second hand as well. A minute later he released Xavier and sat back. “This will take some time, so I suggest we finish the meal before I continue,” he said rather imperiously.

There was another moment of silence, then the sweet course appeared. Conversation wandered back into the realm of social politeness for the time it took to finish up, then everyone repaired to the lounge. Heru seated himself in a cushy armchair and looked expectantly at Xavier, whose face betrayed a hint of anger. But, the man pulled up a chair to the side and sat.

“Which hand is dominant?” asked Heru. “We’ll start with that one.”

Xavier extended his right arm, his hand palm up again. Heru laid it atop his own, using his thumb to force the index finger slightly down. “You could consider this insight into your public nature,” he commented absently. “Your other hand would give insight as to what you keep private. This … tells me you are quite confident, smooth, and charming. Very much in control of your surroundings and not afraid to be commanding.”

He tilted his head to the side and paused. “You can be single minded and intense, almost to the point of obsession.” He looked up and smiled disarmingly. “I imagine that can be quite useful in your business.” Shifting his gaze again, he said, “This”—he traced his index finger across one of the lines in Xavier’s palm—“tells me that there is some division in your life. For example, it can denote a wide gulf between the public and private, or a new beginning in life.”

He lifted his head a bit and pursed his lips. “You’re not a square,” he said abruptly. “Elongation is quite evident”—he tapped Xavier’s palm—“and your lines are strong and defined. Patience is not your strong suit, though you would make a good leader despite that. Along with that, you can be dogmatic. That can be a very good trait for someone with a particular goal in mind, but it can lead a person down fruitless pathways, or cause them to miss the alternate possibilities. You definitely have some goal in mind, there’s no doubt about that, and a great deal of your sense of self is tied up in it.
However”—Heru released the hand and took Xavier’s left—“I can see that there is danger involved, and deception. Some of the people you deal with on a regular basis are those you feel cannot or should not be trusted. What people see in public is far from all that you are.”

Heru flipped Xavier’s hand over and studied the back and the nails, looking through the glamour. “I’m afraid you have some health problems, my friend.” He flipped the hand over again and reached for Xavier’s right to hold them side by side, palm up. “You keep your private life very private, showing only what you feel is necessary. Deception is easy for you, effortless.”

Heru wasn’t mentioning half of what he was seeing, not particularly wanting to see Xavier erupt into fury at having his life and personality discussed or dissected openly in front of his minions, though he was speaking so quietly that it was possible only Xavier could hear him properly. “And, your family is very important to you. Something occurred within the past year that brought you rather a lot of good fortune.” Heru squinted and cocked his head. “It’s a bit fuzzy, actually. I cannot tell if you caused it to happen, or if it was serendipitous—how strange. You’ve spent a great deal of time traveling, but that’s hardly a surprise in your line of work.”

Heru straightened and released his grip, allowing Xavier to reclaim his hands. In a slightly louder voice he said, “I sense that you currently have two major goals—more immediate, that is, as opposed to an overriding one. Both of them are attainable and I see nothing that bars your way for either. I am quite confident in saying that you will achieve success for these two things, though it may take up to six months to realize them both.”

Xavier gave him a measuring look, then nodded and sat back. “Fascinating. But you cannot see what those goals are?”

Heru shook his head. “I would have to take more time than I have this evening to give to determine what they were. And, they are your goals to share or not, as the case may be, with whom you see fit. I wouldn’t dream of trying to delve more deeply without due cause.” He gave Xavier a quirky smile.

“So you would have no recommendations as to likely associates?”

Heru appeared to consider, then shook his head. “I would need the proper tools before I could attempt to answer that.”

“I see.” Xavier gave him another measuring look, then angled himself as though inviting normal discussions again.

When they were finally able to leave Heru and Severus donned their travel cloaks once more and stepped outside. Heru checked the cloaks over for anything odd as they strolled through the frosty air to the gates of the estate, then nodded to Severus once they were through. “Shall we?”

Back at Hogwarts—they had apparated to underlake—Heru snatched a pain potion from a cabinet and downed it, then dropped onto the couch in the lounge.

“So tell me, what did they try?”

“A derivative of veritaserum and something to make us very agreeable to suggestions.”

“And your impressions?”

“Aside from the obvious, I think Voldemort was searching for something I wanted, something he could provide and have me owing him for. But I wasn’t giving him the answers he wanted—well, except for the one genuine prediction.” He shrugged and leaned back.
“That I am already aware of.” Severus folded his arms over his chest and stared.

“Sorry. Yes, I was able to study him once he stopped interrogating me and the rest of you were able to join in. And then again after that reading, though I was able to spare a bit during it as well.” He sighed and stretched his legs out, rubbing his forehead reflexively.

“Severus, I may be right in my suspicions, but I really need more time. My first impression was that he’s very tenuously put together. I think his little ritual was slapped together haphazardly, as though he couldn’t quite manage to do what he was supposed to, so he improvised. It worked, but…”

“But you aren’t sure. Are you even watching right now?”

Heru shook his head. “I’m sure Moody or Sirius is. Or even Albus. I did set up a mirror for him. One of them can fill us in later. If not, I can always scry.”

“Then I expect we should be thinking about the fact that you need more time around Voldemort and how to accomplish it without committing to anything. And I should, perhaps, be thinking about the fact that they did, after all, use potions against us—or tried to.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t see why I cannot use my knowledge and talent to try to find a way for us, and the Order by extension, to become immune to veritaserum, even if only temporarily. You cannot always be there to defuse things.”

Heru gave him a blank look. “All right. Please forgive me for sounding like an ass, but why haven’t you tried before now?”

Severus sat down beside him and said, “Because, my dear Heru, up until not so long ago, I was a chained man. You released me, remember? I continue to play a role out of choice, but I am freer now than I have ever been in my life. I have time now—actual time—to try to accomplish things that prior to now were only fragments of dreams.” Then he gave Heru a rather intense look. “Besides, even what little you did this evening is more than enough to make you look like hell.”

“I didn’t—”

“No.”

Heru started to say it was only a little pain, but remained silent. He knew that Severus would rightfully lay into him, and be merciless about it. “Do you think you could?”

“The answer to that lies in trying.”

“Well, you are better at Potions than I am,” Heru said diplomatically. “I don’t have your flair and intuitive understanding.” Severus gave him an incredulous look. “I don’t. I like Potions very much, but I think you love them.”

“I’m not sure I see where that makes a difference. You are not unintelligent.”

Heru sighed. “I’m not sure I can draw an accurate comparison. I love the kinds of things I’m good at, but I can’t show you the beauty of magic in its most raw state. I wish you could see what I see, and be able to manipulate the threads of pure power. I can spin them from my fingertips, but I can’t share that with you except indirectly. Potions, well, they interest me a great deal, but I wouldn’t say I’m passionate about them. I don’t have the particular mind set that says, what if?”
“All right, I can accept that.”

“I feel like I missing something. Something so obvious that I’m going to kick myself for days when I realize what it is. Something is very much not right with Voldemort,” Heru said in frustration. “All I can see right now is the forest, not the trees in it. Or maybe I mean the other way. I don’t know.”

“Shush.” Severus reached out and pulled Heru into his embrace. “You’re tired and in pain right now, potion notwithstanding. Just let it go for the moment. It will come,” he soothed, his fingers trailing through Heru’s hair. “We’ll figure it out.” After a minute of silence he said, “You were magnificent, by the way. I nearly choked at some of the things you did, though, but you played him well.”

“Thanks,” Heru said softly, letting the sound of his mate’s heartbeat steady him. “I’m glad you’re here. You have always helped me to see things more clearly.”

Severus’s hand paused for a fraction of a second, then resumed its slow movement. “Even then?”

“Even then,” Heru agreed in a whisper. He reached up without looking to trace his fingers over Severus’s lips gently. “I was so lonely, so scared, so angry, and then, so resigned,” he said in a detached voice. “I didn’t appreciate you enough back then. Later on, I did. I appreciated you. I delighted in crossing swords with you. I loved your sarcasm, your quick mind, even your suspicion to some extent. You were so alive, so fierce. But it hurt when you didn’t actually trust me. I know it’s not rational. I just…”

Heru felt Severus shift, then a hand on his own, and a kiss pressed against his fingertips. “I miss my children, Severus. Isn’t that crazy? I feel like all I should need to do is walk a few steps into the next room and they’ll be there waiting for me. And for all that Salazar was an ass, I miss him like I’d miss one of my arms or legs. I don’t know whether to feel cheated or blessed for what I was given. I guess I’m wrong to be so selfish.”

Severus shifted again, pulling Heru onto his legs so he could cradle him against his chest more comfortably. Heru rested there for a while, idly playing with the buttons on the shirt his mate was wearing. “I’m sorry,” he said finally. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” Severus pressed a soft kiss to the top of his head and went back to stroking his hair. Eventually, Heru drifted off to sleep.

He awoke to filtered light that shifted ceaselessly around the room, stained blue by the water it traveled through and the sky from which it came. Seconds later, Severus appeared with a muted crack of sound and took a seat on the edge of the bed. His eyes were soft, and the hand he placed on Heru’s chest was gentle. His tone when he spoke, however, was quite normal. “It’s about time you woke up.”

Heru blinked in confusion and looked around, his gaze shifting back to Severus when his mate spoke again. “I thought it was best to just let you sleep last night, rather than waking you so we could return to our normal quarters. I also thought about taking advantage of you, but I decided you were in no condition to appreciate it.”

Heru smiled without thinking. “What time is it?”

“Just about ten. Not too bad, considering.”

“Considering what?”

Severus arched a brow at him. “Considering how badly you were affected by last evening’s activities and how much strain you were obviously under.” He paused and tilted his head to the side. “You know, I never thought I’d hear myself say this, but your moments of vulnerability are strangely
endearing.”

Heru flushed and dropped his gaze.

“I see that I need to explain. It makes me feel like this isn’t all some sort of dream. You are here, with me. You trust me enough to let down your guard, to show me what you’re really feeling, and you trust me not to use it against you or think less of you.”

“Severus, I…”

“My dear Heru, we are bonded for reasons other than convenience or mere physical expressions of desire. You don’t always have to be strong, and you aren’t. You let me be that for you at times. I wish I could be as open as you.”

“I think you’re doing a pretty good job right now,” Heru mumbled, glancing at his mate through his lashes.

“Well, then, I shall continue. When you are vulnerable I feel a number of things, but one thing is crystal clear. Not one part of me doubts the depth of your feelings for me. I believe. You need not say it, because I see it and I feel it.” A moment later he removed his hand and said briskly, “Now get up. Your son has been driving me mad with his requests to see for himself that you are all right.”

Heru’s head shot up. “Oh, so now he’s my son?” He snorted and struggled up to a sitting position, then shot a glare at Severus. “Push off, then, so I can.”
Out of Sorts

It took several minutes to reassure Mark. Eventually, though, he stopped fussing and ran off to firecall the kitchens so Heru could have breakfast. Heru wisely made a run for the bathroom so he could take a shower. As the warm water cascaded over him, he tried to think back over what he had seen and sensed, trying to find the knot that would unravel the puzzle named Voldemort if pulled.

He thought about it while he ate, listening to Severus with only half his attention. He continued to think about it all the way up to the headmaster’s office, only really becoming aware of his surroundings at the sound of the door being kicked shut by his mate. He shook his head to clear it, then dropped into a chair.

“I am pleased that you could come,” said Albus. “Heru, your performance last night was masterful.”

Heru waved his hand vaguely in acknowledgement, already back to thinking about Voldemort.

Severus let out an exasperated snort. “His head is off in the clouds, Albus. You won’t get much sense out of him for a while.”

Heru snapped back to attention. “That is so not true. But you’d be a little distracted, too, if you had to touch that foul creature for so long.”

“I’m sorry—dear boys, what is it that I’m missing here?” asked Albus.

“I take it you didn’t realize that Chaldren was Voldemort?” asked Heru, and was not surprised to see Albus’s eyes widen. “Well, then, I assume you can understand that dinner was not quite as aboveboard as it may have looked.”

“Please, go on.”

“You’ve probably already drawn the obvious conclusions. They were once again trying to ascertain my preferences or inclinations, and I was not particularly willing to be cooperative. However, what you would not have been able to see, aside from being unable to penetrate through Voldemort’s disguise, was that several of the meal’s courses were tainted. They tried to ensure both that we would be speaking the truth, and that we would be very open to suggestion.”

“When I—” Albus stopped and furrowed his brow, darting a look at Severus. After a moment he came to a decision and said, “The one time I attempted something similar, you simply pointed it out. How is it that you avoided the issue this time?”

Heru gave a deprecative shrug. “At the time you refer to, it was more to the point to make you aware I saw through your ploy. However, last evening it was far more important to handle the issue quietly. As you well know, I was able to remove Severus’s Mark. That is possible because I can see magic, just as I can see the wards here at Hogwarts. I simply unwove the magic, rendering the food harmless, normal.”

Albus appeared to be mildly speechless for a moment. “You’re saying—all right. If I were to present you with any magical object, could you disable it?”

“Most likely, sure.”

“What of the prediction you made last night?”
“I assume you do not mean the palmistry. The prediction was genuine enough, though I wasn’t trying very hard, I admit. He does have several goals at this time. I suspect one must be the prophecy sphere, and he will eventually get it, Albus. As for the other, I am not sure what it was, but he will also achieve it.”

“How do you have any sense of what order?”

Heru shook his head. “Sorry, no. But given that I placed a six month time period on them, that gives us some breathing room. He will be far more likely to proceed carefully with what I’ve told him. And, as the sphere was replaced, that should confound him for a time further.”

“I confess to being curious as to why you bothered at all.”

Heru favored the headmaster with a piercing look and a snort. “I should think that would be obvious.”

“How?” said Severus warningly.

Heru narrowed his eyes at his mate, then said, “Then I shall explain. Again, I can see magic. I thought it would be wise to take the opportunity handed to us to study the man—if you can even call him one.” He snorted again, this time in disgust. Being awake had its disadvantages; he felt rather unclean despite his shower. “I was looking for weaknesses. There’s something very much not right about that man, and I’m not talking about his head.”

Albus cast a look at Severus, clearly disturbed by Heru’s sudden shift in mood.

Severus gave a slight sigh, then said, “The ritual Voldemort used is suspect. It is possible that he was unable to correctly follow the actual directions and had to improvise. That it worked is one thing, but there may be repercussions that would prove to be his undoing. Heru would need more time to study him, and that in itself is problematic.”

“Yes, of course. Well, I continued to keep an eye on Lucius after the two of you left, but I’m afraid his guest left shortly after you did, which is probably why I did not realize who he was.”

Heru noted that Severus nodded out of the corner of his eye. “Then I expect I should get back to working on that mirror. It would be far easier for all of us if we could watch Voldemort directly,” he said.

“Yes, how is that going?” asked Albus.

“I find it rather odd that my conjured mirrors have stayed around as long as they have, actually. But that is beside the point, I suppose, or not. I did not wish to waste what little blood I had on a mirror that would disintegrate, but was curious as to the differences between conjured, transfigured, and normally created mirrors. Anyway, I am just about ready to try my experiment, though having spent that much time sitting so near the man, I may be able to try something else.”

“What,” said Albus, “do you mean?”

Heru shrugged again. “I leech a few power strands from him.” That was not exactly true, but the headmaster did not need to know that. In fact, he had been thinking that the time the founders had spent working on his scar might be of use to him in a peculiar sort of way.

Apparently that was the wrong thing to say, as Albus actually frowned. “This disturbs me,” he stated. “I am already disturbed by your reaction to last evening. I worry about the consequences to you personally.”
“Albus, I have no doubt that you would be disturbed on a far more personal level than I already am if you had had to touch that man, or spend time delving into his magical nature looking for points to exploit. But to answer your unspoken question—or should I say, concern—I am in no danger of being corrupted by him, so get that out of your head right now.”

The headmaster did not seem entirely reassured, but Severus spoke up to reinforce the idea. “I myself am confident that Heru is able to handle himself quite well.”

And, while that endorsement seemed to ease Albus’s worry slightly, it did not completely go away, which only served to worsen Heru’s already deteriorating mood. “You know, Albus,” he said in a deceptively casual tone of voice, “I’m beginning to think you no longer trust me, or trust in the things I say. And, if that is the case, I could simply pack up and leave so that you would not need to worry any longer about the state of my mental health.”

“Heru,” said Severus again in a warning tone.

“What?” Heru snapped.

“You’re sparking again,” Severus pointed out sternly, though his eyes were amused.

Heru took a deep breath and dropped his gaze, then slid his eyes over to fix on the headmaster intently. “I understand that you have concerns, Albus,” he said tersely, “but if you think for one moment that I will sit here and let you call into question my abilities, my talent, my sense of self, or my loyalty, then you’d better think again, old man. Perhaps it would be wiser if I were to gather up my household and leave the British Isles before I become angry enough to—” He had slowly risen to his feet as he spoke and let an ugly sneer disfigure his face. Almost as soon as he cut off the flow of words he apparated out to his underlake bedroom, then shed his clothes and slipped into bed, falling asleep in mere seconds through sheer force of will.

When he woke up again it was late afternoon. He stared at the watery ceiling for a long time, trying to understand why he felt so wretched. With a sigh he ran it all through his mind again, what he had seen, and eventually gave it up. He simply had not been able to see enough, and perhaps it was his frustration that was making him so edgy and quick to anger. He spared a moment to check and see where his family was; they were reading, though Mark was in his room rather than sitting with Severus.

He seriously considered going back to sleep. He had no doubt that Severus had checked to see where he had gotten off to and decided to leave him be once he was satisfied that Heru remained on the grounds. He thought about returning to their quarters, but decided he didn’t really want to do that, either. Now that his anger had cooled, he felt apathetic and listless. It was at that point that the castle decided to meddle in things.

Severus appeared a few seconds later and took a seat on the edge of the bed, causing Heru to suffer a moment of déjà vu. Severus did not speak, though. Instead, after looking at Heru for some few seconds he rose and stripped, then slid into bed himself and wrapped himself around his mate. It wasn’t until after Severus had expressed his feelings in a very physical manner that he opened his mouth for speech. “Consider yourself taken advantage of.”

Heru smiled faintly. “I consider myself lucky to be taken advantage of by you.”

“Then maybe I should do that more often.”

Heru rolled over and pressed his back against Severus, then sighed. “I won’t complain. Thank you for giving me some time to myself, though.”
Severus draped an arm over his form and kissed his neck. “I thought it was wise considering your mood. I know you’re frustrated, and probably even feel a bit ill.”

“I am. I do. Why, Severus? I’ve never felt that way when I’ve reached into his mind. Why now?”

“You said the founders severed the link into your mind, correct?”

“Yes.”

“But you still experience moments when something nebulous alerts you. While I know that could be prophetic powers, it may be that they were a little off in their manipulations through no fault of their own. It could be that being so close physically does something to you that neither of us comprehends. He does have some of your blood, my dear Heru. I admit, I can only speculate, but it is possible there is a very valid cause for your exceptionally bad reaction.”

Heru sighed again. “Was Albus very upset?”

Severus gave a low chuckle. “He was beside himself after you walked out. He is worried that he has offended you so badly that you will, in fact, pack up and leave. I told him he ought to be grateful for your self-control.”

“I should probably apologize.”

“No.” Severus placed another kiss on Heru’s neck, then said, “I do not think that would be wise. Albus needs to learn that while he may be the leader of the Order, he by no means controls you, regardless of how amiable you generally are. You are more powerful than he, and you are the only one who truly understands what you are capable of. He must respect that. You are not his damn pawn, Heru. You refused that role once already. Do not willingly place yourself into a position where he knows he can push you around. Don’t you dare be weak in front of him.”

“Can I at least apologize to you for being such a bear?”

“Of course. Though, I can think of much sweeter things that could come from your lips. In fact, I heard some of them not so long ago.”

Heru grinned and twisted around so he could kiss his mate properly, reaching back to tangle his fingers in Severus’s hair. Things had just become very interesting again when Severus stiffened for a moment, then cursed under his breath. “What?” Heru asked, alarmed.

“She didn’t alert you? The castle passed along a message from Mark. Lupin is looking for you.”

“Well, Remus will just have to wait a little while,” Heru purred, then asked the castle to relay back a message through Mark.

They apparated into their bedroom and emerged seconds later to find Mark and Remus sitting in the lounge discussing the virtues of quidditch. Remus stood immediately and nodded a greeting, then smiled as Mark bounced over to Heru and hugged him tightly. After dropping a kiss on Mark’s head, Heru looked at Remus and said, “You wished to see me?”

“Yes, if that’s all right. There were a few things I was hoping I could talk to you about.”

Severus disentangled Mark from his father and said, “Come along, then. We’ll give your father some privacy.” Mark seemed a bit reluctant, but allowed himself to be led away.
Heru crossed to a chair and sat down, gesturing for Remus to sit again. “What can I do for you?”

Remus looked nervous for some reason. “I realize you know I overheard you and Severus that night.”

“Yes. What of it?”

“It made me curious about a few things. Naturally, I spoke to Sirius to find out what happened. You have to understand that he’s—”

Heru cut him off. “Don’t attempt to apologize on his behalf—”

“I wasn’t—”

“—and don’t attempt to explain him, either. I know quite a lot about our Mr Black, and no, not all of it is from Severus. I am a fairly patient man, Remus. If Sirius has a change of heart at some point, I’m quite sure he can find the courage to tell me himself. Until then, I would hope that all of us can at least coexist.”

Remus looked to be at a loss for a moment, then said, “You see, after listening to what Sirius had to say and thinking about what I overheard I—well, I’m rather glad you said what you did.”

Heru arched a brow and waited.

“I’ve cut Sirius a lot of slack. Part of that is because of what he’s gone through. Part of that is because even I found it hard to believe in his innocence then, and I—he’s very important to me. But I can’t say that I pretend to completely ignore his faults, regardless of the cause. I’m not entirely sure what’s keeping him going at this point—some of the time, at least. Your talk with him—it was like a sharp slap in the face from someone he couldn’t afford to ignore. I think … it may have done him some good.”

Heru tilted his head to the side and declined to comment.

“He’s been … very thoughtful lately. Maybe coming from you, a relative outsider, those words actually penetrated for once. I’ve also noticed that Severus has backed off. I get the feeling that has something to do with you as well.”

“Mark, actually,” said Heru.

“Oh?”

“Mark has developed a bit of fondness for you and Sirius. Severus knows that.”

“I see.” He paused a moment, then said, “You’ve certainly never shared Severus’s enmity, nor have you discriminated against either myself or Sirius, though you obviously aren’t afraid to tell it like it is. I guess what I’m trying to say is thank you.”

Heru’s brows rose and he leaned forward. “I mean no offense when I say this, but I have long considered you the more reasonable person out of yourself and Sirius, so I am not entirely surprised to hear you say that. You’re welcome, by the way. I had not intended to be so cruel, but Sirius set me off and I’m afraid I lost my temper a bit.”

Remus nodded. “Were you the anonymous gift giver?”

“I’m sure I have no earthly idea of what you mean,” Heru said with a smirk.
“Of course,” Remus said with a smile, then, “Arthur should be out of St Mungo’s in a couple of days. I know the Weasleys are very glad you were able to prevent his death, as am I.”

Heru inclined his head. “I was pleased to be of service. I try not to ignore when I sense things.”

“If it isn’t rude to ask, what did happen? No one really explained.”

Heru shrugged. “A prophetic dream that woke me. The only thing I was sure of was that it involved the prophecy sphere, so a watch was set up on Mr Weasley just in case, as he was on duty. As it was, his death was prevented by quick action once his peril became clear.”

“It’s a shame, then, that a watch of that same type couldn’t be set up on the corridor itself.”

Heru shook his head. “Unfortunately, it doesn’t work that way, and while I agree it would be nice, part of the point of having watchers physically in place is so that Voldemort is aware of the Order’s suspicions.”

“Yes,” Remus agreed with a sigh. “Well, I suppose I should be going. Thank you for sparing me some of your time.”

Heru smiled. “Any time, though there may be the occasional delay.”

The moment Remus was out the door Heru cast the spell to spy on him. There was something the man had not brought up and Heru was hoping to find out what it was. It wasn’t long before Remus was with Sirius.

“Well, I was right,” said Remus with a slight smile.

Sirius looked a little shocked at the bland statement. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, but I am. I could smell it. It was some time before I actually got to see Heru, and I’m quite sure of why.” Remus didn’t seem smug, just satisfied.

“Is that why he was defending him?”

“No, I think he was being honest with me when I brought it up. You really pissed him off, Padfoot. He was being nice about it, though, I think. He’s quite willing to hear you out, by the way—that is, if you wanted to talk to him.”

“What about Snape?”

“Heru says he’s backed off because of Mark. Seems the kid has taken a shine to us.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, Padfoot, the logical conclusion is that Severus is a bit fond of the boy and doesn’t want to upset him. It stands to reason, don’t you think? If Heru and Severus are shagging each other, I imagine that he at least likes the child, and I didn’t see any evidence that they didn’t get along. In fact…”

Sirius gave him a plainly curious look.

“I noticed something odd, I guess, about Severus. I’m not quite sure what it was, though. Maybe the next time I see him I’ll be able to figure it out. Either way, I’m positive those two are together.”
“But, Severus?”

“What—because he’s not Witch Weekly material? Because he can cut you to pieces with words alone and his nature is often abrasive?”

“Moony,” whined Sirius, then he sat up straight and said, “Do you think it’s a power thing?”

“Strangely enough, no. I don’t. I went to see Albus first and heard a few interesting things. Apparently Severus has absolutely no fear of Heru or his temper, though it is clear Albus does.”

“Huh? Why on earth would Albus be afraid of Slytherin?”

“I’m not sure, but whatever happened, he was almost frantic—at least as far as I could tell. I think he did something to piss off Heru as well. In any case, I believe that Heru takes the stain on his family name very seriously. If you had stopped at saying thank you, you probably would have avoided what he said. Though”—he gave Sirius a frank look—“it’s probably as well you didn’t.”

Sirius flushed.

“You know I love you, Padfoot, but you can be awfully rash and pigheaded at times, and you don’t always listen to me.”

“I know,” Sirius mumbled. “I’m sorry, Moony. I’ll try to think before I open my mouth.”

“That’s all I can ask for. Now, why don’t we go see those two lovely elves and ask about something to eat. I’m famished.”

Heru broke the connection, feeling a bit like a fool himself. It wasn’t like he could send a note to Remus asking him to keep quiet about his knowledge, and he’d already told Sirius. On the other hand, Sirius seemed to be paying a lot more attention to what Remus was saying, so perhaps his little outburst had done some good. That didn’t stop him from feeling a sense of dread over the idea of telling Severus that their secret was out, at least among certain people.

When his mate did come out—probably at some signal from the castle—Heru was slouched in his chair with one hand behind his head. “Am I going to have to take advantage of you again?”

Heru gave him a weak smile. “As much as I would love to have another go at that, there’s something I need to tell you.”

Severus narrowed his eyes and sat down across from him.

“Is Mark safely occupied for the moment?” At Severus’s nod he said, “Well, you aren’t going to like this, I expect. Seems we were a little indiscreet, popping in here as we did so quickly. I suppose it didn’t occur to you, either, at the time that Remus is a werewolf?”

Severus’s eyes widened. “You’re saying he knows.”

“Yup. And he’s told Sirius. It seems that they were quite curious about us, but I will point out that Remus thinks, and I quote, ‘Apparently Severus has absolutely no fear of Heru or his temper, though it is clear Albus does.’”
Severus couldn’t seem to decide between anger or smugness. As a result, his expression was somewhat peculiar.

“Remus also thinks there’s something odd about you. You might want to avoid him for a while. On a brighter note, my little chat with Sirius seems to have done some good. Black was a great deal more thoughtful and willing to listen to his friend about things in general. Perhaps he will not be as antagonistic in the future.”

“You don’t think it’s the blood bond, do you?”

