FeS2

by Shivani

Summary

Harry learns something about pure-bloods, and his father, which rocks his world. And not in a good way. And oh, the repercussions!

Notes

Spoilers: PS—DH, Pyrite, Myst (Uru, V, Myst Reader), Death Note (barely), and something I did in Deception and wanted to play with more.

Warnings: Slash, multiple major character deaths, do-over, not-entirely-sane-ridiculously-powerful-unforgiving!Harry, canon mangling, bashing?, semi-causal-OOC-ness, clichés, instances of crack and absurdity

Beta: Batsutousai

Attributions: Rather than having these in chapter notes, I’ll just compile them here, so most chapters won’t have notes. Quite frankly, starting author’s notes piss me the fuck off in most stories these days, so I’m trying to avoid them in other chapters as much as possible.

Shout-outs to Xanth, Hunger Games (as the most recent incarnation of an ancient theme), a movie I won’t name because doing so might somehow inexplicably give away the reference, and appropriation of a (modified) boss creature from Silent Hill. As a shout-out to She Who Cannot Be Turned’s fabulous HP/SPN crossover Let’s Party ’til the World Ends, I am using
the name Derek (with permission). Some passages (many of which are appropriately modified) pulled from Philosopher’s Stone, Prisoner of Azkaban, Goblet of Fire.

Batsutousai and I got very giggly one evening talking about certain parts of this fic, so... and she’s been awesome and pointed out errors.

**Foreword**: As some of you know, *Pyrite* was originally released as a oneshot. It finally came to me after reading the first few chapters of Batsutousai’s *Xerosis* what I could do with it. Now, I did speak to Bats and she was fine with me using her fic as an inspirational source, so I felt comfortable playing with this idea. (I didn’t even dare read that in full until I was well into this so I didn’t actually take more from it than the initial concept, some of its ideas, and some of those don’t even come into play for a good long time.)

And hey, I’m writing this because it amuses me, not because I’m trying to produce some deep, meaningful story. I have my guilty pleasures, too, and I’m not ashamed to dip my toes into the muddy waters of barely justifiable mayhem. So if you feel tempted to scold me for me doing what I just said I was going to do, I preemptively laugh in your face.

That being said, the text used here from *Pyrite* has been modified to better fit the current use I have for it (and a bit of canon, too) and the original version will remain, as is, as a oneshot (at FFN, at least). And to keep things from being too confusing, I used the chemical formula for pyrite as the name of this fic. I said in the “summary” for my Oneshots collection that “nothing in here will be linked to an existing story at this site”, but this was too good to pass up as an excuse for Harry to start over again (and for what I used from *Deception*).

Don’t be getting any ideas about Harry being perfect or having perfect reasoning. As I keep adding more to this story I see so many fallacies in “his” thinking coming out, or instances where he’s honestly afraid to know the truth, whether he admits it or not. But then, people do like to deceive themselves, yeah? There’s cherry picking going on, in a sense, so in some ways one could easily accuse this Harry of a lot of things one could accuse Dumbledore of. On the other hand, Harry does recognize that he’s a hypocrite, so.... yeah, whatever.

If you happen to be fond of people like Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Sirius, Remus, Dumbledore, and Molly... well, go elsewhere, please.

**24052014**—Finally. It took me a long god damn time to write this story, from February of 2011 to May of 2015, and almost a year of that was because my father died and I had no fucks to give about much of anything. I finally got sick to death of it sitting there, languishing on my hard drive, and figured out some kind of an ending. There wasn’t anything else I wanted to write that wasn’t of a crossover nature better suited to add-on chapters or a Snapshots file for those same crossovers (you’ll understand way at the end what I mean). I have already written these two into a different story entirely as a guest appearance (and heaven only knows how long it will take me to finish that story). You all may find the ending a bit abrupt or rushed, but I want this story out and posted, so there you go. I was going to wait until Saturday to start posting, but what the hell.

**11062015**—I realized, well after the fact, that I mucked something up regarding Uru. The building that comes up I say is K’veer, but really, what I was thinking of was the interior of K’veer and the exterior of Katha.

- Inspired by *Xerosis* by Batsutousai
Harry took a seat when the goblin waved at one of the visitor chairs and looked up attentively, albeit a bit nervously. After all, he had broken into the bank not so long ago and kept expecting someone to have identified him as the culprit, and probably try to kill him. He just kept hoping the obliviation had taken hold properly.

He was seventeen—almost eighteen—and therefore old enough (according to wizarding law) to officially inherit. And frankly, he wasn’t sure what would be there. Certainly, the Potter name was quite old, but one look at a family like the Weasleys brought home the point that far-reaching ancestors might mean nothing when it came to monetary matters.

“I am Gildmaar,” the goblin said, sliding a folder over and opening it. He glanced at the contents, then said, “The world knows your birth date, but we must verify, that and your identity, to satisfy the usual safeguards on inheritance.”

He nodded, seeing the sense, and suffered to be tested. Thankfully, the goblin magic (and he was internally hooting over the idea that the Ministry thought they were being so repressive by denying the goblins wands) was surprisingly gentle, and it was over quickly enough.

“Excellent,” the goblin quite nearly drawled. “Then we shall move on. Mr Potter, it is rumored that your education has been somewhat lacking, you having been raised in the muggle world. With that in mind I shall explain more in depth than I would normally.”

And by then Harry was feeling mightily curious.

“Pure-blood families have, for a very long time, held to the custom of testing their younglings for certain factors, generally all before the age of six weeks. What is important here is the test performed which helps them to determine advantageous marriage alliances for those same children.”

“Huh?” What the devil was he talking about?

“The specific test I speak of reveals the child’s orientation, Mr Potter. To be blunt, if the child is homosexual.”

Harry imagined, after his brain kicked back into gear, that he must look quite stupid sitting there gaping. “They can determine that?” he finally choked out.

“Oh, yes,” Gildmaar assured him. “Mind, the test is done, for some purely as custom. Some do not seem to care about the results. They would arrange a marriage based on their needs, and not based on what the child is suited for, if you catch my meaning.”
Well, that only made a certain kind of sense. He could hardly imagine Abraxas Malfoy or Orion Black giving a flying fig if their sons were gay when it came to cementing an alliance to another powerful pure-blood family. But... Harry gave the goblin a suspicious look. Why was it the topic of conversation now?

Gildmaar nodded several times and glanced back down at the contents of the folder. “In addition, Mr Potter, some families made inheritances conditional.”

Oh dear. Was he going to have to be married or something to inherit? Well, he did have Ginny, so...

“In the case of James Potter, the man was quite adamant that his primary heir not be homosexual.”

He shrugged, not seeing how any of this was relevant.

“It is said—and this is strictly rumor, you understand—that James was pressing for more children, quite possibly due to the results of your testing,” the goblin continued. “Then again, perhaps your parents—”

“Wait, what!?” he interrupted. “What do you mean, the results of my testing? I’m not gay,” he protested. “I plan to ask Ginny to marry me soon.”

One of Gildmaar’s brows shuffled up in a display of disbelief. Then he shrugged and continued, “His wishes, of course, impact your inheritance.” The goblin slid a sheet of parchment out of the folder and stared at it for a moment. “Another custom of pure-blood families is to set up a trust vault for each child, assuming they have the money to do so. This ensures that the child will have the resources they need until they come of age, especially in the event that a disaster occurs.”

Trust vault, paid for supplies... Harry nodded absently, far too caught up in confusion over the determination of his sexuality to protest again. This was all surely a mistake.

“A trust vault is handled in one of two ways when the child comes of age. If they’re the primary heir it is absorbed back into the estate. Otherwise it becomes the sole property of the child in question. Therefore, you will retain whatever funds remain.” Gildmaar pushed the parchment across the desk. “That details, as of 8 o’clock this morning, the value of that vault. Also listed are your earnings from Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes. Apparently you are a silent partner in that business. And, given that the seed money did not come from the main estate, you keep the earnings for yourself.”

He realized he was having some trouble breathing, but he could not quite pin down what he was feeling just then. The parchment was as described, giving a total for the trust vault, including the money the twins had dumped into it—not that he had known they were doing so. His hand was shaking as he trailed a finger down the page. “What’s this?” he asked, glancing up.

“Ah,” Gildmaar said with a nod. “Your mother, on the other hand, held different views. She, of course, held the right of disbursement for any and all money and property she brought into the marriage. Her wishes were that her estate be divided equally between any of her offspring. As you are an only child, you inherit all of it. You also have money left to you by various persons due to your ‘miraculous’ defeat of the Dark Lord in 1981.” More sheets of parchment were slid from the folder and pushed across the desk. “These detail any and all transactions for your vault.”

Ten minutes or so later Harry looked up, bottom lip firmly between his teeth. And then he spoke, in a curiously even voice. “So all that I have is now in this one vault, is that correct? And I have complete control of it as of now.”
“Correct, Mr Potter.”

“What a bloody asshole,” he shouted suddenly. “I knew he was a cruel bastard as a kid, but this is disgusting! Happy effin’ birthday, Harry.”

“Mr Potter,” Gildmaar said sternly.

He was instantly contrite. “I’m sorry,” he said softly. “You’re not the target of my anger. Please accept my apology for my impropriety.”

Gildmaar stared at him, then nodded. “Apology accepted. Now, let us move on to the other matter, that being the will of Sirius Black.”

Harry’s gaze snapped up. More shitty news? Or was there a glimmer of hope to be found? It wasn’t about the money, it was about the attitude, and knowing that in his father’s eyes he would never be good enough, all because some stupid test reported the wrong results. And he couldn’t even yell at the man directly, his anger left mostly impotent.

“All other bequests outlined in Mr Black’s will have already been executed, as those parties were already of age.” Gildmaar closed the folder and pushed it aside, sliding a different one over to open and glance at. “You are Mr Black’s primary heir, and thus, the bulk of his estate falls to you. You have the option to consolidate your holdings into a single vault if you wish, just to keep things tidy.”

He took a deep breath, wondering, yet afraid to wonder, and finally asked his question. “When . . . was his will made?”

“Mr Black filed three wills with us, the first being after he inherited from his uncle. The second was after he was named your godfather, and the final will was in January of 1996.”

Not so long before he was killed, then. And yet . . . . Did he want to know if he was the heir primus before the final will, or not? He wasn’t sure he could handle another seeming betrayal. It was, after all, quite possible that Sirius had been privy to the results of that stupid test, but had forgotten due to his long imprisonment. “I would like to consolidate, please.”

Gildmaar nodded and fetched out some paperwork and began filling it in. One sheet was pushed over to him for perusal and a signature, another was placed into an outbox after that. He imagined it contained orders for other goblins to start shifting things around. He spent some time looking at the statement for what he had inherited from Sirius, and wondered, exactly, how expensive it actually was to live in the wizarding world. It wasn’t like anyone had ever offered a class on those things applicable to everyday living. He couldn’t even tell if he would need to get a job after he left Hogwarts, though he had planned to do something, perhaps become an auror. At least he knew he had a home now.

A key was presented to him—he probably needed a bigger vault, then—and the meeting wrapped up. As he stood to leave he paused and looked at the goblin. “What . . . will happen to the Potter estate, then? I mean—wait, no. Never mind. Even if I have the right to know, I don’t think I could stand to.” Hundreds, possibly thousands of years of Potters, and everything they had accumulated, gone . . . and to what. He could not bear to know. He only knew that the image he held of his father was irrevocably shattered. “Is there any way for me to find out what Sirius’s earlier wills stated?”

Gildmaar paused in the act of tidying up the paperwork on his desk, then said, “We do not keep copies of older wills. However, there may be copies amongst his belongings. I would suggest checking your vault once the consolidation is complete.”
“Approximately how long will that take?”

“An hour or two.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you for your time,” he said, then exited. Back in Diagon Alley he wandered down the street in something of a daze. He was being denied his inheritance because of some stupid test that was obviously faulty? He swallowed hard and drifted to a stop, absentmindedly noticing that he was outside Madam Malkin’s. Well, he had defeated Voldemort, so the least he could do was fix that little problem with sporting a wardrobe entirely consisting of Dudley’s cast-offs, right? On that thought he went inside and began the tedious process of shopping.

Two hours later he was back in the bank, this time hurtling all the rails on the way down to his new vault. Inside he quickly noted that it had been arranged so that coin was in one area, books and papers in another, artifacts in another, and so on. He hastened over to the reading materials and began shifting through them, eventually finding what he was looking for. He breathed a sigh of relief, then immediately tensed back up. With trembling hands he began to read the second will.

Some time later he came out of his fugue to see that books were all over the floor of the vault, artifacts were also, and the neat piles of gold were scattered. The parchment in his hands had scorched edges. Sirius was just as bad as his father. Obviously the time spent in Azkaban had altered his memories to Harry’s benefit. He dropped the will on the floor and turned to gather up some money in his bag, then left, ignoring that his goblin escort looked quite put out.

Shortly thereafter he was back at the Burrow, and summoned up a smile when Ginny approached him. “Hey.”

She eyed him with concern and drew him over to a seat, gently pushing him down. “Harry, is something wrong?”

“I—” He took in his surroundings and shook his head. “Not here. I’d prefer a little more privacy.”

After relocating to a spot under a large tree some distance from the house he said, “I went to Gringotts today to see about my inheritance.”

Ginny nodded encouragingly, giving him a faint smile.

“It seems my dad was more of a wanker than I realized. All he left me was my school vault,” he said quietly. He thought for a moment that Ginny looked stricken, but a closer look showed that she merely seemed concerned. “I knew he wasn’t exactly nice when he was in school, but this . . . this is just mad. All because of some stupid test given to newborns that obviously can’t be accurate.”

Ginny coughed slightly. “I don’t know what say, Harry. This is awful. I can’t believe he would do that to you.” She shifted a bit—strangely away from him—and the look on her face was one of indecision. It cleared as she said, “Let’s go back to the house. I’m sure you’re hungry.”

The next day Hermione dragged him off to a quiet spot, the look on her face expectant. “Harry. What’s going on?”

He sighed and looked away briefly, then explained.

Hermione blinked slowly a few times and huffed. “Well, everything I’ve read about that test says it’s completely accurate.”

“You know about it? Wait, of course you do.”

“Well yes,” she said. “Though I doubt the Weasley family would have bothered with it. Still . . .”
She trailed off, nibbling her lower lip.

“What?” he demanded.

“It’s just that from a technical standpoint it was his money to do with as he pleased. I think the custom is just silly, though, but then a lot of pure-blood customs are. Look, don’t worry about it, Harry. You can return to Hogwarts and do your seventh year, then get a job. Everyone needs something productive to do in their lives.”

He half-listened to her continue to speak, incredulous at her utter lack of sympathy. And she had the nerve to say Ron had the emotional range of a teaspoon? How would she feel if her father—not that he remembered who she was—left her out of his will but for a mere pittance because she had bushy hair!? And he wasn’t even gay!

“Anyway,” she was saying, “I’m going to fetch back my parents soon. I’m a bit nervous about it, because I don’t know how they’ll react to what I did, but I’m sure things can be smoothed over.”

Harry got up, jaw clenching, and said, “I expect so.”

That night he had severe trouble sleeping, though not due to nightmares. Ron’s snoring was not helping, either. Hoping that he could sit quietly in privacy for a bit he disillusioned himself and went downstairs, avoiding the steps he knew would squeak, and settled onto the couch in the sitting room. He had only been there for a few minutes when voices attracted his attention, coming from the kitchen. Curious, and willing to eavesdrop if it meant his mind would stop looping around in circles over what had happened, he crept closer and stationed himself by the entrance.

“—could have anything you wanted,” Molly was saying.

“Because he’s famous?” Ginny said. “Mum, that doesn’t translate to gold! He told me what happened at the bank. He’s poor! What good is that?”

“What? Why?”

“That pure-blood test they do. No wonder I couldn’t get him interested until I started dosing him—he’s gay! And because of that James Potter only left him his school vault. I can’t marry a poor man,” she protested.

Harry staggered back slightly, miraculously making no noise.

“Oh dear,” Molly said. “Oh dear. Stop the potions immediately. I won’t have you making the same mistake I made with your father. We both know how that turned out.”

“Yeah,” Ginny said with a sigh.

He really . . . was gay? It was true?

“All right, I’ll stop immediately. It’s too bad the Malfoys are our enemies. I could have gone for Draco. He’s a right snot, but he’s very handsome and I know they’re wealthy.”

Harry felt his stomach heaving and quickly moved away, managing to make it outside and a fair distance away before he vomited onto the grass. Betrayal after betrayal after betrayal. Lies and half truths and coercion. Was that all his life was ever going to be? His father and the Dursleys had betrayed kinship, Ron had turned his back on him numerous times, most of the students at the school had turned on him, Dumbledore had stolen his childhood, used him, and sent him out there to die, and now Molly and Ginny had been added to the list. Even Hermione had betrayed him in her own
fashion, and not just one time. He had always been prepared to forgive and forget, wanting so badly to keep hold of those friendships, shaky as they were, but.

But how was it he was so still in love with Ginny, even after all those months apart? Was Ron in on this, too? His mind took a cynical turn as he began to sift back through his memories of the years. Why had he never stood up for Hermione all those times when Ron was being so hurtful to her? Why hadn’t Hermione simply explained her concerns to him about the Firebolt instead of going behind his back? Why had she given him grief about his ‘saving people’ thing when they had both encouraged it early on? What hypocrisy! Why hadn’t they found a way to write to him that one summer? Hermione could have attempted muggle post, after all. But then—he snorted—she was so devoted to authority.

And Ginny, oh Ginny. It hurt so much to think these things, because despite now knowing it was false he still felt so much love for her. False love, fool’s gold. A girl who had never even managed to speak to him more than a few words at a time for years, then suddenly seemed to ‘get over’ him and start dating boys. But looking back he realized that her eyes were always on him. Trying to make him jealous? And then resorting to love potions, just because she wanted access to his money? Molly didn’t even bear thinking about.

He spent an hour or so gazing at the moon and stars, then headed in to get some sleep if he could. As he drifted off he wondered if there was even any point in staying.

He spent the next week doing something utterly uncharacteristic: research. The very thoughts he was thinking were insane, but he continued nevertheless. He also had to make a decision soon. Return to Hogwarts or not? Move into his godfather’s childhood home or not? He had the distinct impression that should he move Ginny and Molly would help him on his way—perhaps too eagerly. He had certainly noticed that the feelings he had for Ginny were withering.

Perhaps he should move. Maybe then he would not be bothered so damn often by Ron and Hermione. Ron was always pushing him to go become an auror with him right now. Kingsley—the new minister—would probably ease their way in for services rendered. And Hermione kept nagging at him to return to Hogwarts. When was his life ever supposed to be his own?

If he could crash the remnants of the fidelius at № 12 Grimmauld Place and raise another, he would at least have a place of privacy, quiet, and safety. Harry nodded.

“Finally,” he muttered with a roll of his eyes. “Take that, Hermione.” Harry gazed around the still ruinous interior of his new home with mild disgust. All that time using the place as headquarters and nobody had done much of anything to make the place look a bit nicer. Then again, he was not sure he was up to it, either. “Kreacher.”

The house-elf popped in and gave him a look he could not interpret.

“Will you please do something about the state of this house? It’s a disaster.” On seeing the expression on the elf’s face twist he hastily added, “I know, Kreacher, I know. But you see—remember the locket?”

The elf eyed him a bit suspiciously and nodded.

“The locket Master Regulus entrusted you with has been destroyed. It’s ruined now. I couldn’t have
done it without your help. Without you finding Fletcher for me we would never have known where to look. So even if you weren’t able to personally destroy it I swear to you it has been done.”

Kreacher’s eyes widened. “Kreacher will begin cleaning, Master Harry.”

“Thank you,” he said softly, sighing as the elf popped away. He got up and headed for the library. At least he had had the sense to wait to leave until after Hermione had flown off to Australia.

Harry looked upon the state of the ritual room in great satisfaction. Between the books hidden away in the house and those shockingly found in the things he inherited he had devised a way to do things over, this time with his own plans in mind. He laughed to himself. Anyone else would think it was crazy. After all, he was alive and healthy, and he did have a decent amount of money to his name. But why not? He knew what he wanted and maybe this time he could have some fun tweaking everyone’s noses. Maybe even meting out a bit of revenge.

But before he continued there were a few things he needed to take care of, such as emptying his vault, the house of anything of interest, and getting back the Resurrection Stone and the Elder Wand. Even if he did fail to take everything with him there was no sense whatsoever in making it easy for anyone faithless to get it. He laughed again, a little too long. Maybe those Unforgivables really had messed with his brain.

After stepping out into the hallway he called for Kreacher. “Hypothetically speaking, if my soul and mind and magic were sent back into the past to merge with my earlier self, would our bond also transfer?”

Kreacher’s eyes went wide in mild shock. “Kreacher does not know.”

“Hm.” Granted, he did not need it to transfer, though it would probably simplify things greatly if he had a loyal house-elf from the start. Then again, Kreacher only accepted him now because he had done what Kreacher could not. Going back and not destroying the locket. . . . He shrugged. Whatever would happen would happen. “Just curious. Oh, and thank you, the house looks brilliant,” he said, looking around admiringly. “You’ve done work to be proud of.”

The elf gave him a funny look, uncertainty mingled with pleasure, and popped away, so Harry continued on down the hallway. He had those loose ends to tie up, and then he could go whenever he felt it wise, sooner or later.

Harry woke up in what was normally the very last place on earth he would want to be: the cupboard under the stairs. In this instance, however, it was precisely the right place. After blinking a few times and getting his equilibrium back he looked around, a broad smile appearing. Somehow, against all reason, his belongings had come back with him. It was only then that he realized having the Deathly Hallows with him presented a conundrum. Were they duplicates, or had they merged with the earlier versions? And if so, did that mean Dumbledore had lost his favored wand and possession of James’s cloak? That the ring was a Horcrux again? For that matter, what about himself?

He was still trying to puzzle that out when footsteps overhead alerted him to Petunia mincing down the stairs. Several seconds later sharp rapping sounded at the cupboard door, along with, “Get up! It’s time for you to make breakfast, you lazy freak.”

Harry’s jaw tightened in anger, but he went ahead and changed into some of his cousin’s cast-offs
when the sound of the door being unlocked was also heard. His baggy clothing was good enough to hide the Elder Wand, though he thought bringing it with him was just asking for trouble. The remainder of his goods were tucked in a spot dark even with the light on.

Out in the kitchen Petunia was giving him her usual look of disdain, and jerked her chin toward the refrigerator. He kept his face blank as he walked over and got on with things, having to think hard to remember where the stool he would need to stand on in order to reach the burners properly was kept. It wasn’t until Vernon and Dudley were awake and at the table—and he was given a meager piece of dry toast to eat—that he could not help but wonder if all of this was going to be worth it.

Two weeks later he was still wondering, but had been somewhat distracted by the realization that the inhabitants of Little Whinging all had that same look in their eyes—bar Mrs Figg, but she was a stooge of Dumbledore’s. The more he cast a critically analytical eye over the people around him the more he realized that they honestly had taken the word of the Dursleys as to his alleged character. They thought that he, at a mere five years of age, was a budding criminal or something. ‘Merlin! Was this how Tom Riddle felt at the orphanage?’ he thought, then blinked. Maybe they had a lot more in common than he had wanted to recognize.

Granted, Tom had perhaps inherited the insanity brought on by inbreeding in the Gaunt family, but Harry was not too sure about his own sanity at that point. What was right? He took another look around at the people of Little Whinging and frowned. Right would be these people recognizing the signs of neglect and abuse and reporting it. Did they simply not care? Was it simply easier to just avoid thinking for themselves and instead believe the lies? Was this really much different from his experiences in the wizarding world? Maybe it really was that simple. Bad people were bad people and ought to be dealt with.

An eight-year-old Harry was sitting there nibbling on his breakfast toast when Vernon started another tirade, ranting at him about his freakishness. He really wanted to roll his eyes, but knew what that would bring. ‘This is so damn tedious. I wish Vernon would just die or something.’

He was utterly surprised when everything around him froze. It was as though his relations had been put on pause. He was further surprised when the shadows off to one side began to multiply, separating from the corner they were in, and formed a humanoid figure. The Elder Wand was in his hand and pointed at the phantasm before he registered the need, and it did not drop when the figure solidified into what most people he assumed would consider Death.

“Oh?” said the figure.

Harry licked his dry lips and swallowed. “I really have gone mental,” he muttered. “Maybe I shouldn’t have used all those Unforgivables.”

The figure laughed rustily. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am commonly known as Death, but I prefer Derek.”

Harry arched a brow and considered. ‘Maybe that story wasn’t just a story after all?’

“It was not,” said Derek. “I did meet the Peverell brothers. You are descended from one and inherited the Cloak of Invisibility—I rather liked him, actually. But then, you gained the other Hallows, as well, making you the Master of Death. I confess, I did not think it possible. Having done so you have broken the curse on the Elder Wand. In fact, it will go out of its way now to not seem remarkable to others.”
“What,” he said, “does that mean, exactly—that I won’t have to worry about people trying to kill me to get it from me?”

“Correct. The Hallows are now a part of you. They can never be taken from you—unless, that is, you should decide to relinquish them. Even if someone stole one the Hallow would return to you immediately. In point of fact, Albus Dumbledore was extremely surprised when the power of the wand disappeared, along with the cloak. He was forced to fall back to his original wand.”

Harry frowned. “And he has no way of tracking either of them down?”

Derek shook his head. “For all intents and purposes the united Deathly Hallows are untraceable. You could cast the killing curse at Vernon right now and no one would ever know.”

“I . . . see.” He spent the next few minutes trying to wrap his head around that, absently nibbling on his piece of toast. “So what exactly,” he asked, “does it mean to be the Master of Death? Aside from you popping up unexpectedly and making me think I’m about to kick it.”

Derek chuckled. “It’s not just a fancy title. You cannot die, not unless you relinquish the Hallows. If I had ever thought they could be united I might not have imbued them with the power they hold, but that is now irrelevant. Attempts against you will fail. A spell will go wide of the mark or simply fail. Something will interfere. It is not a one hundred percent guarantee, though, so it is possible for you to be hurt. As Master of Death you have many gifts. You can transport yourself to any place in the world where death exists. Because there are no secrets in death, you can know know anything. You can also—”

“Hold up! ‘Know anything’?”

“Yes. I shall liken it to your knowledge of Occlumency and Legilimency. You have perfect protection and perfect mastery. Even someone like Albus Dumbledore would never feel you snooping in his head. It’s not the extent of it, but as an example it suffices.”

“Hn. That could come in extremely handy,” he murmured. “And I can cast all the magic I want with the Elder Wand and no one will ever be able to trace it? No monitor will pick up on it, the Trace will never register it?”

“Correct. And as Master of Death you are technically a necromancer, so you hold power over ghosts and can create and command inferi.”

Harry nodded. Ghosts could be handy, though he was not too sure about inferi. “You said anywhere there was death. That pretty much means anywhere, doesn’t it. I mean, anyone with meat in their kitchens has death there. Anyone who steps on a bug has death there. Anyone with meat in their stomachs has death there.”

“Again, correct. Though, technically, plant life counts.”

Harry shrugged. “What about Horcruxes? Do I have any power over them?”

Derek shook his head. “Nn, not really. The soul must be complete and the body dead for it to count.”

He furrowed his brow. He could work around that, but—“So the souls consumed by dementors...?”

“Are in an unending hell of sorts. And dementors are not dead, so you have no more real power over them than anyone else. They are not technically alive, either, but for the purposes of our discussion they are.”
“If there are no secrets in death then you must know if there’s a way to destroy them.”

“I do.”

Harry huffed and rolled his eyes. “Is there a way to destroy them, and if so, how is it accomplished?”

Derek seemed to grin beneath the shadow of his hood. “Fiendfyre would work.”

“All right. So, supposing I want someone to die, like Vernon here. Can I just wish it and it happens, or do I have to do things the normal way?”

Derek tilted his head to one side, allowing Harry to glimpse what looked to be eyes the mirror of his own. A moment later he pulled a small book out of his pocket and consulted one of the pages. “At present Vernon Dursley is expected to live for quite some time yet, though his obesity, diet, and genetic factors are whittling that down. In any case you could just call me and I would reap the target, but you can do things the normal way as well.”

Harry craned his neck, trying to see the book better. ‘Okay, but what if I wanted something elaborate? Like arranging for an accident of a freakishly bizarre nature. I should think it would be a bother to keep calling you in so I could explain what I wanted while the rest of the world sits frozen.”

Derek seemed to consider again, then nodded. The book went into his pocket and another one was produced, then handed over to Harry. “Write down what you want, when you want it. I’ll take care of the rest.”

He glanced at the little book curiously and flipped it open to see blank, faintly-lined pages. He was about to comment when Derek added, “No one can see it but you. Much like the Hallows it exists only for you.”

Excellent. “Anything else I should know?”

“Nothing comes to mind at present. But if you need me just call. I will answer.”

“All right, well, thank you for—actually, is my scar still a Horcrux? I’d noticed it looked pretty faint.”

Derek shook his head. “Neither is the Resurrection Ring.”

“So there’s only the locket, the diadem, the diary, and the cup,” he muttered. “Thank you for explaining all of this to me. I will call if I need you again directly.”

Derek nodded and left in reverse of the way he arrived, and then everything unfroze and Vernon continued on with his rant. Harry sat there blank faced as he considered the implications and the power now available to him. So many people had betrayed him. His attention focused on Vernon for a split second, then switched back to the book he had. A tiny smile of glee flitted over his face before vanishing.

It was a week later that Vernon had an accident of a freakishly bizarre nature. During a sales meeting in which some of their products were being demonstrated for a potential customer, a drill went out of control, slipped away from the salesman and went flying through the air, only to crash through several windows and drill straight through Vernon’s throat. He died well before anyone could help him.

Petunia received the payout from life insurance, but also his pension and quite a lot of additional
money as it was a workplace accident. If nothing else it set her for life, so long as she was not extravagant. The car, however, went back to the company. Harry was interested to note that his aunt actually did seem to care for Vernon, but his analysis of family dynamics was brought to an abrupt halt when Marge came to visit.

The Elder Wand came out at that point and Marge was encouraged to never again speak a word against Harry or his parents, and her dog developed a strange aversion to him. Once his courtesy aunt was gone Harry proceeded to use a rather subtle application of the imperius curse on Petunia to make sure she kept up with the bills, and on Dudley to ensure the miniature whale stayed away from him. He realized quickly, however, that once Petunia recovered a bit from her grief that the neighbors were giving him even more disdainful looks. Apparently his aunt was playing up his allegedly unsavory character as a way of coping.

And that just pissed him off. He needed Petunia for now, but the others...?
Chapter 2

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“There were rooms of forgiveness in the house that we share, but the space has been emptied of whatever was there.” — Sting, Consider Me Gone

Harry observed the situation for a while longer—several weeks—before he decided on anything. Were all muggles bad? No, but the ones he was forced to deal with on a daily basis certainly looked ripe. Things at school had not changed much; Dudley still bullied everyone (except Harry directly) and the other children avoided Harry like the plague. But they were mostly innocent children. Most behavior was taught, after all. It was the adults he was angry with.

To that end he began to emplace a series of wards around the town, ones which, once strengthened, would supersede the pathetic wards Dumbledore had placed and provide protection over a far wider area. However, powering them up would require life force—that of the adults Harry was so angry with. He was sick and tired of being walked all over, of people making assumptions, of people assuming he would live up to their unrealistic and unfounded expectations. A rather uninspired gas main explosion wiped out a whole lot of those adults, and bizarrely, there were no children anywhere near the site when the accident occurred. Harry watched with a sense of awe as the ward structure flared with power and nearly solidified to his eyes, then slowly turned translucent. It never once crossed his mind that he had just created a whole lot of orphans.

It was seeing Mrs Figg slowly wandering by the house the next day, eyeing the windows, which reminded Harry of Dumbledore again—and Snape, and Umbridge, and Fudge. And Ginny, and Molly, and Ron. Hermione, well, she had helped him out quite a lot over the years, far more so than Ron ever had. But as he was thinking about Snape an idea occurred to him, one that made him grin. A little messing about with the Elder Wand initiated a permanent change to his hair, one slow enough that it would take a couple of years before it was recognizably the same colour as his mother’s.

A few weeks later a terrorist attack wiped out another hundred or so adults, which pushed the strength of the wards even higher. (The news report revealing information about a statement released by the terrorists to the media provided the interesting detail that the driver had become “very, very lost” and they had never intended to be anywhere near Little Whinging.) Mrs Figg casually wandered by again, rheumy eyes trying to see through the windows from the pavement, but declined to knock on the door. Harry had to wonder just what she was thinking. Petunia had not foisted him off on her since Vernon had died. Perhaps the old bat thought that Petunia herself would never physically abuse him, and therefore had not pressed the issue of needing his ‘help’? Obviously she had never had an inkling about those times his aunt had tried to cave his skull in with a frying pan.

He decided to let it go. Mrs Figg was not someone he could arrange an accident for. It would probably push Dumbledore into making a visit, and then find another ineffective watcher, someone he might not even notice right away. And there was that saying . . . better the devil you know. With the new wards at good strength he turned his attention to the issue of Voldemort. It really was too bad the man’s spirit form was off in Albania or wherever. It might have been interesting to rifle through his mind to see just exactly what he had hoped to accomplish. Instead he frequented the library to better research what was going on in the world when Tom Riddle was just a boy. World War II might have had quite an effect, pushing Riddle toward a phobia of death, and a hatred of muggles.
Even he had to admit that the average muggle was as dangerous as a wizard; they just used different tools. And muggles had the advantage of being able to kill thousands of people at a time with barely any effort. Granted, he could now do the same, but he wasn’t pouring over the internet looking for homemade bomb recipes and getting a subscription to *Anarchist Monthly*.

The adult magical folk had obviously not done anything for Tom during the war, when the Germans were dropping bombs over London. Why hadn’t they removed him from that situation? Because he was someone without a recognizable pure-blood name? With no established ‘proper’ lineage? More thought on the matter made him realize that for all they feared Lord Voldemort, they were in some ways responsible for the man he became and had only themselves to blame. They helped to create the problem by their indifference and by sticking their heads in the sand, then compounded it by again practicing denial and sticking their heads in the sand. And these were the kind of people who expected him to play hero at their convenience?

“Honestly,” he muttered, not caring if anyone in the library overheard him. All it would take was a flinty stare and he’d be avoided, and that was assuming anyone came near him in the first place what with them all thinking he was headed straight for prison the moment his wrists were thick enough to not slide right out of a pair of handcuffs. ‘I’m beginning to identify with the guy. He wasn’t lying when he said we had a lot in common. Dumbledore abandoned him, and abandoned me. Imagine if there had been a prophecy back then. Would Dumbles have tried to play puppet master to Tom and get him to deal with Grindelwald? Thinking back to those memories he showed me. . . . It’s obvious he knew something was wrong. All right, he wasn’t a hero yet then, but still. One might think after the fiasco with Gellert and Ariana that he would attempt to steer Tom toward a better life, not just ignore him and hope the problem resolved itself. And then he had the nerve to run my life for me? Cleaning up after the results of his own inadequacy? Pfft.

“But. . . .” He paused, worrying his lower lip between his teeth. “He did kill mum and dad. Then again, they were combatants. It’s not like they didn’t know they could be killed at any time. It’s not like they left the country once they found out about the prophecy. It’s not like, oh, I don’t know, they prepared for the possibility that the fidelius charm might not be good enough, and have escape routes planned out. Maybe”—he rolled his eyes up toward the ceiling—“have emergency portkeys, or even have their wands handy. Now that I think about it I’m rather disappointed in them.

“And why weren’t provisions made for me in the eventuality of their deaths? There was a war going on and they knew they were targets. Come to think of it, Gildmaar never did show me the will itself.” He frowned. “Maybe James didn’t care since I wasn’t what he wanted?”

A voice sounded in his head, startling him rather badly. ‘No provisions were made because Sirius Black was known to be your godfather. You were to live with him. They never imagined he would be tossed into Azkaban on false charges and without a trial.’

‘What about a godmother?’ he asked after realizing that he was not having a psychotic moment and hearing things, but rather that Derek was speaking to him—er, thinking to him.

‘One was never chosen.’

‘Well, shit. So with Sirius out of the picture and no other closer blood relatives, I got stuck with Petunia.’

‘That about sums it up, yes.’

‘Meh. So what did happen to the Potter fortune?’

‘Which—’ Derek suddenly stopped, leaving behind a thoughtful silence.
'Which vault?' he wondered to himself.

'It went to various accounts, including a vault for use by the Order of the Phoenix.'

'All because I’m homosexual. Hm, I wonder why I ever felt any attraction toward Cho, then,’ he mused.

'Plenty of people have some instances of confusion when it comes to attraction. In your case, the only people who ever made it obvious that they wanted you were females, so you went with the flow. And think back about that time period when you became attracted to Ginny. You suddenly became so jealous of her interactions with Dean, and you completely ignored just how petty, catty, manipulative, jealous, and downright nasty she was. I don’t think you ever once had a meaningful conversation and she never once made the attempt to get to know you or help you to fall in love with her naturally. You didn’t even trust her the way you did Hermione. Much of the time she acted in ways that in James disgusted you. If anything that should have pushed you away. But you already know she dosed you with love potions after everything else she tried failed. In point of fact, you acted a lot like James yourself that year.’

Harry grimaced and thumped his head against the table.

Derek seemed to take pity on him and added, ‘A lot of that was attributable to the love potions. You acted in a way that she expected from you. You acted to minimize any conflicts between you. I don’t think it helped that Ron was acting his usual insensitive self and Hermione went off the deep end. She might have noticed something was wrong if she hadn’t been mired in her own hormonal sludge pool.’

‘There’s something very weird about having this conversation with Death,’ he commented. ‘But, to get back to the original point, not even Lily thought to specify that I should never go to Petunia. Neither of them even contemplated that Sirius might be killed as the alleged secret keeper, never mind him ending up in Azkaban.’

‘More or less.’

‘Well isn’t that just peachy. Maybe Hermione was right that wizarding folk haven’t got any common sense. Maybe magic rots the brain or something.’

‘More on the order that magic makes it possible to escape so many consequences that thought processes tend to become warped. You might consider your own state of mind in that light.’

Harry frowned and sat back up properly. He *had* killed rather a lot of people recently—and felt no remorse whatsoever. It was true, he realized, that if he’d had to worry about consequences he probably would never have done any of it. And yet, if he had been worried about consequences he would never have come back in the first place. He had wanted the opportunity to do it all over again with different choices and worked hard to find a way to make it happen.

A good ten minutes went by before he realized that he could no longer sense Derek, and with a shrug went back to reading.

He eventually figured out a way to place the fidelius charm on a trunk of two forms; at normal size it looked most like any other trunk, but when miniaturized it became a charm he could attach to the end of the Elder Wand. And since the wand could never be taken from him the trunk should be safe enough, especially as no one could see it to begin with. Into that went all his hoarded possessions
and money, including money he had stolen from muggles.

With that out of the way he decided to get his hands on those Horcruxes. Harry was uncertain as to what exactly he was going to do with them yet, but it was better if they were safely where he could put his hands on them at any given moment. Naturally all four of them were in inconvenient places, though the locket might be the least problematic. On the other hand, Kreacher was sure to be there and he did not know how that meeting would go. Kreacher wanted the locket destroyed as it was the last command given him by Regulus. Knowing that Harry had no intention of doing so at the moment might cause the elf to become antagonistic. If the bond had not come with him he might be forced to kill the little bugger; there was no sense whatsoever leaving the elf running about and able to cause him problems.

He could try shifting into the Lestrange vault. He did remember it well, after all. The same could be said for the diadem in the Room of Requirement. The diary, however, might have to wait. Or did it? Harry moved to stand in front of the mirror in his room, noting absently that his hair was already lighter and his brows were now more of a dark brown. He concentrated on the Cloak of Invisibility and grinned when his reflection suddenly disappeared. A moment later it reappeared.

Harry was not sure just how in tune Dumbledore was with the wards at Hogwarts, but thought he could slip in long enough to take the diadem without being caught. The same might be true at Gringotts. And if he could find a time when the Malfoy family was out. . . . He could leave the locket for last, in case Kreacher was a problem.

Things had gone absolutely brilliantly once he realized that dust inside buildings contained skin cells—dead skin cells. He was in and out of the Room of Requirement in all of thirty seconds. Gringotts took slightly longer as he did have to disable some curses. The diary was taken care of easily enough after he spotted the family group just entering Diagon Alley, though he suspected that at least Lucius had left quickly. № 12 Grimmauld Place was not under the fidelius yet—and he was not honestly sure it could have stopped him—so entering was child’s play.

He already had the locket in his hand and was preparing to leave when he heard something out in the hallway. For a moment he was torn between going and staying to see how the elf would react. A split second later he left, back to his room. A meeting with Kreacher could wait, if ever there was one. The locket was stored in his charmed trunk and the wand allowed to revert to being a part of him.

Harry thought about the options open to him for the remainder of the day, giving over quite a bit of time to who he would like to see dead based on their behavior from his first time through. For the time being he removed some of his liberated muggle funds from the trunk and shifted to Diagon Alley. The goblins converted his ill-gotten gains with only a handful of sneers, allowing him to spend quite a while at Flourish & Blotts purchasing books on wizarding law, something he had never bothered to check before. He honestly expected the laws to be archaic, confusing, and full of instances where “pure” blood allowed for greater freedoms when it came to adherence to supposedly common law. He also grabbed some books on culture and things that “everyone knows”, geared more toward muggle-borns entering the magical “world”. If nothing else he might get a good laugh out of his new reading material.

He had just shifted back to his room when he heard, ‘Harry. . . .’

He frowned; that tone of voice was both dire and pitying—and he loathed pity. ‘What?’ he asked suspiciously.
‘There is something I want to tell you, but I strongly suggest you go someplace private, preferably a bit remote.’

His heart sank into a pit of apprehension, but he obliged and quickly dealt with his purchases, then shifted to the Chamber of Secrets. He tossed a few spells at the statue’s mouth to prevent the basilisk from exiting and sat down. ‘All right,’ he sent reluctantly.

‘There is something you ought to know, master. I know you will very likely be devastated, but given your current path you should be aware of it.’

Harry huffed in a mixture of frustration and dread. ‘Lay it on me.’

‘James and Lily are not dead.’

Some time later he awoke from his fugue to realize he had done quite a bit of damage to the Chamber, including gouges in the stone floor that looked to have been made by steel claws. ‘What did you say?’ he snarled. ‘Tell me I did not hear that right.’

‘Your parents are alive. You have a twin. You also have two sisters.’

‘How the fuck is that possible?’ he demanded. ‘Even Dumbledore isn’t powerful enough to Obliviate the entire community to make them forget I have a twin.’

‘No, he is not. But remember, they knew they were being hunted and they knew Lily was due in July. There were only a handful of people who needed to be Obliviated of the fact of your twin, after the tests were done and it was realized that you, the elder twin, was homosexual.’

‘So they left me there to be killed.’

‘Your mother was completely against the idea, but was made to capitulate. She did what she could in monetary terms knowing that you would never inherit the bulk of James’s money.’

Well, that cooled his fury slightly. ‘Made to capitulate?’

‘She was convinced that the Longbottoms would be targeted first and that Neville was likely the subject of the prophecy. After all, she bore James twins, half-blood twins. She was finally convinced that you would be unharmed and she would get you back.’

‘And since I ended up being the Boy-Who-Lived and they were thought dead—was that Dumbledore’s idea? Put in a couple of patsies to play the role? And then Voldemort came after me, not Longbottom, because he was actually more concerned about his fellow half-blood. But since the decoys were dead they couldn’t very well own up to such a, oh, I don’t know, Slytherin way of handling things?’

‘Very well reasoned.’

‘And Dumbledore was right there, I’m sure, reassuring my mother—because I’m sure James didn’t care all that much and probably expected me to die anyway later on, or had somehow talked himself into thinking that my twin or Neville would somehow count in my place—and not bothering to mention the detail about me being lobbed off on Petunia. Christ Almighty, I knew that Dumbledore had some massive blind spots because he kept staring into the sun of Greater Good, but . . .’

‘Essentially. Recall that Dumbledore had reason to suspect something due to your scar.’

He rubbed his face with one hand, still reeling, still furious. ‘Tell me, how is my parents’ marriage
doing? And for that matter, it wasn’t them who came out of Voldemort’s wand that time, but they still acted like my parents. Did Dumbledore screw with their memories? Have them under the imperius?’

‘As to the first, their marriage is fairly rocky. She stays because she has even less credibility now without being known as she was. She also adores her two girls, whom she has much more influence over as James is busy with your twin.’

‘And James just arranged in his will to inherit his own money, right?’

‘Correct. James inserted himself back into the family tree from an obscure cadet branch.’

He shook his head. ‘I don’t know why I’m suddenly reminded of that fifth year cock-up where he told me he’d made the mistake of caring.’

‘... You remember Skeeter’s book. Dumbledore identified with you on two counts.’

‘Being gay and being a hero.’

‘Yes. As to the second, they were minor Order members who had been, as you put it, screwed with. Had you not been attacked they would have been quietly fixed.’

‘Wait a minute, are you telling me my parents were alive before and I even went an entire year without hearing from them? Not even my mother?’

‘... The ritual you used—’

‘Ye—’ He stopped, his eyes suddenly widening. ‘You know, I’d been wondering about that. I didn’t send myself into the past and create a timeline split, then, like I thought I did.’

‘No, you did not. You sent yourself into an alternate dimension. In your original your parents did die and you did not have a twin. In this one, however...’

‘Still, James was and is a wanker. And now I find I have living parents, hiding out under a new name, a twin who is probably insufferable, and two sisters that I will likely never know.’

By the time his Hogwarts letter arrived Harry’s hair had completed its slow change to be the same colour as his mother’s. Even his eyelashes were affected, but they were a dark enough shade as to not be immediately noticeable as red except in bright light. He took the letter up to his room to check; nothing had changed, not that he had anticipated any differences despite what he had so far done. It did, however, highlight the fact that he was already expected to know about the wizarding world, regardless of having been placed with magic-hating muggles. Was it more to his advantage to play dumb, or to simply head back to Diagon Alley and send off a reply at the owl office there?

‘On the one hand, playing dumb means that Dumbledore might well assume he could have greater influence over me, even though I never even really spoke to him except at the mirror and in the infirmary that year. If I don’t I’d be playing into the idea of his that Petunia would at least have the decency to tell me about certain facts. Speaking of which, how did he know I was in the mirror room? He couldn’t possibly have seen through the cloak, not if even Death cannot. Perhaps an alert ward on the entrance? Did he perhaps place some kind of compulsion wards in the nearby area to lead me there? He is a manipulative bastard, after all. Did he want me to enter the trapped area? Is that why the puzzles were so simplistic? Or were they simply there as a way to slow Voldemort down, so he would have time to go after him? I should probably check once I get to Hogwarts.'
‘In that same vein, when exactly were the puzzles put in place? Why bother to remove the stone from Gringotts if they had yet to be set up? If they already were, which is only logical, then why have the mirror where I could get to it during break? The only thing that makes sense is if he wanted me to know how it worked, which means he was hoping I’d take the bait just as Voldemort did. Either that or he was curious to know what I’d see. Given that he suspected I was a Horcrux . . . ’ He nodded. ‘Maybe he wanted to know if I’d been adversely affected by it. And once he got what he wanted he put it back in place. Snape went straight there that night, so—wait a minute.

‘Dumbledore told the prefects to escort everyone back to their houses, despite the fact that troll was supposed to be in the dungeons, which could mean either Slytherin or Hufflepuff students would be in danger—how kind of him to consider the safety of the students. And on top of that it would leave Quirrell, who faked fainting, alone in the Great Hall and free to do whatever the hell he wanted. And if that fainting spell had been real being left there alone might have seen him dead via troll. So did Dumbledore suspect the man or not? Did he?’ He paused significantly, and was rewarded.

‘Surprisingly enough he did not,’ Derek chimed in. ‘Snape reported his suspicions that something was very wrong with Quirrell, but Dumbledore more or less laughed it off at the time. He considered the personality change and stuttering to be an amusing quirk, a peculiar souvenir of Quirrell’s trip to Albania. It wasn’t until after the fact that Dumbledore realized just how blind he had been, when the proof was more or less shoved in his face. His superiority complex blinded him to a lot of things, and his personal struggle over believing he was unsuited to power due to what happened with Grindelwald and his inability to stop back seat driving and meddling, well, that distracted him from a number of things. Dumbledore was not a classically evil man, but he was a deeply flawed man. His faults of character and his mistakes were far-reaching and at times devastating. He accomplished or facilitated a lot of evil simply by refusing to act.’

‘I suppose I can see that now,’ he responded after a moment, ‘but it doesn’t change how betrayed I feel, especially since he is even worse in this dimension. I am tempted to see the man dead early simply because he just couldn’t stop playing puppet master.’

‘You could,’ Derek said slowly, ‘but he did have a deterring effect—to some degree—on Voldemort. Though, given your views of late . . . ’

‘I don’t think all muggles are bad. Not as individuals, anyway. But you’re right. I don’t seem capable of remorse anymore when it comes to killing people who’ve betrayed me. I don’t necessarily want to torture them, because that in the end serves no lasting purpose. It can’t ever change what happened, but it can prevent it from happening again this time. Muggles as a whole are dangerous, though, far more dangerous than magicals, and not just to other humans. It would be so nice if we could just carve out our own country. I have to wonder just how many pure-bloods secretly agreed with a lot of what Voldemort stood for, but just disagreed with some of his methods. Maybe if he’d been more circumspect they would have joined him in greater numbers, or at least provided more support from non-front line positions.’

Derek was conspicuously silent on those points, and Harry narrowed his eyes, then changed the subject. ‘I shall avoid Gryffindor this time. I don’t think I want that kind of reputation.’

‘Makes sense. Being there did contribute to your “saving people” thing, though it was not the only factor.’

Harry nodded reflexively. ‘So explain to me about the Horcruxes which have already been dealt with. Were those soul pieces destroyed?’

‘While it is possible to split a soul you cannot destroy one. No matter how far apart the pieces are they resonate with each other. The shards from your scar and the ring were pulled to the closest
instance at the time: Hufflepuff’s cup.’