“I honestly don’t know. It could be. Maybe you smell different.” Heru shrugged helplessly. “He’s barely spent any time around Mark, so I guess I’m not surprised he wasn’t mentioned in that same sentence. He wouldn’t know any better, unless he made some connection about you and looked at Mark next.”

“Wonderful,” said Severus sarcastically.

“Severus, I wouldn’t exactly mind if people were to find out. I think it’s entirely the wrong time for it to come out, but I do love you, and I’m honored that you chose to be with me. Hopefully, those two will stay quiet for now. Remus seemed more interested in confirming what he suspected than in rushing out to tell the world.”

“I’m sorry, Heru. I didn’t mean to imply I was in any way ashamed of us. Though, I’m not sure I could stand the reaction I’d expect from Albus—all that damned twinkling. You may have to hide my wand.”

Heru laughed and leapt to his feet. “We should see about dinner. There’s no point in worrying about this right now. It’s happened, we can’t change that.”

“I don’t have to like it,” Severus said with a growl, then stood. “Mark!” he bellowed.

Heru grinned as he went to firecall for a meal.
Mirror Linking

Two days later Arthur Weasley arrived at headquarters, hale and hearty once more, or so Heru was told. The day after that the students returned to Hogwarts, which made Mark happy as the remainder of his friends were now back. Heru had made a halfhearted stab during that period on the mirror, but his disagreement with Albus made him rather less than enthusiastic about it.

He was somewhat grateful to get back into teaching and was in a fairly good mood when lunch was over and his class started, despite the fact that he was the only buffer between Remus and Severus at the table. When his students had settled down, he began after perching himself on the edge of his desk.

“Right! I hope everyone had a good holiday and is ready to get back to work. Today we’re going to be discussing dowsing. That actually covers several forms, so I’ll go over each at least briefly. The first involves using a forked rod or stick. While it isn’t horribly important what kind of wood is used, you will get better results with ash, hazel, willow, and rowan. Obviously, we aren’t going to go outside and try this. I don’t know about you, but it’s a bit cold for my tastes.”

A few of the students giggled, but most of them simply smiled.

“Dowsing has been around for at least seven thousand years, if not longer, and it is still used to this day, even by muggles. Common things it’s used for are for locating water, gold, people, fuel sources, and so on. When dowsing, you would hold the forked end of the rod with a hand on each extension, palms up. You’d know you found what you’re after when the rod dips down, and it will give you a certain sense of which way to head prior to that. Personally, I find it a horrible bore, and feel quite silly wandering around outside following a stick. I keep thinking I should woof.”

Some of the students laughed openly.

“The reason you hold it palms up is so that you don’t subconsciously try to influence the rod. If you were holding it palms down, you would be far more likely to drop it yourself inadvertently—it’s rather difficult to do if you’re holding it properly. Moving along, there are several forms of dowsing which use a pendulum suspended by a line, often a crystal or a ring—it depends on what you’re trying to do—though technically, you could use this the same way as you would a forked rod outside. For example, if you were trying to locate a person or an item, you might get yourself a map and spread it out, then suspend a crystal over it and let it start swinging as you move your hand above the surface. If your target is somewhere in that area, the tip of the crystal should hit the map in a specific spot.

“The next two are also fairly simple. The first involves marking a cross on a sheet of parchment and suspending a ring from silk thread over it. You ask your question, and the direction the ring swings in will tell you yes or no. Anyone know offhand which is which?” Ron raised his hand, surprisingly enough. “Mr Weasley?”

“If it swings from side to side, the answer is no. Up and down would be yes, professor. Just like how we shake or nod our heads.”

“Exactly so. Five points to Gryffindor. Though, I ought to point out that in some countries or cultures, those head motions can be reversed. The next involves silk thread and a ring—or a crystal—but this time it is suspended inside a glass. You ask your question, and the number of times the pendulum taps the side is your answer. Any guesses there?” Neville’s hand crept up, causing Heru additional surprise. “Mr Longbottom?”
“One is yes, two is no, and three or more means it’s uncertain or you’ve asked something that isn’t a yes or no question, sir.”

“Very good. Another five points to Gryffindor. You lot certainly are prepared today considering I didn’t bother to mention what we’d be covering before the holiday started. There is one more method, but it involves materials that you aren’t likely to see just yet, though if anyone is interested, see me after class and I’ll give you some extra credit work on it. For now, let’s start with the two easiest methods, shall we? If you look under your stations you’ll find the necessary tools. Keep in mind—those of you who do not have any trace of the gift—muggles also use dowsing, so you might be surprised at the results you get. If anyone has any trouble or questions, let me know.”

Though there was a great deal of giggling, there were very few questions. He wandered among them for a few minutes, murmuring things like—“be sure to properly visualize your target or think clearly about your question”—and—“don’t try to force it in any particular direction, just let it circle and find its own path”—before heading back to his chair and relaxing. He was quite pleased, actually. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, and even his rather silly jokes had been met favorably. He was even more pleased to see that students like Neville were having some success if their faces were anything to go by. When the class ended, several students did stay behind to ask about the extra credit. Heru handed them each a slip of paper with the assignment and waved them off with a smile.

The next morning was not as pleasant. The Daily Prophet ran a small article on Broderick Bode. He had been strangled in his bed at St Mungo’s by a potted plant delivered for him over the holiday, which turned out to be a cutting of devil’s snare. Obviously, someone had wanted the man dead, probably to prevent anyone from learning who had used an unforgivable on him.

A look from Severus told Heru that his mate was thinking the same thing. Neither of them glanced down the table to look at Albus. Heru was not surprised when Albus didn’t even call a meeting over it. It was simply confirmation of what Heru had discovered months ago, albeit in a rather gruesome way. That night he awoke abruptly and went through his ritual of checking on his mate and son; both were fine. With a sigh Heru reached out across the link to find Voldemort, then drew back with a startled cry and woke Severus.

“Get dressed. We need to go see Albus.” Heru grabbed the first robe that came to hand and called Praecino, asking him to wake the headmaster. As soon as Severus was up they apparated directly into Albus’s office. Albus had barely appeared when Heru blurted out, “He’s gone to Azkaban. He’s getting back his supporters and taking the dementors with him.”

Albus’s face went ashen. “Perhaps I was wrong about your ideas for that mirror.”

“Is now really the time to be concerned about that?” Heru turned away and conjured up a mirror, tuning it to Peter Pettigrew with barely a thought. “It’s too late.”

Severus stepped up and scowled. “They’re already leaving the island.”

“Why the hell wasn’t I warned earlier,” hissed Heru. “What the fuck good is this if I don’t get information in time for us to do anything? Bastard just had to hold in his emotions this time.” Albus cleared his throat, causing Heru to turn around and say, “What?”

“We could not understand you.”

“It doesn’t matter. By the time you could send anyone after them, they’d be long gone, apparated to who knows where.” He turned again, watching as Peter groveled at the feet of his master with a mixture of joy and fear twisting his face. Arrayed behind him were ten others, most of whom were
holding themselves proudly upright as best they could manage.

“The worst of that lot is Bellatrix Lestrange,” murmured Severus. “Black’s cousin.”

“Well, I guess The Daily Prophet will have another article in the morning,” Heru said rather calmly. “Albus, I will leave this mirror here. If Peter is as much the right hand of Voldemort as he thinks he is, you should be able to learn quite a bit from it. That is, assuming Voldemort doesn’t kill him for being so pathetic. I have to wonder if that’s the only reason he was released with the others.”

“Quite possibly,” murmured Severus.

“I haven’t met the others, damn it. I’m not sure I can locate them if Peter dies,” Heru said softly.

“Severus, Heru, thank you for coming up here, but it is obvious there is nothing we can do at the moment. I will handle things from here, as much as is possible.”

They turned back to face him, then nodded and apparated out. Back in their room they stripped off their robes in the dark and slipped back into bed. “Severus, I’m starting to get a bit worried about Albus. You know him much better than I do. Is he still up for this?”

“Despite appearances, yes. He is simply old, but I have the feeling he would refuse to die even should death come wielding his scythe and try to take him personally. Not before all this is over, anyway. Go back to sleep, my dear Heru. You’ve done what you could for now.”

The most exciting thing that happened during the next few weeks was that Mark had attended several classes of Severus’s and was thrilled to have done so. He seemed to be completely unaffected by the news that had thrown most of the British wizarding community into fresh spasms of terror and panic. He had managed to inveigle his way into being Margaret’s Potions partner on the strength of their mutual love of chess, displacing a slightly disgruntled girl who occasionally shot him dark looks—according to Severus.

Mark had learned, though, and quite quickly, that Severus was a different person inside the classroom. The evening after the first lesson found the two of them snuggled up on the couch, no doubt in an attempt to make up for the coldness that Severus generally displayed during lessons. Heru made no comment, only smiled softly at the sight, and went back to working on his mirrors. Having already made the assumption that Voldemort’s newly freed followers would need to recover from their stay at Azkaban and be provided with new wands, he had decided nothing was likely to happen anytime soon.

Remus had occasionally been caught giving both Heru and Severus odd looks, but he never actually asked anything aside from the usual, mundane queries. He generally restricted himself to normal comments about work and classes when Heru saw him at meals. Of Sirius there had been no sign, though Mark had told him that the man had visited the castle on several occasions. And, strangely, or not, there was no word from Lucius.

On the last Saturday of the month, Heru failed at his attempt to use Voldemort’s blood to bypass whatever protection he had against attempts to locate him. After dutifully informing Albus—he chose to send a note via Praecino—Hera destroyed the mirror in disgust.

Severus found him staring at the ceiling from his underlake bed. Instead of offering false comfort he said, “Your link. You lied to Albus about the dinner with Voldemort, so you must have been thinking about your link.”
“Yeah,” Heru said softly.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I can use it to find him anywhere. There’s got to be something in that, right?”

“Can you duplicate it?”

“What? I can’t even see it!”

“Don’t be so bloody cranky. I’m trying to help.” Severus sat down and scowled at him. “The founders modified your link. Obviously they could see something. Has it occurred to you to ask their portraits?”

Heru sat up abruptly. “Well, no.”

“Then perhaps you should have a little talk with them to see if they have any bright ideas. They might be able to lead you in the right direction to using your link with Voldemort as a template to create one to a mirror,” Severus said patiently. “I’m not suggesting you try to transfer the damn thing, just borrow its structure.” Then he paused with a thoughtful look on his face. “Though, when it comes down to actually defeating him, that might be a wise idea. The fact that you can still sense his emotions, however distantly, makes me quite leery of you remaining linked up through his death.”

“You’re amazing, Sev, did you know that?”

“Yes, quite. And my name is not Sev. I hear enough of that from Draco, thank you very much. Now, are you going to stop moping around over a single failure or do I have to take drastic measures?”

“No, no need,” Heru said hastily. After a pause he squinted at his mate and said, “Have you had any success with an antidote? You haven’t said.”

Severus shook his head. “Not as yet. But I will continue my experiments. I may need to purchase more cauldrons, though, as I seem to be blowing them up or melting them at an alarming rate.”

Heru squinted again; Severus seemed inordinately cheerful. “Are you … feeling all right?”

“Of course, why should I not be? I have a pet project I’m doing simply because I wish to, and you, my dear Heru, obviously need me. For all your luck and quick thinking during near-death experiences, you don’t reason all that well at times when things are calmer.”

Heru snorted and batted a hand feebly at Severus. “Fine, you win that round. I already knew you were smarter than me, so I don’t see why you have to rub it in.”

“How could I possibly pass up such a golden opportunity?” Severus grinned at him. “You do leave yourself so delightfully open at times.”

“Fine, fine, fine. Now are you going to be nice to me, or should I get out of bed and go chat up some paintings?”

Severus arched a brow, then leaned in.

Heru found it somewhat inconvenient that the portraits he had hung in his study were behind his desk, as that meant he could not lean back in his chair and prop his feet on the desk while he
conversed with them. Since that was unacceptable, and he refused to turn his desk around so that his back faced the door, he moved the portraits—or at least, those of the four founders.

Once they were arranged on easels in front of his desk to his satisfaction, he began by briefly explaining the current situation he was facing and trying to overcome. Then he folded both arms behind his head and waited.

Predictably, it was Rowena who spoke. “Hru, I suppose that it is possible for you to detach your link entirely, now that you can actually sense it and use it. But, we’ll get to that later. There is a way for you to see it, though.”

Heru would have dropped forward were his legs not already half on the desk. “You forgot to teach me something?”

She flashed him a quick smile that was entirely unrepentant. “Well, I suppose you could say that. I never really saw the point of it. It’s like being a ghost, only with less ability than even they possess to communicate. I suppose you could use it to spy with, but … you would have to be very, very good to reach any distance.”

“So what is it?”

“Why, astral projection, of course. I’m sure I mentioned it, at least.”

Heru shook his head.

“Are you quite sure? No? Well, all right. Before I get into any kind of an explanation, let me ask you a question. Do you know if this Voldemort person is able to possess other people?”

“Er… I don’t know. Wait, yes. Of course he can. He shared a body with Quirrell, doesn’t that count?”

“All right, though in that case he may have been invited. Still, that means it is likely he can possess someone against their will as well. In what you’re going to try to do, it should not matter. But I would advise that you always stay underlake when you attempt this. There is too much at risk for you personally to allow others to be privy to these attempts.”

“Okay.”

“Do you remember that day, Heru, when I took you into your mind? You set aside everything around you, and those feelings and thoughts of your own?”

“Yes.”

“This is somewhat similar, so I do not think you will have much, if any, trouble. When you can achieve the state, you’ll be able to look at yourself, and see the link for what it is. To do this, just find a comfortable place, a safe place—I would recommend your bedroom—and close your eyes. Relax—you may even approach that point where dreams are just beginning—and simply see yourself floating away from your body. You may feel it, or hear something, but don’t be alarmed. With your sight, you’ll be able to see not only the connection you have to your physical body, but your link to Voldemort as well. Study it, work with it, and if you still have questions after that point, come back to us.”

Salazar nodded sharply. “I’m sure we can figure something out, brother, if you cannot.”

Heru cast an affectionate smile at his brother before saying, “And to get back?”
“Just wish it so, Heru. Or, failing that, try to fall asleep. It will happen naturally.”

“All right, thank you. I’ll go let Severus know what I’m up to so he doesn’t inadvertently interfere, and give it a try.”

He found Severus in the underlake laboratory, and peeked inside cautiously, having remembered what his mate had said about his failures. Severus looked entirely focused, so Heru hovered uncertainly, wondering if interrupting him would cause a catastrophe or not. He was startled, therefore, when without bothering to look up Severus said, “Yes, Heru. What is it?”

“I wanted to let you know I’d be trying an experiment. Rowena was able to give me an idea, and I don’t know quite how I’ll look from the outside. I didn’t want you to be alarmed or anything.”

Severus looked up and arched a brow.

“Astral projection,” Heru said.

“I see. I assume you won’t be projecting yourself into the lab, then.”

Heru shook his head. “Of course not. Who do you think I am, one of the twins?”

Severus snorted and dropped his gaze back to his potion. “I will check on you later, then, assuming you do not come find me first.”

“Sure.” Heru ducked back out of the door and went to his bedroom. Mark was revealed to be off with friends, so Heru made himself comfortable in his bed again, precisely where he had started before Severus had come after him in the first place.

Someone was shaking him gently, but as he felt very comfortable as he was, he grunted slightly in protest and rolled over. He ignored the exasperated sigh and snuggled up to his pillow.

“Heru, if you do not wake up this instant and come to dinner, I assure you that you will not like what I do. As it is, I do not know how you plan to manage to fall asleep tonight if you insist on taking naps at such odd hours.”

“Can wear me out later,” Heru said faintly, drawing the blankets closer around him.

“Oh, I assure you, I will. Did you even manage to accomplish anything?”

“Mm. Link very interesting.”

“Will you please get up?”

Heru cracked open an eye, then closed it and rolled over. A second attempt brought Severus into focus. “Didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“As you say.” Severus reached out to brush the hair away from Heru’s face, then rose and tugged back the covers. “Come on. Dinner. Food? You’d like that, I’m sure. Then we can talk.”

Heru sighed at the loss of his warm, cozy nest and sat up. “I really didn’t mean to fall asleep, Severus. And I was having such an interesting dream.” He slanted a look at his mate. “You would have liked it.”

“Oh?”
“Mm. There was this Potions Master and his naughty student—you wouldn’t believe what his detention was like…”

Heru spent the next few weeks studying his link and trying odd little experiments with mirrors in between classes, meals, and time spent normally with Severus and Mark. Lucius had still not contacted him, and that was becoming something of a worry to him. Heru did not know if it meant his little act had inadvertently convinced Voldemort that he was beyond his reach, or that Voldemort thought he was too wily and needed additional consideration before another move was made.

His first attempt at mirror linking—as opposed to tuning—was done with him trying to link a thread of his own magic to one. Of necessity, he did not simply spin it free—he left it attached to himself. One thread provided no visible result, so he added more slowly, one at a time. The surface fuzzed at first, then gradually, as each thread was added, it started to form a more definite image.

Heru left it at a blurry mid-stage. Though he had not linked a huge amount of his own magic to the mirror, he wanted to see the actual results of his tinkering so far and see if it had any adverse reactions for him personally. He did, of course, ask Severus to please keep an eye on him, as his mate would be as likely to notice anything odd as he himself might.

When nothing untoward happened over the following week, Heru went back to the mirror and continued to link threads to it until the image was perfectly clear. He went to bed that evening satisfied for the moment, intent on letting it sit for at least another week. As the following day was St Valentine’s, he decided that was just as well, not that he had some sappy idea of him and Severus hieing off to Madam Puddifoot’s for a cozy lunch—he’d sooner die than be caught in that place after what he had heard of it.

Something of interest did happen, however.
It was a Hogsmeade weekend, the perfect time to get out of the castle and roam the village without anyone questioning the decision. And, with the amount of time Heru had been seen in the company of Severus, most of the students would not to think to question that, either. Heru, Severus, and Mark had a hearty breakfast and bundled up against the chill, then walked along the drive that skirted the lake and into Hogsmeade.

Not long after they arrived Mark went off with friends, leaving Heru and Severus alone to wander in and out of shops at their leisure, though Heru did keep a discreet watch on their son. He was not expecting trouble from Voldemort’s forces, but it would be very unwise to assume things had not changed since their last encounter.

He and Severus were having drinks at The Three Broomsticks, speaking in voices too low to be overheard, when Severus alerted him to new arrivals by tapping his foot under the table and saying, “It shows a lot of bad faith when people say one thing and do another.”

Heru didn’t need to turn his head to know that at least one Malfoy had entered the building, but judging by his mate’s wording it was more likely that both male Malfoys were present. So it was no real surprise when a shadow fell across their table and Heru looked up to see Lucius and Draco. He flashed them an easy smile and dipped his head briefly in greeting, noting as he did so that the boy looked extremely subdued. But then, he had been since he had returned from the holiday. “Lovely to see you, as always,” he said.

“Heru, Severus,” Lucius said. “I had intended to send an owl, but as I have chanced upon you here, I was wondering if I might visit tomorrow to discuss something.”

“Your timing is excellent, Lucius. I have nothing in particular planned for the day tomorrow, so I see no reason to”—he paused as he felt Severus tap his shoe three times, which confused him momentarily—“refuse your request. Perhaps three in the afternoon?”

Lucius nodded and gave him a faint smile. “That would be suitable. Good day, gentlemen. Come along, Draco.”

Severus gave a tiny shake of his head as they departed, forestalling any questions on Heru’s part as to his recommendation. Shortly thereafter they left and located Mark, who was currently in the company of Margaret, a girl named Luna who also hailed from Ravenclaw, Ron, and Hermione. “We’re heading back up,” he told the boy, then hissed, “You know what to do if anything should happen.”

Mark nodded, ignoring the odd glances from his companions, then gave Heru a hug. “Yes, Father.” Before he let go he hissed, “You’re sure he’ll come if I call?”

“Yes. Have fun, then, and try to be back for dinner.” Heru ruffled Mark’s hair and detached himself with a smile. He nodded at his son’s friends, then turned and headed back toward the castle, Severus a shadow at his side.

In their rooms he flopped onto the couch and looked expectantly at his mate. “Why three?”

Severus laid down with his head in Heru’s lap, so Heru began amusing himself with his mate’s silky hair. “If you had specified the morning, you would have given Lucius the impression that he was more important to you than he is, or should be. Having already said you were not busy, telling him...
three in the afternoon will relegate him to his proper place—in his mind, at least.”

“I could wish this was all more straightforward,” Heru said with a sigh, “but I did ask for this, so I suppose it would be hypocritical to complain now.”

“Yes,” agreed Severus with a faint smile. After closing his eyes he said, “I wonder what he wants this time.”

“No idea. Sometimes I wonder if Sirius and Moody are asleep on the job. Should we invite him in here, do you think, or use your office or the workroom?”

“Draco has already told him by now that these quarters are strangely expanded, so that is likely no secret. Perhaps here would be better. In fact, perhaps you could begin stage two of your linking experiment.”

“Sorry?”

“You have already completed your own mirror. I am going to assume for the moment that it will have no discernible consequences to you personally. So, move on to another. While I am certainly not going to volunteer for it, why not use Lucius as a test subject? It isn’t as though he need be aware of your manipulations. If it works on him, then you can move forward to transferring the majority of your link with Voldemort to another mirror, or several. Frankly, the more I consider the link you share with him, the more I become convinced that you ought to sever it as quickly as possible.”

“I’m not sure I can transfer certain parts of it, Severus.”

“Then find something that will work. A lab rat,” Severus said with a touch of amused malice.

Heru chuckled. “They have enough of a mind to work with, I suppose.”

“My dear Heru, you rarely ever reach into his mind, and then only because he disturbs you. If we were able to watch him on a round-the-clock basis, do you honestly feel you would need insight as to his inner thoughts?”

“I guess not. All right. If it worries you that much, I’ll use Lucius as my next target. I’ll have to use a much smaller mirror, though, so that he cannot suspect what I’m doing, or see anything happening.”

Severus shifted his head in a faint nod. They stayed like that for a time in companionable silence, Heru idly letting his fingers roam through Severus’s hair as he rested his head on the back of the couch and let his mind wander. They both sat up straight when an image flashed through their minds of Remus and Sirius heading toward their quarters.

Severus then stood and said, “I’m going to go sit in front of your mirror.” A second later, he was gone.

Heru went to the door and opened it before either of the two had a chance to knock, startling them both. “Please come in,” he said, stepping back to allow them entry. “Make yourselves comfortable,” he added as he closed the door and turned around. “Would either of you care for refreshments?” He thought that Sirius looked distinctly uncomfortable, though Remus seemed fairly at ease.

“That would be nice, thank you,” said Remus, taking a seat on the couch and dragging Sirius down beside him.

As Heru moved to the fireplace to call the kitchens, he heard Sirius ask, “Snape isn’t here?” He looked over his shoulder long enough to shake his head, then placed the order and took a seat.
“No. He’s in the middle of some experimental work. It’s best not to disturb him when he becomes focused.”

“How did you know we were coming?” asked Sirius. “Were you keeping an eye on us or something?” Remus gave his friend a sharp look.

Hera chuckled. “No, I was not.” After pointing upward he said, “The castle informed me of your impending visit, that’s all. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

Sirius still looked vaguely suspicious, but refrained from speaking on it. “I was on duty at the mirror when I saw something I thought you would want to know about. When I later saw you approached by Lucius in Hogsmeade, I was sure of it.”

A house-elf popped in with a tray, causing everyone to pause long enough to pour themselves tea. “You know, then, what he wishes to discuss?”

Sirius nodded. “Voldemort wants to see if you’d be willing to do another reading for him in his guise as Chaldren. It seems he still has no idea which side you’re on, but he’s willing to continue the association for now in the hopes that even if you are not aligned with him, he can use you.”

Hera snorted, almost upsetting his tea. “As well he should be confused, considering the delicate little dance I’ve been performing. Well, then, I shall have to be on my guard. However, as I’ve been looking for an excuse to be able to study Voldemort in more depth, this presents a good opportunity to do so.” After a pause he said, “I’ll just need to remember to seclude myself after the fact.”

Remus grinned, causing Hera to give him a look of calculated curiosity. “Sorry. It’s just something Albus said.”

“I’m surprised,” Hera replied. “I would not have expected him to reveal much of anything about that encounter.”

“He was a little out of sorts at the time, Hera. Very unusual, I assure you.” Remus gave a casual shrug and sipped his tea.

“I have a feeling you are gifted in making molehills out of mountains, Remus,” Hera parried with a faint smile.

“Perhaps, though that it is not always something to be proud of.”

“That may be so,” said Hera, “but I think we’re starting to venture into territory that is best left undisturbed and that was not my intention. I would much rather concentrate on the here and now.”

“Yes, of course. You’re quite right.”

“Has anything else of interest popped up in the mirror that may not have been passed on to me?”

“Nothing special,” said Sirius. “Just bits and pieces about the escaped Death Eaters recovering.” Then his eyes sparkled in an unmistakable display of malicious pleasure. “Peter is currently providing the dementors with a bit of fun, though.”

“How tragic,” said Hera mildly.

“Yes,” said Sirius distantly, a smile curling the edges of his mouth. Then his eyes focused on Hera directly. “Things got out of hand before. I’m sorry.”
Heru arched a brow. “If I may presume to guess your reference, I will say that that was partly my fault. I never intended to be so harsh, but I’m afraid you touched a nerve. I lost control of my temper, so it would be as well for me to apologize for my actions.”

“Yes, well,” Sirius said vaguely. “I hope we can put that behind us?”

“Of course. It never happened as far as I’m concerned.” Heru waved his hand as though swatting away a fly.

Sirius looked down for a moment. “You’re as gracious as Moony described. Are you and Snape really—” He broke off at a sharp nudge from Remus and flushed.

While Heru could not think of an adequate response for Sirius’s first statement, his unfinished question was something he could answer. “Yes, we are.” He shot a narrow look at Remus before continuing. “You two seem to be the only ones who have figured it out, so I trust that this information will go no further.”

Sirius raised his head, slightly bewildered. “People think you and Snape are simply…”

“Slytherins,” said Remus, as though no further explanation were required.

Heru nodded. “And most people would come to a great number of erroneous conclusions regarding my exact relationship with Severus were it to be known. I would prefer that it not. I have faith, however, that the two of you will keep this knowledge under wraps, though I can see I need to be more careful around you, Remus.”

Then he cocked his head to the side and stared at the werewolf intently. “Speaking of which…” His scrutiny was interrupted by an image in his head of a scowling Severus, arms crossed in front of him.

“What?”

“I wonder… No, I’d have to study you in much more detail.” Heru shook his head.

“Heru, what are you talking about? I’m getting the shivers with you looking at me like that, like you’re seeing into me.”

“I am, actually. I was pondering the possibility of freeing you from your curse,” he said blandly.

“What!?” Sirius said, rising to his feet like a shot. “That’s impossible.”

“Is it? You’d be surprised.” And Heru was surprised, for another image formed in his head, this time of Severus baring his arm. He blinked. A moment later his mate apparated into the room and took a seat, then calmly poured himself a cup of tea.

Sirius sat back down, a stubbornly incredulous look on his face. After Severus had tasted his tea, he looked up and said, “Not so impossible, if Heru was of a mind to tackle the problem.” After setting down his cup he said, “Consider this,” then bared his forearms.

Both Remus and Sirius stared blankly at his smooth, unmarked skin.

“If Heru can free me from Voldemort…” Severus pushed down his sleeves and picked up his cup again.

“How in God’s name did you manage that?” asked Remus eventually.

Heru shrugged one shoulder. “I simply took a long enough look to see how the Dark Mark was
constructed, then removed it. I admit, it took me the better part of an afternoon to accomplish it, and I was exhausted afterward, but it wasn’t that difficult, just tedious.”

“Is this why Voldemort is being so cautious?” Sirius asked with uncharacteristic insight.

“Yes. Or at least, partly.”