‘Hn.’
He arrived at the station about twenty minutes before the hour, in plenty of time to board the train and find a compartment. The encounter with the Weasleys—another instance of meddling, in his opinion, though he suspected it was a spur of the moment thing on Molly’s part—was thereby avoided. Thus he had an excellent view as the Weasley family tumbled through the portal and onto the platform with barely enough time for any of the children to get on the train. Ginny was there, her eyes hopeful as she swept her gaze around at all the people and skimmed the windows on her side of the train; they passed right over him without hesitation. He smirked and opened the window all the way to let in some air.

It was not all that much later when Ron slunk into the compartment with a line from memory. “Anyone sitting there?” he asked, pointing at the seat opposite Harry. “Everywhere else is full.”

Harry shrugged and gestured, eyes wandering to the window as the boy sat down. It would be a while before the cart lady arrived, but he was sure he could bear the wait, having eaten well for breakfast. Ron did not recognize him in the least, and it did factor in that he had not been given help by the twins, so they had never seen the scar. And even then, it was so faint they may not have noticed it anyway given the opportunity.

“I’m Ron, by the way. Ron Weasley.”

Harry looked over and nodded. “Harry. First year?”

“Yeah. I’m not entirely looking forward to Hogwarts. I mean, I want to learn magic and all, but I’ll have three older brothers there.”

“It might have been nice to have three brothers,” Harry said wistfully, not that he had ever once considered the idea.

“Five,” said Ron a bit morosely. “I’m the sixth in our family to go to Hogwarts. You could say I’ve got a lot to live up to. Bill and Charlie have already left—Bill was head boy and Charlie was captain of quidditch. Now Percy’s a prefect. Fred and George mess around a lot, but they still get really good marks and everyone thinks they’re really funny. Everyone expects me to do as well as the others, but if I do, it’s no big deal, because they did it first. You never get anything new, either, with five brothers. I’ve got Bill’s old robes, Charlie’s old wand, and Percy’s old rat.” He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a fat grey rat, which was asleep. “His name’s Scabbers and he’s useless, he hardly ever wakes up. Percy got an owl from my dad for being made prefect, but they couldn’t aff—I mean, I got Scabbers instead.” Ron’s ears went pink. He seemed to think he’d said too much, because he began staring out the window.

‘Funny how he says the same things,’ he mused. ‘Maybe he wants anyone and everyone to feel sorry for him for some reason, like he’s entitled to it. Then again, he always did want so much without ever thinking he needed to work for it.’ When Ron remained silent he pulled a book out of his pocket and began to read.

Around half past twelve there was a great clattering outside in the corridor and a smiling, dimpled
woman slid back their door and said, “Anything off the cart, dears?”

He immediately got up and purchased a selection of sweets, most of which would go into his school trunk. Ron’s ears went pink again and he muttered something about sandwiches, which Harry ignored. Back in the compartment he pulled his trunk out from under his seat and put most of the sweets away, as well as pulling out the lunch he had prepared for himself.

Ron had taken out a lumpy package and unwrapped it; there were four sandwiches inside. He pulled one of them apart and said, “She always forgets I don’t like corned beef.”

From his new perspective Harry could almost see some of why Ron had turned into such a twat. His own mother had wanted a girl—finally realized in Ginny—so yet another boy was probably far down on her list. To not remember such a simple detail, and about a boy who would eat just about anything, was bordering on cruel. “I’d be happy to share some of my sweets after we’re done eating,” he said. After all, Ron may not like corned beef, but it was food, and to someone who had originally grown up eating next to nothing it made Ron seem like a bit of a drama queen. He had not really noticed before, not with being so eager to be kind to someone, hoping for kindness in return.

They had only just tucked away the wrappers of their sandwiches when a knock came at the door, followed by it being slid open. Neville was there accompanied by Hermione. “Has anyone seen a toad?” she asked imperiously. “Neville’s lost one.”

Harry handed a chocolate frog over to Ron and replied, “Sorry, but neither of us has. You’re welcome to join us if you like. I’m Harry and this is Ron.”

Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but snapped it quickly shut. Ron had just unwrapped his frog when it jumped and landed right at the edge of the window. Ron let out a pained cry and got up quickly, took one step forward, and tripped over the edge of his trunk, which he had not properly stowed. Harry watched with interest as Ron fell headlong through the window, his body tipping so his legs rose into the air, his feet shattering the upper glass, and then went entirely though, smashing straight into a tree they were just passing.

He was on his feet in the next moment, his eyes glued to the impaled Ron Weasley for the scant seconds he was still in view. He then slowly turned to Neville and Hermione; she was chalk white and Neville had apparently passed out. “He—Weasley told me he has three brothers on the train. I think—”

Hermione nodded faintly and whirled, dashing off down the corridor. Harry paused long enough to heft Neville onto a seat and prop him against the wall, then stepped out as well, but not before a quick, malicious smile flitted in and out of view. He didn’t even get a foot down the corridor when Hermione rushed back, so he quickly returned.

“T found one of his brothers—a prefect—he’s gone to get the train stopped,” she said really fast. “We’re supposed to stay right here and wait.”

He nodded and resumed his seat, studiously keeping his eyes averted from the window. Hermione took a seat on the same side, but all the way over, and folded her hands neatly in her lap. They stayed that way for all of ten seconds before she began to wring straight into a tree they were just passing.

The train jolted when the brakes were applied, the few remaining sweets he had out sliding onto the floor. Neither of them made a move to do anything about it. And while they were waiting he had to wonder about Pettigrew. He would not have died, so he probably took the opportunity to simply leave. If he wanted to stay with the Weasley family as a cover, though, he would probably turn up and be taken back. Harry imagined the rat being given to Ginny as a Hogwarts pet and had to bite
back another smile.

Eventually a sickly-looking Percy appeared. “I don’t want you to speak of this just yet,” he told them. “I’m sure you’ll be questioned when we arrive at Hogwarts. I called for a meeting of the prefects so they can help keep order while the train is stopped. If you need anything I’ll be two compartments up toward the engine.”

Hermione nodded and Percy left, and Harry resumed reading his book. Neville finally woke up a few minutes later and was immediately filled in by Hermione. Silence reigned again for the remainder of their time on the train. When they did begin to slow during the approach to Hogsmeade Harry stowed his book and pulled a set of robes from his school trunk to slip on.

Percy came to fetch them, reminding them to leave their trunks, and guided them outside. Instead of being taken to the boats Percy led them to the first carriage and gestured them inside. It took off as soon as they were seated and shortly thereafter they were at the castle and being met by McGonagall.

She led them to just outside a small antechamber. “Mr Weasley, I ask that you intercept your brothers before they make it to the Great Hall and bring them here.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Percy said dully, then turned and walked quickly away.

McGonagall had just opened her mouth to speak when Dumbledore appeared, so instead she nodded quickly and went off to meet the rest of the first years. Dumbledore gave them a sad look and said, “I am Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of this school. I know this must be difficult, but will one of you please inform me of the events on the train?”

Neville went a bit green and looked at his feet, though Hermione stepped forward and quietly and quickly explained what she had witnessed. Neville and Harry nodded through her recitation, neither of them having anything to add to it.

“Such a tragedy,” Dumbledore said with a shake of his head, then half-turned when approaching footsteps sounded. “Ah, Messrs Weasley. If you would please wait in this antechamber.” He closed the door after them and pointed, saying, “You three can meet the rest of your year mates over there. I ask that you not speak of this to anyone else just yet. The family should know first.”

Harry nodded and walked away. ‘One down.’

Neville and Hermione stayed near him, but that quickly became a moot issue when McGonagall popped up and herded them all into the Great Hall. Harry kept a surreptitious eye on Snape once names began to be called, though his attention was drawn away briefly when the sorting hat called out Hufflepuff for Neville. ‘Huh, guess watching Ron bite it drove home to this Neville that he’s nowhere near brave. I wonder if that means Snape will be less antagonistic toward him now that he’s not a Gryffindor. And I bet Sprout is a better head of house than McGonagall ever was.’

When his turn came he was eyeing Snape again, and managed to see the minute signs of shock ghost across the man’s face. Harry kept his own blank as walked steadily to the stool and ignored the comments of the students. He was far more interested in Dumbledore’s eyes widening slightly, and how McGonagall’s face puckered up for a split second, probably in chagrin at not having recognized him. Mrs Figg—assuming she ever reported anything of substance anyway—most likely had not mentioned the change since she saw it happening so gradually, and did not think it of any importance.

The hat slipped over his head and there was a distinct pause before he heard its voice in his head. ‘Interesting. You remind me of another boy—from quite some time ago. You’re almost blindingly
ambitious and most certainly cunning. But you don’t exactly have a thirst to prove yourself, which is odd.’

‘I would like Ravenclaw, please. Ambition is of little use without the knowledge to back it up. And why should I prove myself to anyone? I know exactly who I am. Anyone who needs me to prove something obviously has issues. Speaking of which, what do you see when you sort people?’

The hat paused again, possibly in surprise. ‘I don’t see memories. I see choices, inclinations, and character traits. I can see that you would be a bad fit for Gryffindor and Hufflepuff. You plan too much and you give loyalty on an individual basis. You can work hard, but that’s not enough. Since it’s down to the other two, well, why not?’ “Ravenclaw!”

Harry removed the hat and handed it to McGonagall, and as he turned let his eyes linger for an extra second on Snape again. The man seemed conflicted. From his seat at the Ravenclaw table (on the side where he could most easily see Snape and Quirrell, even if not the remainder of the sorting) he watched the rest of the sorting—or appeared to, anyway—and noted with interest that the hat did not stop at having sorted himself and Neville into houses different from their first. Zacharias Smith, previously of Hufflepuff, ended up in Gryffindor, as did a Quincy Rivers, not that he even remembered him. ‘Must have been from Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff. I guess the hat decided to even out the houses a bit.’ He dutifully turned his attention to the head table after McGonagall whisked the hat and stool away.

Dumbledore got to his feet and was beaming at the students, his arms opened wide, as if nothing could have pleased him more than to see them all there. “Welcome!” he said. “Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak! Thank you!” Dumbledore sat back down to applause and cheering, and Harry immediately looked away.

The second the food appeared he was loading up a plate with roast beef, mashed potatoes, carrots, Yorkshire pudding, and rather a lot of brown gravy. As he was taking his first bite he wondered idly if Neville’s toad had turned up, and if either he or Hermione were even able to eat.

A girl five seats down spoke up once the first years had all begun eating. “Hello, I’m Penelope Clearwater, one of the fifth year prefects for Ravenclaw. After the feast I’ll be one of the people leading you to our common room and dormitories. Jack Knightley, the other fifth year prefect, is sitting across from me. You’ll meet the others later. If you have any questions I ask that you hold them for now; they’ll be addressed in the common room.” With that she returned to her meal.

Harry was mildly surprised that his fellow first years did not immediately barrage him with questions about himself. They did start talking amongst themselves, so perhaps it was more that they were waiting to see what he would do. And he was perfectly happy never to go out of his way to make friends—they would probably consider him a stuck-up wanker.

When they did end up in the Ravenclaw common room—and who was foolish enough to have riddles as the password without realizing that people in other houses could, in fact, be intelligent or clever enough to solve them?—they were introduced to the other prefects, then told that through the door opposite the entrance were the dorms, to the left for the boys, to the right for the girls. Knightley said something Harry found very interesting, though, which finally made something click in his mind.

“We’re all Ravenclaws here, which means we’re all intelligent, so you don’t need to go out of your way to prove this to anyone. Yes, pay close attention to your work, practice, and research for your papers—be proud of what you learn and accomplish—but don’t insult people in other houses by showing them up constantly and rubbing their noses in it. A schedule will go up soon on the
—he pointed—“showing times available for tutoring if you’re having any difficulties mastering something. And since we do have classes tomorrow I suggest you all settle in and get some rest.”

Harry followed the other boys to their dormitory and absently began unpacking his trunk, transferring his school books to the feather-light, extended backpack he had purchased. Hermione went to Gryffindor not so much because she was brave, he decided, but because her need to shove her intelligence in everyone’s faces and be admired for it far outweighed any Ravenclaw attributes. It was probably the basic insecurity of a muggle-born coming into play along with any childhood traumas, but her bravery surely did not hurt.

The room itself looked much like the ones in Gryffindor aside from the colour scheme and he was mildly disappointed that there was not more privacy. Maybe the upper years got individual rooms due to OWLs and NEWTs? He was distracted when he realized the other boys were all shooting him looks, so he sat down on the edge of his bed. “Hi,” he said. “I’m afraid I’ve been rather preoccupied with something, so I didn’t really catch your names. I’m Harry Potter.”

After the others introduced themselves Kevin Entwhistle asked, “While I have read some books with you in them I realize that they can’t possibly be the whole truth. I have many questions, but what I’m most interested to know is if it’s correct that you grew up in the muggle world.”

Harry nodded. “Yes, I did. I only learned about magic—” ‘—the first time—’ “—when I received my letter. My aunt . . . doesn’t care for magic, so she was unwilling to say anything before then. This is all a bit strange and I’m going to miss having access to the newspapers. I wonder if there’s a way to still have them delivered.” He paused, then said, “Er, to get this out of the way, my father was pure-blood and my mother muggle-born. I don’t really remember what happened that night except for the occasional odd nightmare about green light and some voices. I’ve read those books, too, and I find it interesting that they place all the honor on me and forget my mother’s sacrifice. It wouldn’t surprise me one bit if she’d done something to try to ensure my survival. I’m also not looking forward to Halloween.”

They looked confused for a few moments before the obvious answer widened their eyes.

“Something happened on the train I’ve been asked not to talk about yet. I think it might come out tomorrow, though.”

Michael’s eyes narrowed and he exchanged a look with Anthony. “I believe we know what you refer to. We won’t say anything,” he promised, then wandered over to his bed, Anthony following him to the next one over.

Kevin and Terry also drifted away, so Harry breathed a silent sigh and gathered up his night clothes. A nice hot shower would feel good, and then he could relax in bed and think about the upcoming year.

It was headline news in the Daily Prophet. The paper was shared between those with subscriptions and those without, and soon everyone knew that Ron Weasley had died in a freakishly bizarre chocolate frog-related accident while on his way to Hogwarts. Percy, Fred, and George were missing from the Gryffindor table, unsurprisingly, and Draco Malfoy was smirking with glee.

Dumbledore stood up and called for attention. “Students, when the Weasley brothers return do not overwhelm them with questions. A quiet word will be enough, or perhaps a letter of sympathy to the family. What happened was tragic, I agree, but please do show courtesy in their time of grief.”
Harry scoffed internally; as if someone like Malfoy would be so kind. He was about halfway done eating when Flitwick handed out the schedules. Why they didn’t hand them out in the common rooms the first night—it’s not as though the first year schedules needed names on them, and sixth years could be handled at the same time. Penelope spoke up again, this time to say, “One of us will be guiding you first years to your classes this week. After that you’ll be on your own, though there is a map of sorts on the board in the common room you can refer to.” She glanced at Terry’s schedule and nodded. “Well, you guys are lucky. Be in the entrance hall by 3.30 and I’ll show you how to get to Herbology. The library is on the fourth floor if you want to do a little exploring. It’s not far from the main staircase and clearly labeled.”

Harry decided to take the free time that day to do a little checking up on the Potions text book again, having thought back to memories of old and the questions Snape had thrown at him, though at least he would not have to see the man in class until Thursday. The answers were there, but one had to read the whole thing to know them, assuming they had not already learned prior to Hogwarts. If nothing else, spending time in the library meant he could finally get his head wrapped around how it was organized. It wasn’t as though he had bothered previously, not with Hermione so eager to find everything and provide what was needed—for her to be needed.

While he was up there wandering around he spared some thought for the ghosts. Should he do something about them now, or wait until they would actually be able to do him some service? Dumbledore probably did have eyes on him, even after the mirror incident over Christmas break, but that was more likely to be the portraits. Unfortunately, ghosts did not make such great spies given that they could still be seen. . . . Well, perhaps there were ways around that if necessary.

By the time Thursday rolled around Harry had gotten more than a few strange looks from people like Snape, McGonagall, and Dumbledore. They were escorted to the Potions classroom and ushered in, and Harry took a seat next to Kevin on the “Ravenclaw” side of the room. He considered sitting with Neville, then remembered just how intimidated the poor boy got around Snape and decided it was safer not to. Perhaps Neville’s fellow Hufflepuffs could help his confidence far faster than the Gryffindors had (which is to say, not at all for years).

Snape billowed in and came to a stop behind his desk, his eyes sweeping over the students and pausing briefly on Harry. He thought for a moment the change in his appearance had completely thrown the man off, but then Snape said softly, “Ah, yes. Harry Potter. Our new—celebrity,” before giving the speech Harry remembered about the “subtle science and exact art of potion-making”. He did not, however, snap questions at Harry, which was surprising. Perhaps Snape figured a Ravenclaw Harry would have read ahead. Snape did take off points for the most ridiculous of things, though, causing his house mates to look askance at the professor. At least Harry wasn’t sharing the class with Slytherins, with their sycophantic sniggering and sabotage attempts.

In the weeks which followed Snape seemed to have reconciled himself somewhat to Harry and became nastier, which eventually caused Knightley to confront him in the common room with a complaint. “Look, I don’t know what’s going on here, but you’re losing too many points from Snape. He’s never had a problem with Ravenclaws before, so. . . .” The implication that Harry was provoking the man was left unsaid.

Harry arched a brow at Jack and, after a pregnant pause, said, “Oh, so now you give a damn? From what I’ve heard Snape has always favored Slytherin and loves to take points off Hufflepuff and Gryffindor for things like breathing too loudly. But you never cared until it affected Ravenclaw? It’s not my fault the man has it in for me. Ask any of the other first years and they’ll tell you I’ve done nothing. Do not lay this on my shoulders when I’m not at fault. Maybe you should complain about the source instead of trying to shame the target. And why on earth would you say anything without first getting both sides of the story?”
The first years close enough to overhear were all nodding their heads and Knightley was forced to backpedal, saying, “Er—sorry. You’re right, I didn’t get all the information first.”

After Knightley retreated Harry turned to his fellow first years. “Thank you.”

He was somewhat disgusted weeks later when nothing more seemed to have come of it. Had Knightley brought the issue up with Flitwick? Or had he just dropped the subject? But then, he himself had not said anything to their head of house, so could he really pass judgment? Odds were that students in previous years had complained and the matter was swept under the carpet by Dumbledore. He had not complained last time around, either, at least not to anyone with the power to do something about it. Having come to that realization before he became too righteously indignant he dismissed the matter entirely, knowing that the less he reacted the more annoyed Snape would become, and look the worse for it.

An encroaching Halloween reminded him to swing by the third floor corridor and check for alert wards very early one morning, then key in an exception for himself. He also set a few wards of his own, knowing that doing so with the Elder Wand meant they would not be noticed. It was a simple enough matter to shift to the final room. The mirror was standing there innocently, and Harry checked it thoroughly for non-integral magic. It, too, had an alert on it, keyed to someone managing to remove the stone. He still had no idea why Flamel would have given the stone to Dumbledore to guard when Dumbledore was a child in comparison to Flamel’s great age. Maybe the ancient man was senile? After all, it was not as though witches and wizards were immune to that sort of thing.

It was a simple enough matter to bypass the ward and retrieve the stone; one simply needed the right mind set. The stone went into his storage trunk, and Harry now had a way to mint gold if he wished. He could not make actual galleons—only the goblins could do that with any authenticity—but he could make ingots to be sold in the muggle world. All he should need to do was borrow the identity of various persons in the business and use a little more magic to ensure he got cash payment.

When Halloween rolled around Harry went about his day as usual, but skipped the feast that night. He assumed that anyone with half a brain would connect his action with it being the anniversary of his parents’ deaths. He disappeared into his dorm and set about reading—ancient runes, in case anyone should happen to look in on him. And he had a small selection of goodies he had picked up from the kitchens, though going in there was always a bit of a trial, what with how the house-elves frequently acted. It was not until he was startled away from his book by Flitwick that Harry remembered to wonder if things had gone much the same as before.

“Oh, there you are, quite safe,” the diminutive professor said cheerily.

Harry crinkled his brow.

“We had a bit of excitement this evening. Someone caused the rapid growth of innumerable resurrection ferns in the entrance hall and many of the corridors, so students leaving the feast. . . .” Flitwick looked slightly bemused for a moment. “Well, you can imagine the chaos that caused. In any case, there is food in the common room if you’re hungry and breakfast will also be served there. Due to the fuss classes have been canceled for tomorrow.” Flitwick favored him with another smile and left.

Harry was feeling more than a little bemused himself at that information. Oh, not that Flitwick had been so forthcoming, as that Harry rather expected from him, though he did think McGonagall, Sprout, and Snape would likely only have checked to see that he was still breathing. But—? Where was the troll? Resurrection ferns? ‘Derek?’

‘Resurrection ferns show, to those in range, illusions of their dead. The tone of the experience has
much to do with a person’s own feelings about the involved deceased, so the results can range from bittersweet to downright nightmarish. The staff has had quite a time getting the students back to their dormitories as so many of them keep breaking down.’

After a few seconds of thought he replied, ‘I see at least that much is the same. Instead of keeping everyone safely in the Great Hall while it was cleaned up they sent them all back, forcing them to run the gauntlet. Honestly. Still, I wonder what made Tom change tactics.’

Kevin looked in at that point, turning his mind to other things.

He was jolted out of sleep some time after midnight by his ward going off and quickly slipped out of bed. Sleeping charms on his room mates ensured they would not wake up and notice he was missing, and Harry shifted down to a spot just out of sight of the final room to wait for Voldemort. It was about ten minutes later when Quirrell hastened by. Harry waited for several minutes, long enough for Voldemort to become frustrated, then dropped his invisibility and sauntered in. Quirrell was staring at the mirror in perplexity while muttering to himself. Given that it was the only thing in the room that made a certain kind of sense.

“It’s not there,” he said softly, and smirked when Quirrell whirled around to face him.

“How—?” Quirrell sneered. “What do you know, boy? It matters not—I’m going to kill you tonight.” He snapped his fingers and ropes sprang out of thin air, but Harry smoothly stepped out of the way.

“No, I don’t think you will,” he said confidently. “And I told you, it’s not there. This is nothing more than a trap. I have to assume you were smart enough to notice the wards and slid by or disabled them. Dumbledore, for all his supposed brilliance, is a little too sure of himself after all. I mean really. A group of determined first years could get through the rooms and end up here. Do you really think it was anything more than to introduce a delay and give him time to arrive like some white knight to save the day by capturing Voldemort? And the mirror—another delay, while you stand there trying to fathom its riddle.”

“How dare you speak that name,” Quirrell spat, then paused at the sound of a faint whispering sound. The professor started to turn away, back toward the mirror—a precursor to a move that telegraphed itself loudly—then pivoted and snapped off a killing curse with deadly aim.

Harry arched a brow at the man as the green light smashed into him—and did nothing. Inside he was breathing a deep sigh of relief. He believed Derek, but additional confirmation was always nice. “Does poor Quirrell know that forcing him to drink unicorn blood has doomed him? Or did you not bother with that yet?” he hissed. “Maybe you should reassess your goals and priorities—and your beliefs. Maybe I’m not at all what you expected, hm?” He sent a deceptively innocent smile Quirrell’s way, then dashed out of the room, shifting back to the dorm the moment he was out of sight. Let Voldemort make of that what he would; Harry was certainly interested in the outcome.
Chapter 4

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“I’ve seen acts of every shade of terrible crime from man-like creatures, and I’ve had the breath of liars blowing me off course in my sails.” — XTC, _Jason and the Argonauts_

Voldemort, it seemed, was not one to give up so easily. There were a few times when he caught Harry alone and attempted to kill him, and also irreparably maim him, but the curses always failed or just barely missed. Harry had to wonder if the man spent most of his time in a royal snit.

He never did have his previous encounter with the mirror, with Dumbledore watching on in curiosity. The headmaster could not gift him the cloak, for one thing, and Harry never bothered to wander the halls aimlessly or try to get into the Restricted Section (that Dumbledore knew of, anyway).

The remainder of the year passed almost placidly, right up until the last day of exams. Harry had noticed Draco giving Snape odd, calculating looks from time to time, and even that Malfoy spent an inordinate amount of time in the library. That evening his ward went off again a half hour after Dumbledore took off for a meeting at the Ministry—and why so late at night, he wondered. Even so, it was a surprise that Malfoy and his two goons had entered the forbidden corridor. ‘Derek? Any intel on this?’

‘This Malfoy noticed the damage to Snape’s leg after the Halloween incident and has been researching since then ways to do what Snape supposedly could not. While he was intelligent to put together the clues and come to certain correct conclusions, he’s showing a marked lack of such right now.’

‘Oh,’ he said in bemusement. ‘Thank you.’ He went back about his business, eventually to sleep, and noticed that Malfoy and his goons were absent from the Slytherin table at breakfast, and Dumbledore and Snape were missing from the head table. Quirrell, however, was present, and looked to be faintly amused by something.

It wasn’t until the next morning that the _Daily Prophet_ was screaming out scandalous front page headlines. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were dead and Dumbledore had been sacked. Lucius was reportedly on a rampage. ‘Huh. This Draco was actually braver and stupider than I thought. I wonder what the fallout will be from Dumbledore getting fired. Maybe we’ll see some staff changes. Then again’—he eyed McGonagall—‘if she’s elevated, maybe not?’

Any decisions made were not shared with the students. He found out after the fact that the ministry had sent in a cadre of aurors and support staff to investigate the forbidden area thoroughly and wondered if Dumbledore had even had time to reclaim the mirror before he was kicked out. And if he had, what was his reaction to the stone being gone? He was tempted to ask Derek, but decided against it for the time being, though he was also curious as to where Dumbledore ended up. At the Hog’s Head with Aberforth, a brother who was still mad at Albus over Ariana and Gellert? Perhaps not. Then again, given that Dumbledore still had Fawkes the man might yet be living in the castle, just in an unused or closed off section.

Regular exam results were distributed a few days later, Slytherin was presented with the House Cup at the Leaving Feast, and they were all soon riding the train back to London. And though he had made regular trips back to the house at Privet Drive to reinforce the imperius curse on Petunia, he
had not bothered to instruct her to pick him up. No one in their right mind would want to spend that much time on a train with her, not if they could avoid it.

He stopped by Diagon Alley for some odds and ends, then shifted back to his room to prepare a ‘letter’, though calling it one would be inaccurate. To his knowledge there was no written form of Parseltongue, and even if there was, someone clever enough could learn to decipher it. Much better to simply send a ‘recording’ of what he had to say.

Quirrell eyed the package tied to a nondescript owl with some apprehension, but the whispering of his master saw him casting numerous spells to ascertain whether or not the contents were dangerous. He eventually untied the package and shooed the owl away, setting it down on the table before carefully opening it. Inside was what looked like a glass sphere with swirling smoke inside, which puzzled him greatly. A small piece of paper—not parchment—at the bottom of the box read “shake it”, the writing visible even through the sphere.

After a moment he complied, then sat quickly when the sphere began hissing; he could almost feel the interest of his master in whatever it played. Once it stopped the silence was almost deafening.

Voldemort felt a sense of anticipation when the next sphere arrived. Quirrell still checked the package for curses, of course, but readily enough shook the sphere after that.

“Hello again, Tom.”

He did not, in the least, appreciate being called that name, though.

“I was feeling rather bored so I thought I’d write to you again. I remember when Ron Weasley took a header out the train window and impaled himself. It was all I could do not to laugh in delight, as I really disliked that boy. Why, you ask? I don’t think I’ll explain just yet. However, I must assume you are unaware of the fact that he had a pet rat. It used to belong to his brother Percy, but when he made prefect the rat went to Ron and Percy got an owl. Why is this important? Because that rat is an animagus. Ring any bells for you?

“I feel like I must have met you before—and no, I don’t mean that night in Godric’s Hollow. More like another lifetime, if you will. From what I’ve learned about you we have a great deal in common. Orphans of parents who were, to varying degrees, idiotic. Raised amongst muggles, though I suppose who got the better bargain there is debatable. I certainly didn’t grow up in the middle of a muggle war. How did that make you feel, by the way, that no one ever came to remove you from that danger? Who were you angrier with? Did the people there beat you like my so-called family beat me? Treat you like a criminal for simply existing? Whoops—several hundred of those people around here mysteriously ended up dead. So tragic.

“Did you kill your father because he was a muggle? Because he never took you in despite not knowing you existed? Were you angry at your mother? Word has it she wanted Tom Riddle so badly she used a love potion to get him, then stopped when she, for some foolish reason, thought he could love her without them. She essentially raped him, repeatedly. So were you angry with her, too? Maybe you’ll never tell me, but that’s all right.

“Though, honestly, pretty much everyone agrees that you are exceptionally brilliant and powerful. Perhaps you should have thanked both of them. Your mother of an old and revered bloodline going for fresh blood, even if it was muggle, and producing you. Then again, are you really insane like the
Gaunt family members? They are a cautionary tale about the dangers of incest and breeding too close, after all. Or are you simply hacked off?

“But, well, never mind. I had some questions for you and I hope to get answers, ones stripped of sales pitches and propaganda. I’m not asking so you can make a motivational speech or recruit me as though I accidentally stumbled into an Amway meeting. Just what is it you stand for? Because I know you’re too intelligent to believe it’s so simple to wipe out the muggles, not with billions of them on this planet. So what is it really?

“If you’re inclined to answer send a reply why don’t you? Box 21A at the owl post office in Diagon Alley. And please do me the courtesy of skipping the curses and traps, as I’ve done for you.”

On the one hand he was absolutely seething that anyone aside from Dumbledore knew so much about him. He wanted to kill the child for that alone. The irreverence was irritating, yet also expected. He now had some knowledge of Pettigrew, and Potter was asking about his ideals and goals, and hinted that he had already killed many muggles?

But was he willing to deal—in any way at all?

Several days passed before he sent Quirrell out on a fact-finding mission. Thankfully the man had once been the professor for Muggle Studies, so he at least had a vague notion of how to comport himself in that world. Searching through newspaper reports pinpointed that, in fact, several hundred muggles had died within a few weeks of each other, all in the same town. But when Quirrell tried to go there he was mysteriously diverted every time. He could only get so far into town before something made him turn away, yet covert checks revealed no wards he could find. It was while he was checking once again that Voldemort sensed something nearby and directed Quirrell to shift his attention.

“Master,” Quirrell whispered, “the child is there, beyond the border I cannot find nor breach. He’s— he’s smirking at me.”

Moments later a car went out of control down the street and crashed; bodies were flung about like rag dolls. When Quirrell’s head whipped around at the sound Voldemort managed to get a look at the boy through the thin veil of his host’s head wrapping. Potter was still standing there, just smirking. There was a strange haziness to the view which could not be accounted for by the fabric—but it suddenly vanished. And then, after blowing a kiss, Potter turned and vanished around a corner.

That evening another sphere arrived.

“Hello, Tom! Well colour me impressed. Maybe the Muggle Studies course at Hogwarts isn’t just a stinking pile of offal explaining all about things one hundred years ago. Maybe they do actually teach something of use—though probably not enough. Anyway, it’s obvious one of you knows how to do research or you’d not have found the area I live in. Isn’t it a lovely place? Why, it’s just full of people who take the word of one person like it’s gospel—sort of like how too many people take the word of Dumbledore like it’s carved in stone.

“Really a shame how they keep dying in improbable accidents. Why, this might drive property values down! So, I figured you wouldn’t respond straight away. That would have been a bit imprudent on your part if you had, right? Now that you’ve had some time to think I’ll reiterate my request for information on just what it is you stand for. Box 21A, Diagon Alley.”

Against all sense he was actually beginning to feel amusement when it came to the boy. He had plenty of bravery, wit, intelligence, and cunning. But loyalty?
‘I’ve been wondering,’ Harry thought. ‘You’ve already said there are no secrets in death—or more to the point, from Death. Death is also any age, any gender, any animal . . .’

A chuckle sounded in his head, but no actual answer was given. But then, he had not technically asked a question.

He nodded. ‘Suppose I’ll just have to give it a whirl and see. The worst that can hap—’ He broke off at the sound of tapping to look at the window; an owl was waiting patiently to be let in. “Hm.” Harry allowed the bird entry and waited for it to land, eyeing the small package it carried. “Dare I hope he left off any curses? Maybe, but that doesn’t mean I won’t check.”

A few minutes later he was giving the owl a few treats and pointed it at a water dish, and he stood there with the package in one hand. Even then he was suspicious, so he set it down on the floor and retreated a fair distance before using the Elder Wand to open it. Nothing happened, so he tipped the box over with a slight gust of air; a sphere rolled out and forward, then off to the side, eventually bumping into his desk. ‘Well, I guess that’s one way to tell if the floor is level,’ he thought. Again he used the Elder Wand, this time to levitate the sphere and shake it. He was rewarded with the sound of Voldemort’s sibilant hiss.

"Harry Potter. You seem to be an inordinately clever young man. But then, your placement in Ravenclaw only makes sense, no? Though perhaps you truly belong in Slytherin, but avoided it due to the suspicion it would bring down on your narrow shoulders. You wish to know what I stand for. So be it.

“I want a place of our own. I am sickened that we must live amongst the muggles. I am disappointed and disgusted that our antecedents lacked the sense to carve out a territory to call our home and ward it well. In some ways I am sickened that our people cast off their squibs into the muggle world, where that blood—though the person lacks the ability to use magic—will eventually again surface, producing so-called muggle-borns, those children who have no idea of and no respect for our culture, our traditions . . .

“Hypocritical, you say? From I, who was raised a muggle? Perhaps my mother should have had the sense to give birth at St Mungo’s. I learned everything I possibly could once I was admitted back to the world I should have been raised in. And I was disappointed. Perhaps at the time the Founders had the right idea. Build their castle of knowledge in a remote area, far away from the frightened, superstitious, and murderous muggles. But they failed at securing enough land for the future. Wizards and witches failed at seeing the opportunity, except for those few who founded the village of Hogsmeade.

“Did you know? The average pure-blood of any real degree would find it difficult to successfully breed with a muggle, especially those pure-bloods with creature blood. Some of us are nearly a separate species. We will either go our own way, or the pure-bloods will die out, leaving behind those who mate and breed with muggle-borns and half-bloods, and the occasional muggle. I’d like to take the muggles out of the equation.

“I want a government that makes sense. Again, I hear you say the word hypocrisy. My actions are hardly those of a political reformer. I kill those who oppose me—not just in words but in deeds. I kill those who test the limits of the Statute of Secrecy. I kill those who get too close to our world, those who have no right to be here. Those who act as I saw in the past, those who would as soon kill us as not. I am no diplomat to wage a bloodless war.

“And I use what can be used. Someone like Cornelius Fudge is a fool. He also responds well to
flattery and gifts. The Wizengamot is made up of old men afraid of losing their grasp on power. They
are frightened by newer blood, newer ideas, anything which threatens the status quo. But they can
be used.

“What do you stand for, Harry Potter?”

Harry set the sphere on the floor long enough to set the box right, then placed it back inside and
closed it. A flick of his wand saw it resting on a shelf, and then he sat down on his bed and ran a
hand through his hair. “He has a point,” he muttered. “But I notice he didn’t try to explain his actions
better, or comment on the insanity angle. Then again, I didn’t ask him to respond to any of that, only
what he stood for. So, what do I stand for these days, hm?”

“This would be much easier if I could just write letters. But really, I don’t want Quirrell reading
them. He’s just a minion, after all. So, what do I stand for? Well, I don’t think all muggles are evil. I
do think they’re dangerous, especially groups and those who have access to some of the more
devastating weapons. I don’t want them all dead. I would prefer to have a country of our own, much
like you would. Part of the problem with humanity is that people will always make distinctions. I
mean, there is no such thing as a utopia; the human condition doesn’t allow for it. I’d still like our
own country.

“I’d even go so far as to say I’d like our own world, but how that could be possible I simply don’t
know. I always scoff when someone says something about the ‘wizarding world’ because there isn’t
one. The muggles continue on, cutting down forests in their rapacious need to have yet more space
to erect their skyscrapers and so on, ignoring all those they drive out of their lands.

“But as to what I really stand for, I can’t say with any certainty yet. I do know I don’t like being
used. You should see the eyes of people when they see, not me, but the Boy-Who-Lived. I’d like to be
remembered for something I actually did. Only you know for certain exactly what happened that
night, not that I think anyone would much care when it’s so much easier to embellish sparse facts
with whatever their flights of fancy bring to mind.

“I kill, too, as you might have noticed. All these people here believing I’m a criminal. And yet I
wasn’t until a few years ago, not that they’ll ever have proof. I used their deaths for a purpose, and
because I hated how they took the word of one person—two originally—over the evidence available
to their eyes. Maybe in another life I didn’t notice.”

This was the second time the boy had referred to a different life. Was that even possible? It would
explain much.

“I find I don’t mind the idea of getting revenge these days, or the deed.”

And again.

“They say it takes a village to raise a child.” Boyish laughter sounded. “And look what they
managed to raise. Right now, whatever you may think, I am not your enemy. I don’t care who said
what. Nobody ever asked my opinion, just made assumptions. Maybe I recognize that my parents
were soldiers of a sort and could be killed at any time. Maybe I recognize that they had other
choices, but decided not to choose them. And I don’t recall being drafted. Now, I admit, I know a lot
more than I should, but I seem to have a way with seeing the truth in people’s eyes.”

A natural Leglimens?
“So I know about the prophecy which led you to attack. My personal opinion? It only holds as much weight as we allow it to. It’s a prophecy, a prediction, not a quantifiable truth. Were you thinking clearly the day you decided it was wise to believe anything Trelawney said? Did your informant tell you the whole truth? I’ll tell you a secret. He’s not yours. Then again, perhaps he’s changed his mind again. He seems to flip like a landed fish at times he’s so indecisive about some things. I think he was thrown for a loop when I showed up looking like Lily instead of James. Either way, whether he’s yours or not, I do intend to kill him at some point, so I hope you don’t mind. A school is supposed to be a place of learning, not a place where I get more of the same as what I used to get here.

“By the way, have you considered Iceland? I did some checking and it only has a population around three hundred thousand. You could start at the middle, warding territory, and gradually push them all out. Maybe a nice plague, some horrific accidents, and the next thing you know, it’s the Bermuda Triangle all over again—except a bit more accurate in the telling. Give it some thought.

“Oh, something just occurred to me. It’s pretty strange, so I wouldn’t blame you for thinking I’m crazy. It’s about parchment. I know, we do things like wear leather and dragon-skin, but writing on parchment? Made from the skins of animals? Muggles have the right idea making paper from plant fibers. Until next time.”

Voldemort chuckled almost involuntarily. Maybe he should stop wasting time and get on with regaining his body.

Harry donned an appropriate disguise—invisibility was always appropriate—and shifted to the Hog’s Head. Aberforth was there just as he remembered, wiping a glass with a none-too-clean cloth. Every so often the man would look up and sweep his gaze around the room, then go back to his wiping. Harry waited until Aberforth went into the back for whatever reason and followed him, stunned him quickly, and searched through his memories. He withdrew with a frown and obliviated the man, unfroze him, and shifted away.

If Albus wasn’t with his brother, where was he? He could not death-shift if he had no real clue where to. Harry thought back through his memories and found no indication of ever having heard of a home Albus stayed at. But there was that time during fifth year when he suspected Dumbledore had stayed in the castle after fleeing from Umbridge and the aurors, though he could have been at № 12 Grimmauld Place.

He waited until after midnight before shifting to the pond near the Burrow. The memory of him being flown to the house by the twins and Ron surfaced and he wondered if the Weasleys even bothered with wards prior to Voldemort’s return. A check of the area showed nothing of any note, so he invoked the cloak’s power and moved closer. A second check still showed nothing of note, giving him more confidence in his idea. After wrapping himself in silence he slipped in through the kitchen door and made his way upstairs to where he remembered the twins’ room to be, and paused before going inside.

This was the twins—what were the odds that they had managed to trap their door? Or would Molly have ensured otherwise? He checked the door and the surrounds carefully and nodded, then eased the door open just enough so he could slip inside. Once that was again closed he cast sleeping spells on each boy and looked around for their trunks.

Ten minutes later he was back at Privet Drive, activating the map, and checking it thoroughly for any sign of Dumbledore. Nothing. Either he was not there or the map was missing his location. He was a
fool for not having checked previously. And true, he could ask Derek, but he preferred to figure it out by himself if possible; he might be the Master of Death, but that did not mean he had to be a dick about it. With a sigh he tucked the map away in his fidelius’d trunk and went to bed.

The next morning he was feeling a bit glum. Dumbledore might have retained the house at Godric’s Hollow, but it was just as likely that neither brother could stand the thought of living there after both their mother and sister were killed. For all he knew they might have sold it and split the proceeds. It wasn’t until he went over his memories again that a new idea occurred to him.

A quick trip to the shops in town provided a map of the United Kingdom, a protractor, and a compass. Back in his bedroom he spread the map out on the floor, located Little Whinging on the map, then checked the compass for north. After a few adjustments were made he placed the Elder Wand on the flat of his hand and said, “Point Me Albus Dumbledore.”

A quick bit of work with his tool resulted in a line being drawn on the map at the approximate angle the wand showed and he packed up his things before shifting to the Shrieking Shack. Another go had another line on the map. Two more rounds and he returned to his room and spread the map out again so he could extend the lines he had made. They converged on a tiny little island north-northwest of Edinburgh that seemed to have no name. He circled it and frowned.

He checked his results twice a day for the next week, absently wondering why Voldemort had not responded. Had he given away too much information? Or just enough to keep the man interested rather than murderous? He rolled his eyes at the reaction expected when Voldemort learned his Horcruxes were missing—and then in Harry’s hands. Once he was satisfied that Dumbledore really was spending a good deal of his time on that island he bought another map and circled the island, then prepared another message.

“And a good day to you, too, Tom. How have we been this week? Made any progress on a new body? You were quite the handsome devil when you were younger, so I can only hope you come back looking like something along those lines.”

Voldemort arched what should have been his brow—or tried to, at least.

“I had some fun myself, though I admit it was a bit tedious. If you check the box you should notice a little something extra. I’ll just wait a minute so you can do that.”

Voldemort directed Quirrell to check and had him stick the resulting map to a wall, then face away so he could see it.

“Right. If you pay attention you should notice a small island circled up near Edinburgh. Dumbledore seems to spend a lot of his time there so maybe it’s his home away from Hogwarts. But after all the work of tracking him down I’m feeling far too lazy to do anything about it just now. Perhaps you have some ideas. It’s interesting, I think. I don’t believe that Dumbledore is evil, but I am certain he has done and will do evil things, if that makes any sense. I think his early years and that flirtation with Grindelwald really messed up his head.”

He ‘arched’ a brow again.

“And he probably went a little more squirrelly when he ended up having to defeat the man. You see, Dumbledore recognizes that he shouldn’t be trusted with power, yet what does he do? Uses his power when he probably should not, and fails to use it when he should. Your situation is a case in point. So is mine, but I can at least absolve him partially when it comes to me, since the laws don’t
seem to take the details into account.

“His little trap this past year put the lives of countless students in danger. Three died because of it. The first inclination of most any child when they hear ‘don’t do that’ or ‘don’t go there’ is to disobey. For having been the headmaster of a school for so long he has little to no understanding of children or human nature, and chooses to believe that what he thinks is correct is true. There’s a saying: The road to Hell is paved with good intentions. Albus Dumbledore in a nutshell.

“I doubt anyone can force him to see the error of his ways, but he can be removed from the game. Maybe he can be of some use to you. Maybe while unconscious so you didn’t have to hear him bleat on about good and love and repentance and heaven only knows what. Then again, if what I suspect is true, you wouldn’t exactly be giving male models a run for their money in the looks department after that.”

It had to be possible, though how he could not conceive of.

“Perhaps I’m being somewhat hypocritical, but they do say it takes one to know one. And I do see it, this man who talks and talks and never once does anything to back up those words. I actually think he’s the worst hypocrite of we three. And, to get back to something I brought up earlier, I do realize that Iceland can be a bit on the cold side, but I think that’d be a small price to pay for a country of our own. I’m still looking into alternative options, though. Until next time.”

Potter seemed quite adamant on the idea that Dumbledore should die. Not exactly subtle, but not nauseatingly obvious, either. The boy—though he suspected that should be man—was actually helping him. Some of that might simply be self-preservation, in diverting Voldemort’s ire toward another target, but as he and the boy both knew Potter was next to impossible to kill. Perhaps the hint of having done all this before with unsatisfactory results was Potter’s way of saying he had genuine reason to despise the man, not to mention many of the people around him.

He thought back to the past year at Hogwarts and realized that Potter held himself apart. Oh, he was polite, but there were too many times when he had caught glimpses of disdain or contempt in those shining eyes when they passed over many a wizard and witch. It was as though he saw right through them, or perhaps had already seen all of it and knew what had already happened—once upon a time.

He frowned. How!? How could the child possibly know? He had spent decades learning magical arts around the world and never had he ever come across anything which would explain this. If Potter was a Seer then his actions in response would have changed the possible future too much for it to be reliable. A time turner would be useless. There were no rituals, either, that he knew of. Could this boy—this far too knowing child—have done something even the brightest and most inquisitive minds had failed to accomplish?

And if so, what should his reaction be?

It was a couple of hours later that he laughed in surprise, startling his host badly. He was amused to realize that he felt challenged by Potter. His thoughts drifted again to the idea of “resurrection” and Potter’s mention of Dumbledore. If that wasn’t a blatant hint he did not know what was. However, he was not immediately inclined to rush things. With Quirrell as his host the curse on the Defense position was temporarily nullified. Perhaps it would be worth his while to observe things for a little longer. Rushing resulted in the loss of his physical body a decade ago and exile.

“Quirrell, tone down the stammer this year,” he ordered.

“Yes, master.”
Harry felt more than a little bemusement when the response from Voldemort was a very simple, “You interest me.” After a bit he shrugged and thought about the upcoming year. Ginny Weasley would not be in danger due to the diary, which was something of a shame. He wondered if Lucius had come up with the same plan and was now in a panic over the diary being missing. Would he find some other way to try to discredit a family he loathed? Would the new head actually do something about the shameful quality of teaching at Hogwarts? Should he hold off on arranging an “accident” for Ginny this year?

When his letter arrived with his supplies list for second year he shifted to Diagon Alley and exchanged more stolen funds for galleons, then got his shopping done as quickly as possible. Oddly enough, despite having gone on the same day as before, there was no sign of Lockhart, nor had that man’s books been on the list, which boded well, he hoped.

The remainder of the summer passed quietly, with only a handful of accidental deaths happening in Little Whinging. There had been a few particularly vocal adults in town who ended up quite drunk one evening and managed to drown in a few inches of water left by a heavy rainstorm. Such a pity no one had found them in time to prevent the tragedy. Harry thought it was miraculous that more people had not moved out of town.

The train ride was spent reviewing his text books with Kevin Entwhistle and Neville Longbottom, so things were quiet, broken only by a pause for lunch and to buy a few sweets off the cart for a treat. It was not until they were getting fairly close to Hogsmeade that the books went away, robes were slipped on, and they got around to discussing how their summers went. Neville was a bit close-mouthed on that subject and Harry and Kevin simply let it lie.

When he entered the Great Hall and glanced up the head table it took every ounce of self control not to chuck a wobbly on the spot. Oh, McGonagall was seated as Headmistress, but off to her side was Albus Dumbledore. What the buggering hell was he doing up there? Was she still going to teach Transfiguration or—? His gaze slid over and he felt a strange sense of relief at seeing Quirrell. The host’s eyes locked with his for a moment and the faintest sign of a smirk appeared before the man’s expression rearranged itself to say “still nervous, but more confident this year”. Harry tilted his head to the side in thought, then nodded faintly before heading to a seat at the Ravenclaw table.

The second he and Kevin sat down Kevin hissed, “What is Dumbledore doing up there? He was sacked!”

Harry sighed and shook his head. “I wouldn’t doubt he called in every favor owed him. The only thing I can think is that he’s taking over for McGonagall or Binns.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Kevin said thoughtfully. “That makes sense. I hope it’s history, then, since I’m not sure I trust his judgment in a wand class.”

Flitwick was the one to usher in the new students and Harry figured he had been promoted to McGonagall’s erstwhile position. It was vaguely humorous to see a man smaller than they were leading them and having them try on the hat. Flitwick needed a step-stool just to manage things.
Once all the new students were seated at the tables McGonagall stood and called for silence. 
“Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts. There have been a few changes. I am now headmistress and 
Professor Flitwick is deputy. Professor Binns has stepped down and taking his place will be 
Professor Dumbledore. I will continue to teach transfiguration and Professor Sinistra is the new head 
of Gryffindor.”

Harry breathed a faint sigh of relief, though he wondered what Dumbledore thought about the fact 
that Quirrell was continuing as the defense professor.

“Aside from that the usual applies as always. The forest is forbidden to all pupils, as is spell casting 
in the corridors. Quidditch trials will be held the second week of term and anyone interested should 
contact Madam Hooch. Finally, starting this year, schedules will be distributed in your common 
rooms this evening. Now, let us all eat.”

As he was filling his plate he felt some disbelief that that was it. The replacement of an ineffective 
teacher and a slight change in when schedules were handed out. Perhaps there would be other 
changes, but he would have to wait and see. He had to wonder what Dumbledore would be like in 
class. It was too bad it was required as he would prefer to stay as far away as possible from him, and 
this gave the old man far more opportunity to be around him. Would he use it as an excuse to 
disseminate his belief system or actually do what was right?

His fellow Ravenclaws seemed a bit conflicted by the change in history professors. True, it likely 
meant they would no longer have to maintain the in-house system they had set up as a response to 
Binns’s deficiency, but the idea of having Dumbledore as a replacement after his own displays of 
inadequacy. . . . Schedules were handed out in the common room and Harry groaned softly on 
seeing he had History on Mondays right after Snape. Defense was after lunch and perhaps this year it 
would be a better class given Quirrell’s change in demeanor. There was nothing to look forward to 
on Wednesdays at all except a free afternoon. Friday, though, would bring an early start to the 
weekend.