“Why … did you remove it?” continued Sirius.

Heru looked at Severus. He was the one who had brought it up, after all.

“I asked him to,” Severus said evenly. “I think, Sirius, that you can understand my wish to be free. Though it was not until I explained myself in detail that Heru agreed to try. The point is, if Heru can manage that, then perhaps he is able to manage something in the way of freeing Remus from his own curse.”

“I don’t understand,” said Sirius. “It’s not like you had to reveal any of this.”

“No. But as Heru has already begun to consider the possibility, I may as well show you two that it is not outside the bounds of reason.”

“But you hate us,” Sirius protested. Remus gave him another sharp nudge and rolled his eyes.

“No, I do not. I hate what you were and what you did. I am not inclined at present to hate you specifically.” Heru barely managed to prevent himself from sending an astonished look at his mate. “I am free of the unfortunate results of that time, and have better things to do now than to waste my energy on something that no longer has any meaning.”

Severus went on to say, “Do not mistake me. I am hardly extending the hand of friendship. But I do think that putting the past where it belongs behooves us all at this point. An olive branch might be a more accurate assessment of the current situation.”

“Wait a moment,” said Remus. “How did you know what was going on in here?”

Severus allowed a faint smile to appear. “I was watching, naturally. Heru has been experimenting on ways to create a mirror that can track Voldemort. His first attempt used himself as the target, and I happened to check it at a fortuitous time.”

Remus and Sirius both narrowed their eyes. “I’m going to assume that makes some sort of obscure sense,” said Remus, “considering that Heru can tune a mirror to just about anyone already.”

“Indeed,” Heru said. “But I did not tune a mirror to myself. I linked it. I plan to use Lucius as my next target. If that works, I will see about Voldemort. It would be a great relief if we could watch him directly.”

“Linked?”

“Tuning is like using a locating spell that lingers. Rather than just a static image or sense of where a person is, it provides a constantly updating picture that can be watched in real time. Linking involves literal linking—causing threads of a person’s personal magic to connect with a mirror so as to bypass any means of non-disclosure.”

Remus paled slightly. “That sounds a great deal like what happened to Harry.”

Heru shrugged. “You could look at it that way, yes. However, I believe the Potter child was forced
to deal with Voldemort’s mind as well, so this is not quite the same thing. I believe that most knowledge can be used for either good or evil. In this case, I see no reason to deny the efficacy of the original accident’s presumed design, so I’ve begin modeling a useful application of it, starting with myself, for use by the Order.”

“You can see magic?” asked Sirius.

“Yes. So perhaps you can understand why I was able to free Severus, and may be able to free Remus. Again, this is not common knowledge, so I would ask that you keep it to yourselves.”

“You knew, didn’t you,” said Remus suddenly, accusingly.

“Knew what?”

“That I knew about you and Severus.”

“Since you bring it up, yes. There was something you obviously weren’t telling me, and I wanted to know what it was.”

“You were spying on us!?” Sirius said.

“Yup,” said Heru cheerfully. “I was. That was the only time, however, so you need not fear I make a habit of it.”

Sirius subsided, either remembering the content of the conversation itself, or because he did not wish to bring Heru’s temper to the fore. Remus looked thoughtful, darting a glance at Heru, then Severus. Finally he said, “The removal of the Mark is not the reason why Severus is different.”

“Doubtful,” Heru said vaguely, then poured himself another cup of tea.

Another minute or so passed in silence. “You’re bonded, aren’t you.”

Severus let out a snort and said, “Heru, I insist you remove that curse. He’s too clever for his own good with it fouling up his system. I knew I should not have come in here.”

“Well, if you insist, Severus. Though, I think Remus ought to make that decision.”

“This isn’t an ordinary marriage,” said Remus, still looking thoughtful.

Heru smiled and shrugged.

“You know blood magic.”

“Your point?”

“There’s no other explanation for the change. What did you do?”

“I’m not sure I see why I should explain. You already know far more than you should,” Heru pointed out. “If any of this were to get out, Voldemort would very likely change his current point of view.”

“I understand that. But neither Sirius or I are sent out on missions.”

“I still see no reason for me to reveal anything further,” said Heru patiently.

“I am enough a student of history to know that current rites are a mere shadow of what was, and
almost a mockery.”

“Again, your point?”

“I’ve been searching for years for the knowledge, for myself. For—” Remus stopped and looked down. It was, perhaps, unfortunate that Mark bounced in at that point and made a flying leap onto his father’s lap. Remus looked up again suddenly and his eyes widened. “Dear God,” he choked out.

Severus sighed heavily and said, “Spit it out, Remus.”


Heru managed to massage his forehead even with Mark on his lap. After a moment he hissed, “Should we just be honest? About the blood bonds, at least. Or obliviate them?”

“Did I do something wrong?” hissed Mark.

Heru shook his head, keeping a careful eye on Remus. “No, it’s all right,” he hissed. “You just arrived at an awkward time. Remus is a little more perceptive than we understood or imagined.”

Mark gave Remus a wide-eyed look, then hissed, “Maybe I’ll just go read. Can I … hug Dad, too?”

Heru nodded and planted a kiss on Mark’s head. “Go on.”

Mark slid to the floor and launched himself at Severus, giving him a quick hug before dashing off down the hall and disappearing into his room.

“Then it is true,” Remus whispered.

Heru glanced over at Severus and arched a brow. Severus responded with, “You have not made it plain why you care, Remus.”

Remus looked at Sirius, who gave him a slightly bewildered shrug. Obviously, Remus had never gone any further in his speculations with Sirius. “How else would I be able to have a proper mate, or even children?”

“Anyone can get married.”

“But not anyone can have a child,” Remus insisted. “That boy is as much your child as Heru’s, damn it.”

“So adopt a muggle-born orphan.”

“That isn’t the same and you know it! It wouldn’t be ours.”

“Could somebody explain to me what’s going on?” asked Sirius plaintively.

Heru tipped his head back to stare at the ceiling. He could feel Severus’s gaze on him for several moments before the sensation passed. He shrugged slightly in response; he felt it was entirely up to his mate what to reveal or confirm at that point. If Severus felt they could be trusted, so be it.

“Mark is as much my son as Heru’s,” Severus said after another pause. “The differences you sensed are valid enough, I suppose. I was blood bonded to Heru using the ancient rites, then Mark to me.”

“Then you aren’t Severus Snape any longer, are you?”
Severus shook his head.

“Somebody?” asked Sirius again.

“I shall attempt to explain,” Severus said, catching Sirius’s attention. “Heru has an extensive library of books from ancient times, passed down through the generations by his family. Included among that was the knowledge of how to perform the original rites and a great deal of information on blood bonds in general. We used those in order to formalize our relationship, and then again to insert myself as Mark’s other father. If you were to do an analysis, you would find that biologically speaking, Mark has no mother.”

Sirius turned to Remus. “We could have children?”

“In a manner of speaking,” said Heru, still appearing to stare at the ceiling. “One of you would need to either have one first, or adopt one, though. I can even speculate that, though I have no way of knowing, if the child were young enough, it might change to resemble you both as it grew older, rather than looking as it would have originally.”

“Is that why Mark does not resemble Severus?”

“No. Actually, he does.”

“I don’t understand.”

Heru summoned Mark, and a moment later he appeared. “Mark,” he hissed, “while facing me, would you be so kind as to revert to your natural appearance?” A few heartbeats later he hissed, “Please show Remus and Sirius? Then you can go back to whatever it was you were doing, or stay if you like.”

Mark turned around, revealing a face that was a skillful blend of both his fathers, much to the astonishment of the two men. Then he sat down on Severus’s lap and leaned his head against his dad’s chest.

“We could have children?” repeated Sirius.

Remus gave him an absent nudge. “I don’t suppose…”

“Not unless your affliction was taken care of,” said Heru.

“Of course.”

“We are extending a huge trust here, gentlemen.”

“Would it be better if we were to each swear a Wizard’s Oath?”

Heru glanced at Severus, then cast his eyes to the ceiling. “I think I would prefer it to be a … Secret.”

“With you as Keeper?” asked Remus.

“Naturally.”

“I see no reason to object. Sirius?”

“Yes, fine.” Sirius was still a bit distant, his eyes unfocused.
After the technicalities were out of the way, they settled back into a more normal conversation, whereupon Mark called his father on spilling the family secret yet again. "Why am I keeping a secret when you obviously can't," he hissed.

Heru gave him a halfhearted glare and fiddled with his hair. "If your dad thinks they can be trusted with the knowledge, that should be good enough for us," he hissed back.

Severus smirked, and, after a quick look at Remus, hissed back, "That's right, Mark. Your father has already admitted I am more intelligent than he is."

Remus narrowed his eyes and said, "Just exactly how much have you been hiding from Albus?"

"Whatever it is he doesn't need to know," said Heru blandly. "And that includes me working on your particular problem."

"Considering that for some things it makes Heru pass out for a day, I think," said Severus, "that you can understand why we have remained silent. Albus would be sure to take advantage of anything he could get his hands on."

"How do you know I won't go tell him what I just witnessed?"

Heru smiled. "Because you can't. Because I very much doubt even if you wanted to tell, that you would be willing to give up the chance at a normal life. I may not ask for money, Remus, but I do exact a price for my services, and for knowledge."

Remus darted another look at Severus, who said, "No." Remus nodded and took on a thoughtful aspect.

"All right," he said finally. "I won't even ask how that was possible. You'd still have to cover for me, though."

"Of course. That goes without saying. I would not have made the offer without considering the effects."

"Why are you offering?"

"Because I think you've got a bad deal. I don't much care for when a person is forced into something against their will, by accident or design. As Severus does not object…"

"Who the hell is in charge here, anyway?"

Heru and Severus exchanged a look. "Of what?"

"You two." Remus shook his head and said, "Between you two."

Severus looked at Heru again and said, "That's rather impertinent, don't you think?"

Heru laughed softly. "Neither and both, Remus. We each have our strengths and weaknesses. I would be a fool to discount Severus's formidable intelligence and reasoning, and he would be equally foolish to discount my very real ability."

Mark stirred and said, "I'm going back to my room. This is boring."
“Remember to change back,” Severus advised, then returned the hug he was getting.

“Sure, Dad,” Mark said, then paused to give Heru a hug. After a brief wave at Remus, and a very distracted Sirius, he disappeared.

“Well, then, I suppose I should ask how you plan to go about this,” Remus said.

“I don’t really feel up to anything this evening, but if you want to stop by tomorrow I could begin trying to figure out what I would need to do to free you. The actual process would have to be set aside for a full day, preferably a weekend. And it would also be wise if Sirius could be here during that time.”

“Why?”

“As a template. You see, that I am aware of, Sirius only has the ability to be an animagus. Mark is a metamorphmagus as well as a parselmouth, and that means I have to look more closely and mentally subtract what comprises those abilities before I start making changes. Having a less complicated template to observe makes things easier.”

He paused, then added, “As well, the first full moon after I make my changes—no wolfsbane. You shouldn’t need it anyway. And if you did, for some inexplicable reason, it would interfere in my observations. Logically speaking, it’s a very simple curse.”

“Observations—should this wait, then? Allow you to watch as I transform, then back?”

“Yes,” said Severus, “though you would not like going without the potion that time.”

Remus shrugged. “I’ve transformed for years without it. One more time isn’t too much to bear, considering.” Then he looked at Heru curiously. “Are you even an animagus?”

Heru flicked his eyes toward the ceiling for a moment. “I have no idea, actually. I never bothered to try. It’s not an issue, if that’s what you’re thinking. I can quite adequately contain you, or me, whichever is easier. Though, I think you’ll understand when I say it would more likely be you.”

“Yes. Sirius is normally with me then. Is that a problem?”

Heru shook his head. “I will caution you. I may not be able to pull it off, though I will do all that I can to make sure the curse is removed.”

Severus snorted.

“Anyway, stop by tomorrow after breakfast so I can take an initial look. We’ll figure it out from there.”

“Right. And thanks.” Remus didn’t expand, wisely. He rose and pulled a still distracted Sirius to his feet, gave them both a nod, then dragged Sirius out.

Heru turned and gave Severus a steady look.

“Because you wanted it, and because it will make you happy. All right?” Severus said with a slight scowl.

Heru stretched luxuriously as he awoke and yawned, then rolled over to wrap his arms around
Severus—or more accurately, his mate’s pillow. Heru blinked his eyes open and sat up, glancing around the room in confusion. Mumbling under his breath, he slid out of bed and padded into the bathroom to have a wash, then back out to dress and consider hunting down breakfast.

He spared a moment to glare at Severus, who was seated on the couch with a book in his hand, and headed to the fireplace to put in an order. After seating himself quite deliberately in a chair, he waited in silence for his meal to appear.

Severus looked up and smiled briefly. “I see you’re your usual morning self,” he commented.

“I wouldn’t be if you’d still been in bed where you belonged,” muttered Heru.

Severus smirked. “It is hardly my fault you cannot seem to wake up properly in the morning.”

Heru ignored him in favor of the breakfast a house-elf delivered just then, tucking in with appetite.

When he was done, and felt a bit better, he said, “So, about Lucius. If all he’s going to do is visit to play proxy for a request, I’m not sure how I’m supposed to conduct my little experiment. I suppose it’s possible that a small mirror would only need a fraction of the threads bound to it that mine did, but I honestly don’t know that.”

Severus adopted a thoughtful look, and remained silent for so long that Heru wondered if he would ever speak. Finally, he did. “Wing it.”

Heru blinked. “I’m sorry?”

Severus gazed at him patiently. “My dear Heru, you have exceptionally good luck, and things generally fall out the way you would like them to. Just … wing it.”

“You’re mad.”

“No, I am not. Did you spend hours searching for answers when you wrote those letters? Did you agonize over your conversations with Lucius? Did you pace restlessly when faced with dinner at Malfoy Manor? No. If Lucius cannot be kept here for long enough, then another way will be found, or another target. It isn’t the end of the world. Now is hardly the time to stop trusting yourself.”

Heru thought about that for several minutes, then shrugged. “All right. You win this round. I wonder what the impact would be of revealing your lack of a Dark Mark to Lucius openly? Say, the two of us in here dressed—dare I say it—normally?” Severus shot him a dark look. “Fine, like I do, then. Very casually.”

Severus relented after a moment and said, “Voldemort knows that his Mark no longer works. He is not sure that it is actually gone, though naturally that is what he expects to be the case. I see no harm in confirming it.”

“Fine, then I pick out today’s outfits,” Heru said with a grin.

Remus and Sirius arrived at 9.30 and were ushered in without ceremony. Heru directed them to sit on the couch again as they had been the evening before. “Try not to move around too much, but you can talk,” he said before closing his eyes and settling back comfortably.

A short time later he opened his eyes and rose, only to move to kneel in front of the two men, between them, and rest a hand on the knee of each. Then he closed his eyes again and went back to looking, and comparing. After a startled silence, Remus and Sirius continued their low-voiced
An hour later, Heru opened his eyes and retracted his hands. “I think I can do it,” he said, then stood and returned to his chair with a yawn. “I’ll be able to confirm better after seeing you transform.” He yawned again and closed his eyes.

“Sleep,” came a deep and decisive voice from behind him. “Now.”

Heru smiled faintly. “Fine. Just make sure to wake me in time for Lucius.” When he didn’t move, Severus tapped him smartly on the shoulder. Heru forced his eyes open and rose, nodded to the two men, then disappeared into the bedroom, leaving his mate to deal with their visitors.

When the time came Severus was lounging in a chair, and it was Heru who went to answer the door. Lucius kept his expression smooth as he entered, with just a faint hint of a smile touching his mouth, but when he got a look at Severus it cleared to utter blankness. Heru’s mate was slung sideways in his chair, legs over one arm, wearing a pair of black jeans and a black, ribbed tank. Naturally, his left arm was resting against the back, exposing his unmarked forearm. Severus looked up from his book and nodded. “Lucius.”

“Severus, how pleasant to see you again.” He simply stood there for a moment, looking, then took a seat on the couch.

“Feeling a touch under the weather?” Severus inquired innocently as Heru took a seat in the other armchair.

“I am fine, I assure you. I trust you are both well, and your son, of course, Heru.”

“Yes, quite. We’re all doing splendidly. Please feel free to take refreshment.” Heru said, reaching out to retrieve his bottle of butterbeer. Lucius had just poured himself a cup of tea when a loud, angry hiss sounded from the direction of the back hall. Heru sighed and went to set his bottle back down.

“I’ll do it this time,” Severus said, slipping out of the chair and placing his book on a side table. He went nowhere, however, as Mark appeared then with his snake wrapped around his torso and neck, and a frustrated look on his face.

“Will you please tell Selthis again he isn’t allowed? He still won’t listen to reason,” he demanded of Heru.

Severus held out his hands. Mark unwound the snake and deposited him with a look of annoyance, then disappeared back into his room. Severus forced Selthis’s head around to stare at him for a moment, then sat down in his prior casual pose, pulling his book off the table.

“You did very well,” hissed Heru. “Now be a love and stare at Lucius here and see if you can make him nervous.” Selthis nodded his head and coiled up in Severus’s lap, fixing his unblinking, unwavering gaze on the blond. “So, Lucius, what brings you here on this fine day?” asked Heru.

Lucius swiveled his head and said, “My associate wished to find out if you would be willing to meet with him again.”

Heru raised his brows. “He was unable to make the request personally?”

“He is … in the middle of some rather delicate negotiations at present, and asked me if I would be willing to do him this small favor.”
“I see. Do you do him many favors, Lucius?”

“When the need arises, yes.”

“How kind of you.” Heru smiled warmly. “I trust he compensates you adequately for your service. Why does he wish to meet?”

“He was most impressed with your prediction after dinner. Considering how important some of his negotiations are, he wished to have a better idea of how things will go. After your display of talent, naturally, he thought of you.”

“I’m very flattered,” Heru said. “Of course, with school back in session, my own time is somewhat limited. It would be better for this to occur at a weekend. Did he have any place specific in mind to meet?”

“I would need to check, now that I know you are willing. And—” Lucius glanced over at Selthis for a moment before saying, “Is there any cost associated with this?”

“With this?” Heru affected surprise. “I feel it would be wrong to take money for such a thing. Perhaps I’m being foolish, but I believe that doing so might lead toward the obscuration or even removal of my sight.”

“I’m sure you could never be foolish, Heru.” Lucius tensed a bit when Selthis decided to ooze off Severus’s lap and coil up next to him on the couch, flicking his forked tongue rhythmically. “What a lovely snake,” he said quietly, shades of insincerity and anxiety colouring his tone.

“Mark found him in a pet shop in Hogsmeade of all places. As I consider him a suitable companion, I allowed it.”

“Was there a problem earlier, if I may be so bold as to ask?”

Heru smirked slightly and replied, “Nothing important, really. An ongoing argument between Selthis and Cooper, Mark’s cat. Cooper seems to find Selthis’s tail irresistible, and Selthis would like to squeeze Cooper to death in retaliation for his frequent pouncing. Unfortunately, as we cannot reliably communicate with the cat, it falls to Selthis to behave himself.”

“I see,” Lucius said, very much aware of the snake staring at him. “He is a constrictor, then?”

“Oh yes,” said Heru cheerfully. “I expect him to get a great deal larger over the years. Enough to incapacitate a man, I’m sure, or kill. I confess that at times I find myself curious as to what that would sound like. But, he only eats rodents, currently, so he’s hardly any trouble.”

“How fascinating.”

“If your associate has no particular place in mind, I’m quite sure my home in Hogsmeade would suit nicely, though you might find it a bit plain and understated. I had planned to check up on it soon, in any case, so I may as well handle two things at once.”

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“Ah, yes. I’m sure that would be fine.” Lucius paused as Selthis unwound and slithered across his lap, then around to perch on the back of the couch behind him. “I will owl you as soon as I’ve had a chance to speak with Xavier on the matter.”

“Splendid. Well, then, I expect you have other business to attend to, so I’ll just see you out.” Heru rose and stepped away from his chair. Lucius, being no fool, stood as well and allowed himself to be gently ejected from their quarters.
“Thank you, Selthis,” Heru hissed, back in the lounge. “Please tell Mark thank you as well. I think you did a lovely job.”

“As if I could do otherwise,” hissed the snake, then slid off the couch to wind its way back to Mark.

“Well?” Heru delved into his pocket and removed a small mirror, then handed it to his mate. “Very good. And he wasn’t even here all that long.”

“I’ll just write up a note to Sirius for when he stands duty,” Heru replied, then went to fetch supplies. As soon as he had dashed off several lines and dried the ink, he rolled the parchment and tied it off, then called for Praecino. His phoenix was happy to oblige and flashed out with the note.

“I suggest you pull the same trick when we meet with Voldemort again. Much as I hate to admit it, I’m beginning to think you were right about certain things. I don’t think he’ll even notice what you’re doing.”

Heru smiled and moved in for a kiss, then resumed his chair. “However, perhaps I shall use a method that does not require such close contact this time. It isn’t fair to you or Mark if I come away in such a wretched mood, so if I can avoid it, I will.”

Severus nodded. “If the transference does not work, the small mirror will at least be something.”

“True. Depending on how involved things get, I may be able to manage more than one. For reference, that one didn’t take nearly as many strands.”

Severus set the mirror on the table. “Now, if you don’t mind, I shall go change back into something decent.”

Heru leapt to his feet and advanced on his still seated mate. “I don’t know, Severus. I like what you’re wearing. It gives out such tantalizing hints of what you normally keep hidden. I think it’s … sexy.” He extended a hand and smiled when Severus took it. “Maybe I could show you?”

“And have you drop off into another coma directly after?” Severus favored him with a dark look, then smiled. “You should be resting, my dear Heru, but in this instance, I will bow to your whims.” He hauled himself up using Heru for leverage.

When Praecino arrived shortly thereafter with a reply from Sirius, he was kept waiting for some time.

They arrived early and Heru immediately set out to temporarily disable the wards designed to prevent Death Eaters from entering his home, and indeed, the wards designed to keep anyone out who was not a member of the household. Mark was spending the evening with Tonks again; she had been more than happy to help out. Severus went through the ground floor vanishing dust from the rooms, eventually coming to settle in the lounge where Heru was already standing, eyes closed.

Heru’s hands were moving in strange gestures, almost as though he was manipulating something tangible, yet unseen. Severus watched, fascinated, as he had never been able to see Heru at this kind of work before—unless one counted the removal of his mark. Without opening his eyes Heru said quietly, “It should not take much longer. I think I will want that replenishing potion, though.”

Severus nodded reflexively and flipped his robes aside so he could open a slim case attached to his upper thigh. From it he pulled several vials and placed them on the table. “I’ll go make sure Dobby has things ready and waiting,” he said as quietly, then turned and left. By the time he returned Dobby was reaching for the first vial, flipping the top back and downing the contents in one shot.
“It’s so much easier when the structure is sentient,” he said with a grimace. “And this stuff tastes bloody awful.” He vanished the vial and reached for the second, downing and vanishing that as well. He eyed the third vial uncertainly, then shook his head; that one went into one of his pockets. “How long?” he asked as he dropped into a chair.

“A half hour. Enough time for you to doze a little if you wish.”

Twenty minutes later Heru was being shaken gently. He rose with a yawn and began pacing the room to help wake himself up. When he felt a bit better he re-checked his pockets to make sure the mirrors were in place, then headed out into the hall, his wand conspicuously tucked behind one ear. Even so, he waited a good thirty seconds before opening the door when the expected knock came.

“A pleasure to see you both again. Do come in,” he said, gesturing with one hand. Once Lucius and Xavier were inside, he closed the door and turned, saying, “Please follow me.” They were barely seated when Dobby popped into the room.

“Sir is wanting refreshments now?”

“Yes, Dobby. That would be lovely.”

Dobby popped out and was back in seconds, placing a tray in the center of the table that separated the four chairs currently in Heru’s lounge. Heru cast an amused glance at Lucius, making sure that Xavier noticed him doing so, then said, “Thank you, Dobby. I will call you if I am in need.”

“Sir is being most kind.” Dobby gave a little bow and popped out. Not once had he so much as looked in his former master’s direction.

“It’s so hard to get good help these days,” Heru said casually, “but Dobby is quite an entertaining little fellow. Very nice of him to volunteer to help out this evening.”

“He is not bound to you?” asked Lucius a bit stiffly.

“Oh, no. He works at Hogwarts. Quite an independent little creature, I must say, but very helpful to those he takes a shine to. And he does love to chatter away—Mark is rather fond of him, so he tends to be underfoot at odd times. My own house-elves are having a holiday at the moment, you see. Dobby was absolutely delighted when we gave him several sets of socks for Christmas.” Heru smiled warmly, though not because of his feelings for the house-elf. Rather, Lucius’s expression appeared to have frozen. He reached out to snag a bottle of butterbeer and flip the top off.

Severus poured himself tea directly after, which seemed to shake the other two men into action as well.

“I trust that your lovely wife is well, Lucius.”

“Yes, she is. I will tell her you asked after her.”

“And, Xavier, I trust things are well with business? I always did like to see people get ahead.”

“Yes, things have been well thus far, though one can never be too careful. I was pleasantly surprised when your prediction bore fruit so quickly, so you can understand why I wished to meet with you again. It is always advantageous to have some idea of the future.”

“Naturally, and it is a wise man who seeks outside assistance in certain matters. What it is that I can do for you this evening?”
“Several things, I hope. Most pressing, however, is what you can see regarding several people I was considering doing business with.”

Heru tilted his head to the side, reaching out along his link at the same time. “I would prefer I not know their names, then. If I happened to know them, it could influence the results.”

“Understood.”

Heru stood up and crossed to a cabinet on the far side of the room, then paused with an air of confusion. “Severus?” he asked, glancing back.

His mate tapped the side of his head without bothering to turn.

“Right.” Heru slipped his wand out from behind his ear and tapped the cabinet in a complicated, quick pattern, then shoved it back into place. He opened the door and pulled out a small bag, then closed it and resumed his seat.

“I thought we would try something a little different today, then. While palmistry can be very illuminating, it won’t do for what you want to know.” Heru opened the bag and pulled out a handful of gleaming, multi-coloured scales. Setting the bag aside, he fiddled with them for a few seconds, then looked up. “I’ll need you to hold these each time, concentrating on the person in question.” He held them out, then deposited the set in Xavier’s outstretched hand.

Heru paid careful attention to what was going through Voldemort’s mind, then smiled and held out his hand. Xavier returned the scales, though he did not sit back. Heru pushed the tray off to the side, then tossed the scales onto the table with a flip of his hand, watching as they did strange little dances on the surface. When they finally stopped moving, he pulled his wand out again and used it to tap one of the scales.

“This tells me that the person you’re thinking of is moderately well suited for association. This one”—he tapped a different scale with his wand—“says that you could get their cooperation in a very short amount of time.” He studied the scales for a moment before saying, “I also see that the person is quite cunning. A bit manipulative, but trustworthy if the incentives are right.”

Heru gathered up the scales and cleansed them of influence with his magic, then looked up. “A decent candidate, I should think. Next?”

They went through the same routine several times before Xavier decided to speak. “How exactly is it that you read these?”

Heru jiggled the scales in his hand reflectively, then said, “Part of it is simply intuitive understanding — where ability steps in and responds and guides. But, it’s also in how the scales move when thrown. If you’ve watched closely, you’ll have noticed that they do not just hit the table and stop. If one bounces, it’s like adding a modifier to the final position, and even that depends on how many times it happens before it comes to rest. If it spins, that’s something different, and so forth. Someone without ability can learn to read these, but what they saw would never be as accurate. For instance, one of the scales would indicate—in this case—whether or not you could secure a person’s services. How that scale acts tells me how quickly or slowly, and gives me an idea of how far up or down the amount it is.”

“Is that what you were doing at the beginning—adjusting them for the particular type of query?”

Heru nodded. “It makes them quite flexible, within a certain scope. Obviously, they aren’t much good for yes/no types of questions, but neither are they very good for things with too many
variables."

“I don’t believe I’ve ever seen this method before.”

“I would be surprised if you had. They tend to be quite uncommon. They don’t have to be scales, of course, but using something from a magical creature tends to enhance their usefulness. I certainly don’t teach this at Hogwarts—it would take far too much time to get the children to understand them, and I find it’s not really worth trying to teach someone who lacks talent.” Heru shrugged and handed Xavier the scales.

This time, Voldemort was thinking of Severus. Heru adjusted his reading slightly. “Now, this one has me curious. This person is well suited, but whether or not you could secure their services is iffy. It’s pretty much dead on center. In fact, I get the sense that you’ve done business together in the past. This person is extremely intelligent, sly and cunning, would make for a good candidate, and is very trustworthy.”

He scooped up the scales and cleansed them again, then held them out. When Heru got the scales back, he adjusted his reading again, for this time he was the target. “This person is extremely well suited, but also dead center as to whether or not they could be recruited. Quite independent, actually, and rather like the last one in other respects. Intelligent, cunning, loyalty is hard won but unshakable once given.”

After several more rounds Heru affected to be a bit more tired than he was and sat back, jiggling the scales in his hand again. “I think that’s it for these. Pushing is unwise. But there is something I’d like to try.” He reached for Xavier’s cup without asking and swiftly reversed it; the resulting mess was a bit nasty. While he waited for it to drain he tipped the scales back into their bag, then returned them to the cabinet and went through his little façade regarding the reestablishment of the wards.

After he sat down he picked up the cup and studied the interior carefully, turning the vessel slowly, and letting his brow furrow slightly. “Hm. Not good. Not good at all,” he said distantly. “One of your associates is thinking of betraying you, but—no, they are not yet aware of it. It is”—Heru tapped the side of his head in an absent gesture—“somewhere in their subconscious, and has not yet risen to actual conscious thought.”

Heru shook his head and looked up to focus his gaze intently on Xavier. “I strongly suggest you keep a close eye on things,” he said soberly, then vanished the mess on the table and set the cup down. “A sad note to finish up with, but I would hardly be true to my nature if I ignored what I was sensing.” A second later Dobby appeared.

“Sir is wanting me?”

“Yes, Dobby. Would you be so kind as to clear away? Thank you.” He frowned slightly, then reached into a pocket and pulled out a vial, which he uncapped and downed quickly, wrinkling his nose as he vanished the empty. “Severus, do you have another?”

Severus scowled and revealed his case, and slipped out another vial to hand to Heru. The fact that he was once again wearing black jeans was probably not lost on either of their visitors. He stood abruptly as Heru drank the potion and said flatly, “I would be happy to show the both of you out.”

Heru leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, seemingly unconcerned.

Severus said, “If there are additional names, I’m sure another meeting could be arranged at some later date. Please follow me.”
Both men rose without a word and let themselves be escorted to the door. A minute or so later Severus was back. “Are you able to reset the wards?”

“Yeah. That took too long—what did they say?” Heru raised his hands and began gesturing again, his movements a strange mirror to earlier.

“They were curious about the potions, of course. I told them the truth, that this is tiring for you.”

“I feel like I’m about to pass out, actually, even with them,” Heru admitted, his hands never wavering in their movements.

Severus took a seat and waited, quietly. When Heru finally finished he rose again, crossing the space between them quickly, and laying a gentle hand on his mate’s shoulder. “I know you’re tired, but we must return to the castle. Are you able to apparate?” Heru’s brow furrowed. “All right.” Severus picked up the empty vial that Heru had not bothered to vanish and turned it into a portkey. Then he slid Heru’s wand out from behind his ear and tucked it into his mate’s pocket.

Severus gave a slight sigh, then managed to maneuver things so he could heft Heru into his arms without losing his grip on anything. After making sure the portkey was touching both of them, he activated it. Heru was placed into bed and his clothes banished right off his body, onto a chair, then tucked in. He went to see about Mark and Tonks as Heru drifted off.
Heru awoke slowly, quite comfortable with the fact that a warm body was curled up around him. He didn’t know if it was early enough that Severus would not normally have awakened, or if his mate was being nice by staying in bed past his usual hour. He stayed like that for a few minutes, pondering the evening before, then shifted experimentally.

“Good morning, Heru,” was the immediate response. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine, I guess.”

“Then we shall get up and bathe, then have breakfast. I have already asked Praecino to be on hand in case you need soothing. Then we can talk about last night.” Severus tightened his hold on Heru in a kind of hug, then pulled away and slid out of bed.

After a rather sedate shower, they pulled on robes and moved into the lounge, where Severus firecalled for a meal. Mark was still sleeping according to the castle, but Severus ordered enough for three. It wasn’t until they were mostly finished eating that Severus spoke again, and by then Praecino was softly trilling from a makeshift perch in the corner.

He pointed at a box resting on the table and said, “The mirrors from last night. They appear to be working correctly.”

Heru nodded and reached for another slice of bacon. “We’re keeping one,” he said, “until I can see about transferring my link.”

“Albus can decide who will keep the other,” agreed Severus. “Were either of us ones that Voldemort asked after?”

“Yes. Both of us, actually. I made sure we came up dead center—those two. The rest were people I either didn’t recognize or didn’t care about. I thought it would be wise to assure certain things.”

“Are you up to seeing Albus today, or would you prefer I report for us?”

Heru wrinkled his nose and had a bite of toast. After crunching through it he said, “The latter. I have no idea how steady my temper is and I really don’t want a repeat of the last time. Tell him what you think is necessary.” He spent the next fifteen minutes describing what he had seen and sensed in between lazy bites of the remaining food on his plate.

“And the leaf reading?”

“I’m not sure. Who it is, I mean. I just get the feeling that it’s someone fairly high up and valuable to him.” Heru let out a mirthless laugh. “Definitely not Peter.”

“Given Peter’s overall constitution, he is probably mad by now, or close.”

“Maybe. Weak people have odd ways of protecting themselves. If possible, he might yet betray Voldemort, if only because of the life debt he owes Harry. But he wasn’t the subject, I’m sure of it.”

Severus nodded and looked thoughtful for a moment. “Stay here, then. I’ll take one of the mirrors and report. If things get bad while I’m gone, even with Praecino here, go back to bed.”

“All right.” Heru watched as Severus opened the box and removed a mirror, then turned and left. He
sat back and closed his eyes, casting his thoughts back to the tangle of magic in Voldemort. He wasn’t sure how long he had been musing when the sound of someone moving about reached his ears, causing him to open his eyes.

“Morning, father.” Mark gave him a sleepy smile and sat down, reaching for a plate. After picking over the still warm selection he said, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just worn out.”

Mark’s answering look was slightly incredulous. “Where’s Dad?”

“He’s up talking with the headmaster, reporting about last night’s activities.”

“Why is Praecino singing?”

Heru felt a spurt of annoyance and clamped down on his reaction. “My temper is a bit uncertain at the moment, Mark. Praecino is here to help keep me calm.”

“How come—” Mark cut off as Severus walked in. “Hi, Dad!” he chirped, then asked Heru, “How come you’re in a bad mood?”

Heru’s expression twisted. Severus stepped over and grabbed his hand, hauling him to his feet. “I suggest you go back to bed. I will explain.” He placed his hands on Heru’s shoulders and turned him, then gave him a gentle push. “Praecino, go with him, please?”

Heru gave up and ducked into the bedroom, shucking off his clothes to the soothing sounds of phoenix song, and went back to sleep. He was woken by Severus some time later.

“Mark understands,” was the first thing he said, followed by, “I strongly suggest you remove that link as quickly as possible.”

“I’m sorry, Severus,” Heru said sleepily.

“Don’t be. It is beyond your control at this point, but I will not allow it to infringe upon this family any further if I can help it. Voldemort has already asked after us indirectly, so I doubt he will do so again. We already have two mirrors to watch him with and discover any plans he speaks aloud. You should no longer have any need of that connection.”

“But I almost got angry with Mark, and he was just being curious.”

“Then it is just as well I arrived when I did, though I’m certain you would have put him off as gently as possible and retreated so as not to hurt him. Do you feel well enough to begin tonight?”

“I guess so.” He chuckled slightly. “I feel worlds apart now from how I did when we first met after my return.”

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t necessarily have any more clue then than I do now, but I felt a lot more in control of things.”

“Don’t be absurd. The only difference is that you have someone you can lean on when necessary, and I am happy to be there for you. I have no doubt you would do the same for me.”

“You never seem to need that, though,” Heru pointed out quietly.
Severus snorted. “Neither do you, much. I told you, you don’t always have to be strong. I can tell, however, that you are not fully recovered. Tomorrow will be soon enough for you to begin the transfer. For now, you will have to settle for being coddled.”

Heru gave his mate a sweet smile.

“Do you want your lunch in here or on the couch?”

Heru rolled his eyes in distress. “The couch! Staying in here would be too much like being confined to the infirmary.”

Severus snorted again, this time in amusement. “Fine. I will go and get things ready.” He leaned in to plant a kiss on his mate’s lips, then rose and exited to the lounge.

When Heru did leave the bedroom, he was immediately tackled by Mark in a hug, then dragged over to the couch and pushed down and a blanket thrown over him. Heru had been expecting either to not see his son, or to see him looking rather uncertain. Whatever Severus had said must have been good if Mark was treating him in this fashion. A tray was deposited across his lap a moment later.

When he was done eating he was handed a book that held absolutely no redeeming value whatsoever and told to amuse himself by reading it. Praecino had taken up his perch in the corner again and was trilling softly, encouraging Heru to stop thinking, stop worrying, and to simply waste time in idle pursuits. He read right through until dinner, ate, then again until Severus chivvied him off to bed for the night.

Two days later the first interesting bit of news surfaced from the mirror Severus had taken to Albus. One of the escaped Death Eaters, Rookwood, was witnessed informing Voldemort that his original information on the prophecy sphere was incorrect. Avery, the originator of the erroneous report, was punished severely for his transgression, but not killed. After being crucio’d for some time he was sent off to join Peter with the dementors to rethink the consequences of his actions.

Avery was hauled away, gibbering in fear, by a cadre of dementors. A slight smirk graced Voldemort’s face as he watched, which remained when he turned his attention back to Rookwood and said, “Now that I’m done amusing myself for the moment, you will repeat what you said.”

“As you know, my lord, I worked in the Department of Mysteries. What Avery told you is monumentally incorrect. Prophecy spheres are protected by myriad enchantments, causing anyone who touches one to go mad unless they are named by it.”

“Mm. And what of those who work in that room? Surely they must be able to remove them or manipulate them.”

“To my knowledge it has never been done, my lord. I was never able to corrupt one of them in order to learn fully what their duties were.”

“You know I do not like answers of that sort.”

“Yes, my lord. My life is yours.”

Voldemort gave what appeared to be a slight sigh of disappointment. “Then it is only I who can retrieve the sphere,” he stated. Rookwood nodded sharply.

Voldemort looked thoughtful for a minute, then smiled to himself. “Well, then, I can see why that prediction said there would be nothing to bar my way toward that goal.
Obviously, as I must be the one to go, rather than a proxy. No wonder why you people kept failing me.” A short pause ensued, then Voldemort said briskly, “Very well. You may go. Send Lucius in.”

“Yes, my lord.” Rookwood bowed deeply then backed away, turning only at the last moment to slip through the door.

When Lucius arrived moments later, Voldemort greeted him with a coldly amused smile. “It seems that our friendship with Slytherin is paying off, regardless of how slippery he is. However, something that happened has me quite curious, Lucius. Did you know that Slytherin is very much aware of that house-elf’s original master?”

“My lord?”

“Now don’t be coy, Lucius. You know exactly what I refer to. I wouldn’t want to have to jog your memory—you might not like how I do it.”

“The Potter boy tricked me into freeing the elf at the end of his second year, my lord.”

“I see. So, of course, Slytherin knows quite a bit about you, I expect, which makes his games with me all that much more curious. What is it that he wants, Lucius? What will it take to sway him to my side, to stand with his family? He is not adverse to assisting me, that much is obvious. I do not think our little ploys fool him for a moment, not now. So, Lucius, why have you not found out what I need to know? Why do I even still keep you around if you cannot do such a simple thing?”

“Slytherin is a wise man to seek information from unlikely sources, my lord,” said Lucius.

“Struck by the blinding light of the obvious are we, Lucius? It is a wonder you can see straight. And what of our dear Severus? He is obviously Slytherin’s right hand man, daring to order us out in that fashion. Slytherin must be powerful indeed if Severus shows a complete lack of fear when faced with us. You already bungled the dinner—what is it that you will screw up next, hm? I am fast losing my patience, but I think, rather than simply killing you, I will give you some time to reassess your priorities. You are, after all, one of my most faithful, are you not?”

“My life is yours, my lord.”

“Listening in at the keyhole, Lucius? How utterly plebeian of you. Yes, I see I am right. You need some time to think.” Voldemort looked beyond the blond’s shoulder and nodded sharply. Several dark masses detached themselves from the enveloping shadows at the far end of the room and floated forward. “I’m sure you and Peter will get along splendidly for a few days, my good man.”

Heru had been torn between making several smaller mirrors, or making one large one. After some discussion with Severus he decided on a large one. It might come to pass that they would meet with Voldemort again in a fairly innocuous setting, such as at his house in Hogsmeade a second time, and he could always make more of the smaller variety.

He had nine days to work, nine days in which to complete the transference, nine days before the next full moon, when he would need to be on hand to contain and watch Remus as he transformed
without benefit of wolfsbane.

It was a delicate thing, transferring those last few threads of magic. Rather than a rat they had located a tortoise, setting up a home for it in one of the spare rooms at underlake. Neither Heru or Severus wanted Mark to know of it, or have a chance to become in any way attached to the creature. It was those last threads that saw Heru packed into bed again for a day, getting up only to attend the one class he had and give a written test so that his level of interaction was kept to the bare minimum.

He was ready in time, though he felt strange. Why exactly, he wasn’t sure. It was obvious to him that after repeated experiments that his power and ability remained undiminished, so that was not it. Perhaps it was simply the lifting of a burden he had held for nearly forty years. On a whim he reverted, and was astonished to see that the scar he had bore for most of his life was gone.

That afternoon he was ready. When classes ended he apparated to his home in Hogsmeade and prepared, allowing for the entry of both Remus and Sirius, who arrived after Praecino had gone to alert them, and for them to use magic. Severus remained at the castle with Mark.

Downstairs, in a corner of the basement well away from where Mark had been working on potions, Heru constructed a cage not unlike the one in which he had put Peter. Remus recognized it immediately. His wand, and Sirius’s, were placed on the desk Heru had used all those months ago to write at while watching his son.

He opened the door and ushered both men in, then closed and sealed it behind them. It was not, perhaps, a massive cage, but it was at least as big as the room Harry had first met Sirius in, if not larger. Heru moved his desk closer and pulled out a notebook and pen, then sat to wait.

The moment Remus began to transform, Sirius changed. Heru’s focus was very intent, watching the threads inside Remus come to life and glow with their own light. It did not take long, but Heru noted that those same threads stayed active even after Remus was in the form of a wolf, which suited him just fine. And, true to expectations, Remus did not attack his mate despite the loss of his sense of self. Animals were not something a werewolf cared enough about to attack; they saved their efforts for human prey.

Remus spent some time prowling the edge of the cage, snarling and snapping at Heru, so tantalizingly close and yet out of reach. That, too, was something Heru was happy enough to see, for it demonstrated within the man’s savage form the links which held him bound. Eventually, Remus felt he had made his point about the human intruder and turned instead to Sirius, sniffing and pushing his body against that of the dog’s, showing his dominance over a lesser creature.

From Heru’s viewpoint, it explained a great deal about the two of them as a couple. The hours passed by, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, with Heru taking the occasional potion and even dozing. He was awake when the time drew near for the moon to set and release Remus from its treacherous grip. As before, Heru watched with careful concentration, and when the transformation was finally complete, rose to his feet to unlock the cage and open the door. Sirius stumbled out, Remus in his arms, and looked around wearily.

Heru did not bother to voice his thoughts. He scooped up both wands from the desk and pocketed them, pointed a finger at Remus and levitated him, then turned smartly and headed upstairs. He could hear Sirius following, murmuring at his mate, all the way up to Heru’s bedroom. It took mere moments to slide Remus into the bed.

“You will stay here,” he stated, ignoring the look of tired surprise on Sirius’s face. “I have every expectation that you know how to care for him in his condition. So long as neither of you leaves the house, nothing will be able to get at you aside from the inhabitants of this residence.”
Heru crossed to the bedside table and opened the drawer, then slipped their wands from his pocket and placed them inside. Turning back to Sirius he said, “Dobby will be here for that time period, ready to help in any way. Also, I’m leaving you with a mirror tuned to myself just in case. As I have prepared one tuned to you, we will be able to communicate should the need arise. Failing that, Dobby can find me.” He would actually be using his spell, but that was beside the point.

He tapped the drawer. “Your wands and the mirror.” Heru turned and pointed at a door. “The bathroom, which also contains an extensive collection of potions for your use if necessary. You have the run of the house, though I do ask that if something is locked, respect that and leave it alone, and please return any books to where you found them. Is there anything you can think of that I’ve forgotten?”

Sirius shook his head.

“Excellent. I’ll call in Dobby on my way out and be getting back to the school, then.” Heru inclined his head briefly and headed for the door. He paused at the sound of another footstep and looked back over his shoulder.

“Can you … free him?” asked Sirius.

Heru smiled without reserve. “Yes,” he said, then continued on downstairs to call Dobby and set him up with coin for supplies.

Heru was relaxing with a book, leaning against the arm of the couch with his legs curled up beside him. Severus and Mark played each other at chess, though it was clear that Mark had not yet progressed to his dad’s level of expertise. Heru smiled and went back to his own pursuit; truth be told, he was more of an Exploding Snap person.

Classes were over, as was dinner, and Heru had all weekend to waste time if he wanted. A knock at the door brought him out of his bookish focus, so he marked his place and rose, seeing as he walked toward the door an image of Draco Malfoy. Heru sighed, but opened the door and gestured the young man in.

He followed Draco into the lounge; neither Severus or Mark had looked up, so Heru cleared his throat. Two sets of eyes, black and dark green, snapped in their direction, then widened. Heru resumed his seat without a word. Draco was still quite subdued, and very anxious.

“Draco,” said Severus.

“Sir,” Draco began quietly. Heru was marginally surprised himself; he would have expected the boy to be more familiar given where he stood. “I wanted to talk to you and … Professor Slytherin.”

Severus flicked his gaze over to their son. “I think I should find something interesting to do in my room,” hissed Mark, rising to his feet. Heru nodded, so Mark slipped off down the hallway and through the door to his bedroom.

“Have a seat, Draco,” Severus said, tilting his head at the place Mark had vacated. Draco sat, folding his hands carefully in his lap. “What is it, then?”

“Sir, I—” Draco darted a look at Heru. “I’m scared.” Severus arched a brow and sat back, placing his arms on those of his chair. “I—over the holiday, sir, my father—he—” Draco dropped his gaze and took a breath. “And then, he came.”
“Voldemort?” said Severus.

“Yes, sir. He was very angry with me, with Father. He—”

“Tortured you,” said Heru evenly. Draco nodded without looking up. “As expected. Why is this of concern to us?”

Draco lifted his head part way. “I was only trying to do what Father asked. He never explained anything, just expected results.”

“So far as anyone knows, Draco, your life’s ambition is to join Voldemort. I should think you would have expected such treatment at his hands for failure. So I’ll repeat: Why is this of concern to us?”

Draco raised his eyes to meet Heru’s. “I try so hard to do what Father asks. I always get it wrong. I don’t understand, I really don’t. The Dark Lord was furious—I think he must be mad. I can’t—I don’t want to follow him.”

“Then don’t,” Severus said somewhat coldly. “You have a brain, a spine, use them.”

Draco’s incredulous gaze fell on Severus. “But, sir—”

“Are you saying you do not? You would sit there and tell me with a straight face that you could not resist Voldemort’s call?”

“Sir, you went to him,” said Draco, then flinched at the freezing coldness which suffused Severus’s face at his words.

“Am I supposed to take that to mean you believe I am strong? Stronger than you, and by extension, that if I did not resist, you could not hope to? Is that it?”

“Sir, please—”

Severus affected surprise. “Did I hear you aright? Draco Malfoy saying please? I am sure I must be dreaming, for that boy doesn’t know the meaning of the word courtesy, or discretion,” he said snidely.

“You can protect me!” Draco blurted, then dropped his gaze.

“Protect you? Why on earth would I want to do that beyond what I already have? It is far more likely this is some kind of ill-conceived ploy. In fact—”

Heru cleared his throat. “Severus, veritaserum,” he murmured.

His mate rose and stalked off gracefully, returning a minute later with a vial of clear liquid. Standing in front of Draco he said, “Wand.” After he had that, he administered the potion, then resumed his seat.

Heru waited until the potion had taken effect, then said, “State your full name.”

“Draco Lucius Pavonis Malfoy.”

Heru looked over at Severus and said, “Pavonis, huh? How appropriate.” To Draco he said, “Why did you come here?”

“To seek your protection, yours and Uncle Sev’s.”
That was interesting; Draco really did think of Severus as an uncle. “Who sent you here?”

“I came of my own accord.”

“Did you tell anyone, living, dead, or portrait of your intention to come here for the purpose of asking for protection?”

“No.”

“Have you spoken of it or written of it at any time?”

“No.”

“Why do you think we can protect you?”

“Father is scared of you.”

Heru chuckled; sound enough reasoning, he supposed. “Dumbledore would have been happy to protect you—why didn’t you go to him?”

“I don’t trust him.”

“And you trust us?”

“I trust Uncle Sev. Uncle Sev seems to trust you.”

“How exactly do you think we can protect you?”

“You can prevent the Dark Lord from taking me as one of his followers.”

Heru rolled his eyes in frustration. “We have no legal right to keep you from your parents, Draco. Why do you not want to follow Voldemort?”

“I don’t think I’d live. I can’t even do what Father wants correctly. The Dark Lord would surely kill me.”

“Do you agree with Voldemort’s beliefs and aims?”

“I don’t know.”

Heru stifled a sigh and looked at Severus, who said, “Voldemort does not usually take followers as young as you, Draco. So why now? Why do you seek our protection at this time?”

“Father has passed on new instructions. I know I’ll fail, which means I’ll be tortured again, possibly killed.”

“What instructions?”

“I’m supposed to secrete a listening device in your quarters. Failing that, I’m supposed to find a way to befriend your son. Preferably both.”

“Do you know why?”

“The Dark Lord thinks you know more than you let on. There is something he wishes to know that he has been unable to obtain from you directly.”

Heru waved his hand and Draco went curiously blank, more so than could be accounted for by the
potion. “What do you think?”

“I think his first real encounter with Voldemort scared him nearly to death, and certainly into some semblance of reality. He’s obviously been thinking about this for some time, but has told no one of his deliberations. He may yet be redeemable.”

“We cannot afford to let him plant the device here, Severus.”

“I realize that. And if he fails in both of those two goals, I would not doubt he’d be called home over the Easter hols.”

“You don’t honestly think Voldemort would kill him, do you?”

“Do you want to gamble with his life?”

“They’d have to be idiots to believe the child could plant something in here,” Heru said heatedly.

“I agree, which means the real goal is to subvert Mark. Of course, considering his last encounter, that goal, too, is somewhat unlikely. Is he under the imperius curse?”

Heru shook his head.

“A trap?” Severus shifted in his seat, angling his body so he could prop his head against one hand.

“What do you mean?”

“If we assist Draco in any obvious way…”

“All right. But that means we need to play along to some extent, and that means Mark gets dragged into this.”

“I understand. Yet, you have at least twice now asked Mark for his own thoughts on matters. All he would need do is appear friendly outside these walls. If Draco needed anything to pass on, one of us could tell him.”

“That’s like turning a fifteen year old boy into a spy, Severus.”

“And he wasn’t already? Heru, you cannot change what has already happened. If you are considering, even for the tiniest of moments, helping Draco, then you need to remain realistic. If he makes it past the Easter hols, chances are that this will not come up again until school lets out. And by then, Draco can simply disappear for a time.”

“And if that happens, Lucius will storm the castle demanding to know what’s happened to his child.”

“Then we either lie, or use him to our own advantage. For now, I suggest you release the boy so I can administer the antidote. Draco can return in a week, after we have been able to discuss this in far more detail.”

Heru gestured.
Heru slumped into a chair the moment Draco was out the door. “I don’t need this, you know.” Severus gave him a patient look. “Well, I don’t. Stupid complications.”

“Complications which may be to our benefit.”

“Well I’m glad you can see something positive in this, because I sure as hell don’t.”

“I suggest we talk to Mark first.”

“Fine.” Heru summoned their son, and Mark arrived several moments later.

Once he had sat down, Severus spoke. “We have a situation which may involve you.” He summarized what had happened during Draco’s visit, then said, “So, it is your decision whether or not you would prefer to stay out of this entirely.”

Mark looked at his father. Heru spread his hands and shrugged slightly. There was a long pause, several minutes worth, before Mark responded. “I don’t have any friends in Slytherin house. Not one. Wouldn’t it be a bit odd if suddenly Draco and I are being nice to each other?”

Heru smiled slightly. If nothing else was clear, it was evident that his son had a good head on his shoulders.

“And, I expect if I did anything obvious, certain friends I do have would react quite badly.”

“Mr Weasley?” Heru asked softly.

Mark nodded. “I guess I could… Well, maybe not.”

“What?”

Mark wrinkled his nose. “It doesn’t matter, because it’s too obvious. The only people I could reasonably approach are first years.”

“Then perhaps it is not so unfortunate that you have been having trouble with your potions,” said Severus smoothly. Mark opened his mouth to speak, then shut it and waited. “I have been meaning to suggest you join the revision group for first year Slytherins, but feared that you would find the idea insulting.”

Mark tilted his head to the side as Heru said blandly, “It’s up to you, of course, but if you’re having difficulties, or simply want more practice time…”

“Well…” Mark dipped his head briefly, as though in shame. “I didn’t want you to be disappointed in me. But if you think it’s a good idea…” He glanced up at them from beneath his lashes.

“Mm. Wednesday evenings, Mark. Directly after dinner. Potions classroom.”

“Yes, Dad.”

Draco did not return a week later; he did not need to. When Wednesday evening rolled around, things became a bit more clear. Severus reported to Heru afterward that the boy had caught on quite
quickly. As one of the best Potions students in Slytherin, he was one of those who spent time helping during those sessions for house points. That he had been assigned to watch over Mark was hardly a coincidence.

Mark had managed in one evening to charm several of the first years and had been invited to visit the next evening. He did not, however, sit at the Slytherin table the morning following his first trip into the Slytherin common room. Heru assumed that Draco had enough sense to write his father and tell him that he had begun to establish some kind of relations with Mark.

That weekend Heru freed Remus from his curse. With the influence of the moon at its weakest, he figured it was the safest time to take care of the issue. Naturally, as had happened when he had removed Severus’s Dark Mark, Heru vaguely resembled a limp dishrag when he was done.

By the time the next full moon rolled around, they were ready. Heru had kept the cage in his basement out of necessity. It was less of a waste of magical energy to simply leave it in place than to remove it and conjure it back into place. Remus and Sirius entered it a second time, wide-eyed looks of hope on their faces as Heru closed the door and locked it.

As he had fully expected, there was no sign of the moon’s influence on Remus and he did not transform. Heru did not, however, release the two men until the moon had set, just in case, and they remained in Heru’s home for the next two days. As the Easter holiday began the next day, there was no need for subterfuge on Heru’s part, for there were no classes he needed to cover.

Two days later, however, on Easter itself, Voldemort moved, well before the end of the six month time limit Heru had given him. The Order member on duty that night was duly warned and managed to stay out of the way, not to mention get out with his life. A number of people were watching as Voldemort slipped into the Ministry and down to the Department of Mysteries.