At ten o’clock they walked into Potions with the Hufflepuffs. Harry was rather shocked to realize 
that Snape had toned down his taking of points and could almost imagine McGonagall having taken 
a good look at the records, resulting in a talk with the man. What had not changed was the amount of 
vitriol spewed or the complete lack of anything resembling teaching. As bad as it was he was more 
dreading History of Magic next.

When they arrived at that class, shared with Gryffindor, Dumbledore twinkled merrily at them all and 
waved them into seats. Harry made sure to sit at the very back, with Kevin joining him. Hermione 
chose a seat right up front, which was not unexpected. She probably still thought the man walked on 
water. In less than a minute she had out parchment, quill, and ink and was sitting there, straight-
backed, and with her writing hand poised over the parchment in anticipation. He shook his head 
faintly and got out his own supplies.

By the end of the hour he did have to admit that the man managed to make history seem almost 
interesting, but he was out of there the second the bell rang, practically quick-stepping to lunch. He 
would spend the afternoon working on what little homework he had been assigned and relax mostly 
until Charms late the next day.

When Monday rolled around to Defense after lunch he again sat in the back. He understood why 
Kevin so often sat next to him, but he was a little surprised to see that Neville sat to his other side. 
Rumors had already been flying about Quirrell’s increased confidence in his classes so Harry was 
interested to note that he had correctly interpreted the expression on the man’s face at the opening 
feast. Quirrell stuttered far less, for one thing, making it possible for the students to take proper notes.
He also seemed to have developed a faint sense of humor, and whenever his back was turned to the class Harry could feel Voldemort eyeing him. Every so often a knowing smirk would flit across Harry’s face in response.

In retrospect he was surprised that any of his ‘letters’ had made it to Voldemort, or the replies to him. He knew Dumbledore had placed mail wards. Perhaps it might be that his own wards had the side effect of negating parts of that? Maybe he did need to speak with Kreacher to see if the bond had transferred. However, he could tail Quirrell and find out where in the castle he lived, get a glimpse of the inside—or just attempt to read it straight from the man’s memories—and shift in long enough to drop off spheres.

He did just that the next Monday, sifting through Quirrell’s memories at a rapid pace without the man ever being aware of the intrusion. The map had been used all the previous week to chart out the man’s normal movements, but he persisted for another just to be safer.

“I just thought I’d check before I made any plans for the demise of Snape. Do you intend to question him at all, say, once you have a body again? Because if so then I’ll wait. And I must say I am outraged that Dumbledore weaseled his way back into this school. If he’s still here for the next school year then I’ll take that to mean you don’t plan to quash him and I’ll make my own arrangements. On a side note, it’s nice to see that Quirrell’s act was toned down this year. Makes class more bearable.”

He sighed mentally. The boy did raise some excellent points. However . . .

Harry was rather surprised when he got into bed and realized something had been left there: a sphere. He glanced around casually, spotting no one, but just to be on the safe side he nudged the sphere under his pillow for later. In the meantime he decided to ask a few questions. ‘Derek, do you have a few minutes to chat?’

After a short pause he heard, ‘Yes. What is it?’

He took a book off his nightstand and opened it so he could pretend to read. ‘I’m rather curious about something. I know that muggles have fantastically horrific weapons, but to my knowledge they were only ever used twice. They still exist, though, in far greater quantities. It seems like every time I turn around another war breaks out somewhere, though I expect that we’ll be safe enough for a number of years yet if last time is anything I can go by. Still, there was another flare up just recently. So what are the odds they’ll be used again?’

‘War has been busy. There is a miniscule chance at any given time that some idiot with the ability to do so will launch nuclear weapons and initiate the end of the world,’ Derek replied.

‘All right. That’s about what I expected. Now, while I’m rather fond of my Iceland idea, I do realize that all those people living there have never done anything to me that I’m aware of, so advocating to
Voldemort that we kill them all off is really pushing the boundaries of common decency. With that in mind, are you aware of any place on this planet that we magical sorts might actually be able to have as our own?

The pause that time was much longer, causing Harry to wonder if any kind of answer was forthcoming. Eventually Derek said, ‘There is a very huge secret on Earth. Within are more secrets.’

Harry frowned at just how vague the response was, wondering if it was being hinted that this was something he would ultimately find more satisfying to unravel on his own. Even so. . . . ‘And do you mean secret in the sense of a secret being kept, or. . . ?’

‘The latter.’

‘It’s not like a Mayan city or something along those lines hidden in a rain forest that no one has found in centuries?’

‘No, not exactly,’ was the somewhat unhelpful reply.

Harry huffed. Sometimes finding the right questions was really aggravating. ‘Sounds to me like it is a city, though.’ He suddenly snickered and added, ‘I know. It’s a city secretly created by aliens!’

The pause that followed was flavored with a sense of amusement. ‘Kind of.’

‘Hm. And would the secrets this secret contains explain the secret?’ he asked with a grin.

‘Oh yes, assuming one could understand any of it.’

So a linguist would be useful, most probably, and he already fit that bill by virtue of his circumstances. ‘Is it in terms of placement secretive in the same sense that Petra is?’

‘Not quite that obvious, but in the same vein, so to speak.’

‘Petra is situated in a natural enough flaw, but in theory could be seen from above if the circumstances were right. Your answer tells me that is unlikely for this secret. That means it’s likely the city—for I will assume it is indeed a city—is either situated inside a mountain or other elevated structure, or is underground, and there is nothing externally to ever suggest such a sophisticated secret exists. I could also assume it’s likely that the entrance to this secret is in a place where people would not normally go. How am I doing so far?’

‘Very well, actually. I’ll give you a more solid hint. Think volcanoes.’

Harry blinked slowly. Two of his room mates wandered in and began to prepare for bed, so he turned the page in his book. ‘My patience suddenly grows short. Which volcano?’

‘Weeeell . . . Jebel Marra, Sudan.’

‘Good lord,’ he thought, absently turning another page and giving a quick nod to Kevin. ‘All right, I’ll figure it out from here. Somehow. I’ll let you get back to whatever you were doing.’

‘Always happy to help. Or frustrate,’ Derek replied sunnily, then vanished from sensing.

He knew that pretty much every thought in his head was open to Derek if the ‘man’ was paying attention, so it had to be good if Death had brought it up. In theory, the perfect answer, or near enough. More to the point was when he would find time to go investigate—that is, once he figured out where Sudan was.
It wasn’t until all his room mates had fallen asleep that he pulled his bed curtains closed and set up a privacy ward, and then finally activated the message.

“Harry Potter. You continue to interest me. Do as you will with Snape as I expect he’s of little real use to me, and given the sheer depth of his hatred for you I sincerely doubt he would listen to and faithfully obey even me on that subject. If nothing else his body language would betray him. I expect I know enough about you now, what with the myriad hints you’ve been dropping like breadcrumbs outlining a torturous path to the past, that I need not waste my time investigating the man personally.”

A purely mental pause of surprise interposed itself on Harry’s behalf.

“However, while I am sure you have excellent reasons for your stance on Dumbledore, above and beyond those you have shared, I think perhaps it might be too soon to act on the matter of his death. As it stands he is a focal point for Light-minded fools. You may not think that is important, but consider that so long as he is alive those fools will flock to him and we will know who and where they are. The other consideration on that front is that if a place can truly be made for us it would be interesting indeed to watch what happens if the Light gets exactly what it seems to want.”

Harry supposed Voldemort had a point there.

“So, consider. We shall speak again, I have no doubt.”

And then the sphere went quiet. Harry sat there for a minute before stashing the device in his trunk. Back cozily in his bed he pondered the message. Voldemort was obviously getting his hints loud and clear, and was intelligent enough to extrapolate from there, even toward a conclusion that most would consider insane. Then again, perhaps suffering from insanity made that kind of leap easier?

And the man definitely had brought up interesting ideas about the Light and the potential consequences of their rather simple-minded goals. If it were at all possible to find a place where those of the Dark—and even Neutrals, most likely—could exist in safety, did that not have the potential to wreak havoc on the whole concept of balance? A faint mew reached his ears, no doubt from Anthony’s cat, a not uncommon occurrence, but it made him also consider magical creatures and their place in the nebulous overall plan forming in his head.

He decided to sleep on things. It would be soon enough to reply to Voldemort sometime the next day, or even a week later. There was no sense in being hasty, after all, and he did have rather a lot to think about.

It was his decided opinion that he had two major tasks at present. One was dreaming up an appropriate death for Severus Snape, and the other was figuring out exactly where this secret was in Sudan. Still, after his initial reaction to Voldemort’s ‘letter’ had worn off he realized that the man was being awfully cooperative. Was it just that Harry was insanely hard to even so much as damage? Or was it that Voldemort was not as insane as most everyone assumed? He was certainly coming across as being reasonable. . . . Harry shook his head and again decided to table the reply until later.

He finished off his dinner and returned to the common room, heading upstairs so he could gather what books and materials he would need, then returned downstairs. A look around revealed that it was surprisingly full. But then again, it was Friday evening, and it only made sense, perhaps, that his house mates would be eager to get their homework completed now so that their weekend would be free. Only a few spots seemed to have any room at all, one of which was located in a small two-seat nook partially obscured from view by the bookcases that formed its ‘walls’.
Harry became vaguely interested when he realized that one of the seats was taken by Luna Lovegood. She had been such a peculiar girl in his original timeline, possibly due to the trauma engendered by the death of her mother, but quite possibly because she really was a bit loopy. As he made his way over to the empty seat he rather wondered if she was already being bullied by her room mates for being different.

As she looked up at his approach he inquired, “All right with you if I sit here?”

Luna’s more or less permanently surprised look did not waver at the question. She merely nodded and went back to her reading, so Harry took the open seat and situated his things. Within minutes he was working on the first of the essays required of him.

“Er, Harry...?”

He looked up from his seat on one of the more comfortable sofas in the common room to see Michael looking at him a bit anxiously. “Yes?” he said, nodding at an open spot, and noticing as he did so that others in his dorm were converging on their location.

Michael took a seat and settled in rather nervously. “I—we—noticed that you were sitting with Lovegood the other day.”

Harry blinked slowly. “And?”

“Well, maybe you aren’t aware of it, but there’s been a lot of talk about her,” Michael said quietly.

“Yeah,” Terry added, taking one of the armchairs in the grouping. “We’re a little concerned. You know, about how her reputation might...”

Harry did his level best not to laugh outright or even show any level of amusement—or anger, actually. “Might what? Taint me, or something equally ridiculous?”

Kevin, just then also taking a seat, had the grace to look embarrassed, averting his gaze briefly toward Anthony.

“Let me ask you something—all of you,” Harry said evenly, knowing exactly what they were referring to. “It won’t make any sense at first, but bear with me.” After a pause in which each of them nodded he continued, “What draws the carriages?”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Kevin replied. “Magic makes them go.”

“Really?” Harry drawled. “And you know that for a fact? That some spell is responsible?”

“Er, well...” Kevin demurred.

Harry glanced at the other boys and mentally shook his head. “In this case you’d be wrong. The carriages are drawn by thestrals. And before you ask, thestrals are invisible except to those who have witnessed someone dying. Now, don’t take my word for it. Go to the library, ask the groundskeeper, Hagrid, whatever. The point is, just because you can’t see something doesn’t mean it fails to exist. To tie this back into your earlier concern, I am aware that Lovegood talks about creatures no one around here has seen, never mind heard of. None of you can see thestrals, yet they exist.

“Even if the creatures Lovegood mentions aren’t real, is she harming anyone? Because really, I am strongly reminded of that incident last year with Knightley about Snape. Thankfully you guys were
witnesses and present when he confronted me. You can’t know everything, so why are you automatically assuming that Lovegood is crackers? Isn’t that being a bit harsh for something that would otherwise be eccentric? Everyone seems to look up to Dumbledore, yet many people will happily admit they think he’s barmy. So while I appreciate that you guys are concerned, I think it’s unwarranted and a little unfair. And now, if you don’t mind, I would like to get back to my book.”

His dorm mates, while not looking entirely convinced or properly ashamed of jumping to conclusions, all gave nods and wandered off. He had to assume they would do the research, and even if they never said another word on the matter, having then proved his point, they would at least be less hasty in the future. Hopefully.

With that he returned to his book, one on history that was not part of the official book list, and continued to try to get a real idea of the decisions made in the past, not just what Binns had been willing to “teach” about in his soporific ramblings. He was especially interested in at what point the British wizards had begun their crusade against Dark magic—or really, any banned magic, whether Dark Arts or not. Were policy and law changes out of an honest concern for the health, mental or otherwise, of those who might seek to use such magic, or were the changes politically motivated? Plain old clashes in dogma? Was it possible that Light and Dark were so ideologically opposed that a reconciliation was nigh well futile?

Things of such nature were important to the idea of a truly separate nation. There was no real sense in even considering it if things would devolve into the same damn arguments, with people proselytizing or defending their fiefs. And there was still the question—in his mind, certainly—of what to do about muggle-borns. Could it be argued that leaving them to the tender mercies of the Light was ill-advised?

Harry made a mental note to check into, if possible, the home lives of muggle-born students over the past few decades and see how many had been abused because of their ability, and of those, how many had received any help whatsoever. Perhaps if he had not been so wrapped up in his own problems the first time around he might have cared to notice others saddled with abusive muggles. Then again, considering some of the things he had learned during the year after Voldemort’s final defeat, back again at Hogwarts for his seventh year. . . .

Over the next few days, in and around classes and his research, he continued to ponder Voldemort’s message and how he should respond.

“Hello again,” began the message, and Voldemort was surprised to realize that Harry was speaking rather slowly. “I have decided, after a great deal of thought, that you are probably correct regarding Dumbledore. And if he were to die in some deliciously gruesome fashion obviously connected to the Dark—well, he would die a martyr, which is never a good thing. Granted, I could always arrange a freakishly bizarre accident for him, but I’ll just let that subject go for the time being.

“However, there is something I have, of late, felt compelled to bring to your attention. To be sure, I’ve been dropping hints, and you are intelligent enough to pick up on them. That much I never doubted. What I did question was your capacity to reason and be rational. You do, after all, have quite a reputation for being completely off your nut.”

Voldemort scowled, but noted that Potter was still speaking a bit oddly.

“I have decided to be straight with you, not to mention blunt on this matter. I know all about your Horcruxes. In fact, I have them in my possession.”
Voldemort saw red and brutally took control of Quirrell’s body, flinging the orb across the room to shatter into a million pieces against the stone wall. When he finally calmed down he understood exactly why Potter had sent two message spheres. He eyed the second one warily, and not a little angrily. Eventually he shook the blasted thing and ceded control back to his host.

“I expect you’re wondering why I have them and what I plan to do with them. You see, I know exactly what someone like Dumbledore would do, assuming he could ever stir himself to direct action, and we both know how unlikely that is. But given that I have been less than cooperative and have no intention of ever being cooperative, he might actually manage to figure out where you hid them and do something about it. Obviously, that option is no longer open to him.

“Call me crazy, but I figured that I should probably be proactive about ensuring the protection of a potential ally’s life. And, to be honest, none of them were all that well hidden. There were too many obvious ties to your past and to your followers. It wasn’t as easy the first time around to deal with them, but there were far too many tilted windmills in my life back then. And hey, yes, that is confirmation of something you no doubt suspect.

“So, I have them. They are extremely safe. You have no idea how safe. Though there are fewer of them now for reasons I had no reason to suspect, that is not to say that any part of your soul is missing. It was explained to me by an expert, one with unimpeachable credentials. I realize that none of this is reassuring to you right now and I’m going to have to ask that you trust me for the time being. That sounds a little silly given that you did attempt to kill me more than once last year, but . . .

“How I got them this time isn’t something I’m yet willing to discuss, nor will I yet reveal my expert’s identity. I will tell you, however, that you inadvertently left a piece of your soul in me that night, which is presumed to be the reason why I gained the ability to speak and understand Parseltongue. It’s no longer in me, of course, but the ability remains.

“Anyway, now that I’ve confessed about that, I want to say I’ve got a lead on something very interesting indeed, something which could be of use to us in the short and even long term. I need to find the time to either slip away from the school to investigate or wait until break. Hopefully it pans out and would be a far better alternative to my whimsical notions about Iceland. I’ll let you know once I have something concrete to share. Until next time.”

Voldemort came to the angry conclusion that he was going to have to check on the locations of his more accessible Horcruxes, though he strongly suspected that Potter was not lying and had already collected them. How he could possibly have managed to get his hands on the ones given into the safekeeping of Malfoy and Lestrange, though . . . . Even so, what were the odds he would even have bothered to check had Potter not said something? He had always been so very sure of himself.

Poor Quirrell did not get much sleep on subsequent weekends. The diadem, indeed, was nowhere to be found in that room, and attempts to require a room containing it failed. The ring was missing from the shack of his crazed Gaunt relatives. The locket, however, appeared to be fine, but Potter’s words forced Voldemort to look closer. Or rather, sense the situation with more than just his eyes. He discovered very quickly that the basin contained a locket that looked correct, but held absolutely no resonance with his soul, so the only explanation was that it had somehow been replaced with a duplicate.

He eventually sent a very short message asking what specifically were the descriptions of these alleged Horcruxes. The sphere he got in response started off with an amused chuckle.

“All right. A diary; a ring; a locket; a cup; and a diadem. Five of the six you had intended to create. The ring is no longer a Horcrux and neither am I. Those portions of your soul now reside in the cup.
And if you were wondering about the cave, I have a name for you: Regulus Black. You used his house-elf when you set that up, but were unaware that he ordered said elf to return to him after you were done with the creature. So he did, thus Regulus knew exactly where to find one of them. Regulus brought that same elf with him and ordered him to retrieve the locket and destroy it. Regulus died, of course. I imagine the inferi got him. The elf held onto that locket, unable to complete his master’s order, right up until I pinched it out from under his nose. I trust that answers your question.”

So he was right in his suppositions, no matter how insane they had seemed. Potter had done all of this already and was changing things this time. Had he gone back? Or had he jumped dimensions? Going back made little sense in reality, not when you parsed the variables related to time travel and paradox. Perhaps an attempt to go back had resulted in a dimensional split? Did it really matter? Assuming the conditions were the same up to that point, he supposed not.

Potter knew of his Horcruxes, had them, and had at some point in his past destroyed them, and presumably but not explicitly Voldemort. So what made him shift from the exemplar of Light to one opposed, if not necessarily opposite? What had gone wrong? Was it incorrect to assume that he had seen his final defeat? And yet, even had he lived, why would Potter start over again and actually help him if the issue was being incapable of said defeat? ‘I'll just have to ask,’ he thought. ‘He may even answer.’
Chapter 6

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“Once that you’ve decided on a killing, first you make a stone of your heart. And if you find that your hands are still willing, then you can turn a murder into art.” — The Police, *Murder by Numbers*

Harry thought long and hard about his next response. That sort of thing would truthfully be better done in person, but he was still wary to some degree that Voldemort would try to pull a fast one on him, especially after having revealed his possession of the Horcruxes, despite the evidence that killing him was impossible or next to. And speaking of that—‘Derek, what’s to stop someone from managing to do something like knocking me unconscious and then dumping me off the side of a cliff?’

‘Oh, you’d probably die,’ came the airy response. ‘But you wouldn’t stay dead. I would come for you personally and pick you up, dust you off, and correct any issues. Can’t have my master heading off to the afterlife on me, now can I?’

‘I see. How comforting. So at this point I can either ask you point blank if Voldemort is planning anything funny, or I could simply set up conditions in my book such that if he or Quirrell do try to off me again that Quirrell would trip and bash his head in or break his neck.’

‘You could, yes.’

Harry let his gaze go unfocused, no longer really seeing the view out the window, then nodded. ‘I think I’ll just do it that way. It’ll be more exciting not knowing for sure. Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome,’ Derek replied, then faded from his mind.

“Okay,” he muttered to himself. “Time to set up a meeting. The question is for when.”

A week later saw Harry meeting his Defense professor in his office after dinner. Quirrell threw up a few privacy wards and took a seat—facing backwards—and unwrapped and removed the turban from his head. Harry arched a brow at the spectre of Voldemort on the back of the man’s head and blithely pulled a stick of rock candy from his pocket and unwrapped the end. “Well hello there,” he said, then shoved the candy in his mouth.

Voldemort just stared at him for a minute, then commented, “How irreverent you are.”

“Yes, well, I try,” Harry said a bit distortedly, then removed the candy. “So let’s hash things out, shall we? Hypothetically speaking, for the moment.”

Voldemort just stared at him for a minute, then commented, “How irreverent you are.”

“Yes, well, I try,” Harry said a bit distortedly, then removed the candy. “So let’s hash things out, shall we? Hypothetically speaking, for the moment.”

Voldemort made a sound like a mildly frustrated sigh. “Where are my Horcruxes?”

“Those? I keep them with me at all times. They literally cannot be stolen from me.” The rock candy went back into his mouth for a moment—a lovely banana flavour, actually. “Their safety is indisputable. So unless you plan to assimilate some of them I don’t see the point in worrying.”

“Interestingly enough a part of me believes you,” Voldemort admitted. “The other part wants nothing more than to wring your scrawny little neck.”

Harry laughed merrily. “I’ll show you something, then. Now, understand, I am not giving you this. I
just want you to understand something first.” He produced the Elder Wand from within himself and set it on the desk. “Again, not giving it to you. Have Quirrell attempt to take it, or take control and try yourself.”

Voldemort eyed him for a moment, then his eyes went blank and his expression slack. Quirrell stood and turned around, reaching down to grasp the wand in one hand. Quirrell’s face showed a twinge of surprise when it disappeared the moment it was touched. The body then resumed its previous position and Voldemort’s face became animated again.

Harry smirked and produced the wand again. The rock candy went back into his mouth as he detached the chest from the end, the wand disappeared, and he expanded the chest to remove Ravenclaw’s diadem and show it off.

Quirrell’s body leaned backward as Voldemort’s expression went all funny, a peculiar mixture of confusion, frustration, and anger.

Harry replaced the diadem, shrunk the trunk, and reattached it to his wand before letting that return to his body. After removing the candy from his mouth he said, “While you probably can’t tell exactly what I did there, you can rest assured that your Horcruxes are decidedly safe. Dumbledore won’t be getting his hands on them. I’d say Dumbledore and his band of idiots, but we both know that man doesn’t much care to share knowledge or power.”

“The fidelius, then,” Voldemort guessed. “And attached, I suppose, in some way to a wand which cannot be separated from you.”

“Well, the old man always did praise your intelligence,” Harry replied. “So back to hashing things out. I do recall mentioning that I had a lead I needed to chase down. So suppose that, in theory, I found a place. Further suppose that we transplanted all of the Darks—those that aren’t raving psychos, anyway—and interested Neutrals. Possibly even muggle-borns snatched from the muggle world, those too young to have been contacted. And I don’t limit this to Britain. On top of that suppose that we transfer magical creatures.”

“And your question is? What sort of government we could agree on?”

“More or less. Even Dark wizards use Light magic on a regular basis, so it isn’t as though any of that would be lost. I’ve been doing a lot of research into why certain magics were banned. It’s funny, in a way, since a lot of Dark magic is deemed perfectly acceptable under certain circumstances, most of which seems frightfully arbitrary. Some people in the government, if they had their way, would ban all magic which could do harm, never mind that it would also encompass plenty of Light magic, and would leave this country open to invasion. But of course, British is best, don’t you know, and no one would dare. . . .” He rolled his eyes.

“Define magical creatures.”

“Mm, anything useful or harmless. For example, acromantula are man-eaters, but their silk is of exceptional quality. On the flip side, puffskeins are utterly useless so far as I know, except as pets. Still, no matter how useful something is there’s always someone out there who wants them exterminated, often someone Light. Far too many of those people have little or no tolerance for anything that even hints of being less than Light.”

“And werewolves?”

Harry snorted. “Ah, no. Most likely not. Not unless they are extremely useful for some kind of potion, and not unless I find something extraordinary. And really, they’re probably always going to be out
there, so it’s not as though they need to be saved or anything. And if they aren’t useful why encourage it? It’s a communicable disease. I’m still rather iffy on the idea of vampires, even, but at least they can sexually reproduce themselves so they are a species unto themselves, even if they can turn others. Don’t get me wrong—I don’t have anything against either in particular, I’m just not sure if there would be a point with werewolves.”

Voldemort gave a thoughtful, albeit awkward, nod. “It sounds to me as though you expect this theoretical population to not have issues with muggle-borns and half-bloods. That the ability to express magic would be of far more importance. Naturally, this would preclude the inclusion of any number of pure-bloods.”

“Yes, but consider that if we took only magical folk—absolutely no associated muggle family members—eventually everyone would be a pure-blood. It would not impact distinctions based on wealth since it’s not as though I would ever advocate leveling. Even if I were obscenely wealthy and liked to be a bit of a philanthropist I would never share it out in that manner, not for a population that cannot seem to make up its mind on how they feel about me. Granted, those sorts of people, the ones who expect little old me to jump straight into a duel to the death with you and save them all from having to be anything but lazy, would never be invited anyway. And those who despise me and want me dead are unlikely to be able to fit in.”

“Are you saying you aren’t wealthy?” Voldemort asked almost curiously.

Harry snorted again. “My father did the usual tests after I was born and once he realized I was not a proper little heterosexual limited me to a relatively small trust fund. All the Potter funds went elsewhere, such as to the Order. Let’s forget about the fact that they were being hunted and he might not have the chance to father one or more other sons. My mother left what she had to me, since she didn’t share James’s views. And assuming things go as expected my godfather will leave me his fortune. He was never properly disinherited, and even if he had been he still has the money his Uncle Alphard left him. That assumes he kicks it anytime soon, naturally.”

At that Voldemort got a vaguely peculiar look on his face. “Since you seem to have me at such a disadvantage, and since you’ve dropped so many hints, I may as well ask outright. Did you utilize some method of time travel to live your life over again, and if so, why?”

Harry stretched out the time until his verbal response by enjoying his candy for a bit. “I used a ritual,” he finally said, “one that I researched for over a year, starting after all of your Horcruxes were destroyed and you were killed for good.”

Voldemort scowled.

“You’ll never guess how you died, either,” Harry said a bit tauntingly. “I already knew that Dumbledore was something of a problem, but not how much, by the end of my fifth year. During my sixth year he took forever to explain certain things about you, such as your past and personality, and what he thought you were using for Horcruxes. And that year started off with him having already found the ring. It was killing him, the curses you had put on it, but I didn’t know that at the time. I should also point out that the diary had already been destroyed.

“Dumbledore died at the end of the year, after going to the cave to get the locket—a fake, I know, but it did give us clues as to where the real one was—and I was more or less on my own at that point aside from the help of two friends. I’ll skip most of what should have been my seventh year because that was more or less the camping trip from hell while trying to locate and destroy the remaining Horcruxes. To shoot to the more relevant parts, it was right before Snape expired—your snake Nagini bit him because you no longer had any use for him—that he gave me a bunch of memories.
“In those I learned exactly what kind of a twisted relationship Snape had with my mother, and how she was not exactly the saintly personality I had been led to believe in, and most importantly, I learned that Dumbledore expected me to pay you a visit so you could kill me. The Horcrux in my scar, don’t you know. I still don’t really know if he expected me to somehow live through that. It was a serious mental mule kick in the head for me. And before you ask, yes, I let you nail me with a killing curse. I survived, obviously, and shortly after that your final Horcrux was destroyed and you were killed.

“I think by then I was already mental from the accumulation of everything thus far, including more than one use of an Unforgivable, though just exactly what effect those had is up for debate. When I was able to visit Gringotts and see about my inheritance I learned exactly what kind of a bastard my father was. My godfather was just as bad, actually, but his stint in Azkaban made him forget the details and he changed his will after his escape to leave me everything.”

Voldemort shook Quirrell’s head slightly. “That is not enough.”

“No, it wouldn’t be and it wasn’t. I returned to where I was living and spoke with my then girlfriend. Yes, I know, why would I have one if I was gay. I told her about my father’s will, and she seemed okay with it, if not upset on my behalf. It was later that I overheard her speaking with her mother about how she couldn’t marry a poor man. Her mother advised she stop administering the love potions.” Harry half-smiled, rather bitterly. “It was after that, when the potions started to wear off, that I finally felt like I could—I don’t know—try thinking for myself. I moved out and started doing some research, especially after my best female friend was less than sympathetic and my best male friend brushed the whole thing off. Maybe he was secretly gleeful that the Great Harry Potter wasn’t getting everything all of a sudden, such as the money he always assumed I had.

“I did go back to Hogwarts to attend my final year, which was rather awkward given that my near-fiancée and friends were barely speaking to me unless it was about games, nagging about revision. . . . And nothing had really changed. Even though a number of the Slytherin students had fought on the Light side in that final battle, Gryffindors still acted horribly toward Slytherins and they were horrible in return. Hufflepuffs were still considered duffers and Ravenclaws mostly ignored everyone. The teachers were still apathetic toward all of it, muggle-borns were still scornful of tradition and culture. . . .

“I kept up my research, thankful that I had access to the Black library, and started paying attention to politics. A friend of mine, I suppose you could say, had ascended to the role of minister, and I started a correspondence with him. There were still laws being presented for vote which would even more severely restrict werewolves, as an example. Some only went so far as to require registration while others were pushing hard for all of them to be rounded up and killed to get rid of the problem once and for all.

“Now I argued, how is that any different from a wizard? One evil wizard willing to act out doesn’t mean we’re all evil and should be imprisoned or killed. So someone like Greyback shouldn’t decide the fate of all werewolves. But the minister didn’t realistically have a lot of power, not with the Wizengamot stacked the way it was. The government was still flush with hereditary fiefs only interested in pushing their personal agendas. Unless he was willing to start bribing people to do the right thing there wasn’t much he could manage.”

“Something tells me you’d be for term limits,” Voldemort commented.

“Probably. Something to prevent families to obtain and hold too much power. Sure, the muggle government has a House of Lords, but they also have a House of Commons. What it boils down to is that nothing really changed. Oh, sure, you were dead, but not all of your followers were properly
dealt with, and the conditions which would lead to yet another dark lord were all still there. I died for these people and they wanted to parade me around at parties and balls and political soirées. I wasn’t a person, I was a thing.

“You say you want our own country, for real. I want one that marches with my ideology. And if I’m famous it’s because of something I actually did, not because it was forced on me by morons like Dumbledore.” Harry stuffed the rock candy back into his mouth and sucked before cracking off the end and crunching through it.

“You decided you didn’t like the way things turned out and found a way to try again, this time courting the other side.”

Harry shrugged. “I wouldn’t exactly say I ever courted the Light. I was more or less forced into it and frankly wasn’t mature enough at the time to really think things through, especially not after having lived with my abusive relatives for so damn long. I was strongly discouraged from asking questions or doing well in school. I did not rise above that until too late. I latched on to the first person who appeared to give a damn and didn’t let go even in the face of evidence that he was using me. I just couldn’t accept that at the time, not until after it was all over and the results were staring me in the face.

“After I, er, returned, shall we say, I tried my best to ignore what a colossal wanker my uncle was. The thing is, I noticed that the people in town actually did believe I was some kind of deviant little shit seconds away from corrupting all their children and really ought to be shipped off by the police, all because my aunt and uncle spread stories. I realized I just didn’t care if they died, and thought perhaps this time around they deserved it, so I arranged for their deaths in order to power and strengthen the wards I emplaced. My uncle had a terrible accident, my former best friend kicked it on his first Hogwarts Express ride, and Snape will shortly join them in death. There are a few people I should like to get revenge on.”

“Even though some of them have done nothing yet now to warrant it.”

“True,” he admitted.

“The obvious question here is how you did it,” Voldemort pointed out. “Even I would be hard pressed to manage what you’ve done, at that age, even with all my current knowledge.”

Harry just smiled.

Harry was sitting beneath a tree not terribly far from the lake, ostensibly enjoying the last of the semi-decent weather before winter set in with a vengeance. It was beside the point that he was wearing a jumper and had a warming charm going. Anyone asking was told he appreciated the “brisk” air. Well before the time dinner rolled around he would be safely ensconced on his bed or in the common room, deciding to give the Halloween feast another miss for consistency’s sake.

Every so often he would glance up briefly, generally while answering a question from Kevin or Neville but not always, and eventually his patience was rewarded on seeing both Snape and Hagrid approaching the area, carrying a case and bucket respectively. Harry knew that Snape was on his way back from an ingredient gathering trip in the forest, though he was not usually so obvious about it. What was interesting about the situation was that Quirrell was quietly and invisibly lurking close by, presumably to see what Harry had in mind for his Potions Master’s death.

It was known to Harry that Hagrid visited the giant squid on a regular basis, partly just to give the
poor thing some company that was not merfolk, and partly because he had to. As it was Hagrid tripped just as he was approaching Snape with the result of the contents of the bucket he was carrying splashing all over the man, much to Snape’s disgust.

Harry watched avidly as Snape erupted in anger, excoriating Hagrid loudly, and then as the giant squid poked its head up above the surface of the lake, its tentacles thrashing around wildly. A fisted hand went up to press against his mouth as the squid reached out and wrapped a tentacle around his professor. Neville squeaked while Kevin dropped his quill, splattering ink all over the place. The next thing Harry knew he was biting down hard as Snape was rudely sodomized right in front of them, while Hagrid flailed around in a panic.

Neville hunched over and lost the contents of his stomach as Kevin said weakly, “Did Snape just get . . . ?”

“Oh, dear lord,” Harry whispered. This was way better than he had anticipated. Snape was being subjected to tentacle rape and it was all he could do not to laugh so hard he cried. Specifying that a melding of the contents of the bucket and the god-awful mess saturating Snape’s hair would turn into the equivalent of squid catnip plus Viagra made the professor irresistible and highly desirable as a partner, despite not even being of the same species. It was only a minute or so later, blood flying everywhere, that the squid dragged Snape under the water and disappeared with him, presumably to actually mate with the man.

Quirrell finally made an appearance, walking quickly toward the scene. He paused at Harry’s little group to say, “Mr Longbottom, if you would please run to the infirmary and inform Madam Pomfrey that there is a problem?” Without waiting for a response he added, “Mr Entwhistle, please run to the Great Hall and see if the headmistress is already present there, or perhaps Flitwick, so they can be informed. If neither are present try to find McGonagall or Flitwick in office.”

Harry was impressed that he said all of it straight-faced and without stuttering once. What a fantastic Saturday. Best Halloween ever! He started slowly gathering up everyone’s things after they took off at a dead run at the professor’s behest, all the while eyeing the lake. Quirrell had continued on to try to get Hagrid to stop panicking and instead do something useful, though he was having little success.

Dumbledore showed up with McGonagall just as Harry was making his way toward the castle, not wanting to linger once the cavalry arrived, and even by then there was not much to see. Snape was still the captive of the squid and the blood in the water had spread enough or sunk so as to not be immediately obvious.

He kept to his intention to skip the feast, instead secured behind his bed curtains creating a message for Voldemort. But he was not alone for very long as someone wandered in and violently shook the curtains to get his attention. Though mildly confused, Harry undid his spell work and poked his head out.

“They’re not having the feast like normal,” Kevin said a bit dully. “Food’s in the common room if you want any. Thought you might want to know.” And then he left, quietly closing the door to the dorm behind him.

‘I wonder,’ Harry thought, ‘if anyone will bother with counseling this time around? Somehow . . . I don’t think so.’

‘If only it were break already,’ Harry thought with a sigh. He very much wanted to track down that secret. Just imagine how different things could be in a place with no muggles, no worshipers in the
Cult of Dumbledore, no holidays based on muggle religion, no so many things he could do without at this point. He would return ‘home’ and then promptly go exploring. It was not as though Petunia would give a flying fig if he was there or not, and going back was only for appearances’ sake.

The furor over Snape’s death had died down rather quickly after the initial outpouring. Certainly there were many, many students who were thrilled that they no longer had to suffer the man’s ‘teaching’, but that happy realization had not really sunk in, pushed aside as it was by the manner of his death, until after Slughorn had been enticed back to the role.

True, it meant that Harry would have to suffer the man’s efforts to ‘collect’ him, but he could deal with that easily enough. If nothing else it just underlined how badly he wanted to get away for a while, no matter how satisfying Snape’s death had been. Voldemort had pointed out that he could only arrange for so many ‘accidents’ in a given year before someone like Dumbledore became suspicious, so eyeing up Ginny or Trelawney was out of the question. Someone away from the school—perhaps. So all he had to look forward to for a while was his investigations.

November dragged on interminably, the only highlights being the occasional conversation with either Voldemort or Luna. He found her to be quite amusing, actually, once she had warmed up to him, no longer fearing that he would mock her for the things she liked to talk about. A part of him wished he could actually find some of these creatures she spoke of, just to prove her right.

He spent several hours sitting with her on Friday afternoons, absentmindedly talking while doing his homework. They would continue on to dinner, and then afterward he would meet with Voldemort, though those meetings sometimes only lasted ten minutes. It was late November when Luna brought up the subject of Ginny. He had been engrossed in what he was writing—mostly from memory, actually, from his first life—and only really caught the name. “Hold up, what?” he asked, looking at her directly.

“I said that you should probably be a bit wary of Ginny Weasley,” she replied patiently.

“She has a crush on me,” he said with a sigh.

“Oh yes, very much so. It’s probably a good thing that she is in another house.”

He nodded; that had been on his mind during his decision process for which house to choose, though a rather minor aspect in comparison to other factors. “And you came by this how?”

Luna gave him a look that was just shy of knowing before she replied, “I live not far from her. We’ve been friends of a sort for years.”

A mild suspicion wended through his head, but he nodded. He knew from the first time around that Luna was very loyal to people she considered friends, but that “of a sort” business said a lot. He also remembered quite clearly just how Ginny had treated any female—Luna included—once she had secured Harry’s ‘love’ with potions. No female was safe, excepting her mother, from Ginny’s paranoid belief that one of them would change him somehow, lead him away, steal him. . . . One would think that the potions alone would have been enough, but no. Just another thing he had not been able to notice until he was discarded and able to see clearly.

He thought back to just how truly horrid Ginny had been about Fleur, for example, a woman who had absolutely no intention of ever even glancing at Harry that way. Ginny was most likely jealous of Fleur’s veela-enhanced beauty and ‘charm’. And if Ginny was willing to use potions to obtain the affections of the unwilling, then what was to stop anyone else, even someone like Fleur who had no need of them, from doing the same to the object of Ginny’s affections? Romilda Vane had tried.
In some ways he felt so ashamed of himself for that first life. So much of his time was either attempting to avoid trouble, suffering trouble he had not avoided, running into things blindly, and having the wool pulled over his eyes. He had been so damn stupid, so self-centered, so needy, so desperate, herded from situation to situation by adults with their own personal agendas. And even his friends of the time were caught up in it, encouraged just as much as he had been to blossom that savior Dumbledore had wanted. Eventually he sighed and said, “I appreciate the warning. If you hear anything . . . specific, would you be willing to mention it to me?”

“Yes.” She almost looked like she was about to say something more for a few seconds, but instead she smiled and returned to the essay she was working on.

Harry was stuck in one of those moments of wanting to know, knowing he could should he choose to without her consent or knowledge, and realizing that Luna was one of the few people who simply did not deserve such treatment.

Later on in Quirrell’s office after dinner he stared at the wall for a bit before saying, “I’ve been thinking about vampires, wondering what the effects would be on bringing them along, hypothetically, since most of them live on a diet of human blood so far as I know. Doesn’t make much sense to do so if they’ll be killing our population. Do you think they’d go for blood banks, or would that ruin the whole thrill of the hunt thing?”

Voldemort looked at him funny, like he was not sure he was hearing correctly. “Don’t you think that is a bit premature? Yes, you have this ‘lead’ you spoke of, but until you have something solid . . . .”

Harry rolled his eyes in frustration. “Yeah, yeah. I’m just bored as hell being in this damn school. It honestly never crossed my mind.”

“A little too focused on revenge?” Voldemort said snidely.

Harry snorted at him. “Such wit. So tell me, is it true that you like to torture your followers for the hell of it? Just because you’re in a slightly pissy mood? Because really, I can’t say I’d mind seeing Bellatrix writhing around in agony. Or maybe Lucius.”

“I am going to assume that both of them did something to upset you?”

“Well. . . . She did, at the time, but it has more to do with her talking down to me. Lucius, though, he’s just poncy. I suppose if he had managed to get the school shut down—not something he could possibly do the same way this time—I would have been extremely upset since it would have meant living full time with those horrid muggles. This time around I wouldn’t care since I have that situation under control.”

“And not Peter?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know to be honest. He’s such a sniveling bastard that I can’t imagine torturing him would bring any real satisfaction. I do blame him for what happened to my parents—more than I do you, amusingly enough—but he’s just so pathetic. Or is that an act?” He gave his erstwhile enemy a piercing look.

“No, he really is that pathetic. I had barely threatened him and he caved to my will.”

“Any mental defenses to speak of?” Harry asked suspiciously.

Quirrell’s body shrugged as Voldemort replied, “Not really, which means Dumbledore was far too trusting—or he wanted the prophecy to be set in motion and therefore didn’t look too hard at his people.”
He scowled. “Don’t get me started on him again. Because really, even whining that I’m bored is more productive than me ranting on about the countless things he’s screwed up. I’d rather think about vampires and ways to have Trelawney die in a freakishly bizarre accident. So far all I’ve come up with seems a bit trite.”

“I’m sure something will come to you in the fullness of time. Just exactly how long do you plan to play at being a student, anyway?”

“What, so you know how long before it’s no longer even mildly interesting here and decide it’s better to get your body back? I don’t know. Probably once I have somewhere to move to. The soonest I can even begin to know is during break, but I shan’t hold my breath in expectation that I should be so lucky so quickly.”

“Don’t you mean us?”

Harry eyed Voldemort. “You’re telling me you really are willing to leave Britain behind? I know you said you wanted our own country, but someone might take that to mean this country, just run by you.”

“You find something good enough and I would certainly give the idea honest consideration. Yes, it would be nice to make Britain a proper place to live, but then most people hold some degree of fondness for their home country. But it would never be our country unless all the muggles were gone!”

“They do kill each other off at alarming rates,” Harry pointed out. “Even so, billions is a long way to go. Not really worth the effort.”

Voldemort growled at him. “Do you think I don’t know that? Wouldn’t it be wonderful for a plague to hit and wipe out millions. But then”—he sneered—“that would be killing innocents, right?”

Harry blinked and shrugged lightly. “A natural plague isn’t our business, though. Look, none of this really means anything until a place is found, and I plan to check out that lead during break.” He glanced at the clock and sighed. “I’ll see you later,” he said before getting up and slouching out of the office.
He shared a compartment with Kevin, Neville, and Luna on the way to London. Kevin looked ever so slightly uncomfortable about Luna being there, but kept his mouth shut on the matter. ‘Well, at least he’s not completely dense,’ Harry thought. He was soon caught up in a discussion about whether or not platypuses were magical or mundane creatures. Luna argued for magical, Neville against, Kevin abstaining, and Harry dabbled on both sides depending on what was said and how he reacted to it. Luna could not imagine that something as ridiculous looking as a platypus could be non-magical and Neville (who somehow knew a whole lot more about Darwin than Harry ever thought possible) ranted on about the theory of evolution with equal passion.

Harry was honestly surprised, not with Luna, but with Neville. So little time had gone by, not much more than a year, but Neville’s time with the Hufflepuffs had obviously helped him greatly. Kevin eventually unbent enough to join the fun, and the ride passed by filled with friendly debate and giggles and laughter.

On arrival at Kings Cross Harry said his farewells to everyone and went off to catch a train. He had to, at the very least, appear to be staying with his aunt, but there was nothing stopping him from spending the majority of his time elsewhere. The very first thing he did once he was free and fully back in the muggle world was to buy maps. Those were studied diligently in his room and his efforts were duly rewarded with a set of coordinates and an image of the area in question (thanks to a trip to the library and one bookshop).

Getting there was no problem at all, and the time difference was minimal enough. The last eruption in the area had been around 2000BC so he was unconcerned about that. Actually being there and being able to wander around, however, was monumental. The scope of his self-made task was huge. “I didn’t get this far by being afraid of hard work,” he muttered to himself and began scouting the area carefully.

It was nearly a fortnight before he noticed one of the smaller calderas had a very interesting feature to it. There was a large crack, a seemingly natural fault in the steep inner side, cast largely in shadow. Unfortunately break was only two weeks long and he had a train to catch the next day. After heaving a huge sigh Harry marked the spot firmly in memory and returned to Little Whinging. The work had been dry, dusty, and mostly thankless, but at least he was that much closer to some kind of an answer.

The ride back to Hogsmeade and Hogwarts was much the same as before, except this time they argued about leafy sea dragons, something Harry had never before seen until Luna produced pictures for him. How bizarre! And, he thought with mild astonishment, how enchanting. Kevin had seen some in person and was pleased to relate that tale to the others, and Harry noticed that his sort-of friend no longer appeared to be uneasy around Luna.

But as welcome as that was it remained true that Harry would be stuck in the castle for the next six months. Voldemort was right—he had to assume that only so much pushing could be done before Dumbledore would finally wake up and start paying attention, even if he was no longer headmaster.

But how did that compare to what he knew of the man from before? He cursed himself again for
being so utterly blind. Oh, people always said things such as how, for example, that a person like Tom Riddle should have been able to overcome his childhood conditions, but truthfully they had no real idea what in the hell they were talking about. True, Harry did not grow up to be abusive to others as he had been abused, but that was probably more luck than anything else. The British wizarding world, such as it was, had very little to do with that outcome, so they could not be praised for his first time through whereas they might be blamed for Tom’s. Was Dumbledore evil, or just . . . an idiot? And more fool he for never seeing it. He briefly considered bringing it up with Derek or trying to delve into Dumbledore’s mind, but tabled that decision again. Funny how being able to know anything instantly (or close enough thereto) made one more eager to learn things the hard way. Derek had said Dumbledore was not a classically evil man, but considering what Harry knew he had done this time around. . . .

It was only when he noticed Kevin eyeing him a bit oddly that Harry realized he had gotten lost in his thoughts again, and made an effort to rejoin the current debate. And even then he was not all there, the undercurrent stream of thoughts rather chaotic and unfocused, circling around the topic of Dumbledore and his own idiocy in the past.

“*The thing is,*” he said, “*I’m kind of afraid to find out.*”

Voldemort gave him another one of those looks. “*Isn’t that rather foolish?*”

“Yes,” he said slowly. “*The shattering of illusions is always painful.*”

“*Indeed. But if he is more than just an idiot and we depart, that would leave him with how many impressionable muggle-borns?*”

Harry half rolled his eyes up toward the ceiling. What Voldemort was not saying was that even if Dumbledore was an idiot (and in theory, one high on his own press) the muggle-borns might suffer for it. A part of him saw it as a Slytherin Voldemort manipulating a Gryffindor Harry, but another part scorned having to use those labels at all. If Dumbledore was just an idiot, though, he was still going to kick off at some point and his influence would wane. After all, it was not as though people were rabbiting on about what Merlin would think or do while proposing legislation.

The muggle-borns were always going to be a problem—unless there were enough people included in this happy and somewhat idealistic thought of their own country to be a viable and thriving breeding population. Maybe he should focus on what he wanted rather than what may turn out to be irrelevant. That being so, Voldemort was still correct. Harry was being a touch cowardly in avoiding thus far the truth about Dumbledore. The present time, sitting there with Quirrellmort, was not appropriate for plumbing the depths of that particular issue, though.

“*The muggle-borns are on their own for the moment in my eyes,*” he finally said, then changed the subject. “*You went to school with Minnie. How do you view her now?*”

The tone Voldemort used in answer said very clearly that he was aware of and annoyed by the evasion. “*That would depend. It is not as though I have bothered to look recently. I would say, however, that offhand observation tells me that her spirit and passion for justice has been worn down and blunted by the years or circumstance and she probably has more than once allowed herself to be led.*”

Harry nodded vaguely. While McGonagall had objected to his placement with the Dursleys—a point in her favor—there were a number of times during his schooling when she had utterly failed him. In general terms that was hardly a surprise as he was a student and had been treated as any other—
mostly. He rather thought that her being deputy, head of house, and professor was just too much for her to handle. Flitwick managed to visit the common room once per week and just talk with the students of his house. He was approachable and friendly, but not one of them was mistaken in the impression that he would fail to hand out punishment if warranted. Ravenclaw wit and cleverness had obviously been employed in spades previously to prevent Flitwick from learning about how badly Luna had been bullied.

McGonagall, on the other hand, was rarely if ever seen in Gryffindor. She had done nothing about the ludicrous amount of points Snape had taken (and for equally ludicrous reasons), nor bothered to investigate (to his knowledge) when Harry, Ron, and Hermione had gone to her about the danger to the Philosopher’s Stone. She had done nothing about the flak Harry had gotten about possibly being the Heir of Slytherin, not even within Gryffindor. So much for your house being your family! She did have her good moments where she stood up for Harry or other students, but there were just as many times when she just . . . failed.

The house system itself was divisive and—’Oh, for fuck’s sake,’ Harry thought. ‘I feel like I’m wasting time thinking about these things, especially knowing that even if I do find us a place there is no such thing as a utopia. We’re still going to have problems.’

‘Of course you will,’ Derek responded. ‘But they’ll be your problems, in some ways unique to wherever you end up.’

Harry cast a quick glance up, then nodded slightly. He turned his attention back to Voldemort and said, “What do you know about werewolves?”

He was in some ways very frustrated with Harry Potter. Even with the evidence against the notion Voldemort had been sure he could manipulate the man-child easily enough, and yet it simply was not working. It had the side effect of—reluctantly!—increasing his respect for Potter. Harry had a way of sidestepping things. He was also distressingly blunt at times. It was a curious mixture of Gryffindor and Slytherin.

And Potter was not the only one bored out of his mind. True, he had twice tried to obtain the Defense position and had been denied, but now that he was there, his host teaching it, he realized that whatever illusions he had harbored had been just that. Without the backing of the ministry the changes and adjustments he would have wanted to make would be . . . denied.

If Potter did manage to chase down that lead to a successful conclusion (and if not, maybe he should reconsider the Iceland idea or something like it) he would ensure that Defense Against the Dark Arts would morph into Offensive and Defensive magic and tactics, a far less prejudicial way of looking at things. And if the utter idiots in charge of the school thought even halfway to that same idea they may already have broken the curse on the position for real.