Those same people were watching as he retrieved the prophecy sphere, and subsequently returned to his hideout, then triggered the contents. In point of fact, Voldemort heard no more than his spy had all those years ago, because at that point Albus cut in with a message of his own.

“Hello, Tom. I don’t think you need to hear any more of the prophecy. Harry Potter may have found death while in your tender care, but I am not such a fool as to leave this particular aspect of things unprotected once I realized your intent. Terribly sorry, dear boy, but that’s how things are. You’ll just have to accept that I anticipated you this time, and won this round. Consider it a return gift, humble though it may be.”

To say that Voldemort’s reaction was poor would be to understate the case. Peter, unfortunate soul, happened by within minutes of the incident and was promptly flung head first into a wall. The quite audible snap of his neck made Voldemort pause long enough to flash a strange smile before he continued in his attempts to destroy anything left standing, and several people who made the same mistake as Peter.

On the day that the students who had left for Easter were to return, a letter arrived at breakfast for Heru.

Mr Slytherin,

I trust this finds you and your son in good health. Having little time at the moment, I must press on directly to the point and hope that you can forgive the necessity.
My associate would like to meet with you again. The twentieth is the first open date he has. If you are willing, please let me know.

Cordially,
Lucius Malfoy

After showing the letter to Severus, Heru dashed off a quick reply that specified his Hogsmeade home on the evening of the twentieth. The moment that was out of the way, Severus proceeded to drag every last detail and nuance out of Heru regarding each encounter Harry had had with Voldemort.

Several days later Severus began to outline a plan to his mate, one that had Heru display the beginnings of a smile, one which broadened fractionally with every detail Severus added.

As before, they arrived at the Hogsmeade home early so that Heru could manipulate the wards to allow for the entrance of Lucius and Voldemort. This time, however, they arrived early enough that Heru could take a decent nap before their guests appeared. They were ushered into the lounge and Dobby provided refreshments, then Heru got down to business.

“What can I do for you this evening?”

“I had a number of other names I wanted to check,” replied Xavier.

Heru nodded and fetched his scales, spending a short time adjusting them for the type of query, then handed them over. It was reflex for Heru to attempt to reach out across his link, which of course did not work as it was no longer there. His reaction manifested as, not a sheepish smile, but a gentle upturning at the corners of his mouth.

They went through ten names before Heru called for a stop on the same grounds as the previous session. But he didn’t exactly stop, not really.

“You know,” Heru said, eyeing Xavier curiously, “I must wonder about something.” The scales were being jiggled in his hand like some aid to memory or deduction.

“Which is?”

“I wonder why you persist in that ridiculous disguise,” Heru said calmly. “I know who you are. Severus knows who you are. I’m quite sure Lucius knows who you are.”

Xavier arched one of his brows, then flashed a faint smile. “You do not approve?”

Heru shrugged. “I’m sure it’s fine for wandering around incognito, but I would have thought you’d realize I am hardly fooled by it. I cannot decide if you think I am stupid, or abysmally unobservant.”

Xavier tilted his head slightly. “You present varying stances to varying people. You are indeed cunning, especially as you have managed to stay balanced on a very fine line. Even to me you present a picture that undulates back and forth like a snake from light to dark and back again.”

“Fair enough.”

“Since we’re being so open and honest here, let me ask you a question or two.”

“I’ll answer what I can,” said Heru.
After arching his brow again Xavier said, “You removed Severus’s Dark Mark.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I felt like it.” At the look on Xavier’s face, Heru continued, “It presented a challenge.”

“Why,” Xavier said, gesturing around him, “do you live so simply?”

Heru chuckled. “I find it far more advantageous to do so. Were anyone to see my home, they would assume certain things, would they not? As I was far from ready to decide which side of things I wished to stand on, it made sense to be disarming.” Heru wasn’t bothering to watch Lucius’s reactions; Severus would be able to tell him later on.

“I see.” Xavier remained silent for a minute, then said, “And have you come to a decision? Will you stand with your family?”

“I have not. And, I have always stood with my family, though not necessarily in the sense that you mean.”

“Then I shall be blunt. What will it take? Why do you hold back from standing up for the beliefs of our dear Salazar?”

Heru smiled and shook his head gently. “My dear Voldemort, I have yet to see what kind of a leader you truly are, and if you are what I would willingly ally myself with. It may be that I would prefer to further my own view on things independently.”

Xavier’s face took on a faintly calculating aspect. “And Albus Dumbledore?”

“What of him?” Heru spread his hands, careful to keep the scales safely held. “I have performed several small services for him as well, and find it amusing that the majority of his people continue to distrust and malign me. However, they know full well I am not to be trifled with. I am, on the other hand, sickened by the fact that those people go through Albus in order to get at me. They have neither the courage nor cunning to come at me personally or indirectly. I can only assume that Albus has them firmly under his thumb.”

Heru aimed a conspiratorial look at Xavier, then allowed his face to clear to blankness. “But you, my dear Voldemort… I mean no offense, but your manipulations have not assisted me. I have had to fight a great deal of ingrained distrust to get where I am now, comfortably sitting in the camp of the Light.” He could almost feel the amusement radiating off his mate at his use of truth.

“My lord,” Severus interjected quietly, as though hoping for leave to speak further.

Both Heru and Xavier gazed at him, but it was at Heru that Severus was looking, and Heru who spoke. “Yes, Severus?”

“Might I suggest that you sit in on one of the Dark Lord’s assemblies? Perhaps that would further your … analysis.”

“What a lovely idea, Severus. Remind me to reward you later.” Heru turned back to Xavier and quirked a brow up.

The skin around Xavier’s eyes was tensed. “So you admit that you have stolen Severus from me,” he hissed.
“As I said, it presented a unique challenge to remove the Dark Mark. Of course I kept him when I was done. If I had let you come into direct contact with him after that point, you’d have killed him for his betrayal, and I felt no particular desire to discard him given his qualities. So, if you wish to use that exact term, then yes, I stole him,” Heru hissed back, smiling sweetly. “And, dear cousin, he was fair game at the time, as you were not around to object.”

“Qualities?” hissed Xavier.

“Surely even you know them. He is loyal, blindingly intelligent, and trustworthy, not to mention a Master of Potions. Like any from Slytherin house, he naturally gravitates to the service of one who can protect him, guide him, and make use of his talents in an appropriate manner.”

Xavier frowned and narrowed his eyes. “Why him?” he hissed.

“Is that not plainly evident? He held a position at Hogwarts and the headmaster foolishly believes that Severus is actually allied with him. He also trusts in Severus’s ability at judging the character of others, and naturally Severus sees me as someone to recommend. With Severus at my side, I could be reasonably assured that I, too, could gain entrance and take the opportunity to do a bit of reconnoitering.”

“The two of us together could do great things,” hissed Xavier.

“That remains to be seen. As to Severus’s suggestion, what say you?”

“I will allow it.”

“Splendid, dear fellow. We’re getting along famously already! I would love the opportunity to find a dark shadow to lurk in while you speak with your people. That way I can watch and not make them feel uncomfortable, and still get a sense of how things are. However, I do believe it should wait until after the term has ended. Things are beginning to become rather hectic in my current role. I would not like to overlook any details which may cause the headmaster to become suspicious, and potentially sunder my advantageous positioning.”

“Then I will have Lucius provide you with the date, time, and location when the term is over.”

Heru stood and smiled. “Very good,” he said, then held out his right hand. Xavier stood and reached out to firmly shake his, then glanced at Lucius, who rose immediately. “Do let me show you the way out,” Heru said, then at the door, “I look forward to hearing from you, my dear man.”

Moments later he was back in the lounge, slumped in a chair. Severus took the scales from his hand and tucked them away in their bag, remaining at Heru’s side in a kneeling position. “Do you want replenishers before you begin the ward manipulation?”

“Please.” He quickly downed the vials Severus handed to him, dropping the empties untidily on the floor, then began shifting the wards.

Severus snorted and vanished the vials, then said, “I think that went well. Very well, in fact.”

“What of Lucius?”

“He is conflicted. It is just as well that Voldemort did not see his face during the discussion, else he would have tried to chastise him. I believe he sees you as being the equal of Voldemort, or more so.”

“Then we should be able to use him if the right circumstances present themselves.”
“I believe so.”

“Go ahead and let Dobby know he can leave. I’ll be done shortly.”

When Severus returned Heru was nearly asleep, but opened his eyes at the sound of footfalls. “I think we should go as quickly as possible, before I am unable. Underlake.” Severus nodded, but waited for Heru to apparate out first.

“I don’t feel so good,” Heru said from his position on the bed. When Severus gave him a curious look he continued, “I’m starting to recognize this reaction. I’m going to be a bastard again tomorrow.”

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Severus snarled, then looked at his mate appraisingly. “Or does it?” At Heru’s expression Severus shook his head and said, “Never mind.” A moment later Heru was gathered up in his arms as he braced himself against the headboard. “Nothing to worry about, my dear Heru. Once you’re feeling better, we’ll talk about it. Until then, I shall ponder the matter.”

“S—all right, Severus.” His mate held him, carding his long fingers through Heru’s hair in measured movements, until he fell asleep. He saw no one the next day aside from Severus and Praecino, who once again stuck close by to soothe him with music as he read or idly watched the water above him.

He felt right as rain by Monday morning and was able to take his meals publicly. That evening, Severus expanded on his original ideas, and once again Heru’s smile widened as he heard what his mate had to say. It all made perfect sense when someone took the time to analyze the facts and explain.

The remainder of the term went by smoothly and swiftly for Heru. A number of his students in his OWL and NEWT level classes were happy to tell him that they felt very confident about how they had done, which pleased Heru to no end. Mark had continued to attend the revision sessions for the Slytherin first years and have Draco as his nominal mentor during them, and Draco had had no more problems with his father requesting anything of him.

It seemed to Heru that once he had made his request to attend a Death Eater meeting that all Draco’s problems had ceased, probably in the expectation that such measures were no longer necessary. A foolish thing to do, perhaps, but one that suited him and Severus nicely.

The students in the remaining years received their yearly exam results on the nineteenth of June, and two days later, all of them were packed and ready to go home with the sole exception of Draco. He came to their quarters early that morning, even before breakfast.

Heru gave him a once-over and said, “Right, then. You still wish to go through with this?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Fine.” Heru crossed to the fireplace and called the kitchens, requesting Dobby. When the house-elf appeared he said, “Dobby, I’d like to ask you for a favor.” He ignored the wide eyes of the teenager.

“Dobby is being happy to listen.”

“We’re going to hide Draco here away for a while, Dobby, so I would like you to provide him with meals and such for as long as necessary. Will you come with us, please, so I can show you where he’ll be staying?”

“Of course, sir.”
“Very good. This way, then,” he said as he headed for the exit. He strode briskly down the serpentine corridors until he reached the inlay, then hissed a request for it to open, which it did. A wave of his hand had his two charges enter, and he followed behind and closed the door.

“All right. As you can see the door only accepts Parseltongue, so I have no doubts as to your safety here, Draco. Nor do I need to worry about you wandering off and getting into trouble.” Heru turned to the elf and asked, “Will you have any problems getting in and out of here, Dobby?”

“No, sir.”

“Then I would like you to listen for Draco’s call and see what he needs. I know you will not help him to leave. If you have any doubts as to what he requests, come see me before you do anything else, all right?” Dobby nodded so Heru continued with, “I would like you to fetch his belongings and bring them here, then provide breakfast for him, please.”

“That is being no problem, sir. Dobby will go right away,” Dobby said, then bowed slightly and popped away.

Heru turned back to the boy, noticing and continuing to ignore the astonished look, and said, “This isn’t much of a room at the moment, but I’ll fix that. What’s here can stay, but obviously you’ll need a bed at the very least.” Heru looked around for a moment, then slipped his wand out from behind his ear and gestured with it. A small bed appeared, hardly a patch on what a student would normally find in the dorms, but given the close confines of the room, it would have to do.

Several more gestures cleaned the room, added linens, and even produced a small dresser. He left the option of unpacking to Draco after Dobby popped in long enough to drop off the boy’s trunk. As an afterthought, he created a small nook in one corner with a self-cleaning toilet. He tucked his wand away as breakfast appeared on the desk and took a seat on the bed.

Fixing an intense gaze on Draco, who had seated himself at the desk, Heru said, “I expect no complaints out of you. You will not ask Dobby to deliver any letters or to pass on any messages unless it is to me or Severus. You will not attempt to exact any kind of misguided revenge on Dobby, either. He can and will show you exactly what a free house-elf is capable of. However, he is at least familiar to you, which is why I chose him to watch over you for the time being. You will treat him with respect. If Dobby comes to me with any outrageous requests from your lips or tales of bad behavior, you can be sure you will feel my displeasure.”

Draco shrank back slightly, but nodded.

“If you need books you do not already own, tell Dobby, and he will inform me. In the meantime, you can begin work on your holiday assignments. As soon as it is safe to do so, I will release you. Do you have any questions?”

“Are you going to hurt my father, sir?”

Heru blinked slowly. “I don’t plan to, no. I expect I may have to threaten him, though. Why do you care?”

“He’s my father, sir,” Draco said.

Heru felt his jaw clench and made a conscious effort to relax it. “I will leave you to your breakfast, then.” He rose silently and stopped in front of the door long enough to hiss it open, then left. Back in his quarters he called Dobby to him again, this time not bothering with the fireplace.

“Dobby, I’ve just left Draco. There are a couple of things I wanted to clarify with you. The only
people Draco should be sending messages to are myself and Severus, all right? If he tries to get out of hand, stun him or whatever it is you do, but don’t hurt him. If he asks for anything aside from food, come to me or Severus first so we can approve it. I don’t really expect him to be in there all that long, but it never hurts to be prepared. Obviously, you need to keep quiet about where Draco went if anyone should ask you.”

Dobby nodded his head and gave Heru a toothy smile.

“Thank you, Dobby. I appreciate your help.”

The students ate their breakfasts in due time, then left the Great Hall to take care of any last minute details before piling out through the massive main doors and into the waiting carriages. Very few people seemed to have noticed that Draco was even missing, something that caused more than a few faint smirks to erupt on Heru’s and Severus’s faces.

Later in the day, that afternoon, Lucius Malfoy stormed up to the castle and demanded to see the headmaster. Naturally, Heru and Severus were watching via mirror, and naturally, Albus denied any knowledge of the boy’s whereabouts. In fact, he put on a lovely show of genial cluelessness, one that caused Lucius’s face to tighten in unspoken anger. When Lucius said a curt good-bye and made to leave the office, Severus slipped out of their quarters and arranged to be walking through the entrance hall as Lucius stalked down the staircase. As expected, Severus was hailed almost as soon as Lucius noticed him.

“Yes, Lucius?” Severus inquired smoothly.

“Have you seen Draco? He did not return on the train.”

Severus half turned, cast a sidelong glance at Lucius, and murmured, “I do not believe this is the proper place to discuss that.” Then he completed his turn and strode toward the stairs leading into the dungeons. Nothing more was said as they walked to their destination. As soon as they approached the door, Heru banished the mirror to underlake and picked up a copy of The Daily Prophet to read.

In less than a minute Severus was seated in his usual chair and Lucius was on the couch, a touch of frustration tingeing his normally cool expression.

“What did you mean?”

Heru folded his paper and placed it on the side table as Severus said, “I know exactly where Draco is.”

“Well?” Lucius demanded, then paled when Heru arched a brow.

“Well what?” asked Severus.

“I would like to know where my son is.”

“That doesn’t concern you any longer,” said Heru calmly. “But I will say that he’s perfectly safe. From, I might add, your anger, and that of Voldemort.”

“What!? Why? How dare you keep my son from me?”

“He asked for it,” Heru said, still perfectly calm. “And, I have the power to assure that I could hide him under your very nose and you would never realize he was there.”
Lucius made a visible effort to regain control, then said, “May I understand this more in detail?”

“Certainly. Your son is very confused and frightened. He came to us asking for protection. Naturally, he had enough sense to avoid Dumbledore. Given that he fears for his life, we agreed to squirrel him away.”

“Fears for his life?” Lucius repeated.

Heru tilted his head and gave Lucius an amused look. “Well, my dear man, wouldn’t you when your father insisted on giving you vague orders and instructions, and you kept fucking them up? Wouldn’t you when Voldemort himself saw fit to administer punishment for your failures? Wouldn’t you be worried about further torture or even death when you continued to fail? Quite frankly, Lucius, either you are extraordinarily bad at explaining things to the boy, or he has none of the qualities which would mark him as a fit servant of Voldemort.”

“He is my heir,” hissed Lucius.

“So? Why should that matter to me?”

“You don’t understand. Narcissa cannot have another child. I must have that boy.”

“What a pretty picture of paternal love you present, Lucius,” Heru said sarcastically. “Given that I have grown passing fond of the child, I agreed to help him. Until I am sure that he will remain safe and whole, I will not release him back to you, simple as that. I really don’t give a damn what you think, either. No one should be forced into service and I get the distinct impression that if the boy should live so long, that’s exactly what would happen. Sometimes I think you have no subtlety, Lucius. Sometimes I despair of you even being a proper Slytherin.”

“Draco is my heir!” Lucius repeated.

“You really don’t want to anger me,” Heru said and smirked as Lucius paled. “I also imagine that you do not want Voldemort to find out about this. Heaven only knows what would happen to you then, though I think I have a very good idea. You, my dear Lucius, are going to accept that your son is out of your reach for an indefinite period of time.”

Lucius drew back slightly, then said, “And what makes you think that my master would not back me up if I were to tell him?”

Heru laughed merrily as Severus snorted in amusement. “Surely you aren’t that stupid, Lucius. Voldemort will punish you for losing control of your son like this. He may even kill you. I very much doubt he would squander the chance to sway me to his side over such a little thing. We have a far better chance of seducing the boy into service, after all. You see, he trusts me and Severus. He doesn’t trust you, or Voldemort. If, in the end, I decide against allying myself with your master, the child will remain with us, and I will hide him from your sight. You would have to wait until he was old enough to make the decision for himself as to whether he wanted to return to be a part of your life, and if he did not, you’d have to find a way to dispose of the lovely Narcissa and find a new wife to breed an heir upon. Either way, I expect your master will be most angry with you.”

Seeing that Lucius was at a bit of a loss, Heru said, “You might be interested to know that your son asked me if I would hurt you.” Malfoy’s eyes came into sharp focus. “When I asked why he cared, he said that you were his father.”

Lucius dropped his gaze, retreating into silence for some time. Heru and Severus waited patiently for him to speak again. “It seems I have no choice.”
“No, you don’t. However, just so that we’re all clear on the matter, why don’t you be a good man and tell me what you’re thinking. Or, would you prefer I force it out of you?”

Lucius paled again, and Heru found that to be an interesting reaction indeed. “You are more powerful than my master.”

“Perhaps. Certainly his equal. So what?”

“I cannot lose my son. Will you allow me to see him from time to time?”

“Whatever for? I thought I made it quite plain already that he is not yours at the moment. I don’t care that he’s your sole heir, Lucius. That isn’t reason enough for me to give you any concessions. If I treated my son as you treat yours, I have no doubt he would have sought an escape even as Draco has.”

“He’s my son,” Lucius said softly.

Heru stifled the urge to roll his eyes and instead pinned the blond with a cold stare. “I grow tired of your evasions, Lucius. I will presently become vexed.”

“I love him.”
Heru raised his brows in gentle astonishment. Turning to Severus he said, “Veritaserum.” Several minutes later, Lucius was ready to be questioned, having put up little resistance once Heru intimidated him thoroughly. “Is it true that you love your son, Lucius?”

“Yes.”

“Why have you been so ineffective in communicating your instructions to your son?”

“I hoped if he continued to fail that my master would not insist on taking him into his service.”

“Is that because you wanted Draco to decide for himself?”

“Yes.”

“How did you feel when Voldemort tortured your son?”

“Desperate.”

“Have you ever personally harmed your son?”

“No.”

“Has Narcissa?”

“Not that I am aware of.”

“Does Draco have any idea of how you feel about him?”

“I don’t know.”

Heru repressed the urge to roll his eyes. “Why did you join Voldemort?”

“I believed in him.”

“How do you currently feel about being his servant?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Do you wish to leave his service?”

“I don’t know.”

“How does Narcissa feel about Voldemort?”

“She does not like him, but bows to necessity.”

“Does it bother you that she does not like Voldemort?”

“So long as she does not seek to interfere, I do not care.”

“Do you love your wife?”

“Yes.”
“Out of curiosity, Lucius, which is preferable—death or Azkaban?”

“Azkaban.”

“Would you betray Voldemort?”

“I’m not sure.”

Then, in a moment of unalloyed wickedness, Heru slyly asked, “Are there only pure-bloods in your line?”

“No.”

Heru smirked, gestured, then looked at Severus. “I suppose we should let him see Draco. Briefly, at least.”

“It is up to you.”

Heru nodded and gestured again. Severus rose and administered the antidote, then resumed his seat. As soon as Lucius recovered he blanched, which, given his already fair skin tone, was rather a difficult thing to accomplish.

Heru slipped back into his role, smirking nastily. “I do so love having people at a disadvantage, Lucius. You might want to remember all that you’ve revealed if the idea of crossing me ever occurs to you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I am not without pity, though. So, after you hand over your wand to Severus, I will bring your son in here for a short time.”

Lucius nodded slowly and handed Severus his wand after dropping it out of his sleeve. After a close look Heru could see no others on him, or suspicious items. “Very well. You will keep an eye on him, Severus, until I return. Feel free to get creative if does anything foolish.”

He left and fetched Draco from his hiding place and guided him back to their quarters, then pushed him down onto the couch before taking his seat. “If you have anything in particular to say to your son, Lucius, I suggest you do so now. You may not have another chance.”

Lucius turned to Draco and attempted a small smile. “I cannot be angry with you for what you have done. I have always striven to protect you from my master in my own way so that you might decide on your own if you wished to enter his service. If anyone should ask after you I will tell them that you have stayed with Mr Slytherin to further your education. The conclusions they would no doubt come to should be enough to dispel any suspicions. I will tell your mother that you are quite safe.”

He looked away for a moment, then said, “You should know that you have always fulfilled my expectations of you, even though to you it has seemed as though you’ve failed. I know you may not understand just yet, but I think that Mr Slytherin or Severus would be willing to explain that to you later on if you ask. You’re my only son, and my heir. I understand that it may be hard for you to believe, but I do care about you, Draco.”

Heru cleared his throat, causing Lucius to startle, then place his hands on Draco’s shoulders and grip them gently. “What I’m trying to say is that I do love you, my son, as does your mother. Do not forget that.” When Draco opened his mouth to speak, Lucius moved a hand to cover it. “Just think on it. Talk to the professors later. That is all I can ask of you.” With seeming reluctance, Lucius
released his son and nodded at Heru.

Heru rose and said, “Draco, follow me.” After he had delivered the boy back to his temporary room, he returned to finish things with Lucius. “I’ll give you one last warning, Lucius. I lied about how many vials of blood it takes to make a tapestry.”

Lucius blanched again. Heru smiled and said, “Voldemort is one thing—I used those extras to make a second tapestry to satisfy my own curiosity—but you, my dear man, are a different matter entirely. So you should know that I have seven vials of your blood just waiting for me to find an excuse to use them against you. I strongly recommend that you behave yourself.”

Heru gestured and approached Lucius, kneeling next to him on the floor. He pushed back the layers of fabric covering the man’s arm and touched his fingers to the Dark Mark, closing his eyes to focus better. Having already spent so much time with Severus’s—though it had been some time ago—Heru was able to refresh his memory on its structure easily. Several minutes later he opened his eyes, fixed Lucius’s clothing, then returned to where he had been previously and gestured.

Heru turned to Severus and nodded. As the blond’s wand was being returned he said, “Dare I hope that you already have the information I need about the next meeting?”

“Yes, sir. The twenty-third at seven in the evening. As you are to attend, it will take place at Malfoy Manor.”

“Splendid. You run along now and expect to see me then.”

“Yes, sir.” Lucius rose to his feet and began to step away.

Heru stopped him with, “Oh, one more thing, Lucius. You will remember to call me Heru at that time, of course. I don’t think you’d want to explain to Voldemort why you’re suddenly calling me sir.”

Lucius bowed slightly, then backed away, turning only when he reached the door and could leave.

Heru waited a minute, the corner of his mouth twitching suspiciously, then burst out laughing. A glance at Severus showed that he was also highly amused. A moment later Fawkes flashed into the room and dropped a rolled piece of parchment on Heru’s lap, trilled, and flashed out.

Heru,

You’ve uncovered some very interesting information, not that I noticed the illegal use of veritaserum, of course. The mirror has already been removed from headquarters on my order. The watch on Lucius and Voldemort will continue unabated, but from here only instead.

Because of the prevailing attitude displayed by Alastor, he has been released from that particular duty. While I have no doubts as to your loyalty, I do believe it is best to avoid the confrontation that Alastor would surely begin over what is to come.

I would like to know if you plan to take Severus with you or if he shall remain at Hogwarts to guard your son. And, by the way, let me extend my congratulations to you and Severus on your bonding. In deference to your privacy, I have not mentioned my discovery to anyone.

Albus
Heru clutched at his hair with one hand and muttered, “Damn the man. He just had to go and spoil my fun.” He handed the note to Severus and edged away, managing to place the couch between them before his mate finished reading.

Severus pinned him with a cold look and said, “That map?”

“I assume so. And I’m going to assume he means bonding in the modern sense.”

“So help me, Heru, if he twinkles at me I shall hex him.”

“Now, Severus, I don’t think that would be a good idea. And, since I think we should probably go talk to Albus about Lucius, maybe I should just have you hand over your wand now and save us all a lot of grief?”

Severus scowled and shook his head. “No. First we speak to Draco. Then we can go talk to that meddling old coot.”

Heru folded his arms across his chest and stared. “All right. But if you lose your temper with Albus badly enough to start hissing in Parseltongue, you’re going to pay dearly for making me obliviate the man.”

Severus arched a brow and smirked. “Shall we, then?”

Draco appeared to be both happy and nervous on seeing them stalk into his little room. Heru and Severus sat down on the bed as though they had rehearsed synchronous movement and fixed steady gazes on him.

“We would like to know what your reaction is to having seen your father,” Severus said.

“Is he going to die, sir?” sighed Draco.

“That depends,” Heru replied. “How would you feel if he did?”

“I don’t want him to. He’s my father.”

Heru tilted his head. “Your father has participated in a great deal of evil, Draco. You may even make the decision some day to join him in it. By wizarding law, your father’s life is forfeit.”

“I don’t care, sir.”

“All right. How about Azkaban, then?”

“The dementors are gone. He would be alive.”

“And very likely imprisoned for the rest of his natural life.”

Draco shook his head. “Whose side are you on, anyway?”

“I think we’ve established what we needed to know for the moment,” Heru said, preparing to rise.

“Wait. Please?”

“What is it?” Severus asked.

“Father said you could explain.”
“Lucius already explained part of it, but I shall elaborate,” Severus said. “He purposely left you at loose ends when giving you instructions, knowing that without proper training and details you would not be able to accomplish those goals. In his eyes, your failures would translate into enough time for you to decide for yourself which path you wished to take. He willingly took your punishments in order to shield you from his master.”

“Oh,” Draco said quietly, not quite looking at either of them.

“Then we shall leave you to your thoughts, or your work, whichever you prefer.”

Heru and Severus rose and left to go see Albus.

Albus was twinkling, but not at full force. Heru thought that was a good thing, certainly, and hoped that the headmaster had enough sense to leave well enough alone. He did not fancy the idea of having to restrain his mate.

“I assume you wish to talk about Lucius?” Albus asked.

“Yes. We have just come up from talking to Draco,” Severus said. “The boy does not want his father to die. Are you going to object if he ends up in Azkaban?”

Albus shook his head. “He is already halfway to the point of betraying Voldemort, not that I am saying he will, and not that I am saying that such an action at this late date would necessarily save him from facing the consequences of his actions.”