It was a good thing he had an excellent memory; most of what he had been doing recently was considering people and creatures suitable for an exodus. For all that Voldemort had always been confident that he knew exactly what he was doing he found that Potter had easily challenged that sense of superiority. What did he want?—what a question, one he had recently been reluctant to properly explore even in his own mind. And yet, such a question did much to clarify exactly what it was he felt was important.

Not posturing. Not pure-blood propaganda. Not necessarily killing off the muggle infestation—though the thought of a nice plague did sound interesting. Those silly muggles often experimented with things they should never touch. But yet, he must admit, thoughts of that nature were secondary
to the scenario presented to him.

Vampires would be a problem unless people were willing to become certified donors or the vampires were willing to live off the blood of animals. Werewolves, as far as he could be certain, served no useful purpose whatsoever. Even if they brought along werewolves such as Remus Lupin, who could more or less be depended upon to never so much as think about biting someone, they would still, in the end, in theory, have no werewolves.

So, lists. By country, even.

‘All right, so what’s the deal?’

After a short pause came the response, ‘Finally worked up the courage to ask, huh?’

‘Yes,’ Harry replied slowly. ‘I know, I could just use Legilimency, but—’

Derek cut him off with a quiet laugh. ‘But this way involves no risk for information you could obtain either way. Let us classify people in one of four ways, all right? A bit simplistic, but it suffices for now. Good, evil, stupid, and smart. Dumbledore would be good and smart, but his actions and blindness make him more of a good-stupid sort.’

‘Something on the order of him thinking that because one Death Eater repented that all of them are probably secretly wishing they could, which might explain all those “second” chances they keep getting? I mean, look at what Draco did originally. He nearly killed Katie and Ron, had Rosmerta under the imperius, and never did face trial for any of that, all because he had Snape in his corner and because Dumbledore kept giving him chances. Maybe he would have turned out okay in the end, but a lot of innocent people suffered at his hands along the way who were never compensated or their injustices addressed.’

‘Yes, that is one example,’ Derek said agreeably. ‘Then again, he was also stupid enough this time to get himself and his thugs killed. But getting back to Dumbledore, he had what he thought were the best intentions. His plans and execution, however. . . .’

‘You’re saying his willful blindness to even basic human nature has made him stupid, and plans born of such stupidity—not to mention his arrogance, something he might not even recognize.’

‘Correct. Another example would be Severus Snape. He was very intelligent. Circumstances from early on pushed him toward evil, even if he was never quite evil in full. His experiences at Hogwarts pushed him further. He did repent to a degree, as you well know, but even so, a fundamental flaw was introduced into his character and encouraged to flourish. Think back to when he died. He wanted you to look at him, but only to see your mother’s eyes. He spent most of his adult life living in the past.

‘As for another example, let us examine Ronald Weasley. He was also good-stupid, but with his bigotry, lack of tact, selfishness, and so on, you may as well have called him evil-stupid. He wanted so much he was never willing to work for. Instead he ran others down, people he was jealous of, such as Miss Granger for her intelligence, or Malfoy for his money. And what you would not know, but I can, is that even after the war he would have gone on to be just as awful, even with what he was given—mostly undeserved, I must say.’

Harry frowned in thought and decided he may as well ask about that, too. ‘So did he know or not?’
He was used, but had he known he would not have objected. Molly and Ginevra gave him supplies before you left and told him they were nutrition potions specially formulated for you.’

He started to object on the basis of Ron not getting anything out of it, but then realized that Ron had. Ron would not be the one knocking back supposedly disgusting potions despite the relative lack of food they had all suffered—no, Ron wanted food, not nutrition. And, Ron had been crafty enough to get Harry to take them without Harry even having noticed. He supposed, thinking further on it, that he had not noticed his waning interest in Ginny while Ron was gone because there was simply too much on his mind—such as despair.

Dumbledore had never once done anything—or his staff—to stop the rampant racism and bullying going on in the school. Too desperate to see the best in everyone? Using the ones already on his side as disposable pawns in order to try to attract the Dark to switch sides? They, of course, were too smart to not see through that, or too entitled to care. What category did that put people like Crouch in, he who viciously prosecuted those of the Dark?

‘Dumbledore may have been vaguely on track with all this business about love being a power, but he wasn’t around to see the fall out. Though I suspect even if he had been he would have continued to be complacent, despite the fact that nothing really changed. If you were Light you tried to follow the rules, never mind that people on the Wizengamot were accepting bribes hand over fist to do the bidding of the old guard. Kingsley was worse than useless in his role as minister because he refused to do what he knew to be wrong.’

‘Agreed,’ Derek replied.

‘In the end it doesn’t matter how intelligent or brilliant Dumbledore is. He’s got no wisdom rattling around in his brain. His inaction is just as evil as those deliberate. He knew he was dying and he barely gave me any information at all. That’s either ridiculously obstructive or one hell of a back-handed compliment—mostly toward Granger, actually. That being said, I continue to think the answer is to just walk away entirely. And if the situation implodes I can have a good laugh as the old man scrambles in reaction.’

Derek remained silent, but it was not a judgmental sort of silence.

‘Did I get very close to the secret?’ Harry eventually asked.

‘Yes, you did, in relative terms.’

‘Good.’

He considered asking about Dumbledore’s knowledge of potion use by the Weasleys and almost immediately decided against it. If Dumbledore had known, then obviously he had written it off as high-spirited hijinks by hormonal teenagers or other such rot, never mind that it was akin to rape. After all, this was the man who would have had to sign off on making someone like Draco Malfoy a prefect, a boy who had frequently made his blood purist thoughts known, often in the most racist and insulting manner possible. But that was just one more black mark for the idea that these people ought to be given a chance to express regret or remorse, though why any of them should do so when they never seemed to be punished for their actions was incomprehensible. He had seen it often enough at Privet Drive and it was just more of the same with wizards.

And if Dumbledore had not known, then it meant his spy network in the castle either failed to report it (or Ginny had been cunning enough to do all her related activities away from portraits and such) or had and been ignored. Harry scoffed. ‘Probably like Figg either failed in her duties or was ignored.’ For all he knew Figg had bought into the stories, too. It had not seemed that way once he had
become aware of what exactly she was, but who was to say she thought of him as a person rather than an icon?

He shook his head almost furiously and got up, then grabbed several books and some supplies. Minutes later he was downstairs in his usual spot, dealing with useless homework. Luna joined him a short while later, giving him a brief smile, but did not speak until an hour or so had gone by, asking him a question about transfiguration. And Harry, though by no means “talented” the way his father allegedly was with the subject, certainly knew enough to answer her, and could explain things well. Or, that is to say, he could explain things in a very non-Hermione way such that non-Hermione persons could actually comprehend.

As he went back to his own mind-numbingly boring work he considered which would be more amusing—offing Ginny or getting a restraining order. Harry immediately looked over at Luna and asked if such things even existed in the wizarding world.

She gave him a twitchy smile and giggled lightly, shaking her head.

“Bugger,” he muttered.

“You could transfigure her into a crumple-horned snorkack and sell her to a zoo,” Luna suggested mischievously.

“Tempting. Very tempting.”

Nothing much of import happened during the remainder of the school year in Harry’s estimation. Luna was keeping an eye on Ginny, his conversations with Voldemort were more discussions about a potential government, and classes were, as always, hideously boring. So it was with great relief that he boarded the Express and secured a compartment, sharing with what most would consider his friends. And it was not that he didn’t enjoy their company, but that he refused to become all that close to anyone who would not, eventually, follow to a new home, presuming his success in finding it.

The conversation on the way to London consisted mostly of discussion about yeti crabs, something Harry had never heard of before. Luna had pictures, naturally, and sparked off a lively debate on its origins. Harry could somehow see Hagrid trying to decorate his cabin with them during the winter months.

At the platform he made sure to have a conversation with his companions quite near to where Ginny was greeting her mother, allowing her to overhear him making plans to meet the others for school shopping on the fourteenth of August. “The Leaky Cauldron? Around ten?”

They all agreed, so Harry bid them good-bye and headed off through the portal, making for the nearest café to get something to eat before making his obligatory appearance at the “family” house on Privet Drive. ‘Amazing how Figg wanders by at just the right time to see me glancing out the bedroom window,’ he thought. ‘Oh well, I’ll just set up an illusion to make sure she sees me frequently enough, even if not outside.’

Quite a bit of time was spent packing for his trip as he would be gone for far longer than the last time. It almost made him wistful over the idea of having a loyal house-elf to accompany him, but going after Kreacher was probably a bad idea. So instead he used his extended backpack to carry an inordinate amount of supplies of whatever might conceivably be needed.
He shifted back to the caldera and eyed the crack in the shaded side, then settled the backpack comfortably before approaching it. As he was still in a fairly immature body it looked as though entering would not be a problem. As it turned out it was necessary to remove his backpack and pull it through after him, but the interior widened up quickly enough.

It looked, to his admittedly untutored eyes, like a lava tube, though thankfully not one of the dangerously vertical sort. As such, he supposed, that a little care on his part (such as using a spell to make the bottoms of his footwear a bit tacky) should see him safely along the way without doing something horribly undignified such as slipping and possibly reenacting the Chamber of Secrets slide inadvertently.

Approximately five kilometers later he came upon a breathtaking sight. The tunnel opened up into a prodigious shaft which seemed to go down endlessly. Spiraling around the interior was a walkway eventually lost to the depths. Even with those wonders he was soon enough diverted to simply examining the décor. Who were the people who created this?

He finally snapped out of his unproductive yet satisfying behavior and eyed the walkway with a faint sigh. There was nothing else for it, so he began to walk after getting a drink and snacks out of his bag. It was obvious with even only the barest amount of thought that the shaft had not sprung up on its own. The walls were as smooth as glass where undecorated and unadorned and the walkway was actually a part of the walls, which implied specialized tools or machines.

Harry was just beginning to become badly fatigued when an opening came into view a bit farther down. It was a beautifully carved archway and at either side were lanterns—as there had been along the way—close enough for him to actually examine. Simple enough glass and metal, but not containing flames or anything resembling muggle lights. Inside each “cage” was a glowing blue-white sphere about the size of both his fists together.

Through the arch was a decent-sized room with sleeping alcoves in the walls, still with bedding (which rather surprised him and made him slightly wary), tables, chairs, and various other amenities, but nothing that seemed advanced. Except for one thing, that is. A strange device that looked muggle in design and function. However, he could not quite figure out what it was supposed to do as it was nonfunctional as far as he could tell.

Giving it up as a lost cause for the moment he sat down to have a proper meal, then set up a variety of wards around one of the sleeping alcoves, thoroughly saturated it with cleaning spells, and settled down for a nap.

At the bottom of the shaft were yet more fantastic examples of carving. The devices along the way he suspected of being lifts were inoperable for whatever reason, and he had to walk like any mortal, not having even considered the possibility of needing a broom, an oversight he soundly castigated himself for. He looked around for quite some time, investigating everything in sight, but did not see any way to progress. Naturally, this ticked him off, and he decided to take a breather, shifting back to his bedroom, and so he could be seen faffing about the neighborhood by Figg.

The next day he returned with a more relaxed attitude (and a broom), and started his investigation again, determined to figure out the obvious puzzle. He eventually realized that the way forward was actually the way down, and that the floor itself was a giant lift. Well, a few spells took care of that and he was shortly beneath the floor and staring a whole new problem in the face.

The room he was in had multiple exits. For a moment there he felt like crying in frustration.
Instead, once he got a hold of himself again, Harry thought, ‘Any suggestions?’

‘I don’t know,’ Derek replied blithely. ‘Do you happen to have a fifty kilometer long ball of string? Because your destination is almost that far away.’

Harry groaned. ‘Oh, God, it’s some kind of maze. And your suggestion implies that there are no markings to help me. Okay, let me see what I can figure out on my own.’ He glanced at the openings again before sitting down right where he was to think. Many creatures navigated by echolocation, right? Perhaps there was a spell of that sort he could exploit so he could check to see if any of the offered paths dead-ended. Sound did not move through air the same way it did water, so normal range would be limited, but a spell might make up for that problem.

And it did, once he figured out what he needed and tried it. There was one problem, however. All the tunnels came back as dead-ends, and he knew Derek would not have sent him on a wild goose chase as some form of prank. One of them had to be viable. He made careful note of the impressions he had gotten back of the termination points and realized that one of them was subtly different, so he got up and went down that tunnel. At the end was something approaching a door. He backtracked, spelled a mark onto the wall of that tunnel, then chose one of the others.

The end of that one was uniform enough that he could almost imagine what kind of machine had created the tunnel, and at first he could not fathom why it simply ended. But further investigation showed hints of instability and changes in the type of rock. That being so he went back to the original tunnel and opened the door. The other side was a large room, a kind of hub, with multiple doors in evidence. Harry sighed, and after closing the door he had come through, marked it with the sōwilō and raidō runes.

Unfortunately for Harry most of the new doors seemed to lead to hub rooms like the one he was presently in, something that made him think fondly of the idea of bashing his head against the wall. ‘Derek? You have a minute?’

After a short pause came the amused reply, ‘Yes. Having problems?’

Harry made a face and glanced at the ceiling. ‘My father and his friends made the Marauders Map, but I never did find out how. Care to clue me in? I think it would be very useful right about now.’

After finishing his shopping trip (and making sure to be seen walking around the neighborhood by Mrs Figg) Harry prepared a message for Voldemort, asking for a little assistance—something he could manage on his own with enough magic to smooth the way, but Quirrell could do it far more easily without such shenanigans. Hanging around Little Whinging for a spell would not put him too far off course, and if the man agreed it would certainly be worth it.

The next day he received a response and, after checking that he had all he needed, Harry set off to meet the man at the Shrieking Shack. The interior of the building looked just as ruinous as before, which was comforting in a way.

Quirrell arrived approximately ten minutes later with two house-elves in tow. “Mr Potter,” he said by way of greeting.

Harry nodded, but when he spoke it was in Parseltongue. “Nice to see you again, and thank you for arranging for my two new friends here. I assume Quirrell knows how to transfer ownership.”

“Of course. I assume you have brought the payment.”
Harry’s lips twitched in a near smile as he brought up a bag from under the table he was seated at and flipped it open, revealing a wealth of golden galleons.

Quirrell promptly cast a spell to verify the contents, then pulled the bag closer before glancing at the two elves and performing the ceremony to transfer ownership.

Harry nodded again, in thanks, and hissed, “I prepared a little memory for you, so you can at least see something of what I’ve been up to,” then said to the elves, “In the event I need to get a message to this man here I expect one of you can pop back and forth to facilitate that?”

“Oh yes, Master Harry,” Saen said quickly as Cael nodded in agreement.

“Excellent.” He reached into his pocket for a memory sphere—not entirely unlike the ones used for his letters, or for that matter, the ones used to store prophecies—and pushed it across the table toward Quirrell, who somewhat reluctantly picked it up.

“Something tells me this offering will give no clue as to the actual location of your investigations.”

Harry chuckled. “Quite correct. Again, I would prefer that your friend here knows as little as possible about the details. What I’ve provided should give you an idea of what I’m facing at the moment, though, and why I wanted some assistance that could not be forsworn. When you are ready to inhabit a body of your own it will be a different story entirely. Of course, if I find what I’m looking for I imagine I will want your help, so it may come sooner than expected. Two minds are better than one, and two ways of thinking are more apt to see the possibilities.”

“. . . And should I be expecting anything in particular for the upcoming year?”

He blinked and glanced off to the right, pondering the changes. “Well, no, I don’t think so. I’ve already altered circumstances enough such that the trigger for the year should not exist, so I’m as much in the dark as you are for what’s to come. The rat was a huge factor in things, provoking the escape of an inmate of Azkaban, and the conditions for that no longer apply. If said inmate escapes anyway . . . well, I just don’t know:”

“And who might this inmate be?” Voldemort inquired silkily.

“Er, I suppose there’s no reason to be coy on that point, but as I can’t say the name outright due to your friend being able to understand, I’ll have to be roundabout. The inmate was thought to be the secret keeper for my parents. He was captured right after a confrontation with the rat, after the rat cleverly managed to frame him, and the inmate was so stunned at what had just happened that he cracked a bit, allowing for his capture. He never actually did anything to merit imprisonment, but the people in charge at the time gleefully tossed him in jail without the courtesy of a trial that even your people got.”

“. . . Should I be wondering why you have not in some way corrected this . . . travesty?”

Harry shrugged. “Well, that would be the right thing to do, I suppose, but I admit to being a bit jaded on the subject. We’re talking about someone who allowed a minion of the old man’s to take me away instead of doing his duty by me. Someone who never bothered to escape until twelve years had gone by, and then only because he saw the rat and knew it would be at the school. Meaning, he escaped more for revenge reasons, a chance to kill the rat, and never really considered the consequences. Someone who kept mistaking me for my father, though I suppose part of that was the influence of the guards there. He didn’t know me at all and it was easier for him to try to believe that I was just like his best friend, forgetting that I was a real person in my own right. It’s part of the reason I changed the colour of my hair—in case he did escape. It would make it harder for anyone
to automatically slot me into being a replica of my father. I have plenty of reasons, above and beyond what I’ve just outlined, to dislike the man, though I won’t necessarily say I hate him. I do know that he would be outraged, disgusted, and vehemently against what I’m doing and proposing to do, so I don’t see the point in making contact.”

“I see. Can I expect regular progress reports?”

Harry paused, smirked, and hissed, “What’s the magic word?”

“Crucio, the last time I checked.”

He laughed outright. “It’s nice to know you have a sense of humor. It’s more likely I’d let you know when I’ve found something worth sharing, but since you brought it up I will try to keep in touch on a regular schedule, even if it’s just to say hello and that I’m still alive. But for now I won’t have anything to report if I don’t get back to work, so . . . .”

A minute later he was eyeing his new helpers. “Give me thirty seconds or so, then join me,” he said, then shifted to the entrance at the volcano, just inside the choke point. The map may as well cover the entire journey and he could get one of the elves to handle that up to the point where he had left off—he would simply need to mark which passage was the correct one there at the bottom of the shaft.
Chapter 8

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“This world I like, we architects of life. A song, a sigh, developing words that linger. Through fields of green, through open eyes, this for us to see.” — Yes, It Can Happen

Several weeks later (and with appropriate visits to Privet Drive to keep up appearances) he and the elves emerged into a cavern so vast that he simply stood there gaping, drinking in the sight. Before him was a lake which glowed faintly orange, providing enough light to make out several islands off to his right, what looked to be a small city of sorts almost directly ahead of him at the other side of the cavern, and slightly to his left a small . . . mountain . . . of sorts, with more structures in evidence. Only the fact that he had improved his eyesight so drastically allowed him to understand what he was seeing. To be honest, he hadn’t the least clue where to start, though he did decide almost immediately that a separate map should be made. His present location was one of several possible entry points to the cavern so after getting his fill of the view he sat down to enjoy a meal while perusing the map.

“All right,” he eventually said. “One map we’ll keep on with right into that cavern, but I want a new one which covers only the tunnels we’ve come through. I don’t exactly expect to be invaded, but it absolutely will not hurt to have one that can be monitored just in case.”

The two elves nodded agreeably.

“We’ve yet to finish mapping the tunnels so let’s get to that. We may find more entrances based on what we already have visible.”

As it turned out there were five entrances into the cavern, each of them with a dock. The easternmost was very close to the smaller islands, while the one they originally found had the largest dock. Deciding to start smaller Harry had them enter via near the islands, only one of which boasted a substantial structure, with architecture like nothing he had ever before seen. He and the elves wandered through the buildings, making sure everything was mapped, then made a sweep of the other islands. One contained a park of some kind and another a mansion, perhaps.

The city along the northern wall was next—which turned out to be a multitude of almost identical areas, with some of the buildings carved straight out of the rock itself. Neighborhoods, probably, to hold the general populace. The most interesting thing he found in each (though certainly not the most bizarre) was a smallish room with pedestals, upon which were books. The books themselves, however, seemed to have nothing more in them than a moving photograph, but when he went to touch one Saen made a frightened squeaking sound which stayed his hand and caused him to turn and arch a brow at the little being.

“Saen is not sure what that would do to Master Harry. There is something very strange. That is not like a wizarding picture,” Saen said with a shake of his head, “no matter what it appears to be.”

Harry frowned. Given that these books were in every neighborhood he did not imagine they were harmful, but the elf was right to be cautious. The very way they were displayed suggested they were to be used somehow, but to what end was unfathomable. “Let’s keep on for the time being.”

There were four exits from the neighborhoods area as they discovered. Harry sighed and told the elves that another map would be required for those tunnels and that they would come back to them at a later date. That being so they moved on to explore the big island, though Harry called for a rest
period the moment they got there. As the elves set up the tent and began to prepare a meal Harry fetched out another sphere and started to record a message.

He yawned when he was done, absently setting the sphere aside for later delivery. Aside from being tired this wholesale exploration was the kind of thing to both bore a person to tears from repetitiveness and leave them awed to the point of speechlessness. It was something that simply could not be appreciated except in person, so he knew that his message to Voldemort would not have the effect the place demanded. He was going to have to bring the man down here eventually, as even seeing images could not compare to being there in person.

He was patiently waiting in his room at Privet Drive when his letter came. After glancing through it he set it aside on top of the Hogsmeade permission slip he’d had Petunia sign. His elves were busily mapping away in his absence and he was secure in the knowledge that they were bright enough to pop the hell away should they come upon anything which might endanger them.

His next task was going to be collecting every single book in that cavern. He had already purchased an untold amount of sticky notes to be used to note down where each book had come from. There was a building in that underground city which appeared to be a library (and indeed, it held many books with those odd moving pictures), but other buildings had plenty more, not to mention that one spectacular building. It was a marvel of architecture and ridiculously tall, too. Some of the areas were obviously upper class housing (with additional libraries), but others were of a lesser bent, and yet others contained what might once have been businesses.

But the most interesting thing of all, despite all the wonders to be seen in that cavern, was that his status as Master of Death afforded him the priceless gift of languages, just as Derek enjoyed. All those books—some of them had to have actual writing in them. They simply had to.

He glanced at his letter again and sighed. And then for good measure he rolled his eyes. Divination had been ruled out, straight off. Muggle Studies was a joke. Care of Magical Creatures was still asking for trouble, assuming Kettleburn still retired and Hagrid took over. That left Arithmancy and Ancient Runes (both of which he was already grounded in). Aside from the fact that they were required to take at least two electives, those two were at least interesting enough from his research of Before to bother signing up for. At least this time around his decision in this matter had not come about by using the brilliant strategy of being lazy and copying Ron’s choices.

On a side note, his body was now thirteen.

He would go meet his “friends” in a fortnight at Diagon Alley to shop for supplies and then return to the cavern to continue in his self-appointed task. He stuck the letter and permission slip into his trunk and shifted.

“You are never going to believe this,” came the excited voice of Potter. “I really think I’m onto something here. These people were capable of creating entire worlds! Can you imagine it? If I can get the hang of how this ‘special’ form of the language works... Wow! Well, there is the small detail of needing the right materials and all that, but still. There may still be some around here, and if not, I’m pretty sure one of the books mentioned where to find what I’d need.

“Then again, I have an enormous amount of worlds to check over—they called them Ages—without actually visiting yet, of course. That would be more than a little premature at this point. But even so, the very idea is fairly exciting. From what I can tell so far the upper class and guild sorts were very
into having privately-owned family retreat Ages, like gardens and whatnot tailored to their specific desires.

“The unwashed masses were able to visit public Ages, though I expect that only makes sense given they were living primarily in a cavern miles underground, and that’s discounting the fact that this place is strangely compelling and beautiful. I was able to find out that they were not native to this world so heaven only knows how many they exist on or where they came from, and there seems to have existed debate as to whether they were creating worlds or simply tapping into an infinite possible worlds by the methodology they used.

“All strictly controlled, you understand. Eighteen guilds covered a number of things, including this creation process, another to ‘maintain’ them, and so on. Think of it like an apprentice system of sorts. Anyway, I’ll be sorting away for some time to see what’s available and if anything is an Earth parallel. Maybe I should acquire some protective gear for the future? You, too, since I expect you’d be coming along. It’s not like we can do anything definite until you ditch your host so he can do the boring professor work and you get to do interesting things with me.

“Because really, I’m sure you understand that there’s no way I’m letting him in on this knowledge. Not without, say, an unbreakable vow. Unfortunately, while you’re attached to him you can’t be one of the participants and it’s possible you may get caught up in the bond itself, and it’s not like there’s anyone I’d trust to be a participant except you, so you see the problem here.

“Anyway, right. I have a lot of work to do before the school year starts. As an aside, if you happened to be hanging around Diagon Alley on the fourteenth, say around ten in the morning, you might find yourself amused. But if you plan to be in the Leaky Cauldron I would suggest sitting near the entrance to the alley rather than muggle London or even the fireplace. And that reminds me, I really ought to check to see if that Philosopher’s Stone I stole is even real. I’m still having trouble believing that Flamel would be senile enough to let a child (in comparison to his alleged great age) guard it for him. Later.”

He would have wondered that too had he not been so insanely focused back then. And rather desperate. He probably should thank Potter for snapping him back to reality with a healthy dose of rationality. Far, far into the future perhaps. But if that stone was real it would make getting a proper replacement body so much simpler. Even so, he would still have to deal with time on his hands if he was embodied and had no place to go during the school year, not until Potter was ready to pull a vanishing act, anyway.

Quirrell was situated at a table near the back entrance when Harry arrived at the Leaky Cauldron. Voldemort watched as Potter glanced down the short hallway leading to the public loos before turning his attention to the fireplace, where a blonde girl had just tumbled out of the floo. The girl spotted Potter almost immediately and nearly skipped over to him, and the two were shortly joined by two boys. After a round of greetings the group headed for the gateway, Potter surreptitiously winking at the back of Quirrell’s head before passing out of sight.

He was wondering how long he would have to wait for the action of the day when his thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of a plump red-haired matron and that Weasley girl from the hallway Potter had eyed. The girl swept her gaze over the interior of the main room, a somewhat anticipatory look on her face, then looked at her mother anxiously.

Quirrell cast an eavesdropping charm in time to hear the girl say, “You don’t think we missed him, do you?”
“Of course not, dear. Let’s go sit down and give it a bit more time. He did say ‘about ten’ so. . . .”

Voldemort eyed them curiously through the thin veil of Quirrell’s turban, wondering what was about to happen. Shrieks and screams from the muggle side of the building alerted him to a problem, but he kept Quirrell right where he was, even if it might seem a little suspicious that one of the patrons was incurious. Seconds later the front wall exploded inward in a hail of shattered stonework and dust as a large truck plowed through it and several tables, and came to a deafening halt when it slammed into the fireplace, utterly destroying it.

Then the screaming started inside, too.

Tom, the owner, came barreling out from behind the bar, clutching at his gleaming pate. Voldemort could not see the man’s face, but he could guess what emotions were displayed. It took a while for the screaming to stop and for the dust to settle, certainly long enough for aurors to show up. One of those carefully picked his way to the vehicle and wrenched open the door.

Inside was a rather burly man slumped over the wheel, but the strange aspect to anyone watching was the sound of snoring. The auror reached out and warily shook the man’s shoulder, causing the driver to snort and jerk awake suddenly.

“Eh? What—? Aw, hell,” the man almost whined. “That damn medication was supposed to fix my narcolepsy! I’m out of a job for sure now.”

The auror seemed not to know what to do under the circumstances, given the way he looked at his fellow aurors with confusion. He probably did not understand what the man was talking about.

Voldemort nudged Quirrell into getting up and approaching while he turned his focus to the reverse so he could see through the man’s eyes. “Forgive my intrusion,” Quirrell said hesitantly, “but I am familiar with the term this muggle used. Narcolepsy is a medical condition wherein the sufferer unavoidably falls asleep regardless of circumstances, making it very dangerous. If I’m understanding this right he dropped off while driving and was unable to avoid . . . well . . . this. It appears this was something on the order of a freakishly bizarre accident.”

The auror blinked stupidly, then looked back at the truck. Emblazoned along the side of the body in large, handsome letters was the word “Guinness”. Then he looked at the driver, who was muttering to himself.

A short time later the driver had been obliviated, the truck removed from the remains of the fireplace, and both had been dumped off somewhere in London. The aftermath of the accident was bad enough simply in terms of property damage, but then people realized there were two fatalities, both with red hair, and that was truly the only way to identify them as the bodies had been smashed to paste between unforgiving metal and stone.

It seemed as though the Weasley family was in for another bad year.

Harry could feel the amusement coming from Voldemort. He and his companions had just exited Gringotts and become aware that something odd was going on down at the other end of the alley. “We should probably avoid that,” he suggested. “Well, unless anyone thinks that fangirling a celebrity is a fun idea.”

“Huh?” Neville said.
“Well I don’t know that’s what it is, but that commotion would make sense if someone like Gilderoy Lockhart was visiting the Leaky for whatever reason, don’t you think?”

“Oh. Yeah. What is fangirling?”

Kevin shook his head and glanced over his list again. “We can just shop from here down.”

“Sounds like a logical course of action,” Luna replied with no aura of weirdness.

On that note they happily enough began their shopping, debating whether blobfish were disgusting or just unfortunate. It was not until several hours later that they had worked their way to the Leaky Cauldron again and by then most signs of the accident had been cleared away and cleaned up. The people there, however, were still gossiping away in semi-hushed voices, cluing in his heretofore clueless friends about the recent tragedy.

Neville and Kevin looked stricken, but Luna had a very peculiar almost-smile on her face, something that made Harry extremely curious. But again, not yet so curious as to pry without her consent or knowledge. Still, he was starting to hope she would be one of those willing to join the exodus. A short time later he had said good-bye to his friends and returned to the cavern.

“So do you think if it’s possible, if we can offer to them an Age of their own, that the goblins would ratify a binding treaty to fairly administer banks at our new home?”

Quirrell’s head tilted slightly. Harry thought it was interesting and amusing that both Quirrell and Voldemort tilted the same way, based on their perspective, so if Quirrell’s head tilted to the right—Quirrell’s right—then it was the man doing it. Tilted to the left—Voldemort’s right—then it meant Voldemort had prompted the almost unconscious action.

“I am going to presume that you speak of an Age for them so that this warring race would no longer have much cause to war against us, as a very ripe incentive to treat with us fairly.”

Never let it be said that Tom Riddle was stupid. “Well, in many instances, we’ve given them every reason to war. But yes, that was what I was thinking. Assuming this works out as I’d like it to I could provide them the means to access this planet as well, but that rather depends on whether it’s a subset of their race which goes or all of them. If they all came with us, from around the world, then they would have very little reason to ever return, after all.”

Voldemort made an agreeable sound. “‘What of the stone you stole?”

Harry blinked at the abrupt change of subject. “It’s a fake. Given that I must assume it was simply another detail in an elaborate trap for you and that Flamel isn’t senile as he was made to appear. However, I am fairly confident I can figure out a way to create one for myself, though I’d rather not go into the details at this stage of our . . . relationship.” In point of fact he had every intention of rifling through Dumbledore’s mind to see if he knew where Flamel lived. And if he did it should be simple enough to shift there and ‘liberate’ the process straight from Flamel’s memories.

“Is that what we’re calling it these days?”

“We have to call it something,” he replied with an offhand shrug. “If I could provide a real one will you be able to use it to return to your own body? I assume that is why you wished to acquire it.”

“There is a ritual I can have done that, while it does not require the use of the stone, would be greatly enhanced by it. Unfortunately, as my own body was destroyed that night I have no choice but
to create one anew. As such it would be more of a golem I would inhabit. Use of the stone, however, would make the body real, if that makes any sense.”

Harry thought back to the previous timeline and the body Voldemort had ended up in, with its snake-like taint, and wondered if the man had been sterile among other things due to the manner of its construction and how it might be that it was merely a garment for a soul rather than a home. He could see, dimly, how the Elixir of Life might change things drastically. “Interesting,” he eventually said. “Would this ritual by any chance involve bone of the father, blood of the enemy, and flesh of the servant?”

Voldemort sighed faintly.

“I’ll assume it is, then.” And then, wondering again about the results, he added, “Does the quality of the servant matter, and the blood of an enemy?”

“...I am not certain I understand the thrust of your question.”

“Meaning, do you take on any of the qualities or characteristics of those involved? If you used a stupid person would that affect your intelligence? Or a coward? Someone with a disease? Or...?”

“Ah, I see now what you mean. The ritual is already adulterated to some extent by the inclusion of my father,” Voldemort said. “As to the other ingrediants, I confess to being unsure. That being so I expect I would be best served by choosing carefully.” He eyed Harry for a moment.

Harry, for his part, laughed at the look. “I don’t qualify. I am neither your enemy nor your servant. I do have some ideas as to who might work, though. It rather depends on when you plan to do the ritual.”

Voldemort exhaled another slight sigh and said, “And just when did I do so the last time?”

“Oh, you used an event during the next school year as a cover to abduct a student to fill the role of enemy,” Harry said casually. “I suppose you could use it again, though it would mean separating from your host this coming summer and spending almost an entire year in a construct. It would make a lot more sense to just regain your body this summer and consider using the event as a way to mess with people’s minds. But if you actually need that year because of some detail I missed, which, by the way, included a lot of snake venom—”

“Stop,” Voldemort more or less ordered. “I know exactly what ritual you speak of and yes, it would be necessary because it takes more than a couple of months for the construct to be ready, never mind the potion involved. That does not mean I would have to suffer so for an entire year. I could certainly be back in my body well before the conclusion of the next school year. Probably by Yule break, actually, assuming I had competent assistance.”

Harry considered that and slowly grinned. “Oh, well, that opens up possibilities, now doesn’t it. I know of someone very much devoted to you who could provide that assistance. As for an enemy. . . . Well, I admit to thinking perhaps Dumbledore’s very paranoid associate, as it would greatly annoy and possibly inconvenience the man. But if you don’t like that idea I’m sure you can think of someone who will.”

“And this devoted assistant?”

“Ah, I would prefer not to mention his name just yet. Though, now that I think about it, I can think of one other person who might suit as an enemy. It would be a sort of delicious irony, assuming I even understand the meaning of the word correctly.”
Voldemort frowned at him.

“There’s no point in saying just yet since we have the rest of the school year to go. Perhaps in May? Then you could see about getting things ready for your separation from your host, and I would even be willing to collect the two people I refer to. It might cause a few waves when one of them goes missing, but I sincerely doubt it would be possible for anyone to track them down were I involved.”

“You have such a high opinion of yourself,” Voldemort snarked.

“Yes,” Harry admitted. “But I don’t make the mistake of thinking I’m infallible. Even the wisest, most intelligent being in the universe can and will make mistakes—not that I claim to be that being.”

It was not long after when Harry peeked into Dumbledore’s mind long enough to ascertain that the man had no idea where Flamel was, so he bent his pride enough to ask Derek. A quick trip under the cover of invisibility one fine evening was all it took to gather the information he wanted.

“So, I know what to do,” he told Voldemort a few days later, “but I have to warn you it’s going to take nearly a year. I’ll have to leave the school every month for several hours in order to move things along, and that’s after I gather the required materials.”

“Since you have already made it known that this will benefit me it behooves me to ask if there are any I could acquire for this endeavor?”

Harry smiled at the, in his opinion, horribly awkward wording. “It’s probably a good thing that a mere three people know how to make one since some of the ingredients are highly illegal. If the general public knew what Flamel had to do to create a Philosopher’s Stone they’d have lynched him.”

Voldemort eyed him curiously.

“Someone obviously has a twisted sense of humor. One of the ingredients is the lifeblood of ten irredeemable humans. Magical ones, that is. Suppose that means we’ll have to be hunting for twisted, sick, and utterly remorseless criminals.” He paused for a moment in thought, then brightened. “I think Dolores Umbridge would do nicely as one of them. In any case, it’ll take one month per person used for this, so it should be ready for the summer if I start soon.”

“I can provide a location for it,” Voldemort said after a moment. “As this will benefit me greatly I should be involved. I can also provide some of the sacrifices from my minions, those who are, as you would put it, psychotic whackjobs, and unsuitable for exodus.”

“Excellent. Though I can manage the location personally. Right at this moment nobody is going to find it. But you’ll know once you’re reembodied. If nothing else, the stone can be used more for the Elixir of Life properties than anything else past that point.”

“Oh? You’d like to live forever, as well?”

Harry paused, pursing his lips slightly. “I don’t think,” he said slowly, “that I need to worry about that. But it would be useful for you, and our developing partnership.”

Voldemort frowned at him and declined to ask the obvious question.

“It shouldn’t be a problem for me to start work on the stone as soon as we have the first sacrifice, and getting Umbridge won’t be an issue. That gives you time to decide which of your minions will be chosen. I’ll only have to visit once a month to move things along, and it shouldn’t be a problem to disappear off the school’s radar for long enough each time. If you can guarantee a victim each
month for me to use I can get started almost immediately using Umbridge.”

“That will not be problematic. After Umbridge you can use Bella. She is no longer of any use to me as it stands.”

He nodded, pleased with that offering. “I'll just set up a room, fetch Umbridge, and get started, then.”

One of the places he had found in the underground city was something akin to an office. Oddly, there was no normal way to enter it, unless one counted the windows, and given the sheeress of the drop beneath he rather discounted that idea. It made him think, for some reason, of those strange books with the wizarding-style pictures. The only reason he could get into it at all was due to use of a telescope giving him a clear enough picture to apparate or shift to. All in all, it was certainly large enough for the creation of a Philosopher’s Stone.

After he set everything up he went hunting for Umbridge. His house-elves would see to things during his absence. She, as it turned out, was at her home (the address of which was found easily enough by scanning a few people at the ministry) listening to music while sitting on an overstuffed couch and eating bon-bons. He was disgusted to realize that her home was even more revolting in terms of cat paraphernalia and décor. There were a half dozen cats alone on the sofa with her, never mind the others wandering around.

It was at about that time that Harry realized he had never tried to shift anyone with him. Apparation at that distance was out of the question, and he rather thought it was much too far underground as well. With a faint shrug he sent a stunner at her and watched in satisfaction as Umbridge fell sideways into what looked to be an uncomfortable position. If he couldn’t shift with her he could always return and portkey her to the entrance, then levitate her the rest of the way while he flew.

He shifted; she went with him. Pleased, he dumped her into her place for her part in the ritual. A quick spell paralyzed her, so that even when the stunner wore off she would not be able to move about. The alchemical process involved in making a stone required that her blood slowly drain into the cauldron set up for as long as possible during that month. Thus he inserted a tap into a vein at her wrist and draped her hand over the edge.

A look off to the side showed that his elves had acquired plenty of blood replenishing potions, and he already knew they would keep her fed, hydrated, and clean—and probably silenced. “Right,” he muttered. She would feel the whole time that her life was slowly bleeding away, and despair. Only magic would keep her going, that and the house-elves. And when her time was up he would drain everything she had left . . . and move on to the next sacrifice.

School was so incredibly boring. The ride in had been more of the usual and the opening feast was marked mostly by Harry’s continuing anger at seeing Dumbledore up there at the head table. Quirrell looked even more confident sitting up there, but that was hardly a surprise. He wondered if the man even enjoyed teaching, because he would be stuck in that position for some time. It would not matter after Harry left the school, whenever that might be, and it would be best that the curse’s hiatus end, giving the man one year more, at best, and assuming he even cared to continue. And should he behave himself after Voldemort stopped needing him as a host, it was entirely possible he would join the exodus.

Harry spent most of his time (when not occupied by friends, or classes—and he could practically
sleepwalk through those) taking care of his in-progress Philosopher’s Stone and becoming absolutely
certain of his command of this new language, named after the people in question: D’ni. The higher
form of the language, used in the creation of Ages, was exacting and very specific, but he thought he
might actually have a handle on just how those descriptive books were made. If nothing else it made
it very clear to him what those strange books were in each of the neighborhoods: linking books.

A descriptive book “described” an Age—literally wrote it into existence—and could be used to
actually link to said Age, but linking books were created as a way to still make that jump while
leaving the original in safety. Multiple linking books could be made for the same Age, each
transporting the user to a different location, so in a way they were rather like portkeys. Unlike
portkeys, however, they could not be used to jump around within the same Age; they could only be
activated from a different Age. The linking books also lacked the “guts” of the descriptive book for
an Age, so that no one using one could tamper with the composition of the original.

‘It should be easy enough to explain the concept to Voldemort,’ he thought. ‘And if he’s as brilliant
as everyone seems to think he shouldn’t have too much trouble learning both forms of the language.
Maybe together we could work out how to “describe” this planet so as to create a duplicate? That’s
assuming I can’t find the descriptive book for it. Derek did say they weren’t native. And let’s face it,
it’d be a heck of a lot easier to do it that way than to create a duplicate Earth without benefit of magic
and transport billions of humans.’

As things went Voldemort wasn’t so bad at picking things up, though it was a mite awkward given
that Quirrell had to be involved, even if he was always facing away from the action. When Harry
wasn’t present Voldemort had to take control of the body and suppress Quirrell’s consciousness. The
less that man saw of any of it the better, at least for the time being. Unfortunately, Voldemort could
not take potions to improve his learning rate and so forth, as he could not be affected in that manner,
only his host.

In the meantime he had, at one point, ducked out long enough to lurk during a Wizengamot meeting,
mainly to see exactly which persons on that august body it could better do without. That session
produced a handful of people who could be used for the ritual, and offerings from Voldemort would
round out the necessary number. And as much as he might have liked to use Fenrir Greyback, a
‘tainted’ wizard would not work. While he was there he also stopped by the Department of Mysteries
and ‘liberated’ a few things which caught his interest.

For fun Harry had taken to amusing himself by attempting to drive Trelawney insane. The very first
thing he did was sneak into the Divination classroom and plant a few bugs so he could keep track of
what happened during class time. He planted more at the head table, for those infrequent times
Trelawney decided her “inner eye” showed her joining the rest of the staff for meals. And
accordingly, Harry’s first efforts in concert with listening in were fairly mild.

Trelawney had that awful habit of making random predictions and the fawning masses (such as
Lavender and her ilk) were all too happy to shoehorn events into those predictions. After Trelawney
made a rather vague prediction at poor Neville regarding clumsiness Harry ensured that Neville not
only had a clumsy moment, but also ruined his wand beyond repair in doing so. ‘Take that,
Augusta,’ he thought to himself. ‘Now you’ll have to get him a proper wand.’ A look at Neville’s
dismay and upset made him feel a bit remorseful, but even with the confidence the boy had steadily
been gaining from being sorted into Hufflepuff, his wand work was still sub-par. He deserved his
own wand, not his father’s.
He continued to make Trelawney’s minor predictions come true over the course of time leading up to the holiday, and she was becoming very pleased and proud about her successes, despite both of them knowing her words were utter bollocks, and far more confident. It never seemed to occur to her that most of her alleged predictions were of the gloom and doom variety, and she was predicting pain and suffering without considering the consequences.

It was then that he started stage two of his plan for her; he sneaked into her quarters and enspelled her. He had every intention of leaving the castle during the holiday and staying mainly at the underground city, referred to by the D’ni as Ae’gura, with an eye toward trying to find the descriptive book for Earth. If he could find that he could go over it with utmost attention and attempt to write a new one, minus any passages relating to muggles or magical sentient beings. The exodus, in theory, should take care of that issue.

The spell, however, should allow him to keep track of anything she said, as this time it was connected to her personally, and act if need be. Thinking ahead to when Voldemort would be reembodied he arranged another friendly talk between student and professor. “There’s something you should probably know,” he began. “A servant of yours is being held under the imperius curse, away from you and the rest of society.”

“And this would be?”

“Barty Crouch Jnr,” he replied, hoping that Quirrell just didn’t ask. “His mother begged his father to get him out of Azkaban, going so far as to take his place using polyjuice. The wife was dying—from what I don’t know—so she knew she’d not be there for very long. The father arranged for the swap using what pull he still had. The son was brought home and the wife died while in her son’s semblance. The father let it be known that his wife died, and since the body at Azkaban seemed to be the son, no one questioned it. The point being—”

“That I can arrange for his rescue.” Voldemort looked thoughtful for several long moments. “I assume this happened originally, then.”

Harry nodded. “I don’t recall offhand how you learned of it, but you did rescue him, I think sometime during this upcoming summer. You used him to replace one of the old fool’s people, the, ah, really paranoid one, and your man ended up taking your host’s position here in order to forward your plans of the time. It’s tied into the upcoming event, which I assume will still happen. Still, there’s no real reason for your host to not be here, so the son could be used for other things. From what I could tell he’s very loyal to you, but I’m not too sure about his state of mental health.”

“And this event?” Voldemort persisted.

“It is a tournament, one that they stopped holding quite some time ago because of the death toll for those involved, if that gives you enough of a hint.”

His companion managed a crafty look before saying, “Let me guess. I somehow arranged for you to
be a competitor. It sounds like something I would do.”

Harry nodded again, a slight smile on his lips. “And I ended up being the enemy in your ritual that time due to the machinations of your minion, at your command. I think the paranoid one will work fine. And the son as the other, since he is intelligent and loyal, rather than so afraid of you as to fold to the pressure like a certain cowardly rat. Anyway, yes, you did, and caused a lot of trouble for me at the time. A good portion of the school turned against me. I’d prefer to avoid that this time and there’s no real reason for me to be in it. That said, I wouldn’t be against causing trouble in terms of adding extras just to cause confusion and muck up the plans for the tasks. They’re only designed for three people, and it wasn’t too difficult for them to accommodate one more. Many more, however...”

Voldemort nodded slowly, a wicked gleam entering his eyes.

“Do the other two schools have houses like this one?”

Voldemort made an approximation of a brow raise and shook his head. “No. Yes, students are housed in groups, but by year and not as done here. For that to work we would have to force, say, four students from each school if we wished to keep it even. Or, if we wished to cause trouble for the old fool and the government we would do so only for this school.”

Harry paused, considered, and smiled. “I think I like that idea. Any trouble we can throw his way is a bonus. The other two schools would be very suspicious and angry. Your man used a confundus charm, or so he claimed, to swindle the cup into accepting the fourth name, and at that he put it in under a fake school. I don’t know if your host has that kind of power or subtlety, but I know I do.”

Voldemort adopted a thoughtful expression. Eventually he said, “And how exactly was it set up?”

“Eh, the old fool set the cup up in the entrance hall and drew an age line around it. At least two people I know of tried aging potions to get by, but that failed. Your man, as I said, used an overpowered confusion charm, I assume after checking the entire hall to make sure it wasn’t witnessed. I know how to be invisible beyond anyone’s ability to see past it so it shouldn’t be an issue. My only possible regret is that I can think of two people I’d love to put names in for, but they’re dead. One I killed and one got himself killed.”

“What house was the proper champion in?”

“The house of the loyal and hardworking.”

Voldemort approximated a brow arch again, presumably in understated surprise, then smirked faintly. “Should I assume this would have been the other possible enemy?”

Harry grinned. “Yes. I don’t actually know just how Light he is, but I presume he’d be an enemy. I’d find more satisfaction in using the paranoid one over someone barely an adult and not yet out of school. At any rate, if you want any help in rescuing the son I’ll be happy to assist. Just let me know. I’m sure you can figure out a safe place to stash him while he recovers.”

He left shortly after, leaving Voldemort to contemplate his next move.

Harry was happily scanning through descriptive books when his bug on Trelawney finally coughed up something that sparked his memory of the first time, enough so that he set down the book he was holding and instead produced the book Derek had gifted him. He sat back to listen to the relevant
parts of the conversation after expanding the field of focus. It also had the effect of reminding him that it was time for lunch, but that could wait a little.

“Sibyll, this is a pleasant surprise!” he heard Dumbledore say.

“I have been crystal gazing,” said Professor Trelawney in her mistiest, most faraway voice, “and to my astonishment, I saw myself abandoning my solitary luncheon and coming to join you. Who am I to refuse the promptings of fate? I at once hastened from my tower, and I do beg you to forgive my lateness. . . .”

“Certainly, certainly,” said Dumbledore. “Let me draw you up a chair—”

There was a short pause, a faint thud, and then Trelawney suddenly uttered a kind of soft scream. “I dare not! If I join the table, we shall be thirteen! Nothing could be more unlucky! Never forget that when thirteen dine together, the first to rise will be the first to die!”

“We’ll risk it, Sibyll,” he heard Professor McGonagall say impatiently. “Do sit down, the turkey’s getting stone cold.” After another short pause McGonagall continued, “Tripe, Sibyll?”

It was at that point that Harry’s concurrent search of his memory saw him beginning to write in his book.

“But where is dear Mr Filch?” Trelawney asked.

“Perhaps he is not feeling the holiday spirit,” Dumbledore suggested. “It does happen every so often.”

“But surely you already knew that, Sibyll?” said Professor McGonagall.

“Certainly I knew, Minerva,” she said quietly. “But one does not parade the fact that one is All-Knowing. I frequently act as though I am not possessed of the Inner Eye, so as not to make others nervous.”

“That explains a great deal,” said Professor McGonagall tartly.

“We can hope he will change his mind,” Dumbledore said, then continued, “Derek, have you had any of these chipolatas? They’re excellent.”

Harry suffered some confusion at that, then assumed it was a student at the table he could barely remember, probably a Hufflepuff. Conversation became fairly stilted and boring so Harry started checking through the descriptive books again, keeping one ear open.

And then Trelawney shrieked loudly. “My dears! Which of you left your seat first? Which? Was it you, Mr Chambers!?”

Harry started writing again, having vaguely recalled that name as one of members of the Ravenclaw quidditch team in his fifth year, as McGonagall said coldly, “I doubt it will make much difference, unless a mad axe-man is waiting outside the doors to slaughter the first into the entrance hall.”

Several people laughed nervously and conversation returned to the same polite nothings. That is, until the screaming started.

The next day’s Daily Prophet gleefully reported the sad happenings. It seemed Filch had finally snapped. Questioning by the aurors, complete with veritaserum, revealed that Filch had lost the struggle with sanity after decades of living with the shame of being a squib in a fully magical school,
of not being able to properly vent his fear and anger, and so on and so forth. Poor Mr Chambers had
been met in the entrance hall by an axe-wielding Filch and hacked into pieces.