“Fine. Because I will tell you now that the majority of the Death Eaters are going to die when their master does,” Heru stated. “Do you think the Ministry would be foolish enough to place the dementors back at Azkaban once Voldemort is gone?”

“I do not know, but I would recommend against it. As my credit is currently high, I hold some hope that I would be listened to.”

Heru nodded, then shrugged a shoulder.

“Who will be watching the meeting Heru is to attend aside from myself?” asked Severus.

“Not Alastor, obviously.” Albus peered over the rims of his spectacles at Severus, then Heru. “Is there something you’d like to tell me?”

“Well, Albus, I’d like to know if any of the watchers are going to try to arrest me the moment I return to the castle,” Heru drawled. “If you were to call them here now, then Severus and I could explain what you might reasonably expect to witness.”

“I see. In that case perhaps you have suggestions of your own?”

Heru had the castle flash several images to Severus and got back an affirmative in return. “Remus, Sirius, and Tonks. They are the ones I know the best, and the ones I feel will actually hear me out.”

Albus raised his brows fractionally, then reached for a quill and paper. He delivered several notes to Fawkes, who flashed out seconds later. When the three designated watchers finally arrived—Albus, Severus and Heru had continued a mild discussion about Lucius and his son—Heru got down to business.
“In two days I will be attending a Death Eater meeting at Malfoy Mansion, so I need to make something crystal clear to those of you who’ll be watching. This isn’t a game, just as nothing else up until now has been one. You may witness me acting as something akin to Voldemort himself, because I must convince him I am willing to be swayed to his side. I do not want to return to this castle only to have to contain people out for my blood because I cast Unforgivables at need.”

Sirius was already nodding. “I can understand that,” he said. “You … surprised me earlier, when you were talking to Lucius. You already were acting like Voldemort to some degree.”

Tonks cast a curious look at Sirius, then turned to Heru and shrugged. “I won’t see anything I don’t need to,” she said with a faint suggestion of a wink.

“Given that I’m unaware of the actual plans for after this,” Remus said slowly, “can I ask why it’s so important?”

“I need him to trust me more than he does now. I need him to not notice what I’m actually up to when I’m simply standing there, or so it appears. I have every intention of manipulating the Dark Marks of as many Death Eaters as I can while I’m there in order to make sure that they die when their master does.”

“Manipulate?” asked Tonks, her face sweetly confused.

Heru glanced at Severus, who nodded and bared his forearm to the girl.

“Oh!”

“I managed to make mirrors linked to Lucius without him being aware of it, and mirrors to Voldemort, all while in the middle of a conversation. I believe I can handle the manipulations. The worst case scenario is that I cannot, but for every Death Eater I actually meet, that is one more I can tune a mirror to, allowing us to know their locations at all times and to hunt them down for trial and incarceration.”

“And after the meeting?” Remus asked.

“I will tell him I would like to consider things for a day or so and invite him back to my house in Hogsmeade for two days hence. In order to make sure that he’ll agree, I’ll be going to that meeting displaying the same mixture of amiability and imperiousness, and prove, if necessary, that I have absolutely no qualms about being as sadistic and twisted as he is. In fact, I expect to have to say things that would cause others, mainly Severus, to want to strangle me when I return. At any rate, by the time that meeting is over, if Voldemort isn’t already salivating over the idea of having me join his cause, he should be. And he’ll be perfectly happy to come back to my home in Hogsmeade for a more private meeting to discuss things several days later.”

“All right. But what does that mean?” Remus persisted.

“The wards of my home are rather similar to the ones of Hogwarts. You see, Albus, I was less than candid with you.” Heru shot a look at the headmaster and smirked slightly. “I wasn’t so sure I should trust you. So while I did admit I could see the wards here, I did not tell the whole truth at that time.”

Strangely, or not, Albus’s eyes were twinkling.

“My ultimate ancestor, if you start with the founding of Hogwarts, was no fool. I know exactly how the wards here are constructed and I know how to create ones like them thanks to his foresight and preservationist tendencies. Inside my home, I hold control over who can perform magic, just like I can control who is allowed to apparate here.”
“One of these days you simply must tell us where you have all these family treasures hidden,” murmured Albus.

Herau favored the headmaster with an innocent smile and said, “Now that I’ve had enough time to study Voldemort, I believe I can bring him down. In my home, he will be unable to oppose me with magic. And with any luck, he won’t even realize what I’m doing until it’s too late.”

“Which is?”

“I’m sure you can figure that out. The point is, I need to know that none of you are going to start screaming for my head if I prove to Voldemort that I can cast unforgivables.”

“It will not be an issue,” said Albus. “I think we are all in agreement here.”

“Then I’m sure you will all also understand that you probably won’t see me for at least a day after that meeting. However, as I plan on inviting Voldemort over for the evening of the next, we will have time to meet and discuss things again if necessary.”

Albus nodded, as did Remus and Sirius. Tonks looked a little confused, but nodded as well.

Herau spent some time in his vault, looking for ancient wedding gifts. Eventually he found what he was after and brought them to the lounge and set them on the table. “You know, I still find it odd that no one ever seemed to wonder where Harry’s wand went.”

Severus shrugged. “No one ever saw Voldemort’s reaction when he realized it was not with the body, and our people assume he must have it.”

“Mm. I suppose so. Do you think there’s any point in me consuming this?” Herau indicated the vial he had brought in.

Severus leaned forward to take it, then examined it closely. “Exactly when did you get this, and how?”

“It was a wedding gift.”

Severus gave him an odd look, then opened the vial and sniffed carefully. “It’s still good,” he said after sealing it, “but is strength really something that will help you?”

“I don’t know, that’s why I’m asking. I’m not sure if it would shore me up through the work I’ll be doing or if I’d be better off having a pocket stuffed with replenishers. Is it even permanent?”

Severus shook his head. “It would last for several weeks, gradually fading out. I will be honest—unless there is some reason for you to need superhuman strength for that evening, I would not bother. Secrete a good supply of replenishers and take them as needed. You’ll still come home to me exhausted, but I know that you can hold your mask in place until it’s safe to drop it.”

“All right. Then that goes back into the vault, unless you have some use for it.” Herau shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. I’ve made sure you can enter the vault so you can get it if you need it, right?”

Severus nodded, then said, “And that?”

“Manticore skin. I figured I might as well get some use out of it since I’ve never worn it. I can wear it under my robes.”
“Well enough. Were you planning on something subtle, or…”

Heru exhaled softly. “I’d like your advice on that. You know I told Voldemort I’d lurk in the shadows, but … I was thinking that might not work, and I wasn’t sure if I should just wear something of excellent quality but fairly understated, or something with a bit of flash to it.”

“I need not point out that if Lucius is the only one left alive, he is the only one who could possibly testify against you.”

“That doesn’t help, Severus.”

“Understated, my dear Heru. There’s no sense in drawing further attention to yourself.”

Heru smiled. The vial went back into the vault, the set of clothing went into their normal bedroom, and Heru and Severus sat down shortly after for a family dinner with Mark.

When Heru arrived at Malfoy Manor it was 6.30 in the evening. The house-elf that answered the door looked somewhat startled at his appearance, but allowed him entry and asked him in a soft voice to please wait. It did not pop back into view. Instead, Lucius appeared in the entrance hall and swept up to him gracefully, inclining his head as he drew closer.

“Heru, how lovely to see you.”

Heru took a moment to get a good look at the blond, then said, “I allow I am a bit early, but as the meeting was scheduled for seven, I thought it would be wise.”

“Of course,” Lucius said agreeably. “If you will permit, I will show you the ballroom.” He stepped back in a half turn and gestured, waiting for Heru to move forward before he completed his turn and began to walk. As Malfoy Manor was quite large, the walk itself took a number of minutes, all of which were spent in silence. Eventually they reached a set of grandiose double doors and stepped through.

The first thing Heru noticed was the utter lack of furnishings—that is, aside from a chair set up at one end which closely resembled a throne fashioned from snakes. The back of it rose up from the seat and widened, then arched over, perfectly mimicking a cobra with its hood flared. Someone—Heru thought whoever it had been obviously had too much time on their hands—had made it as realistic and lifelike as possible.

The second thing he noticed was that Voldemort was already seated in the embrace of the throne and had a peculiar smile on his changed face. Heru smirked slightly and strode forward confidently, ignoring the fact that Lucius, with his shorter legs, was having to move at an almost undignified pace in order to keep up with him. Heru pulled up short about a foot away from Voldemort and tilted his head to the side curiously.

“Well,” Heru said, then furrowed his brow and shot a quick look at Lucius. “I cannot fault you for your tastes, dear fellow, though it’s a bit ostentatious for me,” he hissed, then lifted his chin and smiled pleasantly.

“Perhaps,” hissed Voldemort. “You have come early—why?”

Heru grinned. “To investigate any dark corners in which to lurk, of course. But I see that it would be a difficult proposition here, so I shall have to stand around looking imposing, or something equally thrilling.”
“Or perhaps even participate.”

Heru arched a brow. “Indeed. One naturally wonders what that would entail.”

Voldemort turned his gaze on Lucius for a moment, then hissed, “Perhaps you might be persuaded to amuse yourself with some of my less gifted followers. I myself would be interested to see how you handled one of them if they had disappointed me.”

Heru clapped his hands and smiled brilliantly. “We shall see. Far be it from me to turn down the opportunity to play with someone else’s toys.” Then he smirked and hissed, “With permission, that is. Severus was an exception. But, I see no reason for me to remain standing.” He dropped his wand into his hand and conjured up an imposing, yet squishy chair, and flopped into it sideways, letting his booted feet dangle over one arm.

He hummed for a moment, then hissed, “Speaking of toys, were you planning on summoning your followers this evening, or were they instructed to arrive without such prompting?”

“I will summon them.”

Heru arched a brow, then smiled. “It’s more painful that way. I understand. May I try? I’ve wanted to, you see, but somehow I did not think you would have appreciated it had I used Severus as my test case. Very bad form and all that.” Heru let out a peal of high pitched laughter.

Voldemort smiled slightly. “I see you feel no constraint this evening to appear neutral.”

“I felt like having a night off, dear fellow. Don’t misunderstand me, of course. I have yet to make my decision. But as I’m here, I may as well enjoy myself, right?”

Voldemort’s smile widened fractionally. “Indeed. In that case, I will allow it. You can summon them whenever you like.”

Heru flicked his wand back into its holster and turned to look at Lucius. After narrowing his eyes he crooked his finger at the blond and was rewarded with immediate compliance. Lucius knelt before him and bared his arm, so Heru reached out and touched the Dark Mark with his finger and called.
It took several minutes, but less time than Heru actually expected. After the first of the Death Eaters appeared, they began arriving in clusters, almost as though there was some obscure protocol that Heru wasn’t aware of when it came to who was allowed to come when. None of those thoughts showed on his face, though; he wore a lazy little smile as he lounged sideways in his chair and idly kicked one of his feet as though bored.

They arrayed themselves in semi-circles, though not one of them took their place until they had knelt before their lord and kissed his robes. A disgusting display of obeisance, but one that Heru had expected. All of them had cast badly hidden looks at him before returning their attention to their master and waiting for him to speak. Heru was a little surprised, to be sure, that there weren’t more of them. The second they had begun apparating in he had flung threads of his power toward one and started the process of finessing the man’s Dark Mark. By the time they stopped appearing, Heru had managed to deal with five of them from that distance.

“How delightful of you all to join us,” Voldemort said smoothly. “As you can see, we have a guest this evening. I have every expectation that you will be as courteous to him as you are to me.”

A mass of heads dipped in ready agreement.

“Splendid. We are coming up on the anniversary of the death of Harry Potter, so I think it only fitting that we should begin again with our plans to overcome those fools who defy us on that date. Speaking of which…” Voldemort turned to Heru and hissed, “Do you know where they interred his body?”

Heru raised his brows and smirked. “On the grounds of Hogwarts. East side of the lake. There are enchantments protecting it so that the unwashed masses cannot get at his corpse.”

Voldemort smiled faintly and turned back to his people. “However, as we do have a guest, this will not be a meeting in the classic sense.”

Heru did not frown; there was no need to. He had been divided in his opinion on whether or not the meeting would be normal, or something much lighter in nature. As he had not declared himself, it was no real surprise to him that Voldemort wasn’t willing to divulge anything much in the way of plans while he was present.

“You will,” Voldemort said casually, “mingle.”

Heru thought that was just fine. Assuming he was able to walk around and talk to people, he could be assured of finicking with every last Dark Mark aside from Lucius’s. The best of it was that the modification did not actually take all that much effort. The Dark Mark could already kill them; all he had to do was make sure that if the connection back to Voldemort disappeared, they would die.

Voldemort rose from his throne and half turned to Heru, smiling slightly, so Heru stood as well and stepped forward, allowing himself to be led to the first of the many people he would meet over the course of the evening. A buffet of drinks and food had appeared at some unseen or unheard signal, and as they passed it, Heru got himself a glass of wine to carry around and sip from. It did not hurt that he was able to slip a replenishing potion into it, though in truth, he was not yet very fatigued.

Heru smiled a great deal, smirked some, and generally made out as though he was highly amused by the reactions of the men in Voldemort’s service as he charmed his way through the crowd. He was
also full of praise for the obvious magical strength of Bellatrix, the only female Death Eater, and her loyalty, though he kept his comments about her to Parseltongue. He did not in the least care for the fanatical gleam in her eyes, nor her very tenuous hold on sanity, and kept those thoughts strictly to himself.

Once Heru had met everyone the entertainment portion of the evening began. Avery was still out of favor for his mistakes, it seemed, and it was him that Heru got to play with.

“Avery, front and center,” commanded Voldemort, once again sitting on his throne. Heru, who had been talking with Lucius in a careful manner, turned when he heard Voldemort hiss, “Heru, would you care to amuse yourself?”

He smirked and strode up toward the throne, then hissed, “Would that be to the pain, or to the death?”

“He’s already felt pain.”

Heru furrowed his brow, then glanced at Avery speculatively. “All right,” he hissed. A bare shake of his arm saw his wand drop into his hand, and he pointed it at Avery in a negligent gesture. A second later red lines began to appear on the man’s exposed skin, then split as his flesh began to peel away from his body. Though Avery could most certainly scream, he could not, apparently, move. His clothing started to bunch up oddly and took on a wet gleam as his screams became more tortured; then Heru cast again.

Tiny bubbles formed in Avery’s blood that burst almost immediately, only to be replaced instantly. Heru lowered his wand to watch with a faint smirk as the poor man’s blood literally boiled, then slipped it back up his sleeve as Avery suddenly stopped screaming, his eyes gone completely blank. Heru gave Voldemort a sidelong glance and hissed, “That was mildly amusing. Thanks.”

“Interesting,” hissed Voldemort, an undisguised look of pleasure in his slit-pupiled eyes. To Lucius he said, “Do clean that up, my good man.” There was a long pause while that was being taken care of, then Voldemort hissed, “Feel like amusing yourself more quickly on one other?”

“Are you suggesting the simple route?” Heru asked with raised brows.

“Naturally.”

“If you insist,” Heru hissed with a petulant expression, “though I’m afraid it’s not very creative.”

Voldemort smirked and barked out, “Crabbe!”

Said man stumbled up, shaking and casting glances back over his shoulder at Goyle, then stopped several feet away. Heru looked him up and down, made a moue of distaste at the look of vacant stupidity on the man’s face, then shook his wand into his hand again. A heartbeat later a blinding green light shot out and enveloped Crabbe, who fell over, quite dead.

Heru turned and made a mocking little salute to Voldemort, then flopped into his chair again.

“Definitely not creative.”

“I’m sure if you agree to ally with me, you can be as creative as you like,” hissed Voldemort.

“Indubitably. I allow that you do have some very interesting people under your command. Perhaps”—Heru gave Voldemort a speculative look and shook back his hair— “you’ll stop by in a few days and explain to me just what you plan to do. This little get together has been very charming, but I think I’d need to know a little more before I would be able to come to a decision.”
“I think I could be persuaded to do so.”

Heru gave Voldemort a dazzling smile and wrinkled his nose playfully. “I knew I liked you for some reason. Well, I really must get back. Wednesday or Thursday is fine, unless you prefer to wait ’til the weekend. You can always have Lucius drop me a note. He’s so deliciously obsequious at times—delightful, really.”

“Of course.”

Heru leapt to his feet and vanished his chair, smiled sweetly, then apparated to Albus’s office, where he immediately sagged to the floor with a groan of pain, not caring who saw him collapse. Severus was at his side in an instant, slipping one hand under his neck to support his head and holding a vial to his lips.

“Come on,” he coaxed. Heru drank, then closed his eyes. He felt his mate pluck the wand from his fingers and slip it into the holster hidden beneath the sleeve of his robe. “All right, Heru. Let’s get you into a chair.”

Heru groaned again in protest and tried to sit up; the pain made him dizzy. Severus started to lift him, but stopped when Heru abruptly rolled to the side and vomited. Severus made a noise that was half distress and half annoyance, which made Heru chuckle weakly. “Sorry,” he whispered.

“It’s all right, my dear Heru. If you feel well enough to try this again, just nod.” Several moments later Severus gently lifted him off the floor and backed into one of the chairs, sitting down with Heru sprawled across his lap. “Do you think you can keep a pain potion down this time?” he asked.

“Give me a minute.” Heru opened his eyes to give his mate a pained look. A whisper of noise made him turn his head, then wince for having done so; it was only Albus cleaning up the mess he had made.

“Severus, is this normal?” asked Albus softly.

His mate nodded. “It is like…” A soft sigh, then, “One comparison would be a migraine, Albus. This is a reaction from direct manipulation of dark magic, and of course, overexertion.” Severus looked down at Heru and added, “I doubt having to kill two people directly to maintain this charade has helped matters any.”

“Perhaps now I understand what happened the first time,” Albus said with a sigh.

Heru rolled his eyes, then bit his lip at the stupidity of his action and promptly closed his eyes again.

“I won’t move you again, Heru, at least not for some time. Shall we try another potion?” When Heru mouthed an affirmative, Severus produced another vial and held it to his mate’s lips, making sure none of it spilled. When it was down, he began to smooth the hair back from Heru’s forehead soothingly. “Judging from the way Tonks is looking at us, I would say our secret is out,” Severus said with quiet amusement.

A faint smile curled the edges of Heru’s lips before he whispered, “S’okay.”

“Just try to sleep.” Severus stroked his hair for several minutes before he spoke again, this time to the other inhabitants of the room. “I think that went well. Voldemort seems very happy with the way the evening progressed.”

Heru simply listened as they talked, absentely pleased that no one seemed to be angry or unduly upset at what he had done. They seemed far more concerned with his current state of health. He wasn’t
really sure when he actually fell asleep.

He awoke in his own bed—in their quarters, not underlake. That failed to surprise him. Praecino and Fawkes were trilling softly off to one side, somehow managing to be soothing while carrying on a conversation with each other. Heru smiled crookedly; they must really be worried about him if both phoenixes were present. Severus entered the room on the heels of that thought and sat on the edge of the bed.

“I’m glad to see you’re awake. As the castle says you’re hungry, I thought perhaps you’d like to move into the lounge. The others are here, though, so if you’d rather eat in here…”

Heru shook his head tentatively. “S’okay. Just find me a robe or something.”

Several minutes later Heru was tucked into a chair with a blanket wrapped around him and a tray hovering over his lap. He smiled in appreciation of the fact that he had been given real food, not a convalescent’s. Severus was in his usual chair, while the couch was taken up with Sirius, Remus, Tonks, and Albus. Praecino and Fawkes followed him and continued to sing softly.

Heru looked at them, almost shyly—and it was not entirely for effect—and said, “Sorry I collapsed. Didn’t mean to.” Bright, understanding smiles greeted that statement, so Heru looked at his tray and picked up the fork to eat.

They remained remarkably quiet while he ate, and Severus levitated the tray away as soon as he finished. Heru gave another crooked smile. “Both phoenixes?”

Severus smirked. “Of course. And if they don’t work, I will. Now, are you able to report?”

Heru sighed slightly. “I managed to change all the Dark Marks. I left Lucius’s alone. Do you think Voldemort was convinced?”

“We could not understand most of what went on, Heru,” Albus pointed out, “but if his expressions were anything to go by, then yes.”

Heru looked over at his mate, who gave a tiny nod. “All right, then all we need to do is wait for Lucius to contact me.”

“Are either of you going to explain this plan?”

Heru dropped his chin and gaze, then looked up through his lashes. “No, I think not. In fact, any of you could have come up with it based on available information.” Heru paused significantly. “But you didn’t. So you’ll find out when Voldemort does. I think you’ll enjoy the show. Just be prepared to have someone take Lucius into custody, and believe me when I say I will rise from exhaustion to deal with matters if that man is killed, or even harmed. I’d like for Draco to have a father to visit once this is over.”

Everything was ready. Everything was set. Lucius and Voldemort (he was wearing his Xavier disguise) arrived on time and were ushered into Heru’s lounge in much the same manner as they had been on previous visits. And, as before, a number of people were watching them, holed up in Albus’s office in front of several mirrors, and absently noshing from a tray of edibles.

Heru was sporting a dazzling smile comprised partly of genuine pleasure and partly of a decided
smirk that quirked the corner of his mouth. Truth was a funny thing, and any good liar knew that
thruth was what lent a good lie verisimilitude. Heru had very rarely been caught in falsehoods, if ever.
That Potter child might have been another story, though. It was much easier to be honest in word but
not in meaning, or to shade the truth, or conceal aspects of it.

So it was that Lucius and Xavier took seats in the lounge, and Voldemort’s reaction to Heru’s
welcome spoke promises of sadistic pleasures yet to come from a glorious union of family. Severus
was once again silent and forbidding, taking care to sit only after Heru had, but letting his lips twist
in a mockery of a smile. His eyes on Lucius were distant, and on Voldemort revealed simply respect,
but for Heru they shone with unwavering loyalty and devotion.

When everyone was settled, Heru spoke. “Absolutely delightful to see you again, my dear fellow,”
he said warmly, then added as an afterthought, “and you, Lucius.”

“I trust after this evening that we will become much better friends.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that,” replied Heru enigmatically. “Do you remember,” he said casually, “when I
told you that you had health problems?” Without looking or gesturing, he cast a wandless spell of
binding on Lucius. He would be able to talk and move a bit, but not rise from his chair.

“Vaguely. Why?”

“Something isn’t quite right about you, my dear fellow.” Heru had something a little different in
mind for Voldemort.

“Really. And why do you say that?”

“Because it’s the truth.” Heru gave him a look of mingled disbelief and confusion. “Why would I
lie? You aren’t healthy. Whatever it is you’ve done wasn’t done properly, or was a mistake, and
you’re suffering because of it.”

Voldemort gave him a penetrating stare, then said, “Let me rephrase. How are you able to tell?
Surely this isn’t some aspect of divination.”

Heru arched a brow and cocked his head to the side, feigning concern. “At first, yes. But you’re
right, this isn’t about divination. There’s something about you that makes me ill.” He didn’t bother to
hide his distaste.

Voldemort appeared startled by that, showing it plainly.

“Very ill. Something foreign, something that fights within your body, something that makes me want
to heave. Quite frankly, I can’t stand to be around you for long periods of time.” Heru glanced at
Severus and held out his hand. His mate flipped aside his robes to get a vial from his thigh case and
pass it over. Heru opened it and knocked it back without a second thought, then stared at Voldemort
again. “What did you do? How can you stand this?”

Voldemort appeared to consider his words, his brow furrowing in thought. “It is true that I have not
quite felt like myself since I was reborn.”

“This is connected to whatever you did to regain your corporeal form?”

“Perhaps,” Voldemort said vaguely.

“Will you tell me? Because, my dear fellow, I can hardly make a decision of this magnitude when all
I can think about when I’m near you is how sick I feel. I’d rather not be forced into a decision against
you because of it. I’d like to be able to choose freely.”

Voldemort’s face tightened, his eyes narrowing slightly. “And how do I know what you say is true?”

Heru smiled faintly and flipped the empty vial at him. “Look for yourself. Smell it.” Voldemort caught it handily and checked the label, then held it to his nose. “You know very well that if I were to take that without symptoms that I would be hunched over right now emptying my stomach the hard way. I would not be able to help myself.”

Voldemort turned his gaze back to Heru and nodded. “True enough.” He placed the vial on the table beside him and said slowly, “The ritual I used required three things: the bones of my father; the flesh of a servant; and the blood of my enemy. I chose to use Wormtail’s flesh and the Potter boy’s blood. And it worked.”

Heru sighed heavily and slumped a bit in his chair. “Of course—the trial. Did you not know that the Potter brat was a descendant of Gryffindor?”

“What!”

“You’ve poisoned yourself, Voldemort. You live, obviously, but you are tainted with that bloodline now. I’m sorry to have to be the one to tell you this.”

“You’re mad.”

“Am I?” Heru stood and wandered back to the cabinets where he stored his divination tools. He knelt and flipped up a wide, low door and pulled out a case, then stood and returned to where they were all seated. He had worked on this for some time, ever since Severus had explained his plan and he had gone to Godric’s portrait for help. It had not been easy to duplicate the original Gryffindor tapestry and force it to cut off at Harry Potter with a date of death. Wordlessly Heru stripped away the case and revealed a tapestry, then conjured up a stand near Voldemort’s chair and hung it. “See for yourself. Trace down Godric’s line,” he said, then took his seat.

A half hour later Voldemort was seething in anger.

“I’d appreciate if you didn’t rip my furniture to shreds, dear fellow,” Heru said with a pointed glance at Voldemort’s hands where they gripped the arms of his chair. “As I said, you’ve poisoned yourself.”

“Where did you get that abomination?”

Heru gave him an amused look. “The castle of Hogwarts holds many secrets if one has the knowledge of where to seek. It was to my benefit that the family passed down many things for me to learn from. But, it was unfortunate that the family was not aware of you, dear fellow, or you would have been brought properly into the fold.”

“And what do you propose?”

“What I propose is not something you may agree with. I may be family, but that doesn’t mean you trust me.”

“Why don’t you tell me and I will decide that,” Voldemort grated.

Heru gave a slight shrug and smiled. “Fair enough. I propose to leech the tainted blood from you on the theory that its removal will allow you to recover from the ordeal of your rebirth and allow you to regain your former strength and prominence.” Heru held out his hand to Severus again without
Voldemort gave him an incredulous look.

“You didn’t really think that the creation of tapestries was the only blood magic I was proficient in, did you? At least now I understand why your presence affects me so.” After a pause he said, “If you wish to think about it, that’s fine. We can always meet again at some other time, or not, as you decide. I offer my help on this out of familial obligation, not as a sign of my personal affiliation. As I said, I would prefer to choose freely, and right now I would be unable to choose anything but against you.”

“Removal of the taint poses no complications?” Voldemort asked finally.

“That depends. Why Potter’s blood specifically?”

“I chose him so that I would enjoy the same protections he did.”

“He’s dead. Do those protections matter any longer?” Heru countered.

“I suppose not,” Voldemort admitted.

“Then I see no complication. Besides, you have already proven that you cannot be killed.” Heru smirked, ostensibly in admiration for the feat.

“True enough.” Voldemort considered again, then nodded sharply. “Proceed.”

“Splendid. But first…” Heru shook out his wand and knocked Lucius out with a swift spell. “I don’t think he needs to see this. In fact, you might want to consider obliterating him later.”

Voldemort gave Heru a faintly suspicious look. “And Severus?”

“I need him to keep me upright, remember? I can obliterate him afterward. Now, if you would be so kind, please do not move, though you should try to relax if that’s possible. This may end up feeling quite odd. Severus, fetch me a basin.”

Heru waited until Severus had returned and placed the basin—it was pure silver—on the table. “Lovely.” Without being asked, Severus also handed over strengthening and replenishing potions, which Heru knocked back quickly. “Please turn your hands palm up, if you would, and I shall begin.”

Heru pointed his wand at Voldemort and focused, mouthing a string of Latin words. Nothing happened at first, but that was to be expected. As he continued to chant soundlessly, a droplet of blood formed in the center of Voldemort’s left hand, and a cut slashed open in his right. The droplet grew larger, filling the depression of the left palm, and they watched as a pure white light appeared in the air just above it.

Heru focused, his brows drawn together in concentration, and made a odd little movement with his wand. The pool of blood arced up into the light, then split, the majority of it continuing over to Voldemort’s right palm and sinking into the open wound, while a hair-thin stream went to the basin. Partway into the process Heru spoke absentely. “You were raised in the muggle world, weren’t you? Think of this as dialysis, though it’s much, much faster.” His eyes never left the arcing streams of blood, and a smile of satisfaction slowly curved his mouth at the sight. By the time the process ended—the arc to the basin disappeared—Heru was sweating heavily. Severus rose and came to kneel at his side, offering up several vials.
Heru made another peculiar gesture with his wand and chanted under his breath, then slumped back. He noticed that Voldemort did not look much better as he took the vials and drank them. “Severus, please take care of that.” And his mate did, picking up the basin and disappearing with it, then returning a few minutes later to take his customary seat.

It was then, when Voldemort was still recovering from having his blood filtered, that Heru slapped him with a very subtle binding spell and smiled. “Well, I’m very glad that part is over. I should not like to do that again any time soon.”

“Why,” Voldemort asked, “do I feel like utter hell?”

Heru tucked his wand behind his ear and smiled lazily. “Recovery isn’t an immediate thing, dear fellow. You’ve had that poison in you for quite some time I expect, and even I can’t work miracles. Those silly muggles feel like hell, too, after having their blood purified.”

“We are not muggles.”

“No, and thank goodness for that. I’ve done some research,” Heru said casually. “I learned some very interesting things about you, my dear fellow. For instance, I know why you did not die when you attempted to kill the Potter brat the first time.”

“Is that so?”

“Oh, indeed. I had always been curious about that, you see. But in time, the answer came. It was when I learned of the diary you made as a boy that I understood. You poured a part of your soul into that. It was a part of you that was safe, and with it safe, the killing curse was unable to properly finish you off when it reflected. It would be like trying to use it on a vampire, you see? You cannot use conventional methods to kill what isn’t exactly alive in the first place.”

Voldemort looked vaguely interested, so Heru continued.

“So you were able to stick around until the right time and regain your physical body. The thing is, that diary was destroyed, and with it, that part of your soul. The Weasley girl regained what you had taken from her, but what you left behind was lost. She was too pure, despite what you had done to her, to absorb it, and the Potter boy’s actions made sure it could not return to you. You are, in effect, a half-souled creature.”

“Not something easily proved,” commented Voldemort.

“Indeed not, but I have a few special talents, cousin. The only thing that’s been keeping you alive after that ritual is magic.” Heru reached out silently with his power and began his manipulations. “The Potter blood, poisonous as it was, was also helping, though it hurt you just as much. I am well aware that you’ve been near to helpless, relying on your former glory to keep your people in line. You’ve been relying on the Dark Mark and what it can do to maintain your people’s fear of you.”

“But that will change now.”

“Oh, yes.” Heru gave Voldemort a dazzling smile. “It will indeed. You see, a half soul isn’t such a terrible thing, but it does have some disadvantages.” He paused to smirk. “Without your magic, you would die, unlike others.”

A faint cast of suspicion crossed Voldemort’s face as the glamour that had been masking his features collapsed. Anger appeared as he attempted to move and realized he could not.

“Problems, dear fellow?” Heru reached out a hand and curled it around the vials Severus placed
there a heartbeat later. “Perhaps you begin to understand what I’m getting at.” Without taking his eyes off Voldemort he drank the potions and tossed the vials on the floor. “You see, I do have a number of interesting talents, as I said. One of those happens to be spell weaving, though I should probably clarify and say that I can weave and unweave at my discretion. It’s how I removed Severus’s Dark Mark, Tom. It’s how I released a man from the curse of being a werewolf. It’s how I’m releasing you from the burden of being a wizard right at this moment.”

Heru smirked again and said, “Don’t bother trying to speak. It’s not like I care what you have to say. You’re a disgrace to the name of Slytherin. The gods know you allowed yourself to be outmaneuvered, but then, I am a pure-blooded Slytherin, unlike you. Did you know that Salazar was a very kind, loving person, Tom? Very set in his ways, though. He feared and despised muggles because they hate us and would do anything to be rid of us. But, he would have been happy enough to live apart from them and let them destroy the muggle-borns with their own hands. He thought it would help keep them away from us. But really, I doubt a history lesson at this point will benefit you much.”

Heru gave a mock sigh of regret. “You might be interested to know that you never could do magic here. I’m surprised you never bothered to test that, but it’s just as well, because here you are now, under my control. Honestly, I must be a better actor than I imagined to have fooled you.” Again without turning his head away, he said, “Severus, love, are you enjoying this?”

“That’s good. It was an excellent plan you came up with and I’m glad you’re here personally to see it in action.” Heru smiled gently as the fire in Voldemort’s eyes reached new heights of anger and panic. “I did tell you that Severus is blindingly intelligent. Anyway, from what I can tell, Tom, when Salazar left the school he obtained a new identity and started a second family. You came from that line, as well as many others, though not all of you had all of the family talents. I’m so very glad that I do have the Slytherin family tapestry, and yours, because I do know who they are. You’re the only one who went bad, did you know that? Salazar would be very, very displeased with you. I just hope that somewhere, somehow, he’s able to see this.”

Long moments passed before Heru spoke seemingly to no one. “The wards are adjusted. You can come in now.”

Seconds later the crack of multiple apparations could be heard. Albus, Minerva, Remus, Sirius, and Tonks appeared behind Voldemort and slowly walked around to face him, flanking the two chairs that Heru and Severus sat in. Tom’s eyes blazed again, but with less force; he probably could barely keep them open.

“And now, for the last,” Heru said as he reached out his right hand and made a strange hooking gesture, then moved it as though he was dashing something to the ground. The light in Voldemort’s eyes died and Heru let loose a heavy sigh.

“Heru?” Severus asked softly.

“It’s over.”
“What was that final gesture?” asked Tonks as she dropped into a seat in Albus’s office.

“The destruction of his magical core. What was left of it, anyway.”

“And the blood?” asked Remus. He was looking very relaxed now that his secret was out.

“I destroyed it,” said Severus.

“I still don’t understand why it made you sick, Heru,” protested Minerva.

Heru shrugged and settled back in his chair.

“You aren’t going to tell us, are you?” asked Albus with a twinkle in his eyes.

Heru shook his head and smirked. “No, I’m not. Someone once said you could be infuriatingly inquisitive, and I replied at the time that I could be infuriatingly reticent. That was between him and me.” Heru tapped his chest hard with his middle finger. “But it was important. It was part of what helped to keep him alive. Once it was gone, I could cut off Tom’s magic and destroy him utterly. I’m sure you noticed his glamour disappeared—it’s not like he could maintain it at that point.”

Several of them looked confused, so Severus spoke. “Some say that blood carries a bit of a person’s soul, and certainly a bit of their magic. However much of a disgusting brat the Potter boy was, even he didn’t deserve to have a part of himself swimming around in Riddle’s veins. Now that the blood is destroyed, what’s left of the child can return to ether.”

“In any case, he’s dead for good this time. And, being the suspicious person that I am, I did not tell him everything I knew, just in case something went wrong. I would not have given him ammunition to use against me later.”

“How is it that you’re so sure his soul is gone?” asked Sirius.

“I told you. A half soul cannot survive physical death. You heard what I said to him—the only thing that kept him around the first time was that diary. Tom only had half a soul, but the other half was still around. This time it wasn’t.”

“Then why didn’t you just use the killing curse and be done with it?” Albus asked.

“Do you honestly think I like using that? That I wanted to taint my home with it? My own soul? I’ve used it a grand total of once and you witnessed it. Look at it this way—yes, I killed him, but I did it indirectly. If I did to you what I did to him, you’d end up a squib, not dead. I killed every Death Eater but two indirectly as well. I’m quite sure there are a number of people out there still having hysterics right now. Yes, I could have used the killing curse and had it over with almost instantaneously, but frankly, that isn’t a very Slytherin thing to do.”

Severus started laughing softly and shaking his head.

“Oh, shut up,” said Heru with fond annoyance. “And the rest of you stop pestering me. I’ve dealt with my black sheep, that should be good enough. Now I can go back to my quiet life, right?”

“Does that mean you’re leaving us?” asked Albus.

“I don’t know. Do you really want someone here who can do what I can? Am I going to be faced with suspicion down the road? Are people going to start thinking I’ll turn on them, betray them? Am I going to be reviled for my power? People have a history of turning on their saviors, Albus. People have a history of being afraid of another’s power and trying to take them down so they cannot be
enslaved to it or have to feel jealous or envious. People would rather honor a martyr than a living person, though, frankly, I’d just as soon my participation in this remain as under wraps as possible. I can and will disappear if I need to, and take my family with me.”

Albus held up his hands. “There is no need. If you wish to remain, I think you’ll find you are welcome. I’m also certain that the castle will make my life a living hell if you were to go.”

Heru smirked faintly. “I suppose so. Severus, I leave the decision in your hands.”

“I would like to stay.”

“All right, then. We’re staying. Someone other than me is going to have to go down and clean up the mess in my house, though.”

“It was rather gruesome how Riddle’s body just … disintegrated like that,” commented Tonks.

“That reminds me…” Heru pondered for a moment and closed his eyes. A second later he was given a vision by the castle and grimaced. He sighed and opened his eyes. “Excuse us a moment,” he said, then rose and tugged on Severus’s sleeve. Once they were off in a corner he said, “The tortoise exploded. It’s a complete mess in there.”

“Just like the mirrors.”

Heru nodded. “More proof, in any case, not that we need it.”

“We’ll deal with it later. For now, let us just rest and talk.” Severus placed a hand around Heru’s waist and turned him, prodding him gently back toward the others.

“I’m tired,” whined Heru. “and I don’t feel well. I want to go to bed. If I take any more potions I’m going to be horribly ill.”

“Then we’ll go back to our quarters and let the others handle things from here,” Severus said soothingly. “Go on, but walk. I’ll explain and meet you in a few minutes, hopefully. If you’ve managed to fall asleep by then, that’s all right.”

Heru nodded and split off, walking out the door without bothering to say good-bye and heading on a slow but steady path to their quarters. Once inside he gave Dobby and Mark an absent greeting and disappeared into the bedroom, stripped off his clothing, and fell into bed.
Ripples in the Pond

Heru awoke to the calming sensation of being wrapped in someone’s arms. Heru smiled lazily and shifted his hips. He got an immediate response, one that made sure he got out of bed an hour later in a very good mood.

When he left the bedroom for breakfast, Severus was at his side. Not five minutes after the food was on the table, Mark bounced down the hallway and took a seat, smiling winsomely at his parents. “Morning!” he chirped.

Heru smiled and continued to eat. Severus, on the other hand, said, “Mark, just a reminder. Your father’s temper may be a bit off today.”

“Sure, Dad. I remember. So, when are you going to let Draco out?” he asked innocently, then snatched several pieces of toast from the rack.

Heru coughed and blinked slowly, then looked at his mate.

“Later this morning, I expect, though possibly this afternoon. We’ll need to speak with the headmaster first to make sure the details have been taken care of.”

“Okay. I just thought it would be nice to have another kid to talk to, you know?”

“I think,” Heru said, “that you could visit him after you’re done eating. But when you’re ready to leave, call Dobby in to make sure he does not get out, all right?”

“Thanks, Father.”

After breakfast Heru and Severus walked up to Albus’s office and entered after a quick knock, then seated themselves. Albus was already there behind his desk, and looked up from the paper spread out before him.

“So, about Lucius,” said Heru without preamble.

“He has been taken into custody by the Ministry. Of course, they found it rather odd that his Dark Mark was no longer present and Cornelius has pressed to have him released because of it, and because he survived what obviously killed his fellow followers.”

Heru furrowed his brow, then glanced at his mate. “Er, does that mean he thinks Lucius is something along the same lines as Severus? That he was a spy?”

“I believe so.”

“Well, that’s just great. I have no idea what to do.” Heru snorted and crossed his arms.

“You do still hold a dear threat over his head,” Severus pointed out. “Several, in fact.”

“I suppose so.” Heru sighed and shrugged. “Whatever. If he goes free of his crimes, so be it. But if he has the temerity to try to rise in Voldemort’s place, he’ll have to deal with me.”

“Then I suggest you make that plain to him,” Albus said calmly. “Would you like me to contact the Ministry to have him brought here?”

“Yes, fine, but warn us before his arrival, or at least secure him somewhere and let us know so we
“Then I guess we can go let Draco out,” Heru said.

Dobby was summoned almost as soon as they had stepped through the serpent door and asked quite politely to pack up the boy’s things and move them to Heru’s and Severus’s quarters. Draco was led out and eventually was able to sit on a real couch—rather nervously, that is.

Praecino was present for two reasons. Heru’s temper was certainly not steady, so naturally his faithful friend was there to soothe him with song. And, of course, they had no reason to hide their affiliations any longer. So it was that Draco’s first act upon sitting down was to stare at the phoenix with wide eyes, only to snap his gaze over to Heru when he spoke.

“That,” said Heru calmly, “is Praecino. I’m his wizard.” Draco said nothing at that pronouncement, just blinked either in surprise or at the odd phrasing, so Heru continued. “You are here, released, because Voldemort is no more. You no longer need to fear slavery at his hands.”

Draco looked at Severus for confirmation, who nodded and said, “Yes, he is gone. Utterly, unlike the first time. Given that, I suggest you take a good, long time to decide what kind of man you want to be. I think you’ll find that’s a very important decision considering that Voldemort wasn’t actually all that hard to deal with in the end.”

“How—”

Heru shook his head, catching Draco’s attention again. “How is irrelevant. In fact, every single Death Eater, bar one, was killed as well.” Draco’s already pale face blanched, so Heru hastened to clarify. “Your father lives.” He saw the confused look darted at Severus but ignored it. “No doubt you will be able to see him. I suggest that you give that a great deal of thought as well. Your father lived, when those of many others died in Voldemort’s service. Perhaps you will be grateful for that kindness and strive to live up to being worthy of it.”

“I don’t understand. Uncle Sev?”

“I don’t expect you do,” Severus said. “Not yet, anyway.”

“You aren’t … dark?” Draco asked Heru, and was met with rich laughter.

“Dark, certainly. Evil? No. Do you honestly think a phoenix would have chosen me otherwise?”

“Draco,” Severus cut in, “I think you probably ought to clean up. I’m sure you’d enjoy that at this point.” He stood and flicked his wand out to levitate the boy’s trunk, then stalked off toward the bathroom Mark normally used. Draco, after another look at Heru, followed. Severus was back in a minute and sitting in his chair. “That went fairly well, don’t you think?”

Heru shrugged. “Hopefully.” He gave Severus a steady look. “Hopefully we won’t have to worry about another dark lord rising. Severus, what does the Ministry know?”

“Not much, actually. They know that the Death Eaters are dead and that Voldemort is presumed so. Albus was … how shall I put this … infuriatingly reticent about what happened. He was, however, being straight about how the Ministry regards Lucius. Being that only he and I survived—apparently there was a social gathering in progress when you finished off Voldemort. Narcissa contacted the
Ministry.”

“Did she now. How very interesting. I think I feel a bit better about that lady, then.”

“H eru?” Severus gave Heru an indecipherable look.

“What is it?”

“How do you feel about what’s happened? We shattered a number of families last night.”

Heru shrugged again and gave his mate a frank look. “Part of me grieves, but another part of me says that had anyone else come forward, as you had all those years ago to Dumbledore, and sincerely asked for help or to help, I would have spared them. I realize that some of his people had to have been too scared to do so, but you normally don’t receive help unless you ask for it. Nearly every single person was from Slytherin house, Severus. Any one of them could have come to me, a blood Slytherin, for judging. Even Lucius is only alive because of his son and he was halfway to his own decision. As for the children, I’ll find a way to take care of any orphans or those of my blood who need assistance, even if it’s quietly done.”

“I can accept that. What of sympathizers?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we—” Heru broke off as Fawkes flashed into the room and deposited a parchment on his lap. “Fawkes, can you wait, please?”

Fawkes trilled agreement and fluttered over to sit next to Praecino for a cozy chat.

**Heru & Severus,**

Lucius is in my office, along with Narcissa. Would you prefer to bring Draco here, or for them to come to your quarters?

**Albus**

Heru scratched his head and handed the note to Severus. After a moment he said, “I almost prefer going up there. I mean, we can threaten him either way, right?”

Severus chuckled. “So we will go up there.” He fetched a quill and scribbled something on the parchment, then offered it to Fawkes, saying, “Thank you, Fawkes. Please return this to Albus.” The phoenix obligingly flashed out a second later.

When Draco appeared again he was prodded out the door by a silent Severus with Heru close behind, up to Albus’s office and in. The second Heru spotted Lucius he crooked his finger at him, then stalked off to a corner.

“You will remember,” Heru said as soon as the blond was at his side, “what I told you previously. I trust you recall the things I’m referring to.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good,” he said coolly. “Then let me say a few more things before you can reunite with your son. You owe that boy your life, and due to him people think you lived because you’d betrayed Voldemort to us. I suggest you capitalize on that, if you take my meaning.” Heru arched a brow at Lucius and continued, “I also suggest you stay far away from politics, my dear fellow, or anything else that might cause my eye to fall upon you with suspicion. Disgrace the name of Slytherin again
and I will not be so lenient. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

“Yes, sir.”

Heru could almost smell the nervousness that Lucius was hiding. “I’m sure you can be quite reasonable when you put your mind to it. One last thing. If you decide to be helpful in the aftermath of recent events, send Severus and me a note. I’m of a mind to do a little more community service work soon regarding the families that have been upset. You might wish to partake of that, as it could help your image, no?”

“I will take that under advisement, sir.”

Heru broke into a warm smile and rested his hand briefly on Lucius’s shoulder. “Well, then. I do believe you have a son to see and take home.” He turned on his heel and stalked back over to Severus, nodding ever so slightly. Heru turned to Albus and said in a low voice, “Will you be able to handle things from here?”

“Of course, Heru. Rest and spend time with your family.”

Heru flashed the headmaster a quick smile, then paused at Narcissa’s side long enough to greet her before retreating back to the dungeons with Severus.

“When?”

“July thirty-first.”

“Sounds good. Found any candidates yet?”

“Yes, but we think you should look them over first for potential.”

“Let us go look, then.”

“Ow! That hurt!” whined Sirius, cradling his fisted hand with the other.

“Don’t be such a baby, Padfoot, and get on with it.”

Heru cleared his throat rather loudly and gave Sirius a pointed look. “The blood is supposed to go into the goblet, if you please?”

“Right, sure.” Sirius angled his hand so that the cut on his palm dripped as directed, hastily snatching it away when Heru nodded.

Heru nobly refrained from rolling his eyes and gestured, then coated his index finger in the blood still seeping from the wound and traced runes on Remus’s forehead and cheeks with it. “Now, each of you drink. Trade off until it’s gone.”

Heru bit his lip at their expressions as they traded sips of the concoction, then smiled briefly. “Now kiss, and that’s it.” Five minutes later—Heru had to clear his throat again, loudly—he said, “Gentlemen?”

“That was it?”
“Yes.” Heru gave a long suffering sigh. “You’re blood-bonded as mates. Congratulations!” He threw his hands up into the air, then brought them down to push the hair back from his face. “We’re taking a half hour break before the next part, okay? Go … stare at each other adoringly or something. Oh, and you can wash off the blood now.”

A look at Severus showed that his own mate’s mouth was twitching suspiciously. “Just shut up, Severus. Not one damn word.” Heru whipped around to face the other way. Seconds later he felt arms slip around him and sharp teeth nipping at his ear.

“Not even, I love you?”

“That’s more than one word, so it’s all right.” Heru shivered and pressed back against his mate, then abruptly pulled away and reversed himself. “I don’t care how lost they are in each other right this minute, or seem to be. I refuse to provide them with any ammunition. But I’d be thrilled if you’d take advantage of me later.”

Amused laughter reminded them both that Tonks was standing nearby. Heru shot a glare at her and said, “Don’t think I won’t hex you senseless, cousin.”

Tonks gave him a saucy grin, bounced over to a chair, and flopped into it. “Well, that was an interesting ceremony.” She looked up with a sober expression and said, “I’m glad you let me witness it.”

“You’re family, Tonks. I’ll even do the same for you if you like, when you find the person you want to marry.”

“Why don’t you explain that in more detail, hm?”

By the time Heru was finished it was time to bond the new couple to their soon-to-be children.

“Sirius, Remus, I have a proposal,” Heru said solemnly, though his eyes were sparkling. “I realize this will probably open some wounds, but…”

They glanced at Severus before raising their brows at Heru questioningly.

“There are some people that ought to be … chastised, don’t you think?” Heru cocked his head to the side and simply looked at them.

“The Dursleys?” Severus hissed.

Heru gave him a quick grin. “If they agree,” he hissed back. “Don’t you think it would be fitting?”

“That depends on how you define chastisement.”

Heru shrugged and looked at Severus innocently. “Just some changes, that’s all.”

Remus cleared his throat. “Excuse me, you two, but could you use English?”

Heru grinned. “Sorry. This is really none of my business, actually, but it came to mind, so I figured I’d mention it.”

“Yes, but who?”

“Potter’s muggle family.”
Sirius sat up straight. “Albus would kill us.”

“You’d let that stop you?” Heru asked with a snort. “What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him, and it’s not like I’m proposing anything nasty. Just … somewhat malicious.”

Remus gave him an appraising look, then glanced over at his mate. “What did you have in mind?”

“For one thing—if what I’ve heard is correct, anyway—someone badly needs anger management lessons. I was thinking that embarrassment is an effective teaching tool for certain kinds of people, you know?”

Sirius grinned. “I can think of a few things I’d like to do to that lot, yeah.”

“Then how about we have a little talk about their welfare, hm?”

1 September 2002

Heru took a moment to glance over at Mark and smiled faintly. His son caught his eye for a second, then turned to answer one of his friends at the Ravenclaw table. Moments later the last student had been sorted so Heru stood and spread his arms, catching the attention of all the students in the hall. As Severus sat down beside him, he began.

“Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts…”

And Now, Our Cast:

Albus Dumbledore eventually retired and gave over his position as Headmaster, finally taking on the mantle of Minister of Magic.

Minerva McGonagall also ended up retiring and gave over her position as Deputy Headmaster, taking on a spot at the wizarding orphanage set up by Heru.

Remus Black continues to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts and has become the new Head of House for Gryffindor. It should be noted that he took on the name of Black after agreeing with Sirius that it was time the name was redeemed.

Sirius Black took on the position of Transfiguration Professor, though he and Remus both spend as much time as possible with their blood-bonded twins, Servius and Tychon.

Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy took an abiding interest in Heru’s orphanage under his watchful eye, and set aside a great deal of their own fortune for its operations.

Draco Malfoy left Hogwarts at the end of his seventh year and went off to see the world, purposely staying in muggle areas for a year to see how the other half lives, and coming to the conclusion that the poor bastards aren’t that bad.

Tonks still hasn’t found the right person to bond with, but insists that she has plenty of time, blaming part of it on the fact that she let it get out that she’s related to Heru (and nobody wants to cross him).

Ron Weasley finally got up the courage to ask Hermione out and their first date was a complete disaster. They agreed not to try again, thankfully, and after he left Hogwarts went on to an entry level job at the Ministry.
Hermione Granger attempted the auror program at the Ministry, but decided it was not right for her, and ended up working at Heru’s orphanage while studying to be a mediwitch in her spare time.

Vernon Dursley was cursed with the unfortunate tendency to turn plaid whenever he became excessively angry rather than red or purple, and also to sound as though he’d been inhaling helium. Rumor has it that he’s gotten fairly good at reining in his temper of late.

Petunia Dursley has developed the unfortunate tendency to whinny like a horse whenever she laughs, not to mention bray like a donkey every time she attempts to spy on her neighbors.

Dudley Dursley mysteriously lost a great deal of weight and had to be fitted for glasses after a small accident involving a quartet of smirking wizards—not that he remembers the incident, having had his memory erased—and has become quite frightened by technology in general.

Marge Dursley has embarrassed herself on more than one occasion by having a little too much to drink and then spilling every secret she has to whoever happens to be close enough to overhear. Rumors of bestiality abound.

Mark Slytherin lost his Potions partner once he began at Hogwarts, but continues to spend a great deal of time with Margaret, much to his parents’ barely hidden amusement.

Severus Slytherin took on the mantle of Deputy Headmaster in addition to his duties as Head of Slytherin House and Potions Master, and has already tried teaching his new son, Salvalus, how to brew a boil cure potion.

Heru Slytherin took on the mantle of Headmaster and promptly tossed Albus’s supply of sherbet lemons, replacing them with Refreshers, and spent the entire summer prior to the start of the new year searching for a replacement Divination Professor, finally luring Ron Weasley away from the Ministry to do the job.
Alternate [40: Slytherin Solution]

Chapter Notes

How things might have gone if Heru had been a bit more forthcoming during his defeat of Voldemort. Some of the wording/speech has changed, as well as the ending to the original chapter.

The changes and additions are extemporaneous, so don’t expect anything magnificent!

“Severus, are you sure?” Heru gave his mate a piercing look.

“Yes, actually, I am. You know damn well Albus is going to get ideas from this. He will pester us near to death to satisfy his curiosity.”

Heru adopted a calculating expression. “Perhaps, but I could always just forget to take your wand when he starts in and you could hex him senseless.”

“You could. It is up to you, my dear Heru. If you want to be more forthcoming, do so. If not, that is your choice.”

“I allow that it would be nice to see the look on the old snake’s face,” Heru said.

“All I am saying is that I am in no way ashamed, Heru.”

“We’d better get going. I have to shift the wards and I’d like a nap before they arrive.”

Everything was ready. Everything was set. Lucius and Voldemort (he was wearing his Xavier disguise) arrived on time and were ushered into Heru’s lounge in much the same manner as they had been on previous visits. And, as before, a number of people were watching them, holed up in Albus’s office in front of several mirrors, and absently noshing from a tray of edibles.

Heru was sporting a dazzling smile comprised partly of genuine pleasure and partly of a decided smirk that quirked the corner of his mouth. Truth was a funny thing, and any good liar knew that truth was what lent a good lie verisimilitude. Heru had very rarely been caught in falsehoods, if ever. It was much easier to be honest in word but not in meaning, or to shade the truth, or conceal aspects of it. Of course, Heru was strongly considering using truth as a weapon this evening, and a very sharp weapon at that.

So it was that Lucius and Xavier took seats in the lounge, and Voldemort’s reaction to Heru’s welcome spoke promises of sadistic pleasures yet to come from a glorious union of family. Severus was once again silent and forbidding, taking care to sit only after Heru had, but letting his lips twist in a mockery of a smile. His eyes on Lucius were distant, and on Voldemort revealed simply respect, but for Heru they shone with unwavering loyalty and devotion.

When everyone was settled, Heru spoke. “Absolutely delightful to see you again, my dear fellow,” he said warmly, then added as an afterthought, “and you, Lucius.”
“I trust after this evening that we will become much better friends.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that,” replied Heru enigmatically. “Do you remember,” he said casually, “when I told you that you had health problems?” Without looking or gesturing, he cast a wandless spell of binding on Lucius. He would be able to talk and move a bit, but not rise from his chair.

“Vaguely. Why?”

“Something isn’t quite right about you, my dear fellow.” Heru had something a little different in mind for Voldemort.

“Really. And why do you say that?”

“Because it’s the truth.” Heru gave him a look of mingled disbelief and confusion. “Why would I lie? You aren’t healthy. Whatever it is you’ve done wasn’t done properly, or was a mistake, and you’re suffering because of it.”