And, not that it was reported in the paper, Trelawney was in the infirmary, heavily doped up.
Perhaps she was starting to learn that her predictions had a downside? Well, she was in for a nasty
shock if she kept running her mouth without thinking first. McGonagall had been severely shaken up
by the incident given that it had been her mentioning mad axe-men.

Saen popped in at that moment, looking conflicted.

“What is it?”

“Saen senses that the—that your partner?—wishes to send you a message via elf.”

Harry arched a brow. “Oh. Well. In this instance, since I am pretty much otherwise unavailable. . . .
Er, hang on a moment while I dash off a quick note.” He grabbed a piece of plain paper and a biro
and wrote one quickly before handing it over. “He’ll probably have one to send back.”

While waiting he wondered who would take over as caretaker. Hagrid might have been tapped, but
considering he was fumbling his way through being Creatures professor. . . .

Saen arrived back a good ten to fifteen minutes later with two notes. The first one related just how
amused Voldemort had been over the Filch/Chambers incident and mused on just how long it would
take for Trelawney to either snap or never speak another word in her life for fear of it coming true.
The second was in response to Harry’s note, agreeing that a mail drop was a good idea for those
times he was off spelunking. He nodded, then returned to scanning books.

He was informed not long after his return that while Voldemort might prefer Beltane for the ritual (to
appease his sense of symmetry and the sense of the world awakening from the death of Winter) he
would actually be holding it during the Summer Solstice.

“That’s fine,” he replied after a few moments mentally calculating times. “The stone should be
complete in late May, in plenty of time.” Then he paused, uncertain. “How exactly will this play in?
Do you just need elixir or. . . ?”

“It will be fine. Though the idea of using the entire stone is an interesting one, even I do not know
what effect it would have. I need elixir only.”

“All right. I mean, I could make another one, but no sense bothering if elixir’s all that’s needed. I
don’t personally need the thing except for making gold to sell in the muggle world, but the elixir
would be good for keeping you healthy and, effectively, immortal. Speaking of which, I wonder if
what’s-his-face and wife have pretended to die and started over with new identities. They would
have to, at least for so long as the old fool lives, assuming he actually thought the stone was real,
and because of them, in case they knew what the old fool was using it for and assume you’d try to
find them once you realized it was a fake.”

Voldemort gave an awkward, dismissive shrug.

“Anyway, we just have to get through this year. Get you a new body. And then I can show the
wonders of the city,” he said with a smile. “You’ll have to make yourself portkeys to get back from
then on, assuming portkeys will even work given the circumstances. Though”—he paused—“if I can
work something out with linking books we’d just need protected stations somewhere on this planet
“Yes, I recall you explained about the limitations. And portkeys can be traced if not used with care. Same with apparation.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll be pleased when you can take the odd potion to speed up your rate of assimilation for the language. Two people scanning the books and deciphering how the descriptive books are made—or rather, phrased—would be a great deal of help and a time saver. The sooner we can duplicate most of this world the faster I can ditch this school.”

“Oh?” Voldemort said. “And not one for the goblins?”

“I... don’t know,” he said slowly. “If we duplicate this planet the goblins would have a field day digging for metals and gems. Would they really need their own Age to do the same?”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. I wonder if they would even think to ask after they realized what we’ll have done. They can be paid a percentage fee for extractions, they can administer the banks, though I hesitate over the idea of allowing them complete control of any associated warding schemes.”

“And then again, all we need are private Ages to store our wealth,” Harry pointed out. “No need to trust a goblin for that for ourselves. Any books involved can be protected from outside access, by fidelius if nothing else, and we can be our own Secret Keepers for that. If they argue for a private Age strictly for goblins, and not take, say, the equivalent of an Australia for themselves, they’ll have to make it worth our while.”

“I trust you mean private Ages we write ourselves, and not existing ones,” Voldemort said coolly. “We have no idea if these people yet exist, and if they have linking books to the Ages used in the past.”

“All right,” Harry said agreeably. He wandered off a few minutes later, they having exhausted conversational options for the time being, and completed his pending homework in that little nook he often shared with Luna.

A number of people suffered minor accidents or illnesses as a result of someone not keeping her mouth shut. He was on his way to lunch, accompanied by Kevin, when Blaise Zabini had the dubious luck to tumble down a flight of stairs and break both legs. Score another theoretical point for Trelawney. But oh, if only she would predict another death! He idly wondered if it would make her simpering little sycophants like Lavender even more enamored of her, or scared to go anywhere near her for fear of what they might hear.

It struck him halfway through his sandwich that he had not even noticed Hermione of late and glanced over at the Gryffindor table. She was just sitting there, nose in a book, absently eating her food. It looked as though without him and Ron she had retreated into herself. ‘Come to think of it, I don’t even recall her waving her hand around frantically in class always trying to be the one with the answers. Maybe she got a hard talking to from her house mates? Well, she may not be popular, but that goes more than one way. Not popular as a friend, and possibly not popular as someone to torment. They never did that to Neville last time around so I expect that so long as she keeps her head down she’ll have a quiet, albeit lonely, Hogwarts experience.’ If she stayed out of trouble it would stay a state of ‘out of sight, out of mind’ for him, and it was very unlikely she would ever be targeted for mischief or death by his hand.

His only real possible concern when it came to Hermione was her blood status, but given his developing relationship with Voldemort it might not be an issue at all, excepting some of the man’s more ardent psychotic followers, and he was already using some of those for the stone. Somehow he
had trouble believing that she would join the exodus. In addition to nagging so damn much about returning to school back then she had already been going on about muggle activities such as learning to drive and use computers. To give all that up? To give herself completely to this ‘new’ culture? Never see her muggle parents again? Unlikely.

Neville, on the other hand, was a maybe, as were his other friends. Being in Hufflepuff this time around Neville was blossoming so much faster, and Harry assumed that his bravery would still shine through as necessary. It might even be enough for the boy to finally realize that his family had been, to a degree, abusive. The Dursleys had never made it a secret that they hated Harry and indulged in all sorts of abuse, verbal, physical, and mental, but could not the same be said for poor Neville, minus the loathing? Contempt, perhaps, born of fear, but not outright hatred. Augusta was living in the past to an extent, never having recovered from her son’s torture—and how could she, realistically, when she was reminded on a regular basis?

Still, having noticed Hermione his thoughts turned back to the potential plight of the muggle-borns. Those who were being abused—well, it was a bit obvious that the British magical government had no real intention of actually helping any of them. To cause those children to disappear would not be a problem, though finding them families might be. An orphanage was one possibility, but it would have to be very well funded and have more than enough staff to prevent the majority of conflict. After all, children—especially badly-supervised children—were vicious little monsters only too ready to gang up on a perceived weakness.

The other ones, however... He did not think, with what conscience he had left, that he could rip them from mothers and fathers and guardians who loved them, despite this frightening knowledge. Hermione was one side of the spectrum, Harry another, and Neville a third. On the flip side, even happy and loved muggle-born or muggle-raised students might end up in eventual trouble, even with the worst of Voldemort’s supporters ending up dead. Umbridge was not alone in her views, after all, and she had never been a Death Eater. With a Wizengamot interested mostly in judgments to keep themselves in power they would think little of, if given the chance and enough support, further limiting the power and opportunity available to half-bloods and muggle-borns.

But that was another kettle of fish entirely. Assuming other countries were more liberal there was nothing stopping an intelligent person (or family) from emigrating and still not be deprived of their muggle heritage. Harry gave a slight shrug and decided to worry about it later. Plans were all well and good, but none of it meant much if he—they—could not come up with an Earth-parallel world for them to move to.

“All right. So here’s a list I’ve made up of tasks for our new world,” Harry hissed, glancing at his notebook. “Compile a list of people and their current land holdings so we can plot out where to move them to. And if they want more they’ll have to fork over some gold. We can create a temporary set of linking books tailored to each to drop them right onto their new properties, preferably with the boundaries already clearly marked. Each of those properties would have a linking book to a public nexus with, at the very least, a linking book to whatever city we fashion to begin with. Obviously, the other big task there is to decide where that city will be and how it’ll be laid out so we can get government infrastructure in place, and a bank.

“That public nexus can later have linking books added to additional Ages for anyone to visit and enjoy. You and I can have a private nexus if necessary. Either way, the public nexus will devolve mostly to links to other Ages since people will be able to apparate once they’ve gotten their bearings, though I suppose it’d be handy for minors to move around. Dealing with the goblins, naturally. Figuring out a set of laws, and people to fill roles in said government. As I’ve said before, I think,
I’m not too keen on the idea of inherited roles. It opens up too much in the way of hereditary laziness, stupidity, and entitlement issues. Beyond all of that are issues like abused muggle-borns or muggle-raised, because we obviously cannot expect the government to do anything about it, in Britain anyway. No idea what it’s like in other countries.”

Voldemort nodded. “Good starting points, certainly. Also, a school, with attendant staff and curriculum.”

“Absolutely. It’s a prodigious amount of work, but necessary. If we can get the Age and the basic plans worked out, a lot of it can be delegated. Not like we’d personally be out there constructing every building, just maybe some very necessary offices to start with before bringing in people skilled in construction and warding.”

Voldemort nodded again, then smirked. “It occurs to me that any astronomers will be in paroxysms of either joy or confusion. Even if this new world is a parallel Earth, I have serious doubts about the sky and stars. It may also throw off plenty of others, those who do magics which rely on certain configurations.”

Harry paused in surprise, that not having crossed his mind at all. “Oh, yeah. Stuff like equinoxes and solstices are one thing, but anything that relies on the constellations. . . . I think we can assure ourselves of still having a moon, but the star patterns are something else entirely.”

They tossed ideas back and forth for a while about school curriculum, a goblin deal, and various other issues before Harry had to get back to being a student.

“About the event. . . .”

“Yes?”

“You once said you have a way of seeing the truth. Obviously, so do I. I propose that we find a minimum of five persons from each school to participate, preferably students who actually wish to compete. Those from this school could be deliberately manipulated to include some you personally have a grudge against, though there is no guarantee that any of them would be badly harmed or even killed. After all, increasing the number of participants so drastically would mean the tasks would most likely need to be redone in their entirety.”

Harry gave Voldemort a thoughtful look before nodding slowly. “I can think of three students offhand I wouldn’t mind seeing in distress. I’ve been doing a little research into past events and I expect you’re correct in them having to scramble madly to come up with something different. There hasn’t been a whole lot of originality so far in expressing the rather simplistic event themes.”

“And you had to. . . ?”

He grinned. “A dragon, rescuing a hostage from the lake, and a maze full of traps and creatures. Maybe if some of this school’s competitors are underage it could push the bulk of the redesigned tasks onto the other two schools, with the idea that obviously our bunch cheated in some way, never mind that there would be way too many students to begin with.”

“Very possible,” Voldemort said agreeably.

“Er, wait, no,” he amended. “They only brought a short-listed bunch of candidates, which meant all of them were seventeen by the time of the choosing. Not saying I wouldn’t put in underage Hogwarts
names, but I don’t think we could do it for the other two schools.”

Voldemort shrugged. “Once we know who we want in and the artifact has been confunded, we can make up the entries ourselves and place them in. Then we can set up warding to switch out the entries of any approaching students who make it past the line with blanks.”

“Sounds good. Or putting up a very powerful ward around the real one to hide it, with people putting their entries into a fake that shoots the slips straight to one of us—you, probably—and we hand seed the real one with the names we want after confunding the heck out of it.”

The remainder of the year was surprisingly uneventful. Trelawney had apparently learned to keep quiet, which Harry felt was a shame as it meant it was unlikely she would crack up in a spectacular fashion.

May rolled around right on schedule and the Philosopher’s Stone was completed, meaning Voldemort could get on with fashioning himself a new body. When he finally did Harry would be relieved to not have to deal with the host any longer—at least, not as a package deal with Voldemort.

The ride back to London was consumed with yet another animal discussion, this time about jerboas. Where Kevin had gotten the pictures from was a mystery, but it was nice to see that he was very much into their discussions at that point. Harry thought they looked like kangaroo mice, and often with rabbit ears. Luna argued that kangaroos were actually the result of magical experimentation on the “adorable” rodents by the equivalent of a mad scientist. Of course, Luna also claimed that dementors were actually Unspeakables being punished for having messed something up and forced to masquerade as the creatures and do guard duty at Azkaban, so one had to take her pronouncements with the odd grain of salt at times.

After his usual stop at № 4 Harry immediately relocated to Voldemort’s summer “home”, dropping off a bag of supplies before going with a Voldemort-controlled Quirrell to liberate Barty from his father’s clutches. Barty Snr was knocked out and his memories modified, things twisted so that every time his son came to mind his thoughts would be shunted away to something else, generally work related. Barty Jnr was released from the imperius curse and whisked away. As a bonus, depending on how one looked at it, the family house-elf elected to stay with Barty Jnr, so they had less work to do in terms of helping the man adjust to his changed circumstances.

Barty took a while to come out of his fugue, but when he did it was with an air of bewilderment. His examination of Quirrell and Harry just made his expression twist even more in confusion. That is, until Voldemort took control again, Quirrell’s eyes flashing to blood red and the features shifting subtly to that of a man with a somewhat tenuous hold on sanity.


“Master. . . ?” Barty breathed, a moment later slipping down to the floor so he could kneel and look up pleadingly.

Harry rolled his eyes and cleared his throat meaningfully, causing Quirrellmort to toss a brief glare at him. “This is very touching and all, this reunion, but does he really have to kneel like that?” Harry complained. “If he’s as loyal as you claim, well, it’s degrading.”

Quirrellmort clenched his jaw before saying, “I suppose.”

Barty spared a moment to eye the person crazy enough to speak to Voldemort that way, then slowly
stood up, shuffling backward as he did so, and promptly sat down when the backs of his knees hit the bed he had been laid out on.

“Better,” Harry pronounced. “Barty, are you hungry? Thirsty? Winky came with you, so. . . . And speaking of Winky, perhaps you should see about commanding her full loyalty?”

Barty’s gaze shifted back to Quirrellmort and when he was given a nod called for the elf to have a serious talk.

Harry set about creating some chairs for himself and his partner, and also called an elf for refreshments. That out of the way he said, “I’ll try not to upstage you like that again in front of one of your Death Eaters, but really, we have to get beyond this weird stage with the guy. We have very little time available to capture the paranoid one and brief your man here on the ritual.”

“I realize that,” Voldemort said a bit stiffly. “One would think I’d be used to your irreverence by now.”

Harry grinned at him, absently noticing that Barty had been startled from his conversation with Winky by the realization that someone other than his master could speak the language of snakes.

“Oh, I pray I never cease making your life exciting.”

Winky was sent away a minute later and Barty gave his full attention back to his master, who launched into a clipped explanation of the events which were shortly to take place. Harry was both interested and disturbed to note that Barty seemed thrilled to find out he was expected to donate of himself to his master’s rebirth and held up a hand at that point and shook it slightly to halt things. “I should point out, perhaps,” he said to Voldemort, “that the last time around the idiot doing the ritual lopped off his entire hand. This fellow seems so enthusiastic that. . . .”

Quirrellmort gazed at him for a moment, expression blank, then looked back to Barty. “You will not go overboard for your part,” he clarified. “Just . . . strip the skin from your forearm or calf. That can easily enough be healed.”

“I’ll do the healing part,” Harry volunteered. “No sense in Barty being in agony for any longer than necessary.”

Barty seemed a bit taken aback at this evidence of consideration for his well-being.

“You do realize that he thinks of you as a father figure,” Harry commented after a searching look at the man. A vaguely startled look was aimed his way so he added, “Oh yes. You gave him all the attention his father never bothered to. It’s part of why he’s so devoted and loyal. He doesn’t actually believe you care, exactly, because he’s not sure you’re capable of it, but he’s wholeheartedly yours.”

A funny look rippled across Quirrellmort’s face like the shadow of a high-flying bird over uneven ground. It was fascinating to witness. After a few moments his partner went back to his explanation and instructions.

Harry nodded in satisfaction some time later, assured that Barty fully understood the plans. They left him to rest and repaired to Voldemort’s sitting room.

“How exactly did you say it went last time? Capturing the paranoid one?”

“Yes, because of his wards a disturbance was made outside his home, with the dustbins. When he came to investigate he was knocked out and whisked away,” he replied. “It was deemed easier to get him to come outside his wards than to try to get inside them.”
Voldemort nodded. “So, a wild animal or a cat.”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know exactly where the man lives, so the odds of a fox being there isn’t something I’d be able to gauge. But yes, that sounds reasonable. I can find out easily enough,” he added.

Voldemort gave him an inquiring look, but Harry shook his head and said, “No, not until you’re in your own body. I can take you to the city—after your host has been placed under a vow, just in case—and then I think perhaps I can be a lot more forthcoming about certain things.”

“How long will it take you to find out? As you pointed out earlier we don’t have a lot of time.”

“Maybe as little as fifteen minutes. I’ll go now and come back as soon as I have it. Here, to this room.” Voldemort nodded again so Harry called upon the power of the cloak to disappear from view and shifted away to the ministry. He spent a few minutes tracking down Amelia Bones and then searched through her mind. She did not know, surprisingly enough, but Harry suddenly remembered a time at the Burrow, when Amos Diggory had firecalled to obtain Mr Weasley’s help after the aforementioned incident with Moody’s dustbins. Bones did know where he could find Diggory, so he went off to search him instead. Shortly thereafter he was back at Voldemort’s, abruptly flicking into view and taking a killing curse to the chest.

Voldemort let out an exasperated sigh and shook his head. “Would you consider not startling me like that in the future?”

He unrepentantly shrugged. “I know where he is.”

Moody was retrieved with very little fuss and stashed away in an interim cell after being relieved of his magical eye, false leg, and anything really aside from a simple robe. Harry realized that the difference this time was that Barty would not be taking the man’s place, but that could not be helped. Were it not for the possibility of an adverse side effect during the ritual he would have dosed Moody with Living Death to ensure he remained in no position to cause trouble. It would hardly do for Voldemort to be reembodied only to drown because he was too sleepy to get out of the cauldron. Instead, he set Cael on the man with instructions to keep him subdued.

“Say, that reminds me.” Harry looked at Voldemort curiously. “I know this is that house, so what happened to the caretaker? I know what happened last time, but… .”

“He decided to take a holiday.”

“. . . One he’ll be coming back from?”

Voldemort frowned at him. “Yes.”

“Uh huh. So this place is temporary. It’s interesting, actually. I mean, why would the Riddle family set things up so that the estate was kept, with a caretaker, instead of selling everything and the money going somewhere? What was the point? They’re all dead, so it’s not like they can use the place. They didn’t know about you until you barged in all trigger happy, so it’s not like it was being kept until you could claim it. I never really thought about it before, but… .”

Voldemort shook his head slowly, his expression clearly stating that Harry was batshit insane for wondering about things like that.
Chapter 10

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“Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right, here I am stuck in the middle with you.” — Stealers Wheel, *Stuck in the Middle With You*

Voldemort stepped out of the cauldron naked as the day he was born, though in considerably better shape than the last time around. This time he looked entirely human except for the blood red eyes and Harry found himself, only a little reluctantly, admiring the man’s form. The lack of Nagini’s venom (for a homunculus had not been necessary, and for that matter the conditions under which Voldemort had even obtained Nagini did not exist) and the inclusion of the Elixir of Life had really changed things up. Heck, it may have made a difference that he and Barty had drained Moody of blood rather than just taking a sample.

“Very nice,” he heard himself saying, absently tilting his head. He handed over Voldemort’s proper wand a few moments later, after the man had dressed himself and strapped on a holster. “Welcome back,” he said, reaching out to briefly touch Voldemort’s wrist. He then turned to Barty and smiled. “Well done.”

Voldemort simply nodded. “Barty, you may go rest now.” After he was gone Voldemort looked down at Moody’s body.

“Bury him, leave him in the alley, make trouble for Barty’s father by dumping the body in his house during a dinner party?” Harry suggested.

The corners of Voldemort’s mouth twitched, as if he was amused. “Barty may wish to kill his father.”

“He did before, but I think it was an opportunistic deal. Right place at the right time. As I recall, he had his father under the imperius. But his father was better at fighting the curse and managed to get to Hogwarts, trying to warn Dumbledore. Barty happened upon him and killed him.”

Voldemort cast a few spells on the body and began to head upstairs, so Harry followed, ending up in the sitting room. “Do you have details on the instructions for him under the curse?”

Harry shook his head. “Not unless it was to facilitate certain aspects of the tournament, and you already had Barty helping out there. Whatever it was couldn’t have been too important considering that Barty was forced after a while to keep his father more or less imprisoned at his house. I don’t think anyone ever found his body. How long is Bryce going to be away?”

“Bryce?”

“The caretaker,” he clarified.

“A fortnight.”

“So we need a new place soon. I know you used Malfoy manor at one point, but I don’t have any information on how loyal he really is. Besides, while I can appear any way I want to, I’m not sure I’d want to trust that he’d behave himself. I don’t have any properties unless you count the Black house, and technically that’s not mine yet, even if I am a Black by blood. Nothing a fidelius charm wouldn’t fix, though I might have to fake destroying the locket to get Kreacher on my side unless I just kill
“I am going to take the logical view on this and assume that the city is inconvenient at this time for someone like Barty.”

Harry looked up and nodded. “It’s in Sudan. Maybe I should manufacture a reason for Sirius to escape, if only so he can change his will again to leave everything to me. That’s the only reason I had more of a claim. Sirius came down the main line and he’s my godfather. Everyone else is secondary, and lot of families married Blacks.”

Voldemort arched a brow. “And he would not find it odd that he could no longer remember his childhood home?”

“He hated the place, utterly loathed it. Wouldn’t give it a second thought, I expect, as it would bring up memories of his mother. If you’re cool with a London base I’ll go whack the house-elf and we can set up the charm. Then Barty would have a place to stay, and he has Winky to look after him. Besides, maybe you, of all people, would be able to get that damn portrait of Walburga to shut the fuck up.” He rolled his eyes at the memory of her rantings. “It’s in terrible shape, though. Kreacher stopped doing much of anything after Walburga died. But if you asked her portrait she might get him to shape up. Or she may scream at you because her beloved son ended up dead.”

Voldemort closed his eyes as though praying for patience, then stood and said, “Let us go find out.”

Harry, knowing it would probably anger the man, nevertheless reached out as he stood up and grabbed Voldemort’s wrist, then shifted them into the front hall. He let go and eyed the curtains over the portrait warily, then leaned in and whispered, “I guess if all else fails, I can take the wall plaster out. She used a permanent sticking charm, you see.”

Voldemort reached out, grabbed Harry’s wrist, and squeezed until Harry squeaked in pain. He then let go and growled, “Next time, warn me!” Then in a normal voice he demanded, “And why are you whispering?”

Harry groaned and covered his eyes for a moment, shifting his hand aside then to the sight of the curtains flying apart, revealing Walburga in all her drooling glory, yellowing skin stretched so tightly she resembled an animated skull, and her eyes rolling around in a psychotic frenzy. And then she started screaming about mudbloods and blood traitors being in her house.

“Oh, good God, she went there. Look, you foul-mouthed harpy, you just called the Dark Lord a mudblood!” he yelled. In the abrupt silence that fell he could hear Kreacher approaching, muttering imprecations the entire time.

Voldemort was staring icily at the portrait, one brow raised.

“Mistress, shall Kreacher make them go away?” the elf inquired in a gravelly voice.

Harry was amused to see Walburga reach up to wipe the drool away and try to fix her hair. He leaned in toward Voldemort again and said, “She was a year above you at Hogwarts, yeah? Man, she really let herself go.”

Voldemort’s gaze swept over to give him one of those looks he was getting used to, then returned his attention to the portrait, waiting.

“I— I apologize,” she finally said. “I assumed that waste of a son had turned up and brought his horrid friends.”
“Your manners seem to have slipped since we last encountered each other,” Voldemort said coldly.

“What can I do for you?” she asked slowly.

“I had wanted the use of the house, but having seen it I must wonder how you can stand, even in that form, to exist in this cesspool of filth,” Voldemort responded contemptuously. “A once proud house is now a ruinous derelict and you don’t even have the manners left to see who it is who visits before going off on a screaming tirade like any low-class muggle female. You displease me.”

‘Oh wow,’ he thought. ‘I had no idea an portrait could go pale like that. She’s actually trembling.’ It was pretty obvious that she understood what had not been said.

“The house is yours to do with as you please,” she said shakily.

Voldemort nodded, his eyes flicking briefly over the house-elf.

She immediately added, “Kreacher, you will obey the Dark Lord in all things. He is your new master.”

Harry looked around and sighed. The place was even worse than he remembered. But then, Mrs Weasley had not been around to valiantly make an attempt at cleaning. “Do you want me to call in my two to help?” he asked Voldemort.

“Yes, that would be fine. I can give them a key to one of my household vaults for anything they might need. This will take a lot of work.” He looked contemplative briefly, then asked Walburga, “Where is the keystone?”

“The second floor,” she said promptly. “There is a hidden cupboard there, off the landing. It’s the approximate center of the house.”

Voldemort turned to him and nodded. “Call them, then we shall see about updating the wards here.”

At its most basic, the warding on the house consisted of being unplottable and having a fidelius charm on it. Voldemort performed the charm and implanted the secret into Harry, who then immediately let Voldemort in on it. For the time being Cael and Saen were whipping through the house, chivvying Kreacher along the entire time, and cleaning like demons, trying to turn the structure back into a home.

They left them to it and returned to the Riddle House. Barty was clued in the next morning and told to prepare his things for a move within the next few days. They had taken practically everything from Barty’s room at the Crouch house, so it was not as though he was entirely destitute in terms of possessions. Harry had asked one of his elves to come find him when there were proper rooms available for them and certain other rooms had been cleaned up and refurbished.

With that in mind there was no reason Harry could not take Voldemort to Ae’gura. ‘Oh, wait. Quirrell needs to be placed under a vow,’ he remembered and promptly brought it up. “I just want to make sure he doesn’t get any funny ideas this year, yeah? And on a side note, we need to get Barty a new wand.”

By the time those two issues were taken care of Saen had popped by to let him know about the house, so they wasted more time changing bases. Harry took Sirius’s room and Voldemort took Regulus’s, and both doors (and the nearby walls, and the windows, and the exterior walls, and the floors, and the ceilings) were heavily warded. Moody was stashed in the attic for the time being. And then, finally, he could show off the city to his partner.
“You ready?”

Voldemort nodded, the coals of excitement banked in his eyes, and extended his arm, so Harry took hold and shifted them to the spot where he first was able to view the cavern. He felt that same sense of awe and majesty he had the first time and was incredibly pleased to note that Voldemort’s bland, slightly-cranky expression had transformed.

“How did you find this?” his companion said, his tone hushed.

Harry grinned and tightened his grip. “Hang on a second,” he said, then shifted them to halfway down the grand staircase, a spot with a fantastic view of the lake and Kerath’s Arch. After letting go he sat on the railing, just drinking in the sight. “There’s just something about this view that’s almost transcendent,” he observed quietly. Eventually he turned to Voldemort and said, “It’s a really weird story, actually. You’re familiar with ‘The Tale of the Three Brothers’?”

Voldemort furrowed his brow and nodded slowly.

“And the Deathly Hallows?”

“Yes, of course. But what do—no.”

“Oh yes. They’re real. That ring you used as a Horcrux? It was a Hallow. The invisibility cloak passed down in my family? A Hallow. The final one was the wand Dumbledore ‘won’ off Grindelwald. Last go around I had all three of them, or rather, had the cloak and ring and was master of the wand through a rather convoluted process. I don’t know if you were ever aware of my cloak, or that the ring was one, but you were very interested in the wand. It came to me via Draco Malfoy, of all people. Now, at the time it didn’t mean a whole lot to me. Like most people I assumed it was just a story.”

Voldemort took a seat on the railing as well, angled so he could see both the arch and Harry.

“After I went back is when it came into play. I was sitting there one day, eight years old, listening to my uncle rant yet again about what an unnatural freak I was, and I thought to myself, ‘Why can’t he just die?’ And then the world froze. Off in the corner the shadows writhed and shifted until at last Death was standing there. I felt like my heart was going to leap out of my chest.”

“Did—did Death come for your uncle?”

He shook his head. “Not exactly. I mean, yes, but he was curious to know how I would like that to happen. He also explained about the Hallows and how it’s impossible to separate them from me. I am, effectively, immortal, which is why your killing curses are about as useful as hitting me with a tissue and anything that did manage to off me would be useless, since Death would just pick me up, dust me off, and shove me back into the game.”

Voldemort started shaking his head slowly, his mouth slightly open and his eyes a bit glazed.

“So anyway, Death is that unimpeachable source I mentioned a while back. He explained what happened to the soul bits in my head and the ring—they went to the cup—and then gave me a nifty little book I can use to arrange freakishly bizarre accidents for people. Once you and I started talking about a country of our own I asked him if there was anything on Earth that might suit.

“We played word games for a bit before I asked for a more straightforward answer and he pointed me at a specific volcanic area in Sudan. The route here from the surface is like, fifty-five kilometers. Um, hang on, let me show you something.” He produced the wand so he could get at one of the maps in his trunk, then slid off the railing so he could spread it out on the landing, smirking when
Voldemort joined him on the stone to gaze at the enormity of the journey.

“This is incredible,” Voldemort commented a bit faintly.

Harry felt a bit of surprise at how human Tom was acting, but decided to roll with it and shifted the map so it centered on the main city and would show the both of them. “My father and his friends made a map like this for Hogwarts. I did have to ask Death how they did it, though, because I never learned the last time. For some reason I never worked up enough curiosity to just ask Sirius or Remus, but in my defense I was pretty mentally deranged.”

Voldemort quirked a brow at him as if to say, “And you’re not now?”

Harry favored him with a sarcastic smile. “The point is, it allowed me and my elves to map all of this. I don’t really expect to be invaded or anything, but it’d be nice to have warning. And more importantly, if we use this city as a staging area to move people to a new Age, we can see at a glance who is here and where they are. The map doesn’t lie. Polyjuice, invisibility, none of that fools it.”

He tapped the map and said, “This area is a bunch of lower-class neighborhoods. There are also sections for middle and upper, guilds, the palace, and so on. If we had to we could fit thousands in here. I’d still prefer to write an Age for ourselves and use this for staging. I don’t know if it’s possible to put a cavern this size under the fidelius. Of course, nobody can even get here except by walking, unless they fly Potter Airlines,” he rambled. “I don’t think a house-elf could pop someone this far underground and I have my doubts that a portkey could do it. A linking book could if we could figure out how to write one, but not from Earth, which means a nexus, which rather negates sending them here in the first place unless—”

Voldemort reached over and placed a hand over Harry’s mouth, cutting him off. “Slow down,” he said with uncharacteristic gentleness. “Begin with your idea of a best case scenario.”

Harry blinked as Voldemort’s hand slipped away, and nodded. “Okay. Best case is that we learn to write Ages to our specifications so that we can make one for our population, a private vault Age for the two of us, and one for a nexus. I would prefer new just in case the people who were here previously still occasionally pop into the existing ones. Also, for the main Age, to have it be written such that we could incorporate existing muggle and magical plants and animals, metals, gems. Even extinct ones if we can get enough information about habitats and whatnot. We could still use this cavern. For example, if we had a bunch of people wanting to emigrate but did not yet have the buildings in place, they could temporarily live here, I guess. Or they could bring wizarding tents and use those while they built their homes. Because really, a little deprivation isn’t going to kill them.”

Voldemort nodded. “That sounds reasonable. So, why don’t we go to wherever you’ve stashed all the books and start working. We can return to the house for the night as I doubt there is much in the way here yet of comfortable accommodations. If you think Barty would be of any use he can assist us. The other option would be to have Barty start going through student profiles for Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, but I get the feeling you can figure out who to pick much faster.”

“Oh, right! Yes, that’s one of my, I suppose you could say, powers. I can read anyone, so yeah, I could rifle through the minds of the short-list students once they arrive and select for whatever we’re after. I have three people in mind from Hogwarts, maybe four, and all of them are wankers.”

“Oh? And what exactly did these three or four do to arouse your ire?”

Harry smiled nastily. “The only one who might really deserve it is Romilda Vane. She tried to dose me with love potions during my sixth year, and as you can imagine I’m a bit touchy on that subject. The others just pissed me off for various reasons. The problem with Vane is that she’ll only be a
second year. Realistically we could select for anything. If Ron was still alive, or even Malfoy, I’d say them. It kind of irked me when Malfoy was stupid enough to get himself killed,” he said with a frown.

“So once we make a decision on what to select for, you can do it very quickly.”

“So right. We have to have the fake goblet ready, but the logistics of. . . . Er, do you happen to have a pensieve or know where we can steal one from?”

“Yes. But you could just as easily share a copy of whatever memory with me and save time. I get the feeling I would not be able to use Legilimency on you,” Voldemort said a bit sourly.

“Mm, yeah, I don’t think you could,” he replied with a shake of his head. “Copy it is, then.” He concentrated, casting his mind back to the night the other schools arrived, and more specifically when Dumbledore had brought out the goblet, and mentally marked off start and end points. He raised his wand to his temple and hooked out a copy of his selection and carefully extended it toward Voldemort, who slid the silvery strand onto his own wand, and then brought it to his temple.

A few minutes later Voldemort opened his eyes, a thoughtful expression on his face. “I see what you mean. We would have to prevent anyone from entering their name until after we could effect a switch. That means you will need to stay, even if invisibly, and deter anyone who tries. I am uncertain of how that age line would react to you, though.”

Harry glanced up out of habit and thought, ‘Derek?’ He was surprised when Death materialized in the cavern without freezing time. Voldemort jerked back in surprise and actually paled, one hand rising up in an abortive gesture of warding.

“You have a weird sense of humor,” Harry commented lightly. ‘You just scared a decade off poor Tom. You have to know how—pardon the pun—deathly afraid he is of you,’ he sent.

A smirk somehow seemed to emanate from Derek’s hood. “It must be the influence of my master,” he teased, prompting Harry to make a face. “What is it you needed?”

“Well, we were just discussing our plans to fuck up the upcoming Triwizard Tournament and neither of us was sure if I’d be affected by the age line Dumbledore is going to draw around the Goblet of Fire. I mean, I’m like twenty-eight or something, but I’m in a fourteen year old body.”

Derek tilted his head and replied, “Technically, those first five years count, too, so it’s more like thirty-three. In any case, the line will not affect you. Remember what we talked about. Death is any age.”

“Right,” Harry said, nodding. “I just wasn’t sure if it would work that way given that an aging potion didn’t. But my situation is rather a bit different.”

“An aging potion does not change how long you have actually existed, it only temporarily matures the physical aspects of your body,” Derek pointed out, then practically purred, “I’ll make you a special deal on this one,” piquing Harry’s interest. “You specifically select for at least one of the Hogwarts students you dislike and write up a death for them, and I’ll be there to freeze time so you can effect the swap both times. No one there will have a clue what you’re up to.”

His right hand flew up to press against his lips, the meaning of Derek’s offer flooding him with a wild sense of glee. “Oh. Oh my. That means I would have some control over how they’d have to change the task or tasks. That never even occurred to me earlier. Yes, absolutely. You have a deal.” He suppressed the urge to cackle.
Derek’s eyes flared a killing curse green as he directed his gaze at Voldemort. “And you, Tom Riddle. So long as you continue to treat fairly with my master, you need not fear me.”

Harry watched as Voldemort nodded and regained some of his usual poise, and yet it was obvious he heard the unspoken converse of that promise. “Understood.”

Derek turned those brilliant eyes back to Harry and said, “I would suggest checking the S-14 section,” then faded out.

Harry blinked, then grinned. “Well, that saves us some time. Excellent.”

“S-14 section?”

“I labeled all the books by where I got them from. I think he’s trying to tell me that S-14 has the book or books we need to figure out this Age writing thing. And I’m sorry. I didn’t expect him to actually pop in. I figured he would think at me like he usually does. I’d have warned you otherwise.”

Voldemort gave him a considering look. “Yes, I actually think you would have. Shall we go, then?”

“Mm.” Harry packed up the map and rose, waiting until Tom was ready before shifting them to his makeshift library in the palace. He hunted down the S-14 section and sighed at the sheer number of books stacked there, but gamely sat down and pulled the first one to him as Voldemort produced potions to accelerate his learning so he could more quickly assimilate the D’ni language.

An hour or so later Tom asked quietly, “Do you ever think about calling your parents here?”

He didn’t answer straight away, though his concentration for the words on the page was shot to hell at the question. “I have at least once. Calling my mother here, I don’t know if she would be disappointed in me and my choices, and I’ve yet to figure out how I might react if she was. It’s something I’ve kind of shied away from contemplating. Looking back on what I know I can cut her a lot of slack, for her school years, anyway. She was at least as self-centered as the average teenager and she really wasn’t prepared to handle the situation she found herself in with Severus. She wasn’t the saint people would have had me believe, but neither was she a bad person. Her later choices mystify me to a degree.

“My father, though, ugh. Part of me thinks I’d call him here only to scream at him for a while and part of me thinks I’d start demanding a whole lot of answers. I kind of want to know if he felt any remorse or regret over the things he did, not only to me but to people like Severus. I look back at my own first time through and am quite disappointed in myself.

“True, I had a shit upbringing and was completely unprepared for entering the wizarding world and how all those people would react to the Boy-Who-Lived. But I wasted so much time. I was revoltingly lazy. I forgave too easily for fear of losing the only friends I had and didn’t stand up for and support the ones who needed it. I didn’t think for myself and relied too much on people like Hermione and Dumbledore to give me the answers.

“I remember, after being a nosy little sod and peeking in Snape’s pensieve, feeling horrified that my father was such an entitled, cruel, self-important wanker. I guess I could have gone either way, and please understand that what I’m about to say isn’t some unspoken commentary on you.” He glanced over and waited until Voldemort nodded. “With the way I was treated growing up I could have become cold and cruel and sadistic. For whatever reason I didn’t, but I was fairly Slytherin in my mindset.

“It was only after meeting Draco and being subjected to some brainwashing about the evils of
Slytherin that I begged the sorting hat to put me anywhere but Slytherin. More fool me, I discarded all those lessons learned with the Dursleys and bought into the Gryffindor mentality. I dunno, maybe going into Slytherin would have refined me, or maybe I’d have been dead inside of a week. The thing is, I can see where I made mistakes, a whole lot of them, and part of me fears that my father just never did.

“I’m already so angry and disappointed in him that I’m not sure I could bear to learn he never once stepped outside his own skin.” He shrugged uncomfortably, yet felt perversely relieved that he could say these things to a living person.

“And this also flows into your thoughts about Sirius Black and Remus Lupin.”

“Yeah. All these years Sirius has been in Azkaban for crimes he did not commit. He didn’t escape last time until he saw a photo of Wormtail with the Weasleys on the front page of the Daily Prophet. He told me he stayed sane mostly because his innocence was not a happy thought and therefore couldn’t be taken from him by the dementors. Well, and being an animagus. All these years, and not once has it apparently crossed his mind to escape, not for revenge or even to find some way to prove his innocence, but purely for me, his godson, the person he swore to guide and protect.

“Maybe I’m being horribly unfair and the deaths of my parents really screwed up his head and the guilt he felt was so devastating and crushing that he was flattened for too long. Still, I’m having a really hard time working up anything resembling forgiveness, especially since he agreed with my father on the whole homosexuality thing and would have left me a mere pittance if Azkaban hadn’t scrambled his brains. Him continuing to mistake me for James at times was just feathers on the tar coating. That I blame Azkaban for, but it was really hurtful for me at the time.”

He huffed a laugh. “All this kind of stuff is also why I’m ambivalent about the fate of the muggle-born. I realize now that there may have been countless muggle-born or raised children who suffered abuse at the hands of their parents or guardians. I was too wrapped up in my own problems to see it back then. Those children I would be inclined to kidnap and bring along. But the ones with loving, supportive parents? Not so much. The thing is, Death confirmed something for me. My ritual didn’t take me back in time to start it over.”

Voldemort quirked up a brow. “I had been wondering. How is that relevant?”

Harry swallowed and a bitter smile twisted his lips. “Well, this world is different in a number of ways. My Draco was not nearly so stupid, for one thing, or do I mean to say suicidal. What I told you about my father was true, certainly, but this father….” He shook his head and said thickly, “The James and Lily of this world are alive.”

“What?” Voldemort whispered.

He nodded. “Yeah. And I have a twin. Two sisters.” He blinked a few times against the sting in his eyes and looked up. That old rage was welling up again, the fury that he had tried so hard to sublimate for the sake of his already somewhat tenuous hold on sanity. “This James still had a problem with me being gay, so that didn’t change. But since I had a twin, well….” He conspired with Dumbledore after those tests and they obliviated the few people who knew about my brother.

“The people you killed were not my parents. They were, as Death put it, minor Order members who had been induced to believe they were. And of course, once they were dead, it wasn’t like my parents could just pop back up after such a Slytherin maneuver. Hagrid had already spilled the news down at the pub and it spread like wildfire.

“James left the majority of his money to himself under a new name, some obscure branch of the
Potter family. My mother, though, she disagreed. She was against it, fought it. Death didn’t give
details and I didn’t ask, but she was ‘convinced’ to see things their way. I can never forgive him, and
I’m so very tempted to arrange his death,” he finished in a harsh whisper.

He rubbed his eyes wearily, then looked over to see Tom was resting his chin on the palm of his
hand, gazing at him solemnly. “I haven’t unloaded like this on anyone ever. Do normal people do
this kind of thing, you think?”

Voldemort shrugged, a bemused expression flitting by. “I am afraid I have no idea.”
He noticed over the passing days that Voldemort was acting far more humane around him. At first he couldn’t think of a reason why. Eventually it occurred to him that perhaps Derek having reassured him in his scary sort of way had made a real difference. With the specter of death not looming quite so large perhaps Voldemort was more inclined to be relaxed around him. But then he had to wonder —had his outpouring of woes and uncertainties and disappointments (even in himself) made Voldemort think about his own youth? Drawn parallels of some kind? Admitted, even if only to himself, certain commonalities? Whatever the reason, Harry was not inclined to go rifling through the man’s brain.

Derek’s advice had been spot on and they were steadily working their way through S-14, slowly learning the secrets behind the writing of Ages. Harry was feeling far more confident that their best case scenario was in reach, and was consequently in a fairly good mood rather than obsessing over the many hurdles they might have to face. He was also noticing that certain members of the Guild of Writers seemed to have a natural flair for it and suspected those people were natural linguists. If that was true it boded well for Harry and his abilities. Voldemort’s mastery of the language was coming along beautifully, as well.

Barty was, unfortunately, a bit bored, so Voldemort had set him to scouring the Black library for anything that might be of interest, with a particular focus on Harry’s searches on why certain magics had been banned. He was also given a few primers on the D’ni language to learn from when he became burned out on history.

During their own breaks they discussed who from Hogwarts should be in the tournament, and what sorts of ideas they could come up with for altered tasks. “If we’re going to have four or five—eh, let’s say four, one for each house at Hogwarts—students for each task we need to devise some kind of group event for at least one of them,” he said.

“Such as a free-for-all duel?” Voldemort suggested.

Harry wrinkled his nose in thought. “Yeah. I could kind of see dumping the lot of them into an arena of some kind, possibly with a set amount of supplies they could fight over. You know, food, medical potions, since they would only be going in with their wands. The last one standing gets the most points.”

Voldemort’s gaze drifted off to the right, to stare out the window at Kerath’s Arch. “Preferably with some creatures in there people wouldn’t mind seeing killed. It would increase both the danger level and the excitement,” he finally offered, then flicked his gaze back to Harry.

“Mm. That sounds good. I could write up a death for, say, McLaggen under those circumstances, and in doing so could force certain creatures to be chosen. Something along the lines about how he was badly injured by creature A, which made him, for whatever reason, too damaged to get away from creature B, which ate him. Something like that.”

Voldemort unbent enough to smile. “You said that the second task involved the rescue of hostages.”
“Right.”

“The first task was against a dragon, but I think we can come up with something else considering that I sincerely doubt the ministries are going to authorize twelve dragons to be transported over. Hostages, though, should not be an issue for the second task. So, let’s say . . . that part of the supplies includes items that function as a kind of key or shortcut in the process of rescuing a hostage, but there would only be four of them, perhaps. You could still effect a rescue without having one, it would just be more difficult.”

“The participants may or may not realize that they were something to fight over, but still, I like the idea. Depends on whether or not the officials would bother to mention them.”

Voldemort smiled again, though it was a bit nasty in nature. “We can always imperius Crouch Snr and get him to push for a mention.”

“And possibly for the first task’s creature,” he said with a nod. “So maybe some sort of vault with twelve locks, one per participant, where the hostages are. Or even four with three each, or whatever, so that they didn’t all converge on the same spot. The egg recovered in the first task gave us clues to where our hostage would be found, so . . .

“The final task was a maze, but it was quite boring for the audience because the walls were so high they really couldn’t see anything. I’m okay with a maze again, but surely there would be some way to keep an eye on them, maybe project images onto screens so the audience can see what’s happening.”

“Oh course,” Voldemort replied. “That is in the same class as the enchantments that allow the ceiling of the Great Hall at Hogwarts to function. It also applies to the enchanted eye that Moody wore. Set them up so they can levitate and follow a particular target, and what they ‘view’ is directed to a screen rather than a single person’s brain.”

Harry blinked. “Now why didn’t I think of those? Same with linked mirrors, I suppose.”

Voldemort favored him with an uncharacteristically indulgent look before saying, “The point is that it can be done. Why they did not do so last time around is probably a matter either of lack of brains or not wishing to go to the expense.”

“Or maybe they were so impressed with their supposed cleverness in terms of the task compositions that it never came to mind that watching would be a colossal bore after dragons,” he opined. “Well, for the first task, how about . . .”

“No,” she said, “despite their looks the pangolin’s closest relative is not the armadillo!”

“And you have proof?” Kevin more or less demanded.

Luna whipped out a book and started flipping through the pages.

Harry rolled his eyes discreetly and gazed out the window at the swiftly-moving landscape, far more occupied with what they had learned thus far during their time at Ae’gura. They were so close to having a proper handle on the higher form of the language and being able to start testing a proof of concept. He expected, though part of him was against doing so, he could ask Derek if their initial effort was not only safe but precisely what they were after.

If so they could create a linking book to their starting location—probably one of the rooms in the
choose to use the new descriptive book they’d have created, and once there create a linking book to that same spot so the descriptive book could safely be stored away. Then they could move on to creating a nexus and a whole new world. He so badly wanted to be able to move away from it all, to build something of worth of a hopefully enduring nature. Then again, he was effectively immortal, so he would be around to do his best to ensure it retained that worth. Voldemort, too, given that he had the means to ensure the man’s longevity, even if he did rather consider it to be cheating. Derek was interesting company, but Voldemort was human, or was mostly, and it was the company of a human through the years he would more likely welcome over that of an agency.

Luna seemed both to notice his distraction, and, judging by that odd look on her face, knew something of why—or at least a possible why. She also left him to it, not trying to draw him into their debate. He sincerely hoped she would be one of those to join the emigration. But that made him think of her father. Xenophilius was not a bad man, and had been forced into a very hard choice. Still, should he come along, he could be used to funnel information about Earth to the public of their new Age, assuming anyone was interested. And if he could create an Age with the creatures Luna so often spoke of, that could provide much in the way of amusement.

He eyed Luna speculatively, wondering if she would indulge his curiosity or if she would revert to thinking she was being mocked. But . . . her treatment had been much bettered this time around, so perhaps she would take it in the spirit it was presented. She shot him a smile—almost a smirk—and went back to arguing passionately with Kevin and Neville. Harry huffed a very quiet laugh; were he that sort, Luna would presently be his first choice. ‘Okay, Derek?’ he thought. ‘Is she actually knowing, or does she just come across that way?’

A moment later he heard, ‘She has a particular talent, not entirely unlike one of your own, so yes, she’s knowing to a degree. It is a combination of things, I suppose. She can more or less discern people’s thoughts, but more than that, those thoughts lead her mind to the resulting possibilities. She isn’t quite a natural mind-reader or even a prophet, but something similar.’

‘Which tells me I can most likely trust her. After all, once she got past her initial wariness, she’s been helpful and, insofar as I’m aware of, has never spilled any secrets she may have gleaned from me.’

‘Mm, yes. She was, admittedly, a bit taken aback on first seeing you to realize just what a bloodthirsty psycho you were in opposition to all the previous hype.’

‘Oh, Derek, you say such sweet things! My heart is all a’flutter.’ And then he conceived such a weird thought.

‘No, Harry,’ Derek sent, obviously having caught it. ‘I do not have emotions in the normal course of things. They would be a monumental detriment in my . . . line of work. It is only with you, my master, that I possess anything resembling humanity.’

‘Oh. Perhaps to make the ‘relationship’ easier? I had noticed you were being at your scarily best with Tom.’

‘Perhaps,’ Derek said agreeably. ‘I have certainly noticed I am somewhat influenced by your personality, but it is still true that death is my nature and my work, so assisting you in a little mayhem is . . . Or even in suggesting it.’

He nodded thoughtfully. ‘So will you be able to tell me if the first Age we create is . . . right?’

‘Certainly. I am as curious as you are to see what will happen if the Light gets its way here on Earth, so it behooves me to facilitate your success. And that includes things such as your Luna’s creatures.’
Harry smiled faintly, pleased.

‘And that’s that,’ he thought as Dumbledore sat back down after the opening statements McGonagall allowed him. ‘The school will be all in a pother over the Triwizard Tournament and—hm. With Derek helping with certain things, that might actually be a fantastic way to disappear, even though we hadn’t planned it. Damn it, I wish I could communicate with Tom the way I can with Derek.’

‘You rang?’ Derek asked, startling him into flipping the fork he’d idly been fiddling with onto the floor.

‘Bugger,’ he thought, twisting over to retrieve it and toss a cleaning spell at it. He ignored the amused looks of his house mates and sent, ‘Er, not exactly. And I don’t see how you could help anyway, not with that.’

‘Really?’ Derek drawled. ‘You are my master, Harry. All my powers are at your disposal.’

He frowned in confusion. Now what in hell was that supposed to mean? He couldn’t possibly mean—could he? ‘Are you saying I can speak telepathically with anyone? And—’

‘Hear their responses? Yes. But I would suggest you be very selective on that front.’

‘Well, yes. I can’t imagine at the moment I’d want to talk to anyone aside from you and Tom—maybe Luna,’ he sent, gratefully loading up his plate now that McGonagall had started the feast. ‘Certainly not Remus or Sirius, not Tonks or Bill or Kingsley, and I can’t for the life of me think of any other adult who even makes the list for brief consideration. The students are all, well, young. Luna only because she’s already got such a leg up on things and apparently doesn’t have a problem with me being a sanguinary little shit. I like Kevin and Neville well enough, but they don’t need that kind of insight. They’re just boys. And speaking of which. . . .’

‘Yes, his family is abusive, even now. His grandmother is so wrapped up in trying to make Neville into Frank that she gives no thought to her actions meaning the obliteration of her son’s child, or that Frank would likely flay her alive for what she’s doing if he could. I think . . . that if you wish to take him with you it will be necessary to gently guide him into seeing his family for what it is, plus probably needing the cooperation of the goblins to abscond with the majority of the family money.’

‘And the others?’

‘Well, they’ve stopped putting him into near-death situations to provoke a magical response, but they’ve spent so many years assuming he’s a squib that they can’t quite get beyond it now, despite him being here at Hogwarts and obviously being capable of casting spells.’

‘I can think of one thing immediately that might present an entrée to convincing him his family is nuts: muggle newspapers. It seems as though they have stories about abused kids far too often, and I’ve seen more than one detailing information about dodgy teachers.’

‘Dodgy. . . . Ah, I see, you mean as a way to show that Dumbledore’s acceptance of people like Snape and Binns is abusive in and of itself, or at least a willing accomplice to such. Guilt by association, aiding and abetting, even if that’s only by turning a blind eye to their actions.’

‘Mm. And if this goes the way I’m thinking it will now, I’ve only a year to do it in. Well, that’s not entirely true, but I expect Neville will be startled out of his socks if a supposedly dead Harry shows up after the fact to invite him on an adventure. On a side note, since I’m feeling bizarrely brave right
this second, *has* Sirius ever once considered escaping for my benefit?”

There was a long, long pause. ‘No.’

‘... I see,’ he thought stiffly. ‘And what of Remus? Has he ever thought about visiting me?’

‘Yes, but those thoughts are generally fleeting, as he always manages to come up with reasons or excuses to never do it, often connected to Dumbledore’s wishes or what he assumes they would be.’

Harry stabbed his fork down into a carrot so hard the metal bent. ‘God damn it. I really need to work on not showing my temper so obviously.’

Kevin nudged him and aimed a puzzled look his way.

He shook his head and produced a sheepish smile, then unbent the poor blameless fork. “Just a stray thought. I was wondering what might well go horribly wrong this year. Maybe things aren’t so strange for anyone raised in the wizarding world, but from my point of view things have been downright weird at times since I was brought in.”

Kevin’s eyes went briefly unfocused, then he sort of smiled. “Yeah, I can kind of see what you mean. I wonder how many people are going to try to put their names in despite what Dumbledore said.”

Harry chuckled soundlessly. “Oh, I don’t doubt plenty of people will try. Mind you, I think the whole thing is stupid. I mean, come on, how many people do you think can name any past winner? The fame is apparently quite fleeting. And while a thousand galleons is a lot of money to most people our age, it’s not like that’d set you for life, so is it really worth the possibility of dying? He says they’ve made it much safer, but I for one don’t hold a whole lot of trust in our ministry, especially when most of the people involved are probably getting on in years and don’t remember what it’s like to be seventeen and at that general level of spell knowledge. And—he said the age thing was new, so think about it. How many people had to die before, at heaven knows how young an age, before someone finally wised up and said no more? God forbid they actually tailor the thing to suit a range of ages, no. Instead they discontinued it. It’s like saying that instead of it being the fault of the adults it was the fault of the students for not miraculously being up to snuff.”

“Something tells me you won’t be one of those people trying to sneak your name in,” Kevin observed with an amused smile.

He snorted in response. “Good God no. You know, I’m really kind of grateful I got sorted into Ravenclaw and have friends who more or less ignore that whole Boy-Who-Lived thing, but if I ended up in the tournament?” He rolled his eyes expressively. “If I were going to do something that stupid I might as well change my name to Gilderoy Lockhart and act like a complete wanker in public.”

Kevin laughed. “You think he’s full of it, too, huh?”

“I don’t much trust anyone who whores himself for attention that way,” he replied snidely. “If people stopped to think instead of staring fatuously at his blinding smile they might realize that all those amazing deeds are something we have only his word for. Where were the newspaper accounts? Nobody ever heard anything until another book came out, so if the incidents really did happen I’d bet Lockhart got wind, raced to wherever it was, and obliviated the pixies out of everyone involved after getting the information he needed.”

“You know,” Kevin replied thoughtfully, “that’s not a bad theory.”
He could only hope that Kevin would go on to start an investigation and eventually expose Lockhart for the fraud he was, but if not, no matter. He could always arrange for an accident later on. Being defenestrated by pixies would be a start (instead of the man’s wand) to make up for that first class, but Harry was sure he could come up with something far more creative given a proper application of thought. For that matter, he still had to figure something out for Trelawney. She might stay boring this year, or she might have regained her confidence.

When a selection of desserts replaced the main meal Harry reached out and grabbed a selection of nibbles and wrapped them up in a napkin for later. After a quick question to Derek he grabbed a couple of other things to stow away, then served himself a slice of chocolate cake.

“You planning to have a binge later on?” Kevin inquired.

Harry favored him with a sarcastic smile. “Of course! My aunt has everyone on a diet because my cousin is a fat pig. You try eating salads and plain baked chicken all summer.”

Kevin stared at him for a few moments, then nodded and turned back to his own plate. Harry got the distinct impression that the boy said nothing more on the subject so as not to provoke a rant. A few minutes later the tables were cleared and they were released. He quickly lost himself in the crowd and slipped off down an unused hallway. As soon as he was in a safe place he shifted to № 12 and headed to the library.

Tom and Barty were situated in comfortable chairs reading, so Harry pulled out his gifts and caroled, “I brought presents!”

Both looked up in startlement and aimed confused looks at him. “Aren’t you supposed to be at school?” Barty asked. “I could have sworn it was the first.”

Harry grinned a bit psychotically. “Yep. Now, Barty, I have some Jaffa cakes for you—I know how much you like them,” he said indulgently. “And, Voldemort, some Bakewell tarts for you, cherry ones.” He placed the goodies on the table and took a chair for himself. “I had this really weird urge earlier,” he confided. “I rather wanted to pose Moody’s corpse and cover it with a thin layer of cement, then replace the statue in the ministry lobby with it. Perhaps in a dueling pose next to a set of dustbins.”

Barty’s head thunked onto the table surface and Voldemort gazed up at the ceiling briefly. Harry ignored their reactions and pulled out some treacle tarts for himself. “So, Dumbledore announced the tournament. I’ve decided who amongst the Hogwarts lot will compete. I figure I can just do a little memory modification to ensure they enter and have reasoned ideas for having done it, especially since three of them will be using a false school name. I figure I can probably do the same for Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. After all, wizards in general have no damn logic or common sense so it may not occur to any of them to question more than a couple of the extras on how or why.”

“True,” Voldemort said in a somewhat resigned manner.

“Now, something occurred to me earlier,” he continued, glancing at Voldemort. “It didn’t make sense to, er, copy a past idea before, but given how far along we’ve come on other matters. . . . I was thinking, assuming we’re ready, that Barty here could ‘kidnap’ me from the stands right near the conclusion of the tournament, so there are plenty of witnesses. After all. . . .”

Voldemort nodded slowly, obviously getting the point and remembering what he had said about the previous go around’s events. “Can your . . . source . . . confirm the viability of our efforts?”

Harry was mildly surprised that his partner in crime had jumped to that line of thought, but also
impressed. “Yes,” he replied, nodding. “I asked about that earlier, after which I thought about reusing that idea. Having that surety. . . .”

“It would make a certain kind of sense,” Voldemort agreed, “and remove you from the scene in a drastic way, rather than you just never going back. Unless, of course”—his gaze flicked over speculatively—“you wanted to make some kind of private statement to Dumbledore later on, after he’s become bewildered over the fact that his arch nemesis has yet to fulfill his side of the bargain and go off on a mass killing spree of muggles and muggle-borns and blood traitors.”

Harry’s mouth tightened, almost a pursing of the lips, as he considered that, his gaze going unfocused and aimed in the general direction of a stack of books on the table they had copied from the stash in Ae’gura. “I don’t know,” he said slowly. “I’ll have to think about it, and we have time. Though it would surely sow confusion if a letter arrives one day from me when he was probably certain of my death by then. It isn’t as though after a staged kidnapping that anything further need be confirmed, leaving the entire issue in doubt.”

“You should probably get back,” Voldemort suggested. “Surely your house mates will have noticed your absence by now. You can always return later, after they have retired for the evening.”

He blinked and looked over. “True. People do tend to eat themselves into something of a stupor on feast nights. Yeah, I’ll be back in a while. We can work on our first effort?”

Voldemort nodded so Harry got up, gave each of them a nod, and shifted away. He returned to Ravenclaw at a stroll, absently noshing on treacle tarts, until finally he ended up in his dorm room.

“You certainly took your time,” Kevin commented.

“Hm? Oh, I wandered around a little first,” he replied, letting one hand slide down the nearby wall in a slow caress. “Saying hello again to the old girl, I guess you could say.” He bit into the final tart and ambled toward his bed, hoping that Kevin would get the hint. Not so much later on he tossed sleeping spells at his dorm mates and shifted back to № 12, to the library. Barty was industriously working away with one of the D’ni primers and some parchment, doing translation exercises, and Voldemort was scratching away with a quill in an attempt at writing a vault Age for them.

Harry sat down next to him and began reading over the man’s efforts, a part of him vaguely noticing that this was one of the rare times he was so very physically close to his erstwhile adversary, and it really wasn’t so bad. “I wonder sometimes,” he said. “If something like a nexus really is just a protected pocket somewhere out there in space, and a world automatically gets slotted into a viable system, like how Earth is in the right orbit with relation to Sol. Or even if what this really does is expose a multitude of alternate dimensions and it’s more of a case of jumping back and forth.”

“Are you usually this philosophical?” Voldemort inquired with a lazy look at him.

Harry ignored the question and tapped the parchment. “This looks good insofar as I can tell. I can’t see anything off about it. Shall I get confirmation?”

Voldemort nodded so Harry sent, ‘Derek? Do you have a moment to check this draft and. . . ?’

There was a long pause before he heard, ‘It is fine, master. Once it has been done with the proper materials it shall work as you expect with no underlying instability.’

He broke into a wide grin. ‘Then we can move on to doing that, and writing up a nexus. . . .’

‘I see no reason why you cannot proceed. The sooner you are able to get all three done the sooner you can go intimidate the goblins into doing what you want.’
Harry chortled at the very idea. Voldemort quirked an inquiring brow at him so he sent, ‘Thank you, Derek,’ before saying, “Ah, yes, it’s good. We can proceed with this one and move on to drafting the others.”

“And your amused reaction?” Voldemort persisted.

Harry gave him a coy sidelong look and shrugged one shoulder eloquently. “I was just considering ways I can intimidate the goblins when the time comes. I expect they may not wish to take us seriously at first, so perhaps an improbably bizarre freakish accident, right there, right then? Surely one of them in any meeting will stand above the others in terms of being a wanker, so . . . .”

Voldemort smirked and dropped his gaze, slowly turning back to focus on the parchment. “Yes, I can see how that would be amusing to contemplate. And I believe it is wise to consider. Goblins have little enough reason to trust the word of a wizard.”

Harry gasped softly. “I just had a thought. We have so much to do this year and I’m stuck at the school. Sure, I could use a time turner, but. . . . What do you think of the idea of engineering a situation where I’m one of the hostages and I go mysteriously missing because of it. It would get me out sooner—around February, I think. Then I could wear a new face and bear a new name to the general public, and we could start negotiations with the goblins.”

Voldemort adopted a thoughtful expression—Harry could only tell by the minute crinkle of his forehead and the narrowing of the man’s eyes—and said after a bit, “True, the tournament is, at this point, just a way to cause a little mayhem and confusion for the enemy, so you being present throughout its entirety is not essential. Perhaps that would be a wiser course of action under the circumstances. Even after we have the goblins working toward the goals we set for them we will need time for them to actually enact those goals while we are recruiting. We could use a nexus to transport them to the city first, then to the Age, so they have an idea what we’re after and the scope of the project.”

He nodded, wondering what sort of effect that would have on his designs for people such as Neville. Leaving early would cut into the time necessary for his attempt to convince Neville to defect. But he supposed in the long run he could simply try again later, when Neville was older and had been subject to that much more rude treatment. He was not so worried about Luna, expecting almost that all he would need to do is ask and she would start packing.

“I was thinking it might be to nice to replicate that manor—you know, the one in the distance on a small island of its own. I think it’d be nice to live in a place like that. Probably way more room than I’d need, though.” He shrugged and sat back. “Still, a place of such beauty, it’d make up in part for all the shit I’ve been through.”

“You will have to take me there,” Voldemort said. “I am sure the view from a distance is nothing compared to walking its interior.”

Harry spared a second to look at Barty, who was either very engrossed in his task or very politely ignoring their conversation. “We could share it if you like,” he offered to Voldemort. “That way we’d only have to ward one structure so intensively.”

The blank look he got in response told him absolutely nothing.

“O—okay, you just think about that, then. Oh, oh. Can you do me a favor? Can you let Quirrell know he needs to cover for me? If I make the excuse that he’s tutoring me or something several times a week I can use that time to, you know, do real work, with you. It’s either that or I start using the time turner. Suppose that might be safer,” he said as he looked away.
“Use the time turner. Quirrell may well be able to cover for you during those periods, but others may seek his assistance and question your absence. Granted, he was not overmuch in demand previously, so it may not matter. It would still be simpler to use the time turner, so long as you account for the extra sleep you would need.”

“Okay, yeah. After I look over my schedule we can talk about times.”
Chapter 12

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“Here’s the rope, now . . . swing away.” — U2, Wire

“And that reminds me.” Harry paused, flicking his gaze at Barty for a second, then sent, with Tom specifically in mind, ‘Can you hear this?’

In his peripheral vision he saw Voldemort’s hand twitch such that the nib of the quill he still held skittered across the parchment beneath. Voldemort slowly turned toward him, a question burning in his eyes, so Harry sent, ‘I’m going to take that as a yes. Death reminded me that I can make use of any of his powers, so that means we can communicate despite the distance, though to do actual work I expect it would be easier to be physically in the same place. You’ll need to focus and direct your thoughts if you wish to respond.’

‘. . . And I can do this to initiate a conversation?’ Voldemort asked slowly.

Harry nodded. ‘At least, I think so. I expect I would at least get the idea you’re trying to contact me and could then start things off if necessary. Earlier at the feast I had been bitching to myself that I wanted to share that kidnapping idea with you. Death chimed in at that point.’

Voldemort frowned slightly, as though in consternation. ‘Does Death always listen to your thoughts?’

He pursed his lips and shrugged a bit carelessly. ‘I think he’s got some kind of monitoring system going on so that he’s alerted if I might need him, or if I’m wondering about something he could assist me with. It’s not something I worry about because Death is . . . mostly inhuman. He’s the avatar of a concept, and while because I’m his master he acts fairly human with me, I know he’s not otherwise. It’d be like being embarrassed because your cat wandered in while you were on the toilet.’

Voldemort wrinkled his nose at the analogy. ‘I see. We need to decide how big to make a nexus. If we’re going to put multiple copies of the same linking book in for each place so as to keep up with a potentially large demand.’

Harry scratched his neck and frowned. ‘Uh, we need to think about the fact that most people wouldn’t want complete strangers having access to a linking book to their homes. Sure, we can have links to public places, but how does a teenager get back home?’

‘I suggest that we apportion lands into zones or regions. Homes might have their own copies of a linking book to the nexus, but the return book would bring them to a central location. They would have to walk the remainder of the way. If the population grew to require it, perhaps more than one nexus. But please remember, I see no reason why we could not still have a floo system in place, though it is possible that the populace may prefer the books as being a cleaner way to travel where overall distance matters not. The floo might become merely a communication system.’

‘So, like, a room set aside for linking books involving locations in the main city, or even areas of the city, another for a satellite city . . . or something along those lines, plus rooms containing books to various groups of homes. It’s not as though we would necessarily need a road system, just walking paths and the like.’

Voldemort nodded. ‘The goblins could use the nexus to transport materials, though quite probably in
far smaller, more frequent quantities, yet still far faster than having horse-drawn wagons. We could set up a part of the nexus, or a separate one, for strictly that, so the general public does not interfere with their work. They would simply need to tell us what locations they would need available so we could create the linking books for their use. They would have to be different from the public-access books as the goblins would need to arrive at their destination, not some distance away.'

Voldemort reached out and grabbed a fresh sheet of parchment and began making swift and decisive lines on it, sketching out a rough idea of how a grouping of estates could be done and how a nexus could be designed. The image coming to light showed a cluster of manor homes with a common at the center containing a gazebo or something similar, presumably the arrival point. Each estate had a fair amount of land so the homes were not too close together and there was plenty of space for each family, especially if they had a stable or kept the odd exotic animals or even enough land for personal farming.

The nexus he roughed out was more on the order of a series of large alcoves around the perimeter of a circular structure, and he had to assume that each would be properly labeled and that the actual center would be the arrival point at the nexus itself. It reminded him, for some reason, of the KI devices he had eventually learned of that the D'ni used, which stored which linking books a given person was allowed access to and determined which linking books actually showed up in a nexus. But he could not offhand figure out how to work up a system like that, so Tom’s idea seemed sound enough.

‘This makes a lot of sense,’ he offered. ‘And I can see your point about a separate nexus or even area of a nexus, disconnected from a public structure such as you’ve done there, for the goblins. There would have to be a hidden door, though, if we went with the same Age, so we get into place to create the linking books for each of them. It almost makes more sense to just write them separately so there would be no question of the general public somehow gaining access to the wrong place. It’s either that or we have to create a nexus with no structures, mark out where they’ll be, create the books, and then make the actual buildings. Preferably with a linking book for us to be able to go back there, outside the nexus structures, to create more as necessary.’

‘Well...’

As it turned out his only mostly free day was Wednesday. He had Defense in the morning, but after that nothing, so he could, in theory, disappear for most of the day. Still, Voldemort was probably correct in thinking use of the time turner was better. He could shift to № 12, set about work, then turn back and return to the school with no one the wiser. If that meant he developed a habit of going to bed early and getting a couple of extra hours of sleep per day it should become unremarkable soon enough to his dorm mates. In theory he could spend every day from lunch to before dinner there and there were plenty of open periods in which to dash off whatever homework he had. Of course, having access to the abilities of Death meant the extra sleep was probably unnecessary.

He shot off a thought to Voldemort about it while running his eyes over book titles in the hopes of finding something interesting to read, followed up by, ‘And are you going to flip out if I start calling you Tom? Because really, saying Voldemort all the time makes my tongue tired.’

‘...There are days when I still hate you.’

‘Ha! You never really hated me in the first place. You feared a prophecy spoken by a semi-delusional drama queen and then chucked a wobbly when that killing curse rebounded. No, you hated what I represented, not me. You didn’t know me from the next toddler gumming everything in
sight and throwing food at the walls. And more recently, it’s more like—’

‘All right,’ Voldemort sent sharply, ‘I get your point. And you need to learn to take a joke.’

Harry thunked his head against the bookshelf, causing Pince to glare at him for making noise in her library. While he had realized the man was more Tom than Voldemort at this point, at least with him, he had no idea it had progressed far enough that the man would actually tease him, so was it so surprising in retrospect that he failed to recognize it when it happened? ‘I apologize,’ he sent as contritely as he could. ‘I don’t suppose it was all that politic of me to bring that up. I guess I still have some issues to deal with, but that doesn’t make it right to ambush you with them.’

‘. . . Issues with me specifically?’

‘No, not exactly. With you it’s more like how I’ve long thought it was a damn shame that someone so incredibly intelligent and talented ended up going down that particular road and ended up being obsessed and dangerously not right in the head. What a waste! Why do you think I tried from fairly early on this time to short circuit that journey and, you know, make you stop and think?’

‘All right. Your plan sounds fine. I’ll expect you for lunch.’

He sounded a bit stilted to Harry, but no longer angry. ‘Yeah. Say, do you think there’s any point in me copying the restricted section here?’

‘Perhaps. I expect I have my own copies of much of it squirreled away, but it could not hurt to make sure of it.’

‘All right. I’ll add it to my list of things to do.’

Defense with the Hufflepuffs went well. Quirrell seemed confident enough, even without Voldemort there sharing the body. He slipped away on the way to lunch and shifted to № 12 so they could begin work on the draft for a nexus, roughing out their ideas in English first, to describe what Voldemort had sketched out earlier. Voldemort allowed that Harry’s ideas were sound so they were envisioning a much larger space than originally conceived, one where they could set an arrival point for their later alterations, to go ahead and mark out with lines or stakes the area encompassed by each of the expected structures so they could then create linking books to each before building exit-free edifices. Well, unless someone decided to try blasting a wall out to see what was beyond.

When dinner time rolled around he grabbed a time turner from his chest long enough to turn back, then stowed it and headed off for a second lunch, sitting between Kevin and Luna. Herbology and Transfiguration also went well enough and he spent that night, after his dorm mates had gone to sleep, beginning to duplicate the bounty of the restricted section. When Thursday rolled around, and History of Magic, he was somewhat disturbed to realize that Dumbledore was occasionally eyeing him speculatively. It was true that Dumbledore had not originally been the one to enter his name, but it was certainly possible the man was wondering if Voldemort would try something given the ‘exciting’ possibilities the tournament might provide. Or, maybe, he was very much hoping that Harry would end up competing and be killed because of it.

He would know soon enough, anyway—unless he chose to simply rifle through the man’s mind—when it came time for the students to enter their names. If the old man’s thoughts were in any way centered around the issue of his scar, he might well attempt to enter Harry himself. And that reminded him that he needed to come up with an at least vaguely plausible reason for so many people to have gotten around those restrictions. Cedric would be fine as he was; despite being a sixth year he was old enough, being one of those, like Hermione, with a late birthday. Bole from Slytherin was already a seventh year, so no worries there, and Harry had remembered the time when the boy
had slammed his beater’s bat into Alicia that one game, giving him good reason to choose him as a victim. Fawcett was a sixth year, and had wanted to enter last time, so he would facilitate that. To round out their number would be McLaggen, someone who was in some respects so disgustingly Gryffindor that he had little trouble with the idea of arranging the boy’s death.

He sighed lightly and resolved to pretend the old man wasn’t acting strangely.

Harry was very busy as the students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang arrived, winnowing through their minds to see first, who actually amongst the short-list candidates intended to enter (and who had only come along because they wanted a change of pace), and second, who might actually be skilled enough to compete on a fair level. Fleur and Viktor had every intention of entering so Harry shuffled the other candidates around in his mind and eventually came to a decision.

It was while they were all seated and having dinner that he carefully reached out and started modifying memories. McLaggen was induced to believe certain things, and to want to brag a little to acquaintances of his, while others were induced to conveniently be nearby to overhear said bragging. That right there took care of a number of people and how they would reasonably have figured out a way around the matter of only a single champion per school being picked. Others he handled slightly differently, but the end result was that all of them would enter using a fake school name.

As the plates and serving platters on the tables were wiped clean Dumbledore stood up. Harry thought it was mildly pathetic how McGonagall still followed the man’s lead on so many things. A pleasant sort of tension seemed to fill the Hall and the Weasley twins over at the Gryffindor table were leaning forward, staring at Dumbledore with great concentration.

“The moment has come,” said Dumbledore, smiling around at the sea of upturned faces. “The Triwizard Tournament is about to start. I would like to say a few words of explanation before we bring in the casket—just to clarify the procedure that we will be following this year. But first, let me introduce, for those who do not know them, Mr Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation”—there was a smattering of polite applause—“and Mr Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports.”

There was a much louder round of applause for Bagman than for Crouch, perhaps because of his fame as a beater, or simply because he looked so much more likable. He acknowledged it with a jovial wave of his hand. Bartemius Crouch did not smile or wave when his name was announced. His toothbrush mustache and severe parting still looked very odd next to Dumbledore’s long white hair and beard.

“Mr Bagman and Mr Crouch have worked tirelessly over the last few months on the arrangements for the Triwizard Tournament,” Dumbledore continued, “and they will be joining myself, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime on the panel that will judge the champions’ efforts.”

At the mention of the word “champions” the attentiveness of the listening students seemed to sharpen. Dumbledore noticed their sudden stillness, for he smiled as he said, “The casket, then, if you please, Mr Onslow.”

Onslow, the man who had replaced Filch as Caretaker, and had been lurking unnoticed in a far corner of the Hall, now approached Dumbledore carrying a great wooden chest encrusted with jewels. It looked extremely old. A murmur of excited interest rose from the watching students; Dennis Creevey stood on his chair to see it properly, but, being so tiny, his head hardly rose above anyone else’s.
“The instructions for the tasks the champions will face this year have already been explained by Mr Crouch and Mr Bagman,” said Dumbledore as Onslow placed the chest carefully on the table before him, “and they have made the necessary arrangements for each challenge. There will be three tasks, spaced throughout the school year, and they will test the champions in many different ways . . . their magical prowess—their daring—their powers of deduction—and, of course, their ability to cope with danger.

“As you know, three champions compete in the tournament,” Dumbledore went on, “one from each of the participating schools. They will be marked on how well they perform each of the Tournament tasks and the champion with the highest total after task three will win the Triwizard Cup. The champions will be chosen by an impartial selector: the Goblet of Fire.”

Dumbledore now took out his wand and tapped three times upon the top of the casket; the lid slowly creaked open. Dumbledore reached inside it and pulled out a large, roughly-hewn wooden cup. It would have been entirely unremarkable had it not been full to the brim with dancing blue-white flames.

Dumbledore closed the casket and placed the goblet carefully on top of it, where it would be clearly visible to everyone in the Hall. “Anyone wishing to submit themselves as champion must write their name and school clearly upon a slip of parchment and drop it into the goblet,” said Dumbledore. “Aspiring champions have twenty-four hours in which to put their names forward. Tomorrow night, Halloween, the goblet will return the names of the three it has judged most worthy to represent their schools. The goblet will be placed in the entrance hall tonight, where it will be freely accessible to all those wishing to compete.

“To ensure that no under-age student yields to temptation I will be drawing an Age Line around the Goblet of Fire once it has been placed in the entrance hall. Nobody under the age of seventeen will be able to cross this line.

“Finally, I wish to impress upon any of you wishing to compete that this tournament is not to be entered into lightly. Once a champion has been selected by the Goblet of Fire, he or she is obliged to see the tournament through to the end. The placing of your name in the goblet constitutes a binding, magical contract. There can be no change of heart once you become a champion. Please be very sure, therefore, that you are wholeheartedly prepared to play before you drop your name into the goblet. Now, with Professor McGonagall’s agreement, I think it is time for bed. Good night to you all.”

Harry sighed once the old man was finally finished blathering. He left the Great Hall with his house mates, but quickly enough lost himself to sight, intent to wait until Dumbledore had set the goblet up as explained. Soon enough the Hall had emptied out and Dumbledore wandered out into the entrance hall with the casket and goblet, McGonagall trailing along beside him.

The moment Dumbledore actually set things up and his hand had left the goblet, but before he stepped back to draw an Age Line, Derek froze things, allowing Harry to skip over. The real goblet went into his left pocket and the carefully prepared fake was removed from his right, and set up as a decoy. He returned to his previous spot, still invisible, and watched as Derek unfroze the scene. Dumbledore indeed stepped back and drew his wand, and proceeded to circle the cup at a distance of about ten feet, his wand pointed at the floor. As he walked a thin golden line appeared, eventually joining up at the start of the tracery.

Harry nodded, sending his thanks to Derek, and headed off to Ravenclaw. Before he was halfway there Derek chimed in to let him know that the modifications he had made worked out, and McLaggen’s bragging session had been overheard by a number of people. He went off satisfied,
slipped out later to again do some copying in the restricted section, and eventually went to bed.

The next morning, Fred and George still made their attempt to use an aging potion to get past the line, and provided those watching with a humorous conclusion to their efforts. The rest of the day went quietly enough if one discounted the high level of excitement, and soon enough they were finishing up dinner.

Before what had happened previously could begin, Derek froze the world. Harry jumped up and effected the switch. From the fake goblet he pulled all the slips of parchment and rifled through them quickly, shoving the ones he did not care about into his pocket, in the end retaining twelve of them. A extremely strong confundus charm was cast on the real goblet, forcing it to accept and ‘decide’ names for any number of schools, not just three, after which Harry tossed the slips in. Finally, he returned to his seat.

Eventually the golden plates returned to their original spotless state. There was a sharp upswing in the level of noise within the Hall, which died away almost instantly as Dumbledore got to his feet; Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxime looked as tense and expectant as anyone. Bagman was beaming and winking at various students. Crouch, however, looked quite uninterested, almost bored.

‘Tom, I’ve made the switch,’ he sent, not expecting a response until the results were a given.

“Well, the goblet is almost ready to make its decision,” said Dumbledore. “I estimate that it requires one more minute. Now, when the champions’ names are called, I would ask them to please come up to the top of the Hall, walk along the staff table, and go through into the next chamber”—he indicated the door behind the staff table—“where they will be receiving their first instructions.”

He took out his wand and gave a great sweeping wave with it; at once, all the candles except those inside the carved pumpkins were extinguished, plunging them into a state of semidarkness. The Goblet of Fire now shone more brightly than anything in the whole Hall, the sparkling bright, blue-white of the flames almost painful on the eyes. Everyone watched, waiting. . . . A few people kept checking their watches. . . .

The flames inside the goblet turned suddenly red. Sparks began to fly from it. Next moment, a tongue of flame shot into the air, a charred piece of parchment fluttered out of it—the whole room gasped.

Dumbledore caught the piece of parchment and held it at arm’s length, so that he could read it by the light of the flames, which had turned back to blue-white. “The champion for Durmstrang,” he read in a strong, clear voice, “will be Viktor Krum.”

A storm of applause and cheering swept the Hall. Viktor rose from the Slytherin table and slouched up toward Dumbledore, then turned right, walked along the staff table, and disappeared through the door into the next chamber.

Dumbledore went on, when the goblet had eventually ejected another slip, to announce, “The champion for Beauxbatons is Fleur Delacour!” He next announced, “The Hogwarts champion is Cedric Diggory!” Every single Hufflepuff jumped to his or her feet, screaming and stamping, as Cedric made his way past them, grinning broadly, and headed off toward the chamber behind the teachers’ table.

“Excellent!” Dumbledore called happily as at last the tumult died down. “Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you, including the remaining students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will contribute in a very real—”
But Dumbledore suddenly stopped speaking, and it was apparent to everyone what had distracted 
him. The fire in the goblet had just turned red again. Sparks were flying out of it. A long flame shot 
suddenly into the air, and borne upon it was another piece of parchment.

Automatically, it seemed, Dumbledore reached out a long hand and seized the parchment. He held it 
out and stared at the name written upon it. There was a long pause, during which Dumbledore stared 
at the slip in his hands, and everyone stared at Dumbledore. And then Dumbledore cleared his throat 
and read out—

“Cormac McLaggen.”

Every Hogwarts student turned their gaze on the Gryffindor table, and the students from the other 
schools followed suit. McLaggen was seen to be grinning madly, almost insufferably smug at his 
success at hoodwinking the goblet. He jumped up and headed off as people watched in shock.

Dumbledore was about to speak when the goblet’s fire again turned red.

‘That’s it, then,’ he sent a while later. ‘All twelve of them, as planned. This place is in a massive 
uproar and I imagine the officials are pissing themselves.’

‘Excellent,’ Tom responded. ‘You have figured out how you’re going to be a hostage?’

‘Yep. I’ll induce Fawcett to ask me to be her date,’ he sent, nodding absently at something Kevin 
said. ‘Of course, I’m going to actually have to learn how to dance, but really, I imagine it won’t seem 
too strange for her to ask me, even if the Boy-Who-Lived hasn’t exactly done much of note since 
returning to the wizarding world.’

‘You—need lessons. Hm.’

‘Ha, don’t tell me. That was one of the things you taught yourself so you could slide right into pure-
blood society.’

‘No, actually, though Barty would know. You probably only need to know how to waltz.’

Harry vaguely recalled McGonagall trying to teach them all and shuddered. ‘Yeah, well, if Barty is 
going to teach me, remember to tell him I have to be the one leading.’

As it turned out, Barty had an interesting way to teach him at the start, showing him the basic three-
step combo he needed to master, alternating between the right and then left. Once he had that down 
Barty showed how it was done in terms of actual dancing, with the right leading northeast relative to 
Harry’s position, while the left led sort of west, and both included a slight turn. And, of course, that 
one always started to the right.

Tom had arranged to mess with Crouch Snr’s memories to induce him to suggest a specific 
replacement for dragons and according to Derek it went just fine. In and around the usual boring 
school stuff, copying from the restricted section, and learning to master the waltz, Harry continued to 
work on Age drafts with Tom, having moved beyond the nexus and onto an actual livable world.

The last full week of November rolled on up, and with it the first task. By pure chance Cedric was 
again the first one up. The crowd roared as he stepped out from the champions’ tent and into the 
enclosure. The handlers pushed the first cage of many into position and prepared to release the beast 
inside as Bagman explained to the audience exactly what was to happen; essentially, get the golden 
cocoon being guarded by a floatstinger, preferably without killing the creature. Harry and Tom had 
chosen them (and which had necessitated some interesting wards on the enclosure to protect those 
watching) because they could fly, but more importantly because their wings released a
hallucinogenic powder. In addition to that complication, their stingers were poisonous.

Cedric got a glimpse of the creature and seemed puzzled; it seemed that while cheating might be a given for these tournaments, he had walked in clueless. Perhaps he did not take Care of Magical Creatures? Or if he did, these had not yet been covered? The Hufflepuff found out quickly enough, once the prodigious moth-like beast had been released, just what kind of trouble he could expect after taking a face-full of motes.

He began casting somewhat wildly after inhaling the powder, aiming at some unseen foes; but within minutes he seemed to visibly pull himself together and redirect his focus toward the only real creature there. Piercing spells tore holes in the beast’s wings, grounding it, and Cedric ran unsteadily toward the cocoon. He was, unfortunately, stung in the side, just below his ribs, but yet managed to get the cocoon and return to the entrance before he collapsed and was hauled away by Pomfrey.

All told, not a bad showing for someone who’d had no idea what he would be facing.

When McLaggen’s turn rolled around it was similar in that he took a face-full of the hallucinogen, but his reaction was cause for mass hilarity when the young man began stripping for an unseen audience. Harry wasn’t sure he could bear to watch the scene unfold. ‘Oh, God, he went there,’ he thought a moment later.

‘Do I dare ask?’ Voldemort responded.

‘Um, well, damn. Er, McLaggen apparently thinks he’s participating in an orgy if that tells you anything. The crowd is deathly silent right this moment, though I get the feeling the pointing and laughing will start any second. Oh, dear lord, he just got a stinger to the ass! And . . . he’s convulsing and vomiting . . . and they’re hauling him away now. So much for Mr Braggart. He’s going to have to bribe someone big time to get a date for the Yule Ball after this humiliation.’

Krum was surprisingly delicate in his approach, having obviously recognized the creature, whereas Fleur managed to set hers on fire. Bole was just as heavy handed as he was during quidditch games, totally ignoring their instructions and laying into his floatstinger with spells intended to rip it to shreds. No one else did anything particularly special and they were done by the time dinner rolled around, Krum being the clear leader in terms of points, with Cedric not far behind him.

“Why on Earth do you want those included?” Voldemort demanded to know.

“Because it will make Luna happy,” he replied cheerfully.

“Oh, so we’re building a world to suit Miss Lovegood’s tastes now?” was the snide response.

“No, a world to suit all of us, with a few extras included. I don’t see what the big deal is. Death provided those lines for us so it’s not as though we had to do any work for those like we did for the extinct species. Live a little, yeah? There’s always room for some absurdity in life.”

Voldemort closed his eyes and breathed out heavily, his nostrils flaring.

Harry rolled his eyes slightly and reached into a pocket, bringing out a small box. He set it on the table and opened it, then said quietly, “I brought you more tarts.”

Voldemort’s eyes flicked open. “You do realize it’s not fair of you to know things like this.”

“Of course I do, but it’s nice to be able to bring presents I know will be enjoyed,” he said with a low
chuckle.

“One might start to think you liked me.”

He paused a moment before saying, “In what sense?”

“. . . I’m starting to think I have a learning disability,” Voldemort deadpanned.

Barty breezed in at that point and Harry promptly produced another box, this one filled with Jaffa cakes. Barty exclaimed in delight and snatched the box away, falling into a convenient chair so he could begin snacking. “You’re amazingly nice for a psychotic mass-murderer,” Barty commented.

“Mwua ha ha!” he ‘laughed’, then shrugged and tapped the parchment on the table between himself and Voldemort. “I think we’re almost ready. I should be able to confirm it soon. I’ve already gotten the supplies ready—what there was of it in Ae’gura—so we’re good to go. If we need more, well, I think that’s a job for the both of us so we can guard each other’s backs.”

Voldemort nodded. “Yes, agreed.”

The D’ni were not a generally violent people, but the historical books they had found and read indicated that they did occasionally have issues with terrorism, overweening arrogance, and a tendency toward enslaving other races. Not so different from wizards or regular humans in that respect, but certainly a reason to be wary if they needed to gather more supplies. Even if they already had enough, it would probably be a good idea to obtain more, or write an Age of their own, just in case, that would supply those materials.

Surprisingly, to him at least, Voldemort had picked up on those thoughts; perhaps he had been thinking too loudly?

“I agree. We have no way of knowing how they would react to us should we encounter them, and you’re right that it might be wise of us to create our own supply. We may never need it, but it would be foolish not to account for unanticipated potential needs later on. On another note, I think you should simply disappear during your term as a hostage. Leave some peculiar signs, perhaps, but nothing that would actually help them to discern what occurred, nor have any idea as to your life state.”

“All right. In many respects you do actually have a much better idea how these people think. Your plans don’t always work out, but you’re quite good at anticipating them or figuring out how to get around them. I’ll just leave behind some nonsensical detritus and let them make of it what they will.”

Voldemort seemed pleased by the compliment insofar as he could tell without invading the man’s privacy. They continued to work on the draft for the next few hours, then Harry shifted to the school and turned back those hours and headed to lunch.
“It’s a dead man’s party. Who could ask for more? Everybody’s comin’, leave your body at the door.” — Oingo Boingo, Dead Man’s Party

The days continued on until a little over a week later the Yule Ball was announced. Harry had already tinkered with Fawcett and was thus expecting it when she hailed him in the corridor on the way to lunch. “Potter! Hey, can you stop a minute?” she asked.

He eyed her with false curiosity and nodded, saying to Kevin with a shrug, “I’ll meet you there.”

Fawcett caught up with him and produced a smile, twirling a lock of hair around her fingers nervously. “Thanks. Have you heard about the ball yet?”

He just nodded.

“Yeah, should be fun. Er, I was wondering—see, the champions are required to have an escort and, you know, dance—so I was wondering, would you like to accompany me?”

He blinked slowly at her and crinkled his brow. “The only thing I know how to do is waltz. I wouldn’t be much of a date—well, not that it’d actually be a date. I mean, I’m just saying, you’d be lucky to get an opening dance out of me because I rather loathe all that, but I was forced to learn because my aunt thought it was only proper.” He rolled his eyes. “So, as long as you understand that ahead of time. . . .”

She looked a bit taken aback by what he said, but gamely pressed on. “Oh, well, that’s fine I suppose. I know for certain that the champions have to open the ball, but after that—maybe just once or twice more if another waltz comes up?”

“I guess so,” he replied slowly. “I had actually planned to go stag, but . . . you’re a fellow Ravenclaw, so, okay. I’ll help you out and be your escort. Oh, my dress robes are a dark green. Will that be a problem?”

She shook her head. “Thanks, Potter. I, er, really appreciate this.”

“Sure,” he said indifferently, and turned away.

As he started walking he heard one of the girls trailing her whisper harshly, “I can’t believe he said yes, Siobahn!”

He smirked mentally and continued on to a safe spot, then shifted to № 12.

Things continued to roll along, and Harry’s campaign of muggle newspapers in Neville’s vicinity—along with somewhat dramatic pronouncements about how some families were just plain evil to do things like that to their children—was going very slowly. But then, as he had earlier commented, magic folk were seriously lacking in the logic and common sense departments.

He actually did give Fawcett more than a couple of waltzes, more out of boredom than anything else. Still, it would look good to the watchers, even if he did want to crawl under a table and shift away to safety instead. He had also written out his plans for the deaths of Bole and McLaggen (who, as it
turned out, had to import a date), so the officials would have no choice but to rationalize their inexplicable decisions regarding the second task.

By the time the twenty-third of February had rolled around he and Voldemort had completed their Age book drafts and had them approved by Derek. They were waiting to create the linking books until after Harry went missing, when there would be fewer distractions. That evening, as he was leaving the Great Hall after dinner, Flitwick called him over and then led him away from the crowd.

“What’s this about, professor?”

“Ah, Mr Potter, that will need to wait until we have some privacy,” Flitwick replied, continuing to lead him away. They were still on the ground floor of the castle so Harry wondered if he was being led to the staff room. And indeed, it seemed so, and they were shortly inside the inner sanctum of the staff. “So, Mr Potter, as you know the second task is tomorrow,” Flitwick started with.

“Yeeees?” he said, doing his best to look confused.

“Well, the thing is, each of the champions is going to be required to—” Flitwick broke off, looking just a shade shifty-eyed. “They each will have to rescue a hostage.” He looked at Harry expectantly.

“. . . And I’m being asked to be a hostage?” he ‘guessed’.

Flitwick looked relieved at this evidence of his quick mind. “Yes,” he confirmed. “You were Miss Fawcett’s date for—”

“Escort,” he said quickly.

“Er, yes, escort. For the Yule Ball. So we would like your permission to place you as her hostage.”

“Ah, man, that’d mean I’d miss watching the task,” he muttered, then said, “I see. But what exactly would be required of me? And how much danger would I be in? I mean, the first task was pretty rough for some of the champions. I bet some of them are really regretting that they entered—however that was accomplished.”

Flitwick coughed quietly and gave him a strained smile. “You would be put into an enchanted sleep, Mr Potter, and then placed into one of the vaults which have been created within the arena. Each vault can only be opened by its respective champion—and of course the officials—so you’d need not fear being in danger from any of the, shall we say, hazards of the event. As soon as each vault is opened the hostage within will awaken and the officials will be alerted, though I expect since everything will be recorded and displayed on screens they will know it’s about to happen. You and Miss Fawcett will then be removed from the arena.”

“I see,” he said, furrowing his brow in false consternation. “Just out of curiosity, what happens if I say no, sir? I mean, I’m being asked kind of late, aren’t I?”

“Yes, well. . . . Should you decline I must tell you that you’ll still be isolated until just before the start of the task.”

“Mm, so I can’t, should I be so inclined, toss out any hints.”

“Correct, Mr Potter. I know it is a very sudden decision I’m asking you to make, so please, take a few minutes.”

Harry looked off to the side, to all accounts deep in thought, and he let several expressions flit across his face to give lie to him seriously considering what he was being asked to do. Eventually he heaved
a sigh and said, “Well, I only agreed to go with her because she’s a fellow Ravenclaw, so I guess I may as well follow through with support for my House. All right, professor, I’ll be a hostage.”

Flitwick stared at him for a moment, then nodded. “Let me escort you to the isolation area, then.”

‘Yo, Tom,’ he sent. ‘I’m being hauled off to some isolation area now that I’ve agreed to be Fawcett’s hostage.’

‘I expect, then, that Death will be removing you from the enclosure in the arena as quickly as possible.’

‘Correct. The first possible moment, waking me back up, and removing any other spells. I’ll turn back an hour or two so we can travel to Hogwarts together to watch the task.’

‘Fine. I will expect you in the morning.’

They arrived in a generally unused section of the castle that had been converted to a set of temporary dorms and Harry was shown to a room for the night. He whipped a book out of his pocket and read until it was late enough, then went to sleep. In the morning elves provided them with breakfast before Flitwick and numerous others came to prepare them. One moment Harry was wide awake in the makeshift common room and the next he was staring at Kerath’s Arch. ‘That was a bit trippy,’ he thought and thanked Derek, then fetched out his time turner and spun back two hours. Shortly thereafter he was just outside № 12’s kitchen.

Voldemort and Barty were already there as he walked in and the table was being loaded with platters by an elf, so he sat down and nodded a greeting to both men. “Good morning.”

Barty returned the greeting as he began loading up his plate and Voldemort nodded. Harry grabbed a few things just to be sociable, having deliberately not eaten his fill at the school.

“What face do you plan to wear hereon in?” Voldemort inquired.

“Oh, that.” He cast his mind back over the multitude of faces he had encountered in the muggle world and decided on one fairly quickly, shifting his face and form to match. The only concession he made—for he intended for the most part to sport a set of killing curse green eyes to go with Voldemort’s blood red ones—was to retain the original’s liquid black colour.

Voldemort raised his brows. “A Japanese man?”

He shrugged. “Sure, why not? I stole it from a muggle musician—a singer. And my name for this form is Yuki Fuse, by the way.”

“Well, if you don’t mind me saying so, *Yuki,*” Barty said, reaching for some eggs, “if I were the type I’d be all over you.”

Yuki aimed a sultry look his way—or at least he was hoping it was sultry. “Thanks. I figured being drop-dead gorgeous for once might be interesting.” He thought Voldemort was suspiciously silent on the matter but for that one question and wondered if the man was internally shaking his head.

They took their time eating, discussing their upcoming plans, with Barty expressing his interest and excitement over finally getting to see Ae’gura. Before they knew it an hour had gone by and it was time to head out.

“So, Bole and McLaggen will die during this?” Voldemort asked, eyeing the arena and the displays. The screens were situated such that the champions had no way to see them and thus could gain no
clues regarding their opponents’ actions.

‘Mm-hm,’ he replied lazily, only half listening to the chatter around him and watching the officials speaking to each other prior to the opening of the event. They had arrived almost an hour early in order to get decent seats, and even then people were still arriving and being relegated to seats either very low down or out on the fringes where it would be that much harder to see what was going on, even with the screens in place to display each of the champions. They, of course, had managed seats roughly about center and halfway up the stands. ‘I shouldn’t like to spoil how it goes, though. You should be able to appreciate it properly when it happens.’

He got an elbow to the side for that and looked over in surprise. ‘What was that for?’

‘So sorry, that was unintentional,’ replied Voldemort with admirable innocence.

‘Liar. Curb your impatience. If you don’t like what I dreamed up you can elbow me then, but perhaps a bit more gently,’ he said with a reproachful look. ‘That kind of hurt. You got me right in the rib.’

The time finally rolled around to the stated start of the task and Bagman got up and used his wand to place a sonorus on himself. “Greetings, everyone!” he said cheerfully. “We are just about to begin the second task of the Triwizard Tournament. For your benefit, as the champions have already been instructed, allow me to explain what is to happen. Each champion has had a hostage selected for them, and each of those hostages has been hidden somewhere in the arena. The champions’ essential task is to locate and release their hostage, at which point they will both be transported out here to a waiting area.

“However, the arena only contains a finite amount in the way of supplies for our courageous champions, and plenty of hazards they must either overcome or avoid. The centaurs were gracious enough—”

‘—to allow us the use of part of their forest in order for us to have a properly sized field of play. The supplies I mentioned are located at the approximate center of the arena and the champions will be stationed in a rough circle around them. Obviously, there may be a bit of a fight over them, but none of them are, strictly speaking, essential for their task.”

Someone nearer to the officials’ platform called out a question and Bagman nodded before saying, “Yes, the champions cannot hear us right now, though they do know most of this already. Now, the task will run for a maximum of eight hours, so if necessary we will be serving lunch out here, never fear. Any champion who has not yet managed to rescue their hostage by that time will be scored purely on their nerve, inventiveness, and so forth, but obviously lack any points for the actual goal of the task. Champions who do succeed will be given points for that based on how quickly they managed it, in addition to the other, more minor categories to be judged.

“And now, without further ado, let us begin!”

The screens lit up with pictures of the central area of the arena, despite there not yet being any champions in place. Within moments they were, transported into place by portkey, and each screen acquired a label, a name, floating just above and glowing at the edges. A final screen, tuned to the supplies, showed a numerical countdown floating above the pile. 10. . . 9. . . 8. . .

The champions exploded into action the moment the count hit zero, some of them racing out of sight and others heading straight for the supplies, though what they expected to find amongst them Yuki
wasn’t sure. He knew that there were four aids to make opening the vaults easier, but he was not sure they did. The audience most certainly did not.

One particularly enterprising Beauxbatons student managed to down four other champions with stunners and another with *petrificus totalis*, then began quickly rummaging through the available supplies. Within minutes she was racing off into the tree line only to be surprised when a bright red worm about five feet long burst up through the ground and spit at her. She shrieked in surprise, and then in pain as her clothing began to disintegrate and her skin burn, and jinked off to the side. Her screen showed her fleeing, branches whipping at her face and body, until she stumbled into a shallow pool and began rinsing herself off.

Another screen showed Delacour, who had climbed up a tree so as to get a better look at the area the arena encompassed—and probably to see if she could spot any of the vaults. Krum had somehow managed to fashion himself a broom and was using that for speed and evasion. The task itself was surprisingly boring for quite some time, but then the first of the deaths he had scheduled was coming up, so he gave Voldemort a mental nudge and sent, ‘Okay, Tom. Keep an eye on Bole’s screen.’

Voldemort’s disguised reddish-brown eyes—rather like he had tried to cover the ‘natural’ red with brown contact lenses—shifted to focus on that screen, a look of muted anticipation on his face.