Voldemort gave him a penetrating stare, then said, “Let me rephrase. How are you able to tell? Surely this isn’t some aspect of divination.”

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Heru arched a brow and cocked his head to the side, feigning concern. “At first, yes. But you’re right, this isn’t about divination. There’s something about you that makes me ill.” He didn’t bother to hide his distaste.

Voldemort appeared startled by that, showing it plainly.

“Very ill. Something foreign, something that fights within your body, something that makes me want to heave. Quite frankly, I can’t stand to be around you for long periods of time.” Heru glanced at Severus and held out his hand. His mate flipped aside his robes to get a vial from his thigh case and pass it over. Heru opened it and knocked it back without a second thought, then stared at Voldemort again. “What did you do? How can you stand this?”

Voldemort appeared to consider his words, his brow furrowing in thought. “It is true that I have not quite felt like myself since I was reborn.”

“This is connected to whatever you did to regain your corporeal form?”

“Perhaps,” Voldemort said vaguely.

“Will you tell me? Because, my dear fellow, I can hardly make a decision of this magnitude when all I can think about when I’m near you is how sick I feel. I’d rather not be forced into a decision against you because of it. I’d like to be able to choose freely.”

Voldemort’s face tightened, his eyes narrowing slightly. “And how do I know what you say is true?”

Heru smiled faintly and flipped the empty vial at him. “Look for yourself. Smell it.” Voldemort caught it handily and checked the label, then held it to his nose. “You know very well that if I were to take that without symptoms that I would be hunched over right now emptying my stomach the hard way. I would not be able to help myself.”

Voldemort turned his gaze back to Heru and nodded. “True enough.” He placed the vial on the table beside him and said slowly, “The ritual I used required three things: the bones of my father; the flesh of a servant; and the blood of my enemy. I chose to use Wormtail’s flesh and the Potter boy’s blood. And it worked.”
Heru sighed heavily and slumped a bit in his chair. “Did you not know that the Potter brat was a descendant of Gryffindor?”

“What!”

“You’ve poisoned yourself, Voldemort. You live, obviously, but you are tainted with that bloodline now. I’m sorry to have to be the one to tell you this.”

“You’re mad.”

“Am I?” Heru stood and wandered back to the cabinets where he stored his divination tools. He knelt and flipped up a wide, low door and pulled out a case, then stood and returned to where they were all seated. He had worked on this for some time, ever since Severus had explained his plan and he had gone to Godric’s portrait for help. It had not been easy to duplicate the original Gryffindor tapestry and force it to cut off at Harry Potter with a date of death. Wordlessly Heru stripped away the case and revealed a tapestry, then conjured up a stand near Voldemort’s chair and hung it. “See for yourself. Trace down Godric’s line,” he said, then took his seat.

A half hour later Voldemort was seething in anger.

“I’d appreciate if you didn’t rip my furniture to shreds, dear fellow,” Heru said with a pointed glance at Voldemort’s hands where they gripped the arms of his chair. “As I said, you’ve poisoned yourself.”

“Where did you get that abomination?”

Heru gave him an amused look. “The castle of Hogwarts holds many secrets if one has the knowledge of where to seek. It was to my benefit that the family passed down many things for me to learn from. But, it was unfortunate that the family was not aware of you, dear fellow, or you would have been brought properly into the fold.”

“And what do you propose?”

“What I propose is not something you may agree with. I may be family, but that doesn’t mean you trust me.”

“Why don’t you tell me and I will decide that,” Voldemort grated.

Heru gave a slight shrug and smiled. “Fair enough. I propose to leech the tainted blood from you on the theory that its removal will allow you to recover from the ordeal of your rebirth and allow you to regain your former strength and prominence.” Heru held out his hand to Severus again without looking, and knocked back the vial placed in it moments later.

Voldemort gave him an incredulous look.

“You didn’t really think that the creation of tapestries was the only blood magic I was proficient in, did you? At least now I understand why your presence affects me so.” After a pause he said, “If you wish to think about it, that’s fine. We can always meet again at some other time, or not, as you decide. I offer my help on this out of familial obligation, not as a sign of my personal affiliation. As I said, I would prefer to choose freely, and right now I would be unable to choose anything but against you.”

“Removal of the taint poses no complications?” Voldemort asked finally.

“That depends. Why Potter’s blood specifically?”
“I chose him so that I would enjoy the same protections he did.”

“He’s dead. Do those protections matter any longer?” Heru countered.

“I suppose not,” Voldemort admitted.

“Then I see no complication. Besides, you have already proven that you cannot be killed.” Heru smirked, ostensibly in admiration for the feat.

“True enough.” Voldemort considered again, then nodded sharply. “Proceed.”

“Splendid. But first…” Heru shook out his wand and knocked Lucius out with a swift spell. “I don’t think he needs to see this. In fact, you might want to consider obliviating him later.”

Voldemort gave Heru a faintly suspicious look. “And Severus?”

“I need him to keep me upright, remember? I can obliviate him later. Now, if you would be so kind, please do not move, though you should try and relax if that’s possible. This may end up feeling quite odd. Severus, fetch me a basin.”

Heru waited until Severus had returned and placed the basin—it was pure silver—on the table. “Lovely.” Without being asked, Severus also handed over strengthening and replenishing potions, which Heru knocked back quickly. “Please turn your hands palm up, if you would, and I shall begin.”

Heru pointed his wand at Voldemort and focused, mouthing a string of Latin words. Nothing happened at first, but that was to be expected. As he continued to chant soundlessly, a droplet of blood formed in the center of Voldemort’s left hand, and a cut slashed open in his right. The droplet grew larger, filling the depression of the left palm, and they watched as a pure white light appeared in the air just above it.

Heru focused, his brows drawn together in concentration, and made a odd little movement with his wand. The pool of blood arced up into the light, then split, the majority of it continuing over to Voldemort’s right palm and sinking into the open wound, while a hair-thin stream went to the basin. Partway into the process Heru spoke absently. “You were raised in the muggle world weren’t you? Think of this as dialysis, though it’s much, much faster.” His eyes never left the arcing streams of blood, and a smile of satisfaction slowly curved his mouth at the sight. By the time the process ended—the arc to the basin disappeared—Heru was sweating heavily. Severus rose and came to kneel at his side, offering up several vials.

Heru made another peculiar gesture with his wand and chanted under his breath, then slumped back. He noticed that Voldemort did not look much better as he took the vials and drank them. After eyeing the basin curiously, and while Voldemort was still recovering from having his blood filtered, that Heru slapped him with a very subtle binding spell and smiled. “Well, I’m very glad that part is over. I should not like to do that again any time soon.”

“Why,” Voldemort asked, “do I feel like utter hell?”

Heru tucked his wand behind his ear and smiled lazily. “Recovery isn’t an immediate thing, dear fellow. You’ve had that poison in you for quite some time I expect, and even I can’t work miracles. Those silly muggles feel like hell, too, after having their blood purified.”

“We are not muggles.”
“No, and thank goodness for that. I’ve done some research,” Heru said casually. “I learned some very interesting things about you, my dear fellow. For instance, I know why you did not die when you attempted to kill the Potter brat the first time.”

“Is that so?”

“Oh, indeed. I had always been curious about that, you see. But in time, the answer came. It was when I learned of the diary you made as a boy that I understood. You poured a part of your soul into that—quite a lot of it, actually. It was a part of you that was safe, and with it safe, the killing curse was unable to properly finish you off when it reflected. It would be like trying to use it on a vampire, you see? You cannot use conventional methods to kill what isn’t exactly alive in the first place.”

Voldemort looked vaguely interested, so Heru continued.

“So you were able to stick around until the right time and regain your physical body. The thing is, that diary was destroyed, and with it, that part of your soul. The Weasley girl regained what you had taken from her, but what you left behind was lost. She was too pure, despite what you had done to her, to absorb it, and the Potter boy’s actions made sure it could not return to you. You are, in effect, a half-souled creature.”

“Not something easily proved,” commented Voldemort.

“Indeed not. But, I have a few special talents, my dear fellow. The only thing that’s been keeping you alive after that ritual is magic.” Heru reached out silently with his power and began his manipulations. “The Potter blood, poisonous as it was, was also helping, though it hurt you just as much. I am well aware that you’ve been near to helpless, relying on your former glory to keep your people in line. You’ve been relying on the Dark Mark and what it can do to maintain your people’s fear of you.”

“But that will change now.”

“Oh, yes.” Heru gave Voldemort a dazzling smile. “It will indeed. You see, a half soul isn’t such a terrible thing, but it does have some disadvantages.” He paused to smirk. “Without your magic, you would die, unlike others.”

A faint cast of suspicion crossed Voldemort’s face as the glamour that had been masking his features collapsed. Anger appeared as he attempted to move and realized he could not.

“Problems, dear fellow?” Heru reached out a hand and curled it around the vials Severus placed there a heartbeat later. “Perhaps you begin to understand what I’m getting at.” Without taking his eyes off Voldemort he drank the potions and tossed the vials on the floor. “You see, I do have a number of interesting talents, as I said. One of those happens to be spell weaving, though I should probably clarify and say that I can weave and unweave at my discretion. It’s how I removed Severus’s Dark Mark, Tom. It’s how I released a man from the curse of being a werewolf. It’s how I’m releasing you from the burden of being a wizard right at this moment.”

Heru smirked again and said, “Don’t bother trying to speak. It’s not like I care what you have to say. You’re a disgrace to the name of Slytherin. The Gods know you allowed yourself to be outmaneuvered, but then, I am a pure-blooded Slytherin, unlike you. Did you know that Salazar was a very kind, loving person, Tom? Very set in his ways, though. He feared and despised muggles because they hate us and would do anything to be rid of us. But, he would have been happy enough to live apart from them and let them destroy the muggle-borns with their own hands. He thought it would help keep them away from us. But really, I doubt a history lesson at this point will benefit you much.”
Heru gave a mock sigh of regret. “You might be interested to know that you never could do magic here. I’m surprised you never bothered to test that, but it’s just as well, because here you are now, under my control. Honestly, I must be a better actor than I imagined to have fooled you.” Again without turning his head away, he said, “Severus, love, are you enjoying this?”

“Exceedingly,” came the rich voice, then a chuckle.

“That’s good. It was a very good plan you came up with and I’m glad you’re here personally to see it in action.” Heru smiled gently as the fire in Voldemort’s eyes reached new heights of anger and panic. “I did tell you that Severus is blindingly intelligent. For someone like him, figuring out why you were a pathetic shadow of yourself was easy once I told him what I could see and sense. He also explained to me why you made me sick. I can’t imagine why I didn’t figure it out on my own, but then, as Severus has pointed out, I think much better under pressure. I always have.”

Heru chuckled. “I may as well tell you. After all, my victory would hardly be complete if I were less than honest. Do you remember, Tom, that night in the graveyard? How the Potter boy stood up to you with a complete lack of fear? I enjoyed it quite a bit, watching it. Because, you see, I could empathize completely.”

Heru reached out and picked up the basin, setting it on his lap, then let both his hands hover over the top, the tips of his forefingers just brushing each other. He looked up and said, “It’s time to take back what you stole from me, Tom,” then closed his eyes and concentrated. With agonizing slowness the blood in the basin rose, reaching up to wrap around his hands and back down into the basin.

At length Heru opened his eyes and flexed his fingers, smiling broadly. “That’s much better.” He picked up the basin and placed it on the table again. A glance inside showed only a dry red powder. “I bet you’re wondering what that was all about, aren’t you, Tom? I suppose I should thank you for doing nothing more than drugging me for a month. Did you enjoy my diary? Did you have fun demolishing the room when you found my dead, mutilated body?” Heru laughed softly and aimed an insolent grin at Voldemort.

“I can see you don’t believe me, or don’t want to. After all, I am Heru Slytherin, and nothing will prove otherwise to the magical community. Let me think. I’d show you my scar, but I already got rid of that once I removed the connection to you. After you tried to get a reading on Severus and me that night, we decided I didn’t need it any longer. Ah, I know. How silly of me. Did you never wonder what happened to Harry’s wand? You let him keep it, we both know that.”

Heru reached into a pocket and produced a wand with a flourish. “You never found it, Tom, because I never lost it.” Heru smiled slightly and aimed off to the side, intoning, “Expecto Patronum!” A great silvery stag erupted from the wand and galloped around the room. Heru fancied he could almost hear at least one man passing out from shock up at the castle.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. All you need to know, Tom, is that Harry Potter defeated you, just as he was prophesied to do, not that Albus ever let you hear that prophecy.” Heru tucked the wand away and smirked. “I sincerely hope Salazar tortures you for making our name so black. You look a bit drawn, my dear fellow. Not feeling well? We’ve only got a handful more strands to go, so I think if you feel any remorse for what you’ve done with your life, you better start praying now.”

Long moments passed before Heru spoke seemingly to no one. “The wards are adjusted. You can come in now.”

Seconds later the crack of multiple apparitions could be heard. Albus, Minerva, Remus, Sirius, and Tonks appeared behind Voldemort and slowly walked around to face him, flanking the two chairs that Heru and Severus sat in. Tom’s eyes blazed again, but with less force; he probably could barely
keep them open.

“And now, for the last,” Heru said as he reached out his right hand and made a strange hooking gesture, then moved it as though he was dashing something to the ground. The light in Voldemort’s eyes died and Heru let loose a heavy sigh.

“Herr?” Severus asked softly.

“It’s over.”

Remus dropped with a thump in front of Heru, eyes wide and pleading. “Harry?”

“What is it, Moony?”

Remus placed a hand on Heru’s knee and repeated, “Harry?”

A choking sound made them both turn to look; Voldemort’s body was decaying in front of their eyes. “Bloody hell!” said Heru in disgust. “I am not cleaning that up, damn it. Severus, please tell me you have more replenishers?”

“Of course.” Thirty seconds later Severus pressed several vials into his mate’s hand.

Heru knocked them back quickly, tossing the empties to the side carelessly. The hand on his leg brought his attention back to Remus, who was looking at him with something akin to awe.

“Perhaps Dobby can take care of Mr Malfoy for the time being?” suggested Albus. “And perhaps we can talk up at the castle.”

“Fine.” A moment’s thought brought Dobby into the room. “Dobby, would you be so kind as to secure Malfoy in the cell I created downstairs and stay to keep an eye on him? Someone will come to collect him later, all right? I want to make sure he isn’t harmed and cannot get away.”

“Dobby is being happy to help, sir.”

“And don’t worry about the mess. Someone else will take care of it.”

Dobby simply nodded and finished releasing a still unconscious Lucius from Heru’s bindings and floated him off.

“Right, back to the castle then. Apparate to, er, the entrance hall. I’ll show you all something that will make things much easier to understand.” Heru slipped his wand out from behind his ear and secured it up his sleeve, nodded at Severus, then apparated.

Once they were all gathered, Heru asked the castle to have Mark meet them at his portrait, then stalked off toward the dungeons hissing, “Severus, make sure no one gets trigger happy.”

When they arrived at the portrait, Mark was already waiting. “Is it over, father?” he asked with bright eyes. After a moment he stepped back at the look on Heru’s face and switched his gaze to Severus. “Dad?”

“It’s all right, Mark. You know how he gets after being around Voldemort.”

Heru shook his head, then got out his wand and slashed his palm. After securing it again he pressed his hand against the portrait and hissed the password. As soon as it was open, he stalked through, knowing that Severus would make any stragglers follow. As soon as they hit the entrance hall he hissed, “I’ll be in the study,” then apparated again.
Ten minutes later everyone trooped into the study and found chairs. Heru looked up and said, “I’ll never understand why I let Salazar convince me to put the study off my bedroom.”

“You have a lovely home, Heru,” said Albus.

Heru smirked. “And now you know where I kept disappearing to.” He stood up and turned, tapping each of the portraits to wake them, then sat down again.

“Heru!” said Salazar. “You didn’t…”

Heru didn’t bother to turn around. “Sorry, brother, but I did. I couldn’t resist letting Tom know who was killing him.”

“Hello, Severus. You are keeping an eye on my brother, aren’t you?”

“Of course, Salazar.”

“Harry?” asked Remus.

Heru sighed and rubbed his forehead. “I love you, Moony, but if you keep calling me Harry I am going to hex you senseless. I haven’t been Harry for over twenty years.” Heru swept his eyes over the assemblage, coming to a stop on his son. “Mark, please come here?”

Mark stood up and walked over slowly, casting a look over his shoulder at Severus. When he was standing in front of his father he clasped his hands behind his back and toed the floor.

“You can revert if you wish, Mark,” Heru hissed. “The time for most secrets is over.”

Mark looked up sharply, then nodded. As his features shifted he hissed, “Are you okay?”

Heru reached out and pulled Mark onto his lap. “Yes, I am. This will be a bit of a shock, but I’m confident you can handle it. So, first, any questions on what happened at my house?”

“What was that final gesture?” asked Tonks.

“The destruction of his magical core. What was left of it, anyway.”

“And the blood?” asked Remus, somehow managing to look relaxed and nervous at the same time.

Heru smiled. “You were watching, Moony. I reclaimed what was mine. Tom stole it from me during that ceremony in the graveyard.”

“I still don’t understand why it made you sick,” Minerva said.

Heru looked at Severus, who said, “Simple enough. I originally assumed that Heru was badly affected by Voldemort’s presence because of the connection, but it continued to happen even after he completely removed it. Some say that blood carries a bit of a person’s soul, and certainly a bit of their magic. The only explanation left was that. In a sense, it was poison, but not in the way Heru implied. I deemed it best that Heru filter the blood from Voldemort before he killed him. It was Heru’s idea to reclaim the pertinent portions of it.”

“I’m having a hard time understanding why anyone believes this is Harry,” complained Sirius.

Heru chuckled. “Would you like me to describe what happened in the Shrieking Shack the night I first met you for real, Padfoot? Or how Hermione and I rescued you using Buckbeak? How I knew it was you the night Albus brought you down to be keyed into the wards? How I know which cave
you used in Hogsmeade during Harry’s fourth year?”

“He doesn’t understand about your patronus, Heru,” Remus offered.

“Mm, is that so? Perhaps you didn’t see it well enough. But really, I can’t imagine that anyone else would have Prongs. You can also ask the sorting hat, by the way. In fact, I suggest you all do. And Albus, if you don’t stop twinkling like that I am going to lose my rather tenuous hold on my temper.” He was rewarded by seeing the headmaster pale. “I will make this a very short story, all right?”

Everyone aside from Severus nodded. “Fine. As you know, I refused to duel Voldemort in the graveyard. I was, at the time, very, very angry about everything. I didn’t give a damn any longer and was quite happy with the idea of dying. Voldemort didn’t seem to think that was such a good idea, and I’m sure if he had any idea what his actions would lead to, he’d have killed me on the spot. But let’s fast forward.”

Heru extended a hand, snatching up a pensieve as it hurtled into the room toward him and placing it on his desk. A slight shake had his wand in his hand, and moments later he placed the first of several memories into it. “Mark, you’ll want to stand for this. Just do what they do, all right?”

Everyone but Severus rose, and one by one they touched the silvery surface. While they were immersed, Severus stood and moved his chair to the spot next to Heru’s and sat down again. Eventually they came back, but remained standing.

“So, that was Fate, or Opportunity, or whatever you want to call it. I was angry, yes, but not completely lost to reason.” Heru reached out with his wand and reclaimed the memory, then replaced it with a new one. “Mark, you’ll need to translate for parts of this, please.”

Mark nodded and they all entered the memory. When they emerged he repeated the process a third time. He didn’t think he would need to show any more after that. This time when they emerged he waved them back to their seats, pulling Mark back onto his lap after he retrieved the memory.

“So, there you have it.”

“My father is Harry Potter?” Mark asked in a whisper.

Heru snorted. “Sort of, but don’t you go repeating that. I didn’t lie to you when I said we were related, Mark.” He flipped his wand back to tap the tapestry and said, “Later on you can all look this over, but probably not this evening. I am feeling more than a little tired, not to mention irritable. So, questions?”

“How is it that you’re so sure Voldemort’s soul is gone?” asked Sirius.

“I told you. A half soul cannot survive physical death. You heard what I said to him—the only thing that kept him around the first time was that diary. Tom only had half a soul, but the other half was still around. This time it wasn’t.”

“Then why didn’t you just use the killing curse and be done with it?” Albus asked.

“Do you honestly think I like using that? That I wanted to taint my home with it? My own soul? I’ve used it a grand total of once and you witnessed it. Look at it this way—yes, I killed him, but I did it indirectly. If I did to you what I did to him, you’d end up a squib, not dead. I killed every Death Eater but two indirectly as well. I’m quite sure there are a number of people out there having hysterics right now. Yes, I could have used the killing curse and had it over with almost instantaneously, but frankly, that isn’t a very Slytherin thing to do.”
Severus started laughing softly and shaking his head.

“Oh, shut up,” said Heru with fond annoyance.

“Care to introduce us?” Tonks asked, gesturing at the portraits.

“Mm. Starting from the left, that’s Godric, Rowena, Salazar, Helga, Caedryn, Regan, Servius, Tychon, and Anselm.”

“Regan?” Albus asked.

“My wife. And, of course, the guardian to my home is myself. I trust”—Heru looked around sternly—“that none of this will become public knowledge.”

“Why didn’t you just tell us from the beginning?” Sirius asked, looking a bit hurt.

“Several reasons. First, I wanted to be who I was, not the lingering shadow of the Boy Who Lived. I wanted to deal with you all on my terms, as the man I’d become. Second, I couldn’t very well imagine myself waltzing up to Hogwarts to request audience with Albus so I could chirp out that I was Harry Potter. Even if I had and convinced him, I would not have been treated the same. As it was, you were all forced to deal with me, Heru Slytherin, not the boy you knew. The knowledge would have coloured your perceptions and caused you all to act quite differently. So I did it the Slytherin way.”

“Are you going to stay?” asked Albus.

“I don’t know. Do you really want someone here who can do what I can? Am I going to be faced with suspicion down the road? Are people going to start thinking I’ll turn on them, betray them? Am I going to be reviled for my power? People have a history of turning on their saviors, Albus. People have a history of being afraid of another’s power and trying to take them down so they cannot be enslaved to it or have to feel jealous or envious. People would rather honor a martyr than a living person, though, frankly, I’d just as soon my participation in this remain as under wraps as possible. I can and will disappear if I need to, and take my family with me.”

Albus held up his hands. “There is no need. If you wish to remain, I think you’ll find you are welcome. I’m also certain that the castle will make my life a living hell if you were to go.”

Heru smirked faintly. “I suppose she would. She’s quite fond of me, you know. Severus, I leave the decision in your hands.”

“I would prefer to stay.”

“Actually … are you all right with that, Mark?”

“Yes, Father!”

“So be it. But, if I hear one word whispered about what I’ve revealed this evening…” Heru pulled Mark into a hug, then said, “I know you’re all in shock to some extent, and I know you’ll all have a lot of questions soon enough, but for now, I think it’s time I got some sleep before I pass out. And maybe you all can come up with a reasonable explanation for what happened to Voldemort that doesn’t involve me too much.”

Murmurs of agreement sounded and people started to rise. “Severus, I’m staying here tonight,” Heru hissed. “Make sure they know about the wards.”
Two days later they gathered in Heru’s underlake lounge. Mark had found a room for himself and had his parents decorate it to his tastes, then moved in his belongings. Heru had kept to himself as Severus had transferred most of their things underlake; they had every intention of at least appearing to use Severus’s original quarters during the school year.

The Malfoys had been dealt with, with Heru appearing long enough to help Severus collect Draco and spend a few minutes threatening Lucius before retreating underlake. Heru was feeling much more like himself and lounged indolently on a couch with a bottle of butterbeer dangling from one hand.

“So, any news?”

“Fudge believes I killed Voldemort,” Albus answered with a slight twinkle.

“He actually bought that?” Heru blinked, then laughed. “All right. Who am I to argue.”
Severus shifted on the couch and glanced over, one brow slightly arched.

“What is it?” Heru asked, knowing that look.

“I allow that I am curious about something. Now that Voldemort is gone, I have to wonder how you would interpret the prophecy made about the two of you.”

Heru blinked and rubbed the back of his neck. “I suppose I had not really given it much thought beyond the obvious. I can try, though.” After a minute of silence he said, “I’ll just take it line by line.”

Severus nodded and shifted again, turning to face Heru more distinctly.

“The power to vanquish. Vanquish can mean a lot of things. Obviously, it does not have to mean death, though in this case it ended up that way. Really, all it means is I had the ability—some particular ability or abilities—to defeat him in some fashion such that he was no longer a threat to the wizarding world.”

Severus nodded, so Heru continued, “The second line is obvious. However, the only reason he came after me—that I know of—is that he was able to subvert Peter. Who served as the Secret Keeper for the Longbottoms? Was that person ever in any danger of being handled as Peter was? So, in one sense, it was sheer chance that it was I he came after first. I have no doubt that once he was able to finish me off, he would have focused on getting at them as well. That way, it wouldn’t matter which one of us it was. On the other hand, it might well have been me specifically. I have no way of knowing if Fate or Opportunity, whatever you would like to term it, had this as a part of the grand plan. I mean, where does prophecy spring from, anyway?”

“That sounds reasonable.”

“It’s the next line that I find interesting. You see—and you may recall this from when I first admitted who I was—the founders determined that a great deal of my power was locked away. They didn’t understand why I had so much trouble with certain spells, yet was curiously advanced in other aspects. They determined it was the scar. So, in a backhanded sense, Voldemort did mark me as his equal. He bought me down to his level.”

Severus smirked slightly.

“Granted, that did make me a parslemouth, which, in a way, was also an equaling factor. The bit about the power he knows not, though… That could refer to several things, I suppose. The prophecy said “he will have” not that I did. And at that point, when he marked me, I did not. So, once the scar was dealt with, all that I was became available. More power, certainly. Also divination, though I’m not sure that was terribly important. The knowledge of ancient spells, however, was. Sight, spell-
weaving… All of those things played a role.”

Heru brushed the hair back from his forehead and looked pensive for a moment. “I suppose things could have turned out differently. We might have found a different way.” He shrugged and focused on Severus again. “The next bit, well. That spells out death pretty clearly, but not who is responsible. You could say that I am the mysterious other, because technically I’m not Harry Potter, and technically I am the cause of his death. And, of course, I am also responsible for Voldemort’s death.”

Heru shook his head and stared at the ceiling. “The same goes for the second half of that line. But really, assuming other means either me or Voldemort, then all it really means, I suppose, is that one of us had to die, and it had to be the other of us who did the killing, killing the other. Sometimes I wonder if I made it out alive so often because I simply couldn’t die, unless it was by his hand directly.”

“As for that bit on surviving… What is that? What does it mean? Is survival simply existing? Is it passing on one’s genes, as I did, where he did not? With his death, I can live a normal life, more or less. I don’t entirely think that survival is living.” Heru arched a brow at his mate.

“I understand your distinction.”

“I do not exactly count Caedryn and Mark under the mantle of passing on one’s genes, though it does serve that purpose. I think you know I mean Servius, Tychon, and Anselm. If you think about it, I survived his actions. Yes, I stopped him first year, but it was Quirrell who was the agent. Voldemort himself was basically untouched. I simply thwarted him. Second year, it was a memory, half his soul. Thwarted again, but he was harmed that time, but not in such a way that prevented him from keeping on. Fourth year, I survived by putting him off guard, and then again by choosing to move forward. He got back his own by being reborn at my expense, so I think that made us even.”

“It wasn’t until I came back that the balance changed drastically. And, well, you know all of that. I was more than his equal in power, blood, knowledge, and so on. And I had the good sense to see you for what you were, not what I once thought you were. I suppose that some might think that the power was love, but . . . I would like to think you would have aided me simply as my friend.”

“I believe I would have, yes. But, it goes without saying, even though I shall, that I am quite happy with how things turned out.” Severus’s mouth curled up at one corner as his eyes gleamed.

“Perhaps we should go talk about that in more detail, eh?”

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