‘I may have to explain my reasoning after the fact,’ he offered. ‘It’s not like these screens give us sound, too.’

Voldemort spared him a quick, searching glance, then refocused on the screen. Bole was stumbling through a lightly-wooded area and happened upon a cluster of resurrection ferns, Yuki having remembered them from his first year at Samhain. He had no idea who would appear for the young man because he had not bothered to be quite that specific.

The spy eye on Bole swooped around to focus on his face and everyone could see the young man’s complexion pale and then go faintly green. In the edges of the image he saw that the fern targeting Bole appeared to be shaking angrily. Bole started nodding almost absently and then began speaking, though Yuki was not good enough at lip reading to catch all of it. The only thing he could catch was a, “I know, you’re right.”

Bole, after another minute of ‘conversation’, used his wand to transfigure a nearby broken branch into a beater’s bat. His wand went away into a sheath on his arm, and he calmly and resolutely proceeded to bludgeon himself to death with his bat by shattering the vertebrae at the back of his neck. He toppled to the ground almost in slow motion, the bat falling free and reverting to a branch thus freed from his magical influence.

There was a pause, a hiatus, before members of the audience who had been watching Bole erupted. Voldemort eyed him sidelong and sent, ‘I allow I found that to be amusing enough, but yes, I would like the back story to complete the picture.’

Yuki smiled at him, briefly lowering his gaze. ‘Well, there was this incident my third year during a Gryffindor/Slytherin quidditch match where he wailed one of my team mates with a beater’s bat and then claimed he thought she was a bludger. So, I arranged for him to be berated by the form of a family member intent on making him understand what an utter shit he is and more or less demand he atone for it. The funny thing is I understand it happened this time around, too, so. . . .’

‘Ah, let the punishment suit the crime.’

He nodded. ‘Occasionally, anyway. Because really, I can’t think of any crime Snape ever committed to warrant being split open via tentacle rape. I nearly laughed myself sick over that.’
Voldemort twitched. ‘Yes, well, it took a great deal of control to prevent my own laughter from showing through Quirrell.’

Yuki reached over to pat Voldemort on the arm. ‘I am glad you enjoyed it,’ he replied, then glanced at the various screens again. Bole’s was dark. Fawcett was hiking along, wiping the sweat of exertion from her face with her shoulder and upper arm, and her hair was sticking out oddly. Her clothing was holey in places and singed in others, making him think he had missed her having an encounter with one of those Mongolian death worms.

Krum seemed to be flying a search pattern, while Delacour was fleeing from a pack of nifflers after her for the shiny bits on her clothing. An unfortunate Durmstrang student had walked over a snare trap and was presently hanging upside down, his wand just out of reach on the pine needle-carpeted forest floor. And, since it was magic holding him up, it wasn’t as though he could manage to swing his arms up high enough to free himself.

McLaggen had developed a habit of shooting stunners at any other champion he came across, presumably in the hopes that slowing them down would benefit himself, but he in no way seemed to have any idea of the location of his search.

Yuki was pleased and a bit gratified when he saw Fleur actually find her vault. She was one of the few who had obtained an aid and seemed to have an idea what it was for, and shortly the vault was opened to reveal Gabrielle. Once the girl was free of its confines and being hugged by her sister, they were both transported from the arena. Remote-activated portkeys, he assumed. Still, he was very pleased that her original failure was mitigated here, especially given that she was the first to succeed.

‘How long until the other one?’

He glanced at his watch. ‘I’m not actually certain. It’s contingent on Fawcett getting near her vault. Since I had no idea how long that would take I figured I would group them, so to speak, and then we’ll be able to leave if we want.’

‘And because Fawcett’s involvement isn’t linked to a death you could not force the issue of her finding it at a specific time.’

‘Right. But I can link it the other way around. And for all we know right now they placed the hostages randomly. If you get bored, though, I suppose I could ask Death where mine is and then shift in long enough to her position to give her a nudge.’

‘Something tells me you prefer not to rely on his knowledge if you can avoid it,’ Voldemort commented evenly.

Yuki looked over for a second, head tilted, then returned to watching the screens. ‘Yes, that’s correct. The fact that I have such easy access tends to make me more determined to do it properly most of the time. We had an amusing Slytherin-style discussion about the big secret, where I narrowed it down to something vaguely similar to Petra, and he then said a volcano was involved. I admit I got impatient at that point so he told me the exact one. I still did the exploring personally, though I did get him to tell me how to make the map to simplify matters as we went, and it’s something my elves were able to handle, as well.’

Cedric, looking fairly unharmed, was the second one to find his vault, followed not long after by Krum. With the original champions out of the arena the only ones left of interest were Fawcett and McLaggen.

‘What did you leave in your vault?’
He exhaled heavily and scrunched his nose. ‘Well, you suggested I leave it in doubt, so . . . An animated phoenix model, a rubber chicken, a tea pot with still steaming tea in it, a copy of How to Win Friends and Influence People by Dale Carnegie, and a whomping willow sapling. I figured that ought to be weird enough.’

Voldemort actually snorted in amusement.

‘I had some other ideas, but they would have leaned too much toward implicating a champion, and we can all see none of them have had anything to do with my vault. The model and the willow, however, do vaguely point at Dumbledore, as well as the book, I suppose.’

‘It might well prove interesting should others see it that way. Well, while we wait . . . I reminded Barty to pack up whatever he thinks he needs for our move later today. I expect he can explore the city while we start in on the actual descriptive books. I have no doubt that we can have all three done inside of a week, plus have the blank linking books prepared. We can set up the linking books for Ae’gura to take with us, as well.’

‘Right. And then we can go to the vault Age and set up the pedestal for the linking book back, create the one for our arrival, then start in on the nexus. Can’t treat with the goblins without that.’

‘And then, the new world,’ Voldemort finished, his mental voice sounding almost . . . relieved, perhaps joyous. ‘We can mark out the infrastructure buildings, that replica mansion, perhaps the odd shop space. I suppose we could mark out a few manor groupings with their attendant pedestals.’

‘Hn. Well, if we can get a few recruits that don’t mind going under an oath of some kind, yeah, because then we could actually take them there and say, “So, this parcel of land would be yours for you to build a home on if you chose to emigrate.” Or something along those lines. Though, thinking about it, it’s a bit tempting to enclose all of them with stone fences to clearly delineate the property boundaries.’

‘Or we could take photographs to show. But it might have much more impact to actually link them through and show them in person. It would be helpful to already have the first buildings in place.’

Yuki frowned in thought, eyeing McLaggen, and sent, ‘Actually, if we know who we’re going to target we could try actually building a few of the manors to match who we plan to move into them. The deal being, if they agree to emigrate, they sign over their original property to us so we can arrange a sale. They get a duplicate house and we get something out of the deal.’

‘Now I know I’m slipping. That hadn’t even crossed my mind.’ Voldemort sounded tired. ‘Yes, I agree with you. Something for something, and they would already be getting a chance in a world with no muggles, so they’d have little to complain about when presented with that as part of the deal.’

‘Yeah. But, Tom, please do consider that we’ve been so focused on actually creating the Ages that we haven’t spent a lot of time thinking about what happens once we’ve done that much aside from the occasional reference to intimidating goblins. You’re not slipping, it’s just not come up before now. Don’t you dare start losing confidence in yourself or I’ll bitch slap you into next week.’

Voldemort snorted in amusement again. ‘I’m sure I don’t need to tell you how very peculiar it is to speak with someone like this.’

‘What? And not be tossing out a crucio a second later?’ Yuki grinned at him. ‘It’s not like I would ever expect you to become a friend to the world, Tom, but having a friend isn’t such a bad thing.’ Voldemort did not respond to that and Yuki was content to let his comment lie.
Shortly thereafter they were being served lunch, section by section, row by row, and Yuki tucked into a bacon sandwich with enthusiasm. Bacon was one of the fundamental food groups in his opinion, right up there with chocolate. The side of chips with malt vinegar was just a bonus. “Oh, that was good,” he said blissfully, speaking out loud for the first time in hours.

Voldemort set aside his bowl of stew to be collected and nodded. “They generally do have good food here.” ‘I wonder how soon, though. I’ve been trying to decide if all this food is going to come back up shortly from many in the audience.’

Yuki glanced over at Fawcett’s screen and wondered himself. If she got too close too soon, McLaggen would die, and all these nice people might well vomit up all the hard work the elves had gone to. ‘Well, I hope it doesn’t come to that. The smell alone would be horrific, not to mention the possibility of the people behind us decorating our clothes with partially digested food.’ He wrinkled his nose at the idea. ‘It’s just occurred to me that I have no idea what message was in those cocoons, what sort of clues. Half of these guys seem to be wandering around blind. They can’t all be abysmally stupid, can they?’

Just then a Beauxbatons student knocked himself senseless by running full tilt into a tree while fleeing from a death worm. Right before the beast would have attacked and killed him he vanished from the arena, having failed the task.

Yuki shook his head and rolled his eyes toward the sky. When he was nudged again he looked at Voldemort questioningly.

‘I think it might be time.’

His gaze flew back to the screens as he tossed some shielding spells around just in case, to Fawcett, then McLaggen. The boy triggered a snare trap, and on his way to being flipped he not only lost his wand but also disturbed a doxy nest, crushing a number of the eggs. The mature doxies took exception to this and swarmed the boy, stinging him so many times so quickly that anyone with sense had to know he was probably dead before his portkey triggered. Even before he vanished he was foaming at the mouth and convulsing.

‘Was there hidden meaning behind this one, as well?’ Voldemort inquired.

‘Oh, definitely. My sixth year McLaggen tried out for keeper, having missed the trials the year before because, as I recall, he was in the infirmary for having eaten a pound of doxy eggs for a bet. Typical enough Gryffindor behavior, right? What frosted my cookies, however, was that he had to sub in as keeper one game after Weasley was poisoned. Not only did he keep trying to be captain when I already was, he screamed abuse at members of my team while in play, took a beater’s bat from Peakes, and tried to play that position at the same time as keeper. In the process he cracked my skull when he missed the bludger and hit me instead. But I couldn’t have both of them suiciding by beater’s bat, so I went with a doxy-related death instead.’

‘That makes sense. Well done.’

Yuki smiled to himself and kept an eye on Fawcett. She should be arriving at the vault any minute now. And she did, two minutes later, and looked to be very relieved when her efforts finally cracked it. However, when she opened it... The look on her face was priceless. Yuki’s shoulders shook as he tried to suppress his laughter and one hand came up to conveniently rub his mouth and chin. Apparently the officials were more than a little perplexed as it took several minutes before Fawcett was pulled from the arena.

He turned to Voldemort and said, “I don’t know about you, but I’m getting bored. You want to take
off?”

Voldemort nodded and rose, waiting for Yuki to also stand before edging his way out of their row and ignoring the complaints. Shortly thereafter they were back at the house and Harry was asking, “I wonder. Now that I’m missing I suppose I should go empty out a few vaults.”

“What about his?”

“I’m not sure. I could. But how much?” He looked over. “One sixth for the number of family members? One fourth for the number of children? Half because I’m pissed off? How much to punish him, but not her?”

“Hn. Let us come back to that one. Who are you going to hit?”

“. . . The Order, the main Black vaults, my trust. Nobody should even notice that they’re empty for a while. Well, unless Dumbledore is using the Order vault on a regular basis for some reason. He has to know you’re back simply because Snape would have mentioned his Dark Mark coming back, but there’s been no activity.” Voldemort started shaking his head so Harry asked, “What?”

“Snape was already dead well before my ceremony,” Voldemort said simply.

Harry smacked himself on the forehead in chagrin.

“Karkaroff is the only one who might reasonably have said anything to Dumbledore.”

It was Harry’s turn to shake his head. “He did say something to Snape. Seemed pretty frightened by it and what it meant. But I don’t know if he would have gone to the old man. Doesn’t really matter, I suppose. If and when Dumbledore notices it’ll be just another mystery, especially if he has the ability to check my trust vault.”

“Would you like help doing this?” Voldemort offered.

“That would be nice. Thanks.” Shortly thereafter they were methodically emptying various vaults (though he decided against the Order vault for the time being), dropping the trunks—extension charms a given—off at the palace as each set of two was filled. Once they were done he dropped Voldemort off at the palace and then went to fetch Barty from the house.
Potter had snatched up the paper as soon as it arrived and was currently chuckling over it. The previous evening the young man had settled down with a virgin book and his other materials and carefully written out the vault Age. Voldemort had done most of the work of drafting it, but Potter was the one to write it given his instinctive understanding of the language. There was far less of a chance of him making a mistake in the transference. That done they had created a linking book to the designated room in the palace and called it good for the night. Well, after Potter had slapped sticky notes on both books as a reminder of what they were.

The room in question was presently warded against entry by anyone other than the two of them and the descriptive book had been placed on one of the ubiquitous pedestals found around the city. At its base was a wooden box containing both linking books. When they were established in the new Age—they still needed a name for it, he reminded himself—they could set up a new linking book for the return from the vault. And another for their return from the exterior part of the nexus. But that was for later.

The *Daily Prophet* looked to have several articles regarding the second task of the Triwizard Tournament. Top billing appeared to be about Potter’s mysterious disappearance. “Well?” he asked.

“The DMLE is, and I quote, ‘baffled’”—Potter made an odd gesture with the first two fingers of each hand—“by the things I left there. Naturally, there were no magical signatures left behind, the portkey they attached to me failed to work, and locating spells are laughably useless, so they have no idea what the hell happened to me. Rita did make a connection between the items and Dumbledore so she went off on a dramatic bit about it, somehow managing to accuse him of all manner of things without actually saying it directly. You know, the usual.

“I wouldn’t doubt she was on the platform the whole time in beetle form, and later attached to one of them while they were investigating the vault. The next article goes on about the rankings for the second task and overall, plus a reminder for the expected date of the third task. The next one covers the suicide of Bole and McLaggen’s unfortunate death.” Potter folded the paper and slid it over to him.

He scanned the articles quickly, noting that Skeeter did her usual hatchet job in her customary florid style, but there was nothing of note about the disappearance of gold from Gringotts. True, they had most likely only reported his attempt through Quirrell because there had been nothing to steal and could thus present it in any way they wished—to their benefit, naturally. They would never admit to actually having ‘misplaced’ hundreds of thousands of galleons, possibly millions; it was not like they had bothered to count any of it.

He was about to ask what effect Potter thought this might have on James, but stopped himself in time to prevent being construed as either cruel or insensitive. No matter what he presented outwardly, he did actually think of Potter as a friend. A part of him quailed at the admission. On the other hand, Potter had proven he was as wily and clever—as Slytherin—as he himself was, and had proven to be an excellent companion. And of course, Potter had ably demonstrated that he was never going to be able to best him, and that was before he had been let in on the big secret.
A crawling sensation went unpleasantly up his spine. It had been one thing to be informed that Potter was the Master of Death, but to have Death literally drop by for a visit? The rules were clear: do not play Potter false, lest you die. He expected such a death would neither be quick nor in any way merciful. Even so, he had been well on his way to genuinely appreciating the young man before that point, and with the spectre of death—that stultifying fear of dying—removed he was able to relax further. Potter was ridiculously not-Slytherin at times, but it had become part of his charm.

So he asked something else instead. “Why did you comment on my ability to be rational during that first real meeting?”

Potter looked up from his almost obscene enjoyment of bacon and blinked at the sudden and unexpected query. “Er . . .”

He waited patiently for his partner’s brains to catch up and was eventually rewarded when Potter’s gaze cleared and sharpened. He seemed to deliberately prolong the wait by consuming another rasher, then looked at him directly, his green eyes shining so like the killing curse. “Before,” he said slowly, “you seemed to be fairly rational at our first meeting. Not much change there from this time. The second time it was your diary and, well, your sixteen year old self was—” He paused, his upper lip twitching. “Arrogant. But still rational.

“You even seemed to be all right at the rebirth ceremony, though you did meet common expectations by going off on a monologue, which, now that I think about it, was disappointingly cliché. It wasn’t until later that it seemed as though you were losing it. Yes, your plans were still managing a fair amount of success, but the arrogance was back, the hubris, and at least one thing . . . was pretty damn slipshod on your part. Maybe two, considering that if I had been thinking a bit more I could have used one of your tactics against you to devastating effect.”

He felt almost hypnotized by those haunting eyes.

“I believe that one particular point contributed a lot toward me winning, that and my damnable luck. You didn’t think. You hadn’t researched it properly. You didn’t confirm. It was like you were so caught up that care and detail and attention just no longer mattered. It was the same mistake you made by going to Godric’s Hollow. So when I met you this time, down there in the mirror chamber, I was trying not only to ruffle your feathers but make you step back and think. I continued to taunt and provoke you, to make you react, yes, and to think. To try to get you to acknowledge. . . . I don’t know. Definitely to try to keep you off balance. And then of course, I blatantly questioned your ability to be rational. You did what I expected at that point, though there was always the chance that you’d disappoint me. I’d like to think by then you felt challenged and possibly even amused at times. I wondered if the ceremony was half the problem. Peter being involved and contributing, that sniveling coward. Using only a fraction of my blood. Not having access to the stone. But we used all of Moody’s blood, we used the stone, and Barty is devoted to you, not because he fears you, but in spite of it. I wanted you to be . . . whole, even though you can’t exactly be and I remain the keeper of your soul.”

He sat back, feeling oddly tired. Though Potter had slid by an explanation of that “particular point” he had made it clear that his counterpart had not learned from his mistakes. But then he felt suddenly better. Potter had come back to try something different, with him, not against him. To show him a different path he could choose to take, though it was more like being seduced, in truth. Had showed him he had faith. And, while Potter seemed disinterested in killing purely for the sake of killing, he did not abhor the act and neither did he expect Voldemort to. A different path, not an opposite one. He felt, for what might be the first time in his life, mostly uncritical approval from another, and by another who clearly did not need him, yet wanted him.
Yes, he had a friend.

He also suspected that Potter had no real idea how becoming the Master of Death had changed him.

Potter blinked lazily and his eyes went back to being almost normal. And then he asked, “So when we do get around to dealing with your merry band of whackjobs, how do you want to handle things?”

“We.

“I can think of several things,” he replied. “The first is likely untenable given the fact that we lack a meeting place and calling in all of them at once would not gain us quite the result I think we’re after. So. One at a time with you in clear view, which I also think is unwise, simply because anyone who is ill-suited would perhaps need to be obliviated and that would be a waste of energy. One at a time with you invisible, to obviate that aspect.”

Potter piled some scrambled eggs onto a piece of toast and folded it in half. After taking a bite, chewing thoughtfully, and swallowing he said, “Because I have delightfully unique and valuable abilities, and cannot be discerned, detected, or barricaded from. Like what I did with Barty.”

He nodded. “Criteria being who might suit to emigrate, or those who must be cut loose.”

Potter arched a brow at him with maddening slowness. “Cut loose, or killed, depending.”

“Correct.”

His partner grinned wickedly. “I wonder how the guards at Azkaban would react if they suddenly noticed a bunch of new prisoners they had never processed nor had paperwork for.” And then he switched gears entirely and said, “Say, I’ve realized something. I don’t think I’ve ever said it so, please call me Harry. Well, unless I’m Yuki.” He shrugged and had another bite of his egg and toast.

“Oh, wow,” he breathed as he looked around in awe. “It’s perfect. So exact.”

“What did you expect, Harry?” Voldemort asked dryly.

He made a face at him and turned back to the vault. They had written it. He threw his head back and laughed in delight. “Damn,” he whispered. “It’s a wonder the D’ni didn’t implode as a species with this kind of power. I had thought at one time to maybe restart their guilds, but . . . I don’t want this power getting around, even under vows,” he said, shaking his head. “They used it frivolously. I don’t want us to do that. Not this. This is playing God.”

“Do you even believe in God?” Voldemort asked, genuine curiosity staining his tone.

“I—I don’t have any idea,” he admitted. “I suppose Death would tell me if I asked, but I can’t say I suddenly feel any inclination to do so.”

“Mm. In any case, I agree with you. This should stay between us. Learning the common form of the language is one thing, but this power is to be venerated. No pleasure garden Ages, only what we need to become our own world, with that small security in case something unexpected comes up.”

Harry turned back from his inspection. “Make the linking book for here outside, for an extra layer of security?”
Voldemort nodded.

“I can store the descriptive book in my trunk.” He looked at the doors to the structure they had written and nodded. “Okay.” The blank book came out and they linked it to a spot about ten feet from the doors. He tapped a Post-it Note onto it with a title and put it away, then moved forward. “Let’s ward this puppy.”

Shortly thereafter they were inside the vault and Harry was placing the linking book back to the palace onto one of those ubiquitous pedestals. It made more sense to them to have it inside the ward scheme. “I’ll move my vault trunks in here later. How much do you plan to move here? All of it, or... ?”

“I think I should leave at least one account open,” Voldemort said. “The goblins are already going to be difficult. It’ll just get worse once they realize they’ve lost a fair amount from their keeping. Leaving one open means I have a place on that world to work from. Let us return and start on the nexus.”

So they did. Harry once again set about transcribing from the draft to a virgin book. He had no idea what Voldemort was up to, nor Barty for that matter, while he worked, occasionally sitting back so he could shake out his writing hand. They met up again for lunch, the food brought in and prepared by his elves. Voldemort had a long piece of parchment with him, in all opposition to generally accepted dining etiquette, and was muttering under his breath as he went through the words thereon, one hand holding food, one a quill. Barty was feeling sociable, though, so Harry engaged him in D’ni conversation to get an idea of just how well the man was doing.

After he returned to his work, it being more involved simply because of the oddity of the starting conditions. He just knew the book for their new world was going to take several days, at the least. By mid-afternoon he was done and Derek had confirmed it, so he shoved the book in his pocket, grabbed the linking books, one to their room in the palace and several unused, and tracked down Voldemort. “We’re good on this one,” he said, eyeing that list with mild curiosity. “So whenever you’re ready. I’m going to be in the library until then.”

Voldemort looked up blankly, then shook his head. “Now is fine. I’m just going over my accounts so it isn’t as though it’s an immediate concern.” The quill went into a holder on the desk, the parchment was rolled up and shoved into a drawer, and his partner got up to join him.

The nexus Age had turned out oddly thanks to Derek’s input. They arrived on a vast plain punctuated by a forest of massive octagonal columns with vertically scored sides. Harry produced a pedestal and laid the linking book on it and Voldemort stepped up to ward their way home. Then they turned to look at the closest column. Forty feet up was a series of openings just large enough for a grown man to get through.

Every column had those openings; all but seven of those columns had ones which simply existed as indents of a sort. The special columns, from fifty feet down, were mostly hollow. Derek had provided Harry with the phrasing necessary to create the structure of a nexus room in the architectural style of the D’ni, though not in the actual style of one of their nexuses. They shared a look before walking over to the nearest one, Harry pausing to stick a note to the side, and flying up. A careful bit of maneuvering got them inside and they were shortly spiraling down around the interior, avoiding the partial ‘roof’ about thirty feet down.

The openings would ensure an air supply and the high ceiling would help keep the interior cool. From the ground looking up one could see magnificent vaulted arches, left open to the space above it. It would be filled with something akin to the ceiling of the Great Hall of Hogwarts, creating a view to mimic a virgin sky, with a second layer of illusion above that to present a second vaulted,
closed ceiling. Above that would be warding to prevent the curious from getting too curious. Later on the openings would also be warded against egress.

If it came to it, later on down the road, the goblins could be allowed exit from their nexus in order to convert some of the solid columns into additional nexuses, but for now they thought seven would be far more than they would need for the foreseeable future. And, for the time being, the many, many alcoves around the perimeter of the structure would remain empty and unlabeled.

Harry produced two pedestals and set them at the center of the room. One would hold the book linking to Gringotts and one to the world Age. He paused. “We still haven’t given our incipient world a name, have we.”

“I have been thinking about that myself, but I confess, nothing has yet stood out as a likely name.”

“Well, there’s always the cliché of using Avalon or Atlantis. Ophiuchus. Logos.”

“You had to know saying Ophiuchus would attract my attention.”

Harry grinned at his partner. “No, really? With a main city of Serpens? If we won’t have the same constellations we could still take them with us in the form of names.”

Voldemort favored him with one of ‘those’ looks and nodded. “I am fine with Ophiuchus and Serpens. As this is a Slytherin venture it makes sense.” He looked around, his eyes glowing a sullen red. “We’re going to need to gather supplies. Please pass on my thanks to Death for providing the requisite phrases. The sheer number of linking books we’re going to need. . . .” He trailed off, shaking his head.

Harry smiled, feeling rather pleased. Not so much that Derek had, in fact, provided or pointed them to exactly what they would need to create more books from base materials, plus the necessary ink, but that Tom had thought to thank that provider. He supposed that Voldemort might never get over his deep-seated fear of death, but this was progress. He glanced up. ‘You got that, Derek?’

‘Yes. And I agree, this is progress.’

He nodded and took a deep breath, then exhaled. Voldemort was right; they were going to need a whole lot of books. “Well, all right. I can shift us back in here next—ooh.”

“What is it?”

Harry adopted an innocent expression. “Well, I was going to say we’d have to come back to place a linking book to Gringotts after we started negotiations, but I could just cheat. That would add another layer to things when they linked back and realized I had been in their very private sanctum and they had no clue.”

A slow smile stretched Voldemort’s mouth and his gaze went half-lidded. “I like it. Yes. It will not hit them until they arrive home, but will reinforce our power, the idea that we can get to them anywhere. That should help them to remember their manners. Very nice play, Harry.”

He grinned, a bit loopily. “I’ll have to sneak in anyway, see what an office would look like, that we’d meet them in. I need to know what I’ve got to work with for a completely unexpected and tragic death.” Then he switched gears and swept his gaze around the room. “It’s light enough now, but it’s day. Suppose we could put in a bunch of fire-marble lanterns, one per alcove and a set hanging over the center.”

A week later saw the book for Ophiuchus written (with changes to include the conditions under
which fire-marbles were created) and Harry had started on the last Age, the one to provide them with the materials for writing books. As for the fire-marbles, why bother enchanting something to do a job when they already had something that would work? It was clean light and gave off no emissions or pollution, and all they had to do was mine them; the goblins would be fine doing that, he supposed, and they would already be happily mining away for the bounty of metals and gems cradled in the shell of the world.

The only structure included in Ophiuchus was a replica of K’veer, that manor house Harry so admired on one of the cavern islands. That allowed them, on arrival, the opportunity to set up a room in the manor much like the one in the palace. Their private linking books would go there, in a room protected by the fidelius. Voldemort would hold that secret for them. As it was, their arrival brought them to a wide open space right before the manor. The sky was a brilliant blue, decorated by scatterings of puffy white clouds. If Harry didn’t know better he would swear he was on Earth.

He exchanged a look with Voldemort and headed in. Shortly thereafter their chosen room was under the fidelius and Harry was in on the secret (though he suspected no secret could bar his entry given his status). Pedestals and linking books were set up around the perimeter, each with an incised stone nameplate affixed to the wall above. The vault, the nexus exterior, the palace, and so forth.

Back outside they set a linking book for normal arrivals, set up a pedestal for a link to an unwarded part of the palace, and detoured back to Ae’gura to fetch Barty and the elves, explaining how the process worked. All of them returned to Ophiuchus at that point. The elves were given instruction on obtaining furniture and other supplies and shooed off to get on with it. Harry, Voldemort, and Barty, however, set about the start of marking off where various government buildings were to go, including a school and its associated environs. They had to at least have something to show the goblins once they had them here.

Harry would also have to set up linking books to the quarry sites for marble and granite. Sure, they could do it the hard way, but why bother? And why bother to set up a nexus if not to use it? If they fell in with the plans, then another book to link to the Australia-like landmass the goblins could settle as their own.

They got a fair amount of work done that day and gratefully enough retired back to Ae’gura for the evening. Over the next week they marked out areas for construction (and Harry set up more linking books) to prepare for their negotiations with the goblins. Harry and Voldemort also went to the extra Age, simply enough named Materia, to gather up what they needed to construct more blanks.

The Daily Prophet continued to report on the mysterious disappearance of Harry Potter, affording him his daily morning amusement. He also took a day off to skulk around Gringotts, checking out various offices and the far more private areas within the goblins’ domain. A linking book was set to a spot in a cavern far underground, in one of the common areas of their ‘city’. Goblins from other locales would be dealt with later; it was the British goblins they would be dealing with at the start. Nearly every office had at least one ceremonial weapon on the walls, often more. That was good. He could write up a death and just leave a few spots blank, such as the name and the weapon. He snickered; mad-libs had come to mind.

In the meantime, his elves had been busy transporting goods between realms and had nearly finished outfitting the new K’veer. In earlier times the original had, at one point, been used by the Guild of Illusionists and it was more of a bizarre fortification than a manor house of any kind, but he simply preferred thinking of it as one. As such it rose high above ground level and had views in every direction. The style changed from section to section, but some of them were breathtaking. There were times he was sure humanity was a plague, but then he would see something like the grand windows of K’veer, or the view toward Kerath’s Arch. . . . Such beauty was heart-stopping and
awe-inspiring.

He and Voldemort now had private suites, their protected personal linking room, reception rooms, several meeting rooms, and so forth. The elves had set aside an area for their own use, and for others who would follow, and the kitchens were protected against any being except elves, Harry, Voldemort, and Barty. The building had been warded rather in the way they would have a base of operations on Earth, so the general public would be gently pushed away, but those bearing Voldemort’s Dark Mark could gain entrance without too much trouble.

Harry ran through his mental list of tasks and nodded.

Potter was dressed to impress and wearing his natural form, though his eyes were deliberately that glowing killing curse green. He also had his hood up and secured with magic so that it would stay in place until the right time. They apparated to Diagon Alley and swept up the steps on into Gringotts, and started things off by visiting all but one of Voldemort’s many vaults. Contents were guided into extended trunks and shifted to their palace linking room while their goblin guide waited cluelessly outside each time.

Voldemort would close them down later, after they already had a treaty in place. The remaining vault had a fair amount of money in it, but it was there more to handle things such as bank drafts. Once the wholesale divestment of funds and goods was complete they returned to the surface. To their guide he said, “Who amongst the Host has the authority to negotiate at a high level?”

The goblin eyed him suspiciously. “Goldbrik,” he finally responded.

Voldemort waited a moment, listening to Harry comment in his mind, then sneered. “I believe you meant to say Narok. And as you cannot be trusted to do something so simple as speak the truth we will go through someone else.” He swept off with Harry in tow, straight to the exact goblin they needed as a go-between. He knew very well that the goblins could verify a person’s identity without appearing to do so, so it was not a shock that they were shortly being escorted toward Narok’s office. Having the Dark Lord and the Light’s Pawn visiting as a pair was enough to make anyone aware of their identities curious.

He also assumed that Potter could fake his ‘magical’ identity any time he pleased, but had left it alone for this so as to sow confusion. During the walk he noticed that his partner was writing something in his book, which was surprising as he had not expected to be able to even see it.

‘That goblin, Bordash, is going to have an accident on the carts today,’ Potter remarked casually. ‘Tragic. So unnecessary. They really ought to set a refresher course on safety.’

His mouth twitched from holding back a smile. Their escort stopped before one of the doors and knocked. After a moment he opened the door and gestured him and Potter in, then shut the door after them. Inside was Narok, seated behind a decadently-ornate desk; and with him, a good half dozen other goblins. ‘Well,’ he sent. ‘Six extra goblins just for us.’

‘Do they not realize this comes across as them being hilariously frightened of us?’ Potter replied, confusion in his tone.

“What can I do for you, gentlemen?” Narok asked evenly.

After a brief pause Potter casually conjured up two chairs—as there were none in evidence for them, and against policy for wand use in the bank—and a little table to go between them, then took a seat,
allowing his hood to drift back to expose his face. The glow in his eyes increased until it looked as though he was holding a killing curse in reserve. Voldemort took the other chair, then looked expectantly at Narok, ignoring the other goblins for the time being.

There was quiet for some minutes before Narok finally capitulated in the silent war and turned to order one of his underlings to bring in refreshments. Only after he had a cup of tea (untainted, naturally—Potter had checked) and had availed himself of a sip did he speak. “Narok. We have a proposition for you and the Host, one which would see you, should negotiations complete successfully, in possession of a virgin island roughly the size of Australia for your clans.”

Narok was good; he did not so much as twitch at that outrageous statement. One of his underlings, however, scoffed rudely.

Potter had a sip of tea and set his cup down, reaching into his pocket to remove that black book again, along with a fountain pen. Then he looked up, glowing eyes focused on Narok.

Voldemort waited patiently again, his face locked into a cold expression, taking occasional sips of his tea. ‘I wonder how many rounds this will take before Narok finally admits to himself that he’s just prolonging the agony.’

‘The agony of silence, the agony of our company, or the agony of unsatisfied curiosity?’ Potter replied.

‘While occasionally frustrating, your company could never be described as agonizing.’

‘Oh, Tom, you’re so sweet,’ Potter teased. ‘All this flattery is turning my head.’ After another sip of tea he asked, ‘So who do you think we should approach first amongst your lot?’

‘I was thinking Lucius Malfoy, actually.’

‘Oh, my. I must wonder if he’s checked on that diary yet. He’s got to be shitting bricks over it having gone missing.’

‘Shitting br—Harry, really.’

‘What? It’s just an expression. Would you prefer “having kittens” instead? The meaning is the same in the end. But I don’t like to say “having kittens” because it gives me flashbacks to Umbridge.’

“I find it difficult to believe,” Narok finally said, “that there is a land mass that large and yet unknown.”

Voldemort quirked a brow. “On this planet, anyway.”

For a split second Narok looked confused. Off to the side that same goblin shifted restlessly, his face twisting into a scowl. ‘I cannot decide if that fellow is badly trained or acting that way on purpose.’

‘Eh, badly trained,’ Potter promptly replied. ‘Hasn’t had enough training, actually, but they were in a bit of a hurry and scrambling to assemble a group for this.’

In a surprisingly short amount of time Narok stated, “You would have me believe you have access to a different planet.”

“Not access. Ownership,” he said firmly. “We successfully broker a deal and you get your own continent on a virgin world.” ‘Which one is this, anyway?’
‘Ragnok’s eldest, which explains the authority level. He thinks you’re crackers, by the way, but he sort of already did.’

The twitchy goblin burst out in a torrent of Gobbledygook, the meaning of which Potter echoed to him even as he made a few notations in his book in a very casual and indifferent manner. A heartbeat later the goblin in question, Bokdon, gestured so vehemently that he lost his balance and stumbled back against the wall, which caused tremors to travel upward and disturb a ceremonial axe on display. The axe hitched, then became loosened enough to fall straight down and guillotine Bokdon.

As the goblin’s head rolled away from the body Potter looked up and said innocently, “I wasn’t aware goblin meetings included a floor show. Will there be an encore performance?” Then he focused on his book again and began writing.

Voldemort made the assumption that his partner was ready to accidentally-on-purpose kill another goblin if they proved to be slow learners. Narok’s expression went flat as he gestured to one of his underlings to clean up the mess. Voldemort sipped more tea, looking entirely unimpressed.

Narok had obviously been rattled at the coincidence because he asked, “I must assume you have proof of this claim.”

‘Nice double meaning there,’ Potter commented, still writing away.

“Naturally,” he said dryly. “I must assume you are wise enough to understand that I have better uses for my time than coming here to enact your humiliation.”

“The reputation of your companion’s sire might allude to otherwise, though I admit the reason would escape me.”

Potter looked up again, seemingly shocked and a bit insulted. “You must think very highly indeed of yourself to believe I might possibly waste my valuable time here taking the piss. I get that you’re suspicious and all, trying to see where the knife in the back is coming from, but really, you just had to go there and accuse me of being involved in some kind of convoluted prank at your expense? On the basis of my father having been an insufferable asshole? . . . Or is that you actually desperately want to believe we’re being straight with you and have no Earthly idea how to move forward? Because really, an entire continent for yourselves? No humans or veela or vampires or whatever sharing the land with you? Tempting. Very tempting.”

Silence descended again to his complete lack of surprise. Potter jotted a few more things down in his book between sips of tea. Then he muttered, with proper projection, “I wonder if there really are gnomes in Switzerland.”

Narok looked affronted.

“Maybe they’d be more amenable,” Potter continued, still muttering, still writing, “though they don’t have the same reputation as builders. A shame, really.” ‘I know, a very transparent play,’ he admitted.

‘Rather. But you have riled him up nonetheless.’

“What is your proof?” Narok asked grittily.

“I’m thinking a photograph won’t do,” Voldemort said dryly. “Proof consists of a little trip, both to show you the world, and to explain just exactly what it is we would require in return for the island.”

“Actually,” Potter piped up, as planned if it had gone this way, “I’m sure our friend here might enjoy
seeing a memory, and anyone competent can discern falsified ones.”

“An interesting suggestion,” he replied. ‘I take it you’ve been looking and are responding to his thought processes.’

‘Naturally.’
Chapter 15

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“I took a day job amendment, I took a liking to you, I took a page out of my rulebook for you.” — Scritti Politti, Perfect Way

Narok gestured at an underling, who hastened off and was back with a pensieve before Potter had a chance to finish opening a packet of biscuits he had pulled from one of his pockets. After the pensieve was in place, Voldemort produced his wand and looped a memory away from his temple, and gently placed it in the device.

Narok took a fairly well-concealed deep breath and activated the pensieve. The projected memory showed them using a linking book, appearing at the nexus, using another book, Potter first each time, and appearing just in front of the manor in Serpens. They walked away from the house rather than going in, mainly to show the work they had already done in terms of planning. Eventually they returned to the house and went inside, heading to the highest level. At that point the memory ended and he reclaimed it.

“While they may bear some superficial resemblance to portkeys, those books are nothing of the sort,” Narok stated.

He quirked a brow. “They are not.”

“What was that place?”

“The infant form of the city of Serpens.”

“How?” Narok breathed.

He quirked a brow again. “Why not? Can you honestly tell me you like living on this planet, surrounded by billions of muggles? With no true home of your own?”

‘At least he’s smart enough not to ask how,’ Potter commented, then popped a biscuit into his mouth. ‘Want one?’

‘What kind?’

‘Chocolate chip, of course.’

‘Sure.’

Potter handed a biscuit over and had another for himself, eventually offering the open packet in case he wanted another. Even without Potter’s abilities he could tell they were confusing the hell out of Narok with their suddenly homey, entirely silent behavior. He took another, dunked it in his cooling tea, then had a bite, wondering where Potter had gotten them; they were quite good. So he asked.

‘These? Oh, I make them myself. The ones the elves make never come out right.’

“Why was there an interim step?”

Voldemort replied, “There is a limitation in the method. While in the case of the memory it was not strictly necessary, it would be moving from one point to another on the same world.”
Narok looked mildly confused again. “Why not just apparate?”

“Children cannot.”

“Floo?”

“Dirty, nauseating, possible to arrive at the wrong grate.”

“Are you proposing to do away with those two methods of transport?”

He shook his head slightly. “Hardly. If adults prefer to apparate, assuming they are capable of mastering the skill, so be it. The floo is still useful for communication purposes. As for the books, they would allow the Host to transport quantities of materials without having to rely on ground transport or other, potentially less stable methods. Any materials brought from Earth would require the use of the books.”

Narok nodded thoughtfully, his eyes shifting to look at the surface of his desk, which had an angled rest on it, much like a podium would for holding notes or a book in the right position to read from.

‘It’s a communication device, runic in nature,’ Potter supplied. ‘He’s getting instructions from Ragnok.’

Voldemort finished his biscuit and accepted a third, finally noticing that the muscles in Narok’s arms would twitch minutely, almost entirely hidden by the set of his clothing, and made the assumption that he was replying in some fashion.

Eventually Narok looked up and said, “About this trip?”

“The purpose of the trip is to one, give you an idea of the architectural style we desire, and two, show you the actual site where construction would begin. Then, after you have had a chance to contemplate things”—‘and speak with your superior,’ he thought—“we would return and begin negotiations regarding the magnitude of construction we require in exchange for the island. Also, so you could, in theory, choose a location to build a new Gringotts. We would also have to negotiate a treaty for the operation of said bank. Unlike the fools at the ministry, we believe that the Host are imminently suited to continue with administering the banking system.”

Shortly thereafter they were ready to take Narok and his underlings on a trip. Due to the logistics Potter would go last so he could, in fact, simply take the book and shift to their room at the palace. After that was dropped off he would link to Nexus and shift inside the goblin column to join them.

Narok looked mildly suspicious at that, but Voldemort simply said, “Surely you do not wish to convey the impression that you are such a fool as to believe we would leave a book behind?” He went first, knowing that Potter would be in no danger, and was shortly joined by the six goblins at the nexus. As soon as his partner shifted in he said, “This is the nexus designated for the Host. This way, should you use the books to shift materials, either in-world or from Earth, such as for construction, you will never have to deal with other races using the same facility and having to dodge around them. Note that there are many alcoves here set to receive books. Assuming we come to an agreement books will be provided which will link you to each site. The architecture of this structure is one example of what we wished to show you. Feel free to look around for a few minutes before we move on.”

When it was time he indicated the first of the books they were to use, then linked through to the top of the grand stair in Ae’gura. When they were all assembled he said, “This is Ae’gura, a city deep underground. More importantly, this will give you a very good idea in terms of examples. We can
pause here for an hour or so if you would like, or we can move on to Ophiuchus so you can investigate Serpens and begin your calculations.”

‘Wow, these guys are like . . . aroused or something. It’s really creepy,’ Potter commented.

He had to rigidly clamp down on his reaction to that, and the images that unfortunately came to mind. The goblins elected to stay so they could look around, or, as Potter commented further, ‘to burn the images into memory so they can have wank dreams about the place later’. It was all he could do not to burst out laughing or glare, he wasn’t sure which.

He called a house-elf to him and instructed it to keep an eye on any wanderers, recruiting others if necessary, so they knew where everyone was (without revealing the map) when it was time to move on. He and Potter had lunch right there with the view of the lake’s orange glow and Kerath’s Arch to appease their eyes.

Finally—they were ready to go. Potter produced a linking book back to the goblin nexus, and they all returned there. He then indicated the next book and linked through, shortly followed by the goblins. They arrived in that same initial point, in front of K’veer, and as Potter joined them he swept his hand and arm out to the side to indicate the markings they had worked so hard on.

Narok’s head swiveled to followed the gesture, nodded to himself, and said, “My faith is confirmed. This world is virgin. The air is so clear and clean it is patently obvious it has never suffered the weight of generations of humans. The earth resonates in a way which tells me it has never felt the rapacious hand of a miner. We shall investigate.” But before he walked away he looked back at him and added, “I believe we will be able to come to an agreement that suits us all equally.”

‘Okay, I didn’t actually realize they had that kind of relationship with the rock and soil, but whatever, it helps our case,’ Potter remarked gleefully.

‘Indeed. Now that we have them here I expect they will seduce themselves into an agreement. They will, I imagine, quickly enough think a bit more about that mining reference, as well.’

‘Yeah. Well, shall we amuse ourselves while we wait? Maybe get an elf to bring out a table and chairs for us and we could go over the minions. You said Lucius first, but we may as well work on the list. I don’t know about you, but I’m thinking that Crabbe and Goyle are too damn stupid to be of much use aside from muscle. Can’t say I know them very well, though.’

‘Macnair, Pettigrew, and Rowle are useless. Two are psychotically sadistic and, well, Peter is spineless and only really served because he was too scared not to. That and I was more dangerous than his so-called friends. Dolohov, Mulciber, Nott, and Rosier are likely passable.’

Potter’s brow furrowed slightly. ‘Those are from the original set, yes?’

He nodded. ‘The remainder will also likely pass in terms of loyalty and intelligence—eh, not Crabbe and Goyle—but may or may not present issues on the muggle-born and half-blood side of things.’

‘It’s a shame Rookwood was caught. Having someone in the Department of Mysteries still would be nice, but I don’t know how much any of them know about one another in terms of political views so maybe it wouldn’t matter anyway.’

‘You mean as a vector for recruitment,’ he stated.

Potter nodded. ‘You know, there’s a part of me that says track down Pettigrew, turn him over to the authorities with a compulsed note, his Dark Mark clearly showing, and see if the ministry does the right thing and releases Black because he’s exonerated. A part of me, in addition to a kind of swan
song to our former “relationship”, would hope that Black would completely crack up at that point because I’ve gone missing. It might also have the effect of Lupin coming out of the woodwork and feeling like shit for having suspected Black—even though Potter and Black were eyeing Lupin suspiciously for being a were—and falling apart again. Actually, I can’t believe it only just now came to mind. If Potter is still in the country and takes the paper—oh . . . I see. I understand now.’

Voldemort watched as his partner conjured up a set of targets and some knives, and began practicing his aim. Rather than press for information he conjured a chair and sat down, then began to try to puzzle this behavior out. Pot—no, Harry. Harry had brought up Potter and had an epiphany. Potter would not have come forward to secure Black’s release because then everyone would know of their duplicity. Dumbledore had done nothing, which meant he was in the dark on the actual secret keeper, or had decided it was more to his advantage to keep Black away from Harry, or that he knew of Harry’s sexuality and how Potter and Black had reacted and decided that Black could not be trusted to raise the boy savior.

Black had obviously not pressed the issue of custody, and indeed, had spent two days tracking down Peter only to be framed for multiple murders and tossed into Azkaban. And of course, the only reason Harry inherited the Black estate was because the dementors had shredded parts of Black’s memories. Even if Potter was keeping an eye on the news it was unlikely he would come out of hiding, not because his eldest son went missing, not even to help his alleged best friend and “brother”. If Black was released Potter would still remain in hiding; as a Gryffindor his choice must have covered him in shame, and the longer he stayed hidden the higher the magnitude of his duplicity. Potter, the brave Gryffindor who had thrice defied the Dark Lord, was a coward, and would leave Black and Lupin to twist in the wind.

It was utterly beside the point that this James Potter was not Harry’s father, but rather the father of the boy Harry replaced. He was still of the same basic character, even if this one had done far worse things. He supposed he could understand why Harry was flinging those knives with deadly accuracy, and that his friend was most likely imagining his sire’s face pierced by those blades.

His fucking father was a piece of shit who did not deserve to live! He hefted another knife in his hand, drew back, and threw, feeling a sense of malicious glee as it embedded itself dead center. It made him wonder if you could cleave a person’s skull in twain with a mere knife, supernatural connections to Death aside. There had to be some manner of death he could conceive of that suited such a self-important, cruel, entitled, cowardly bigot. And then it hit him, just as the knife he threw split the previous one.

But that could wait a bit. Yes, he would see about arranging for Peter to be captured and interrogated, to see about Sirius being exonerated and released. To see if James would do as expected. He was also curious about the potential reunion of Sirius and Remus. It pissed him off all over again that Sirius had not bothered to break out on his behalf, even after the dementors had altered his memories, and that Remus had not bothered to contact him in any way, even through three and a half years of Harry being visible in the “wizarding world”.

He would have to be clued in to where James was, but not just yet. He would have to consider his mother and siblings, and whether or not he should induce James to alter his current will to shift the balance of power far more to his mother’s side over that of his twin. He would even have to consider whether or not he could convince his mother to emigrate with his sisters. His twin was likely a clone of James—though he would check—and as such utterly unsuited for this new world.

He also wondered how Dumbledore would react, or if the man even cared, either about James or
Sirius.

Fucking bastards, the lot of them.

A thought hit him so hard he gasped, attracting a sharp-eyed look from Voldemort. “Oh, shit,” he breathed.

“What is it?”

He pressed the back of his hand to his mouth, knife slanting up across his face, and stared at Voldemort wide-eyed. ‘I have a twin. What if he’s identical?’

Voldemort paused for a moment, then blinked in consternation, obviously getting his meaning. ‘Oh. Oh, that would be a bold move.’

‘Luna would never be taken in, but with the right story most people would.’

‘Still, you already absconded with all the money, so if that was any part of a motive to make a switch it would be wasted.’

‘True, but a part of me is thinking James wouldn’t at all mind the idea of getting that trust back, plus the money all those nice people left me in their wills because I’m the Boy-Who-Lived. And the money mum left me. Because hey, guess what? Dumbledore would be my magical guardian and have the right to dip his sticky fingers in, so the goblins wouldn’t necessary get a chance to verify “my” identity. Never mind that the goblins already know I’m not as missing as people believe.’ He turned, flipped the knife in his hand, and threw; it thunked into the target loudly.

‘Have you decided?’

He turned back slowly as he figured that one out, then nodded. ‘Yes. Just not when. I am curious to see if my twin pops up first. I am also wondering if, after we get these goblins properly signed up and under treaty, I should mention this possibility to them, or at least that I emptied my trust vault. It’s not technically their business, but a warning might be fair.’

‘Warn them now. It goes toward extending trust and alerting them to the possibility of someone trying to trick them.’

Harry took a deep breath and exhaled.

When the goblins were done puttering around and making calculations he produced a linking book for them to use. They had no need to route through Nexus so he placed the one to return them to their inner sanctum on a pedestal. “We will be contacting you in a week’s time, after you have had a chance to think over this exchange, and to consider terms for a banking treaty. But before you go there is something I feel the need to mention, on the off chance that you at Gringotts UK are affected. It has come to my attention that my mother and father are not, in fact, dead, and that I have a twin brother, though I am not presently aware if this twin is identical. The reason I bring it up—”

He paused, seeing that at least Narok was starting to nod thoughtfully. “I bring it up because it occurred to me that my shameful coward of a father may choose to try to send in my brother to access my account. Or it might be Dumbledore behind it. Either way, I wished to point out that I have already very quietly emptied my trust vault, so there is no gold there for them to plunder. And while I have no doubt you have your ways to verify a person’s identity to prevent fraud, if Dumbledore should step in as de facto guardian of Harry Potter, the true identity of whoever is posing as myself may not come into question.”
“And back to the other matter, if you wish to contact us early, before the week is up, you can send post to the box I maintain at the Diagon Alley owl office: 21A. Do you have any questions before you depart?”

Narok shook his head, so Harry opened the book and gestured. “We will speak again soon enough.”

Surprisingly none of them showed any suspicion or reluctance to link through, even though Voldemort was not going first as usual. He could only imagine their reaction when they realized where they had ended up.

Apparently, his little “joke” on the goblins did not incline them to contact him and Voldemort early, which was fine. After a consultation with his elves Harry went to the ministry’s Office of House-elf Relocation to purchase what they had available. He was using an almost random face for the deal and coin from both his and Voldemort’s fortunes. Depending on how things went they would do the same at ministries around the globe, and all of them would be transferred to Ophiuchus.

He returned to Ae’gura, his newly purchased elves following him, and he set them a task of boxing up every section of D’ni books. When that was complete he linked them through to Serpens with instructions to take the boxes into the manor and await him. After he rejoined them they were bidden to bring the boxes along and stack them outside his and Voldemort’s personal linking room.

“Saen. Cael,” he called and was rewarded with his two original elves appearing. “I need you two to take charge of this lot. I want you to go ahead and start setting up the farms, warding first. Sort out how many elves are needed to help here at K’veer and how many can work the farms. Later on I’ll need some of you for the fencing, but Voldemort and I need to finish marking those estates out first. Any questions?”

“No, Master,” Cael said after a brief pause. “We will begin immediately.”

“Good. Thank you.”

As soon as they all left he began hefting the boxes into the linking room so they could be transferred to Vault. One area inside could be made into a repository. He absolutely did not want to chance anyone ever getting their hands on the sheer amount of descriptive and linking books the D’ni had abandoned. Heaven help them if some unscrupulous whackjob managed it, deciphered them, figured out too much. . . . Barty still had the primers and that was fine; he could duplicate those so that immigrants had copies to study from if they wished to learn D’ni. Everything else, though, was simply too dangerous.

He finished up in a reasonably short amount of time and linked through to № 12 Grimmauld Place, having expanded the number of linking books in the vault for their convenience. Parchment was pulled from a desk in the bedroom he had taken for his own and a fountain pen was taken from his pocket.

**Dear Luna,**

I saw that the second task was a little more exciting than most people would have expected. I wouldn’t doubt that most of them will never quite know what happened. Between the saen and the insaen there is a gulf of understanding.

I expect we will see each other again, you and I.
After staring at it for a while he nodded and folded the letter, placed it in an envelope, and addressed it. A quick notation in the upper left corner denoted his box number, and then he set off to post it from the place in Diagon Alley. He would have to let Saen know about the letter next he saw the little fellow, just in case.

Next he shifted invisibly to check in on Lucius, the first of those they would be interviewing. He wanted a look into the man’s mind to see how he might possibly react to what they would be asking of him. Once he was done he tracked down Voldemort to discuss his findings.

“I’m going to give a qualified yes on Lucius,” he said, sitting back in his chair. “I think if he were to be left entirely to his own devices he would eventually become frustrated enough to attempt a coup of his own, but given what we’re doing I think he’ll fall into line. Yes, he does rightly fear you, but he also honestly believes you are generally in the right. We give him a task he’s suited for and he ought to be fine. I also think he’d be a bit prideful that we approached him first, and gave him the first option on an estate there.”

Voldemort looked thoughtful at that.

“In addition, Narcissa has already produced two children and is working on a third. It seems having their only son go out in a blaze of stupidity has brought home certain truths to them.”

Voldemort smirked. “What, that raising Draco to be a strutting peacock with no sense of personal responsibility was not the best of ideas?”

Harry offered a matching smirk and nodded. “They blame each other, of course, but that just underlines the whole bit about personal responsibility. Maybe at some point they’ll figure out that whole ‘growing up’ bit themselves. In the meantime, they’ve every intention of being more strict with this lot.”

“Either way, it’s not as though we have to worry about the effects of Lucius pulling his son out of Hogwarts and sending him to live on Ophiuchus, which might make Dumbledore wonder what’s going on. It will be an issue with others.”

“Yes. We may have to set vows on the adults to keep the information from their children until it’s time for the exodus. Then we can all disappear and leave the Light to wonder. I finished moving the library from Ae’gura to Vault, so that’s safely away.”

“No word from the Host?”

He shook his head. “I expect they’re feeling very confused, though, suspicious to a degree, and possibly a bit frightened.”

“All to the better,” Voldemort replied, another smirk appearing. “Where is Lucius right now?”

“Malföy Manor. I take it you want to get things rolling?”

“Rather.”

Voldemort stood and offered his arm, so Harry took hold of his wrist and shifted them to the manor’s foyer, then vanished from sight just before a house-elf popped in to see who had managed to enter the house.

“Inform your master to receive me,” Voldemort said.
The elf—whom Harry knew to be Dobby—looked a bit frightened. Dobby nodded and popped away, and was back shortly to escort Voldemort to Lucius. The man was still in his study-cum-library, but had moved to a grouping of chairs and a loveseat, obviously knowing that staying at his desk would give entirely the wrong impression—such as provoking his lord and master with a posture of assumed power over him.

Harry stood behind the seat Voldemort chose after Lucius had risen in greeting, according Voldemort a bow of respect (and fear) before resuming his seat.

“Things have changed, Lucius,” Voldemort began, then stopped when Dobby reappeared with a tea tray.

Lucius offhandedly diverted his attention long enough from his master to berate the elf for taking so long and order him to punish himself.

Harry, however, literally saw red, as though a translucent film of blood had trickled down to taint his sight. The next thing he knew he was visible and leveling the cruciatus curse at the blond, even before Dobby had had the chance to pop away. “How dare you treat the elf that way, you disgusting little worm,” he all but hissed. “You should be grateful he serves you so well considering your base disregard.”

He heard a sigh, partially breaking his concentration and dulling his unexpected fury, and then, “Harry, really.” He released the curse and looked down, seeing Voldemort looking up at him from his seat. “While I certainly do not mind your actions, we have much to do here and it will become quite irritating to watch him twitch like that. You obviously didn’t think to temper that curse.”

His eyes narrowed as he stared at his partner. ‘Okay, I apologize—to you, that is, not him. I have a history with Dobby and just, ugh, flipped my shit when I saw—fuck.’ He noticed that Dobby had not actually left, against orders, and turned to the elf. “Will you please do me a favor?” he asked quietly.

“Sir?”

“Fetch a potion, please, for Lucius, to ease his pain. Then you may return to your duties.”

The elf hesitated, his large eyes widening, then nodded. “Dobby will.” He popped out.

Harry turned to Lucius and said, “If I ever catch you treating an elf like that again I will make you regret it, right after I force you to transfer ownership of every elf you own to me.” Shortly thereafter he had roughly shoved a potion at Lucius and taken a seat next to Voldemort on the sofa, two cups of tea had been poured and prepared, and he sipped his while waiting.

Voldemort closed his eyes briefly, probably an expression of mild frustration, and returned his focus to Lucius. “As I was saying, Lucius, before you just had to invite punishment for yourself, things have changed. After a great deal of considered thought I have come to the conclusion that trying to fix the British Ministry’s corruption is pointless and we shall simply start anew. To that end, I have a task for you.”

“Yes, my lord?” Lucius said quietly, almost warily.

“You will compile for me a list of all laws of this government. Once that is complete you will begin with the laws of other countries. We will see after that.”

‘He doesn’t get where you’re going with this, but that’s not so surprising,’ Harry commented.
‘Then I assume he thinks I mean to continue with efforts to tear down and rebuild the British
government.’

‘Yeah. Still not seeing any problems, either.’

“In addition to that task, there is something of even greater import,” Voldemort continued. “We are
moving.”

Lucius’s brows rose in an understated display of surprise and confusion.

Harry got up and went over to Lucius, then bent down so he could whisper the secret in the man’s
ear. After straightening he stepped back and waited.

Voldemort also rose and gestured to the blond, who quickly stood and moved to his master’s side.
Voldemort apparated them to № 12, while Harry shifted to get a linking book before joining them.
He laid the book on a side table and opened it to the linking image.

Voldemort gestured to it and said, “Touch the image, Lucius.”

The blond looked as though he would rather do anything but, yet complied, almost prissily, and
warped away; Voldemort followed moments later. Harry grabbed the book and shifted it back to its
home before using it as well.

Lucius was staring up at K’veer with a confounded look on his face, utterly shattering his usual cold
and haughty visage.

Harry bit back a snort and looked at Voldemort in amusement. ‘I just love seeing people like him
lose all grip on his mask.’

Barty came through the main doors and hastened down the steps to greet his lords, and, as an
afterthought, Lucius.

“How are you progressing, Barty?” Harry asked kindly.

“I think I’m doing all right,” Barty replied. “I’d like to spend more time conversing if that’s all right.
It really helps.”

“Sure, it’s not a problem,” he said, noticing that Voldemort had pulled Lucius a bit away to speak
with. “In a bit you can help with marking out estates, town homes, and so on. I want to get as much
done as possible before we speak with the goblins again. And, of course, you can choose where
you’d like to live.”

Barty blinked. “I admit, that never even crossed my mind.”

They were escorted back to Narok’s office, and Harry was pleased to see seating for them already present, a little table between the chairs, and a tea service waiting. It seemed the goblins had learned from their last encounter.

Voldemort opened the meeting with, “Greetings to you, Narok. Has the Host come to a decision?”

“We have,” Narok said gravely. “We are prepared to negotiate a banking treaty, as well as negotiate terms for the transfer of ownership of that island in return for building infrastructure.”

Voldemort let loose a chilly smile and nodded, then got down to business, Harry keeping a weather eye on Narok to ensure that the goblin was not playing them in any way false, and to give Tom hints. And while he sincerely doubted that there would be a repeat of the previous meeting he had written up the odd potential death scenario just in case, black book resting on his lap and a fountain pen held loosely.

Insofar as the bank was concerned the goblins would be responsible for administering it just as they presently did so for the one they were sitting in. The warding would be their responsibility, Voldemort and Harry having come to an agreement on that mainly because Harry could bypass anything the goblins came up with. In many ways the bank in Serpens would fundamentally be a copy of Gringotts UK, with certain improvements the goblins had come up with over the centuries but had not been in any position to implement.

Harry had written down the specifics of the exact size of the island, approximately 7.5 million km$^2$. Analogous to Australia, though not the same recognizable shape. The goblins were prepared to do a whole lot in return for a land of their own, and easily agreed to build the bank, the school, all government offices, and indeed, the other basics of Serpens. The estates they had been marking out would also be built, but they were of a secondary concern. Harry and Voldemort still had to get blueprints of certain manors to be duplicated.

Past that, however, would be a different deal entirely. Even so, the goblins understood that the quarries were not their property. The only unequivocal ownership they would have would be their continent and anything they choose to build or bring there. Even the bank would be jointly owned by the Host, Voldemort, and Harry.

‘They are playing this very, very cleanly,’ he sent to Voldemort. ‘Seems my little prank really shook them up, knowing that one of us can get to their sanctum undiscovered. That and they desperately want a land of their own.’

Narok chose that moment to bring up the subject of rule of law.

“With regard to your lands,” Voldemort said, “you shall decide for yourselves, for your race. If that means you make it illegal for any non-goblin to attempt access, so be it, even if that means death. Citizens of Ophiuchus will be made aware and must suffer the consequences of their own actions. Or stupidity, as the case may be. However, with regard to all other territory intended for the mingling of
all races, rule of law applies. Race is irrelevant with certain exceptions.”

“For instance,” Harry said, “a vampire who refused to use certified donors, blood banks, or animals for their needs, and instead went after the innocent and unwilling, would fall under an exception law. A veela who deliberately went about alluring the populace and causing mayhem would fall under an exception law. If that same veela was simply inexperienced in their powers and required training, that is something else entirely. Same for an immature vampire. In those cases they would be required to receive training, and their guardians might well come under censure for allowing it to happen in the first place.”

Narok nodded thoughtfully and pursed his lips briefly. “You realize that the centaurs would likely demand their own land.”

Harry snorted. “British ones, perhaps. Certain others, from countries where they have been ill treated. There are numerous places where centaurs aren’t treated much differently from any other race and intermingle freely.”

“So . . . the Host is getting a special deal because we can do for you what a race like the centaurs cannot?” Narok hazarded.

“Correct,” Voldemort said. “We are on a something of a schedule. The sooner we have the basics in place the sooner we can begin the exodus and shake the dirt of this planet off our feet. True, house-elves can, to an extent, do construction work, but they are hardly the equal of the Host, either in skill or speed or mining.”

“Which reminds me,” Harry interjected. “While mining you will very likely come across something we call fire-marbles, those glowing spheres you saw that we’ve been using for a light source. I don’t know offhand if there are any at the quarry sites, but if so, they need to be collected.”

Narok nodded again. “And we would have books to link through the nexus to bring us to and from the bank,” he said almost in a mutter. When Voldemort arched a brow he clarified, “The one in Serpens to our new lands. However, that does bring up the subject of our holdings here on Earth.”

“And that depends on what you intend to do in the long run,” Voldemort countered. “Do you plan, as a race, to join the exodus and leave all this behind? Or do you expect some of your number to remain here and administer the banks on Earth?”

“Well, at present there will be only one bank,” Narok pointed out. “But to balance that we will have an entire continent to occupy our attention. And that says nothing for precisely how many magicals you can convince to become a part of the exodus. Serpens is the initial city—the capitol, if you will. It would be foolish to assume others would not pop up over time, which means more bank branches could be opened for local populations. If we were to emigrate as a race it would leave the wizards in a financial crisis.”

Harry smiled. “So? Given the way these governments treat the Host? Why, I had this absurdly amusing idea earlier of, should you choose as a race to leave, pinching the ministry’s gold and then sitting back to watch them flail around in a panic and crash. You already employ wizards. Surely there are some of them smart enough to get the idea should you all vanish and leave behind some instructions as to how to go on.”

Narok shuddered at the mention of such theft, though there was just a hint of amusement at one corner of his mouth.

“That would be hilarious, actually,” Harry continued. “Transfer all the accounts of those leaving,
then pinch everything left and put it in the treasury for Ophiuchus. But back to the issue at hand. You could move everyone nonessential to the running of the bank. They could begin setting up your new home. You could even rotate duties so that everyone gets a chance to see Ophiuchus and you still have people here manning the bank with the wizards being none the wiser. If you, at some point, decide to abandon this place, we’ll talk about how to go about it then. Yes?”

“That sounds reasonable,” Narok said slowly.

The full negotiations took a fortnight, which meant Barty was left to hold the reins and ride herd on the house-elf contingent during that time. Lucius was busy gathering up the required information and compiling it, leaving neat piles at № 12 for them. Eventually the banking treaty was signed and the agreement, as well, and Harry and his partner were more or less free to get back to other business, the first of which saw Harry providing a linking book to Nexus for Gringotts UK.

Goblins from other countries would have to ferry through England, because Harry had no intention of having dozens of linking books floating around on Earth, even if they were in the protected depths of a goblin banking stronghold. He made them escort him to the location for their copy of the book so he could personally erect certain protective measures, then left them to it. If they messed it up they would be in a world of hurt; conditions for the book had been written into the agreement.

They were relaxing at № 12, eating an exquisitely prepared meal, when Voldemort asked about James again, and Peter.

“Well, I was thinking before we break out any Death Eaters you want to keep from Azkaban. If we get Peter sent there they might notice some are missing. After that point we could grab the ones you want, dump off Rowle and Macnair . . . .”

“I am a little surprised that we have heard nothing of any attempts at your trust,” Voldemort remarked. “Perhaps they are being cautious.”

“I intend to check in on them soon. I want to know exactly what kind of mindset they’re in, especially my mother.”

“Barty is doing a good job on the other side so we have leeway to get some other things looked into. Go and check on them,” Voldemort urged. “If they are planning something we will then be forewarned and can pass that warning on to the goblins. Just . . . keep a grip on your temper.”

He laughed helplessly at that.

“Yes, yes, I know. Hilarious coming from me,” Voldemort said a bit testily.

“I’m so glad we’re friends now,” he said sincerely. “I’ve never had a friend like you before, and it just feels so right.”

He was starting to have some very odd thoughts about and around Harry of late, so much so that he began delving into books to try to figure out what had changed since his “rebirth”. Though it had hardly mattered to him in the past he knew that someone somewhere had once done a study on the effects of children conceived under the effects of love potions.

When he did finally track down the reference he plowed into it almost eagerly, wanting to know just what he had been subjected to thanks to his mother’s actions. He learned that his emotions would have been stunted as a result, especially anything that had to do with friendship or love, either agápē
or eros. He would be far more inclined to suffer the darker emotions; even his enjoyment had been of
the dark variety. Others might feel schadenfreude when they witnessed a person getting what they
deserved, but he had always felt it when someone was suffering.

That is, until his rebirth.

Harry kept causing parts of him to come undone. He had already decided to categorize him as a
friend, but when Harry used the word it caused all sorts of peculiar sensations in his chest. He had
even noticed, the day of the second task when Harry was Yuki, that he was not immune to the lure
of those so-called “drop-dead gorgeous” looks, even if they were not Harry’s, and even more
recently, to Harry’s natural looks. This despite the fact that his partner was still wandering around in
a fourteen year old body.

“I’ve never had a friend like you before.”

Like what, he wondered. Someone Harry could actually trust? Though granted, some of that
probably was born of Death’s words. Someone who treated him as an adult? Intelligent, powerful,
trustworthy? Relatable?

“It just feels so right.”

What did? That he might now be considered equally intelligent, powerful, and trustworthy? Of a
similar mindset? Not assuming he had any right to try to control Harry or make his decisions for him?
That he was willing to negotiate and discuss and plan?

He had been those things prior, but these feelings—they were new, and they had been sneaking up
on him with the subtlety of a creeping vine. Harry liked to tease him, not unkindly. He generally did
not get upset or offended when Voldemort snapped at him, and even apologized when he felt it was
required. Sincerely. Not in an “I’m scared to death you’re going to crucio me” way.

Harry was thoughtful, kind even, and he was fairly sure that Harry did not go poking around in his
head. Well, with the exception of finding out what he liked in terms of dessert, and even then he may
simply have asked Death. Harry respected him, and he respected Harry in kind.

So what had changed?

Was it simply just that his body had been recreated from next to nothing in terms of his unlamented
sire? Surely the man’s bones held no lingering taint from those potions. The inclusion of the blood of
a true enemy? True devotion from the servant? Elixir? Did it mean he was healed? Whole but for the
pieces of his soul that Harry stood keeper for?

Was sexual desire supposed to go hand in hand with warm fuzzy feelings?

A part of him wondered just what Harry would do if he indicated his growing desire to bed the man.

He was curious, and he knew he was pushing it, but he went off to find Harry. On doing so he took
a seat, accepted tea and nibbles from a house-elf, and then aimed a considering look at his friend.

“What did? That he might now be considered equally intelligent, powerful, and trustworthy? Of a
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“What did? That he might now be considered equally intelligent, powerful, and trustworthy? Of a
similar mindset? Not assuming he had any right to try to control Harry or make his decisions for him?
That he was willing to negotiate and discuss and plan?

He glanced at the ceiling for a moment. How did one ask questions like this delicately? He could not
think of a way and shrugged mentally. “Did she rape you?”

Harry looked up and gave him the weirdest look. “Violate?”

He glanced at the ceiling for a moment. How did one ask questions like this delicately? He could not
think of a way and shrugged mentally. “Did she rape you?”

Those confused green eyes suddenly cleared and Harry shook his head. “No, actually. She rabbited
on a lot about waiting until after the wedding. Why do you ask?”

He looked away again momentarily, feeling slightly uncomfortable. “I have recently found out just what happens when a child is conceived while one of the parents is under the influence of a love potion. It is very likely had she succeeded in her initial plan that any children you sired would have turned out badly, possibly as badly as I did.”

Harry blinked and began nibbling his lower lip. A short time later he impressed Voldemort when he said, “Just guessing here, but should I take that to mean the potion alters sperm and eggs, and the resulting child because of that, causing some kind of unholy mess when it comes to the, er, finer emotions in life?”

He nodded.

“And that’s why you were—” Harry stopped and waved a hand around vaguely, then looked thoughtful, his gaze wandering off to the side. A hand rose up to rub against Harry’s mouth and Voldemort watched with interest as his expression went through a multitude of permutations. After a long silence his friend looked up and said, ‘I’m pure, and I would be anyway given the ritual I did. I suspect that the same thing has happened to you because of the ceremony.’”

He nodded again, again impressed. He was then surprised when Harry began to smile. That smile was more than just pleased, it was almost psychotic in nature. His curiosity was subsequently disappointed when Harry changed the subject at that point.

After getting the location from Derek Harry shifted to his parents’ home and began skulking around. It was 2am and he expected everyone would be asleep. He was wrong.

James and Dumbledore were having a meeting.

“—think that we can pull it off?” James was saying.

Dumbledore nodded sagely. “Harry has been missing for weeks now with not one hint of his whereabouts. It is entirely possible that he is already dead.”

“But what about the monitors in your office? The wards?”

“They haven’t been working well or reliably for years,” Dumbledore said, “and since his disappearance have slowly wound down to utter dysfunction. I believe it is safe for us to assume he will not be a problem at this point.”

Harry sneered, but was gratified that his failure to remember those damn devices had not come back to bite him on the ass. It was possible that Derek had something to do with their recent degradation, but earlier issues might simply have been a result of him being the Master of Death.

“Okay, so we can either send Dylan in or you can go as his guardian,” James said with a nod.

“Correct. I admit, I am unsure as to whether or not the goblins would require verification of identity given that Harry has been missing for so long. Therefore, I believe it is best that I be the one to make the attempt.”

James nodded again. “That’s fine. Everything can be removed and shifted to Dylan’s trust. I’ll have to store it here temporarily, but it won’t be any trouble for me to drop it off later.”
Harry honestly wondered if, assuming there had still been funds in the vault, Dumbledore would be inclined to skim off a fair amount before handing the remainder to James. After all, James would have no real way of knowing just how much money Harry had actually spent, nor how much had come in from gifts or inheritances from grateful survivors. Deciding it just wasn’t worth the potential anger he might be incited to feel he let the question die in his mind and refused to actually check.

He waited through the remainder of the two men’s conversation, then followed James. Once the man was asleep he rifled through his mind to verify a few things. It was true, he found, that James would still not break cover even if Sirius was found innocent, and that he felt a sense of relief that Harry was assumed dead at this point, or as good as. He and Dumbledore thought that one of Voldemort’s supporters had been behind the kidnapping. ‘Well,’ he thought in amusement, ‘I guess you could call me a supporter of Voldemort.’

Harry also checked his mother’s mind. She would like nothing more than to be free of James, but had very few options. She had no money of her own any longer, not after having left it all to Harry. She had the girls to raise and therefore didn’t work. She had unrestricted access to James’s vault early on, but after all the fuss over Harry and their disagreements James had changed that; he had sole control of their finances.

That knowledge helped Harry to make certain decisions. It also helped that he now knew his twin was a clone of James in character. Satisfied with his fishing expedition he shifted back to Grimmauld Place and went to bed.

At breakfast he reported his findings to Voldemort and said, “We just need to come up with a decent story for how Pettigrew was captured. Sure, a strong compulsion on a note we include will go a long way, but it helps to have something reasonable backing it up, no matter how contrived it is.”

Voldemort opened his mouth to answer, but closed it when Saen popped in with the post. Harry took it and saw that Barty had sent an update—he passed that one to Voldemort—and Luna had replied. That letter he tucked away for later, unsure if he was up to whatever might be within.

Voldemort looked up from Barty’s report and said, “Things are going well. Have you come to a decision yet on how James will die?”

Harry grinned. “Yes. It will require explanation, though. So, it’s up to you if you’d prefer to know now, or wait until after.”

Voldemort paused, a peculiar expression flitting across his face, then said, “After.”

He reached out to squeeze Voldemort’s wrist and rather daringly rub his thumb over the back of the man’s hand. “Hopefully you’ll appreciate my twisted logic,” he said with a smirk, then sat back. “Before I catch Peter, you think it might be a good idea to round up your other, still free minions and ship them off to Ophiuchus? Peter’s interrogation would probably reveal plenty of names.”

Voldemort stared at him for several moments, brow furrowed, then said, “Do me a favor and age yourself up. There is no reason you should continue to look that young. And yes, we should.”

He was imminently satisfied with that reaction, and promptly ‘aged’ himself up to approximately twenty-five, the same age he was as Yuki. Derek had clued him in to some of his friend’s recent thoughts and, while he had considered scolding Derek for having done so, realized that it would make no lasting impression on the avatar. It wasn’t that he wished to toy with Voldemort, either. A part of him was genuinely curious, and had been from almost the moment Derek had spoken.

It was the first time he had ever even considered the idea. Cho had done something of a number on
him, then Ginny had really screwed him over. Since then, over a decade total, having any kind of relationship with anyone had been the absolute last thing on his mind. Perhaps it was a mistake to consider mixing business with pleasure, but knowing now that Voldemort could actually feel proper emotions.

No, the question was not about whether or not Voldemort would be willing to jump into bed with him, but rather about how he would handle whether or not it was simply that in the long run.

He frowned as he considered the problem of those Death Eaters. Where on Earth could they be called to a meeting? If they sent them straight on to Ophiuchus where would they live for the time being? There was room in K’veer, but that was his home, his and Voldemort’s. “Oh,” he said softly, inwardly berating himself for missing the obvious on at least one point.

“What is it?”

“Oh, I was concerned about where we could meet those other Death Eaters, but I realized you could just call them to Malfoy’s. Given what you said about Nott and Rosier, maybe both at once. The same with Crabbe and Goyle together.”

“Avery is also part of the original group,” Voldemort offered.

He nodded. “Aside from that I was wondering where to house them. We could temporarily give them rooms in K’veer like Barty, even if I don’t much care for the idea, but Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott all have sons at Hogwarts. Their wives are unmarked, correct?”

“Yes,” Voldemort replied slowly.

“And I know that even though all three Lestranges were tossed into Azkaban their vault was left alone. The ministry was unable or didn’t try to confiscate it. Which means that if Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott disappear their families would still have access to their gold,” he reasoned out loud. “They could mutter some rubbish about feeling paranoid or having heard some worrying rumors to their wives and that they’ll be in contact, something like that, and then neither the wives nor the boys would be able to spill anything of value should the aurors have a go at them. Theo might be old enough to understand, but the younger sons of Crabbe and Goyle are only just first years.”

“I can have them supply us with blueprints for their—hold on. Your twin. Is your hair colour even the same anymore?”

“What?” he asked, thrown off by the abrupt change. “Oh. We’re fraternal twins, but close enough to identical for it to not matter. As for the hair, his is a red-brown, so they’ll have to alter it if they plan to set him up in my place. Though if they honestly expect you to pop up like a bad penny at some point, I’m not sure if they will.”

“I’m sure Dumbledore does, but given that there hasn’t been the least real hint that I’m around, except perhaps Moody’s disappearance, and the stone’s, they may actually install your twin as you at the school. But you’ve made me remember something, so. . . . How involved was Dumbledore in helping you to find my Horcruxes?”

“Uh. . . .” He frowned, thinking back to make sure he had his facts straight. “The diary I dealt with, not knowing what it was, but that probably confirmed for Dumbledore that you had made at least one, likely more. It wasn’t until my sixth year that—well, during the summer before, I assume—he got his hands on the ring, and the curses you had on it were killing him. Then the locket, only to find it was fake, but I knew of it. Beyond that he showed me a bunch of memories pertaining to you in order to suggest what you might have used. He was dead by the end of the year so we had to reason
out the others, the diadem, the cup, the snake.”

“And you.”

He nodded. “And me. Why?”

Voldemort shrugged. “I was wondering if there was any point in scattering fakes around. He can find the fake locket, but never the real one. That alone should send him into at least some measure of despair.”

Harry shook his head. “Mm, maybe. The note in the locket lends itself to the idea that the thief, Regulus, destroyed it, even though he didn’t. Kreacher never could manage it on his own. The thing is, you didn’t want me to arrange an accident for Dumbledore. While we could get him on the road again to dying with a fake ring...”

Voldemort blinked, looked away, then nodded. “You’re quite right on that point. Better that he suspect and be unable to find any, aside from the fake locket, than find them and realize they’re all fakes, and then realize with certainty that I have returned. If his policies are going to run the Light into the ground it helps if he’s alive to do so.”

He hummed in agreement.

“All right,” Voldemort said. “We’ll call in at least two of them this evening, to Malfoy Manor. Though I hope this time nothing happens to arouse your ire.”

Harry smiled a bit ruefully at that. “In the meantime, I need to go warn the goblins.” And on that note, after standing and giving his friend a squeeze on the shoulder, he hied off to Gringotts to see Narok. Once seated and supplied with refreshments he said, “I have come to give you fair warning. I’ve discovered that my sire and Dumbledore do plan to make off with the contents of my trust, and it will be Dumbledore who comes here as guardian. I’m not entirely sure wh—oh.”

One of Narok’s brows shuffled up inquisitively. “I was just thinking that, when I mysteriously disappeared from the tournament, I left behind some peculiar items for them to find and puzzle over. Perhaps I should leave some in the vault? Or would that be too provocative? It’s one thing if it’s empty, because I could easily have done that as I’ve already done. But if I leave things behind it might come across more as you being tricked in a major way, and I’m thinking that wouldn’t sit well.”

Narok appeared mildly surprised that a human was giving their side of the situation so much consideration. “It would imply that we were incompetent, derelict in terms of security, or in collusion,” he said slowly.

“Mm, all right. I’ll just leave it empty, then,” he said agreeably. “In any case, I’m not sure when they’ll move on this, but you’re warned now.” After a quick pause he added, “And if you should happen to capture the encounter and feel like sharing it later on...”

The corner of Narok’s mouth twitched in response. “I will certainly keep that in mind.”

Harry nodded and stood up, and was shortly escorted out. He shifted back to № 12, to his room, and pulled out Luna’s letter.

Dear 紛,
I am very pleased to hear from you, and I quite agree the second task was exciting. Things here are as well as can be expected, though some are feeling more than a little lost. I have been doing my best to keep things on an even keel.

Flitwick seems a bit despondent, however, over the conversation you two shared the night before the task, but I’m sure he’ll get over it soon enough. I trust that you will inform me when the time is right for that little venture of yours. Daddy and I will be delighted to join you. We saen people need to stick together, after all.

Love,
Luna

He grinned. So Neville and Kevin were all right, but missing him, and Luna was trying to take up the slack. Flitwick was obviously upset over Harry’s questions about his safety as a hostage, but he wasn’t sure if Luna was hinting that she knew in some way that a decoy was to be sent in. Either way, she was set to join the exodus, and that was excellent news.

He fetched out supplies and began to compose a reply, but paused. ‘Derek, where is Luna at the moment?’

‘... She is currently wandering around in the Room of Requirement, alone.’ Derek placed a quick image into his mind.

‘Huh. All right. Thank you,’ he sent, then put his supplies away and rose. A quick shift later and he was standing there, invisibly.

Luna looked up suddenly and glanced around, her forehead crinkling faintly, then returned to examining the items stacked up.

Harry was thinking her talents were indeed unique if she could, even in the faintest of ways, sense that something had changed. After sweeping the room to check for bugs of any kind he shrugged and faded into visibility. “Luna.”

She looked up again, then smiled brilliantly, her eyes shining with happiness. “I had a feeling something interesting would happen if I came here. You look well, Harry.”

He smiled back. “Thank you. I wanted to give you a warning.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “And preferably one not needing to be couched in misdirection. You already know so much, I realize that, but this might be beyond your usual. Or it may not, who knows. The point is, Dumbledore intends to bring in a decoy of me. He may, though I am yet unsure, try to install that decoy here. You won’t be fooled.”

She shook her head quickly. “You know I won’t, no matter what story they come up with.”

He smiled again and nodded. “I don’t know how much of a berk he’s going to be, so please do what you can to protect Kevin and Neville?”

Her eyebrow quirked up. “Your brother...” Her eyes glazed over, cleared, and she blinked. “He won’t be able to help himself,” she said, reaching up to comb a strand of hair away from her face. “Yes, I’ll try to keep them from getting hurt.”
“Good,” he said softly. “As to the other issue, we’re hoping this summer, but that might be far too optimistic. Still, I am willing to send you ahead of the exodus if it’s needful. Otherwise you’ll just disappear like all the others. You should probably talk to your father about what sort of home you’d like, if you haven’t already.”

“Would you like me to keep working on Neville?” she asked. “You were trying, but . . . .”

“But my version of subtlety that time was less than effective,” he said with a laugh.

“Well, yes,” she admitted with a mischievous grin, then added, still grinning, “Try his neck. It’s very sensitive.”
Lucius hosted a dinner party. Avery, Crabbe, Gibbon, Goyle, Jugson, Nott, Rosier, and Selwynn were invited. Narcissa stayed safely away, keeping an eye on her children. Harry was there to rifle through all their minds.

Voldemort was ensconced in Lucius’s study-cum-library, browsing through the man’s selection of books, though in truth there was nothing of particular interest present. He was very widely read, after all.

‘Hn,’ Harry sent. ‘They’ll do. Some of them will get pissy over the half-bloods and muggle-borns, but once we point out to them that none of them have to marry any of those people, and that we’ll all be pure-blood after a while, they’ll settle down. Besides, they all expect to be crucio’d should they show that displeasure too obviously. Aside from the fact that their Dark Marks returned and they know you must be around somewhere, they’re a bit suspicious of Lucius having this little get together.’

He snorted faintly and nodded. That sounded about right. ‘And what are their thoughts on you?’

There was a long pause before Harry replied. ‘They think it was all a fluke. They can’t believe I had anything to do with it. No, some bizarre confluence of orbits, Samhain, and so on, resulting in a wholly unexpected and unfortunate occurrence—a freakishly bizarre accident, if you will. I’m a kid with an undeserved reputation and nothing approaching a threat.’

Voldemort laughed at that, shaking his head at just how hilariously wrong his people were in their assessment of Harry’s level of threat. ‘All right. I am on my way. We shall see how long it takes before one of them notices I’m even there.’

‘Okay. See you shortly.’

He got up and slowly made his way toward the dining room. It took a full ten minutes before any of them noticed him, or the fully visible Harry standing to his right. The two of them were sharing another packet of Harry’s homemade biscuits in companionable silence. Avery happened to glance over and choked on his wine, causing the other Death Eaters to notice and look their way, eyes wide with surprise and confusion and apprehension.

“For being some of my best,” he drawled, “you seem to be seriously lacking in situational awareness. Too busy eyeing Lucius suspiciously, were we?”

A chorus of “my lord” arose and all of them stood so they could bow to him. He waved them back to their seats and strode over to the foot of the table. He conjured a second chair and rearranged them, then took a seat. Harry took the other.

“As I am certain that Lucius has held his tongue I will inform you all of the real reason for this gathering. We are moving. To that end, and to avert potential complications by Dumbledore and his ilk due to an upcoming event, all of you will do the following. After you return home you will inform your wife, should you have one, that you have been hearing disturbing rumors and feel the
need to take a holiday. You will be in touch with them later. Pack your belongings. Then you’ll return here.

“You will not speak to anyone else, nor will you say anything more than I have suggested, nor will you dawdle. I expect you all back here before midnight. You will then be transported to your new, temporary home. If you have copies of the blueprints for your homes, bring them. If you do not you will be expected, after you are settled, to draw some up from memory as best you can.

“Any children will have to be looked after by your spouses for the time being, but as some are currently at school it should be a very minor point of consideration at this time. The less any of them know the less they can possibly share should aurors come seeking information. Is there any part of my instructions which needs clarification?”

Rosier almost smirked. “My lord, should we take them to mean it will be unlikely we will be seen in public again for months?”

“Correct. Pack for an extended stay.”

Nott, who looked rather disturbed at the idea, asked, “My lord, what of our funds?”

Voldemort shook his head. “You will not need any.”

Goyle glanced at Harry, started to speak, and thought better of it. Instead, Selwynn decided to ask, “Are we allowed to bring a house-elf with us, my lord?”

He narrowed his eyes, sending, ‘What do you think? I don’t see the harm in it.’

‘Me neither. And I’d prefer not to designate the ones we have to wait on this lot, not when they’re already so busy with other tasks. They would have to liaise with ours for supplies, though, as I don’t really want them going back and forth between Earth and Ophiuchus.’

He nodded faintly. “One only for each of you. You will be further instructed once we’ve arrived. Now, if there are no more questions, you may all go and I will expect you back here prior to midnight.”

Either none of them could think of any or the ones they had must have been deemed too minor to raise. His Death Eaters all rose, thanked Lucius for dinner, bowed to Voldemort, and took their leave.

Lucius then crinkled his brow. “My lord?”

He nodded, inviting the question.

“Am I to move with them?”

“No. But you will carry an emergency portkey on you at all times, set to the Black house. In the event that—”

‘He’s going to ask about his wife and children,’ Harry interrupted.

“—you are in any danger you will use it. If you wish, Narcissa and the children can be moved either to the Black house or installed on Ophiuchus, though I doubt she would have much of a social life. It would be easy enough to spread a story about her taking the children on holiday so that no one will think it odd that she has not been seen out and about.”
Lucius’s brow crinkled faintly as he took that in, and Harry sent, ‘He’s concerned because she’s six months pregnant and it’s not as though we have a hospital set up yet.’

‘I should think you could deliver her if necessary,’ he replied. ‘You do seem to have a handle on all sorts of knowledge.’

‘I suppose so. Still, Fudge is still in office and easily bribed, so I’m not all that concerned about Lucius being hauled off to Azkaban. I would say give Narcissa the secret, a special portkey, and if anything happens she can retreat to the Black house. And if it somehow becomes really bad their elves can pack up the house and we move them all to Ophiuchus.’

He considered that and said, “For now, Lucius, she can remain here. She will be let in on the secret and will need a portkey capable of transporting herself and the children should it become needful.”

The blond’s expression cleared immediately and he nodded. “Yes, my lord.”

“Send for her now. I expect you will take care of the portkeys by tomorrow at the latest.”

Lucius nodded and called for an elf. A short time later Narcissa glided into the room, so Harry got up, crossed to her position and whispered in her ear—which occasioned a look of surprise from her—and then returned to his seat.

“That is all,” Voldemort told her, and watched as she bowed and quit the room. “We will be in your library, Lucius. Have me informed when they’ve all returned.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Alone again a few minutes later, just the two of them, they took seats on one of the sofas. Harry produced his biscuits again after a quick spell was tossed at the door. “Suppose we can get Barty to ride herd on this lot. Avery, Nott, and Rosier ought to be all right, having been with you for so long.”

“We can set them to choosing their new estates and getting them scheduled for construction,” he said, taking a biscuit. “We need to make the rounds, however, for as many house-elves as we can get. The initial farms are one thing, but we need produce of all kinds. These lovely biscuits of yours would be difficult to do without cocoa, for instance.”

Harry shuddered. “So, the serious basics, such as hospital, school, estates, and then back around again to infrastructure?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any craftsmen amongst your minions?”

Now that was an interesting question. It was all very well to start the farms, round up livestock, find and mark places to acquire certain goods, but much of it would be of little use without craftsmen. He ate his biscuit thoughtfully while running through his mental list of Death Eaters.

Surprisingly, Crabbe was a fair hand at fashioning robes and armor. Avery had a metalworking hobby, though he wasn’t sure of what use that would be. Selwynn was all right at potions, though not in the same class as Severus had been. Still, while he could see setting Crabbe up with a craft, Selwynn was too intelligent to be wasted on something he was only moderately good at.

He could, however, set them to making lists of their own to aid the overall effort. The exodus would make more sense done in waves. Government, hospital and education, craftsmen, and then the general populace. His older Death Eaters were not, in general, hot-headed, and should do well
enough to start as part of the government. He could give them the fruits of Lucius’s labors and set them to hammering out a basic set of laws; the exceptions would come after and they already had several in mind.

“Not really,” he finally said, and gave Harry a quick summary of what he’d just been thinking.

Harry nodded through his recitation, nibbling a biscuit in a way that made Voldemort’s groin react. “Well, what’s the sense in having minions if you can’t delegate to them?” he commented.

It wasn’t yet ten when an elf popped in to inform him that all his minions were present. He nodded a dismissal and stood, waited until Harry was also ready, and swept off to the dining room. There Harry produced a linking book and laid it on the table, open to the image.

“Lucius, you first. You others, do as he does. Your elves, as well,” he ordered and was pleased to see speedy compliance. As soon as they were gone Harry tucked the book away, shifted them to the palace linking room, and they linked through to K’veer.

Harry called his two elves to him and said, “I need you to see to suites for each of these men. They will be living here for the time being. For Lucius you will need to set aside a larger suite in the event that his wife and children need to come here, but for now he will not be in residence. More on that later. Take these elves with you and get things set up, then they can return to escort their masters.”

Saen and Cael nodded, looked to the unfamiliar elves, and led them away.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “you are on Ophiuchus, in the infant form of the city of Serpens. This building is K’veer, my and Harry’s home. And yes, because I know you’re curious, my companion is Harry Potter. He is my partner.”

Harry suddenly laughed and shook his head. “No, no, no. I am not a catamite, Jugson. Though really, considering your fondness for that very subject in your very private fantasies, I am hardly surprised it was the first thing you assumed.”

Voldemort arched a brow, staring coldly at Jugson. ‘Seriously?’

‘Oh yes. He’s never actually acted on those fantasies, but he has them and made an automatic assumption that you keep me as some kind of sex toy.’

Jugson looked surprised, angry, and apprehensive.

‘Jugson,’ he said coldly, ‘as you can see my partner is not without his talents.”

The man bowed, lower than normal, and murmured, “My lord.”

‘He thinks I’ve used an aging potion, of course,’ Harry remarked. ‘Because, you know, one of us thinks it’s otherwise too kinky for cross-gen, pedophilic sex.’

He just couldn’t help himself. ‘Even with your real age it would be cross-generational. I am just shy of seventy years old, after all. But something tells me a thing like that wouldn’t bother you.’

‘... As much as this line of conversation amuses me, we should probably deal with this lot first,’ Harry sent slowly.

“Follow me,” he ordered, then swept off to one of the meeting rooms, asking Harry, ‘Can you please linger a bit behind and have one of the elves send Barty in?”
He continued on and had them take seats around the table while he remained standing at the head. Harry arrived within a minute and Barty shortly after that, and Barty said a bit breathlessly, “Yes, my lord?” He had obviously come at a run.

“Good,” he murmured. “Barty, you’ll be overseeing these gentlemen, with the exception of Lucius, of course. They have each brought an elf to see to their needs, and those elves will obviously need to liaise with mine and Harry’s. You can start tomorrow by taking them to one of the estate areas and helping to get construction scheduled after explaining the deal. After that they can start going over the information Lucius has been collecting for me and putting together some equitable laws, subject to my and Harry’s approval. Any questions?”

Barty looked down for several seconds, something he often did when he was thinking, then shook his head. “No, my lord. But if any arise I can contact you the usual way.”

‘Hey.’

‘Yes?’

‘You going to chuck a wobbly if I punish Jugson?’

After a moment’s pause he replied, ‘No. Go ahead.’

Harry looked over at Jugson and smiled. “If I ever catch you thinking things like that about me again, I’ll do more than just fry your nerves,” he said calmly, then produced his wand and breathed, “Crucio,” his eyes starting to glow eerily.

Jugson dropped to the floor with an aborted scream and writhed, biting his lower lip into a bloody mess. A psychotic smile—for effect, Voldemort thought—appeared on his partner’s face and Harry held the curse for a full minute before releasing it and letting his wand disappear. He broke the mood just a moment later by going, “Mwua ha ha.”

Voldemort could see in his peripheral vision that Barty was desperately trying to stifle his amusement and nearly rolled his eyes himself. He nodded and swept out, almost choking when Harry reminded him of how Snape had always ‘billowed’ everywhere. They eventually ended up in the library they shared and took seats. He rubbed his face, thinking about Jugson. Well, the man could fantasize all he liked about buggering young boys, so long as it never came up again; he really did not need to know things like that about his followers. “All right. Now that they’re here you can go ahead and capture Peter. They won’t have access to the linking books yet so…”

“So it’s not as though they can do something monumentally stupid and pop back home for a quick visit only to get hauled in for questioning and then arrested, right.” Harry gazed up at the ceiling, eyes unseeing. “I need a believable scenario for Peter’s capture.”

“Where is he now?” he asked.

Harry blinked once, his head tilting slightly in a listening posture, then said, “He’s been living in Snape’s house in Cokeworth, using magic to steal from the muggles to afford food from the shops. It was warded against muggles, and nobody magical ever did anything about it, assuming they even knew where it was.”

At first he could not see any particular resolution to that need, but after a great deal of thought an idea began to coalesce. “I think I may have something,” he said slowly.
Harry perked up and stopped staring at the ceiling.

“We do not want Peter dead, but, if we were to find some unrepentant muggle criminal there—”

“Oh,” Harry interrupted. “I think I see where you’re going with this.”

“Yes. We arrange for the aurors to be alerted to a large magical discharge that Peter incurred during a confrontation while trying to steal from this unrepentant muggle. Say, perhaps, that the muggle takes great exception and attempts to fight back. As Peter is casting a killing curse, the immediate cause of the muggle’s death, he is pushed back in some way which causes him to knock himself unconscious. The aurors would be alerted as it’s in a muggle area, arrive, haul this magical person in for questioning. . . .”

Harry started nodding halfway through the explanation. “It’s just a question of wording, basically. Peter could try other spells first to up the magic, as well. My biggest question is how long does it typically take aurors to respond to something like this? I’ve heard one too many stories about how they’re a bit lax. Also, do you have any sleepers in the DMLE, because they may try to help Peter and end up hindering us.”

“Excellent points. Let me think a moment. Macnair is at the ministry, but you already know he’s not DMLE. Still, being in the building he might attempt to cause problems. I do have a few minor people in that department. I’m just trying to think how I can signal them to ignore Peter entirely without. . . .”

“Would it be too obvious to have Lucius do it? I mean, he’s kind of a poncy git, but he’s also fairly smooth when he’s being, you know. He’s always been your man inside the ministry, hasn’t he?”

“Yes,” he said slowly. “Though more for giving generous gifts to people like Fudge to get the fools to do what I wished. Still, it is not at all uncommon for Lucius to be seen there, and not always in meetings with the minister. I think we can swing that, yes. And while he’s there he can distribute more than a few pieces of parchment with compulsions embedded in them—maybe for Wizengamot members, too, but you already dealt with most of the bad ones.”

“Fudge will have to get something, then. He’ll flip out over Peter being found. Never mind that it was what’s-her-face as minister when it happened, he’ll assume it’ll reflect badly on him.”

Voldemort nodded. “Yes, you’re probably right.”

Harry snorted. “I know I’m right. It’s what he did last time when it came up.”

“Fine, whatever,” he said with a roll of his eyes. “But Fudge can probably be handled by you going in and twisting his mind. Doing so for the entire auror department and Macnair is something else entirely.”

“So we have a plan. I just need to go do a few things before I write it up. Shall we head back?”

“Let’s go,” he agreed.

They were in an excellent position to watch the first part of the plan, on the roof of a nearby building. Right on schedule a rough-looking man walked down the alley and behind him crept Peter, who was very much surprised when his imperius attempt failed. The thug turned around with a frightening expression and advanced. Peter threw out several more spells in a flurry, becoming panicked when they did not slow the man down. Just as the thug lunged forward to head-but Peter the rat
completely lost it and snapped off a killing curse, not in time to prevent being hit, then knocked himself out as he cracked his head against the brick of one of the buildings walling the alley.

Shockingly (or not considering the meddling they had done, which included inducing a number of persons to feel the inexplicable and ineludible urge to take a holiday), the aurors showed up within thirty seconds and made quick work of assessing the scene, not to mention taking Peter and his wand into custody.

‘Beautiful,’ Voldemort commented. ‘That was lovely.’

‘I have acquired a flair for choreography,’ Harry replied. ‘There was nothing at all about it that should stink of manipulation.’

‘No, just incompetence on the part of Peter,’ Voldemort agreed, then smirked.

They returned to № 12 and settled in to wait. Lucius was lurking at the ministry that day and would be keeping an ear out in various spots, while Harry had placed some undetectable eavesdropping charms. The aurors were a hive of activity once one of them realized their captive sported a Dark Mark and Amelia Bones was very much in evidence in directing her department’s people. With Fudge out of the way (he was visiting ‘friends’ in Papua New Guinea) she could get on with things.

“What do you think might happen after we leave? I mean. . . .”

He glanced over, one brow raised. “Between the muggles and the Light?”

“I guess. I mean, if a bunch of Light-minded fools stay behind, along with the scared or complacent neutrals, and even the Darks too dangerous to bring—what happens when something finally happens that the ministries can’t stop? When some nutjob makes a big bang in front of the muggle cameras? When their technology finally gets to the point where they can see our enclaves? I just wonder if the muggles will go to war. Yeah, sure, the British PM knows of magic and I’m sure other top-ranking members of muggle government do too, but. . . .”

“Yes, well, if we end up with more of them joining us they will have to understand how the rules have changed. I have lists upon lists of names I think will suit, but there are plenty more who I expect to waver and remain here out of, as you call it, complacency.”

Harry shrugged carelessly. “Is there any way you know of to reach out to people not on the lists, such as with enchanted parchments that are only accessible to those of the right type?”

“. . . I would have to think that over,” Voldemort admitted.

“I mean, once we have the initial exodus done we can scatter around something, such as references to Ophiuchus and our system of laws. Maybe have a—an embassy? Warded to the teeth, of course. Lord knows how fun it’d be to have Dumbledore stroll on in.”

“He might anyway,” Voldemort pointed out. “He does so like to meddle and he’ll end up being ridiculously curious as to what happened to thousands of people.”

“Oh, true.” Harry blew out his breath, puffing hair away from his face, then gave him a speculative look.

He arched a brow in response and waited.

“I’ve been wondering, idly, if you’re feeling okay. You haven’t. . . . tortured or killed anyone lately, and I was just wondering how you’re holding up.”
Voldemort just sat there, brow still arched, though it was slowly deflating, feeling a bit stunned. He wasn’t sure if he was stunned over this display of concern or because he hadn’t actually done anything particularly evil of late. Harry had tortured people, killed people and beings, but... “I’m fine,” he said eventually. “I think I’ve been having too much...” He could not possibly say that word.

“Fun?” Harry offered, a crooked smile on his lips. “Interested, challenged, focused, fulfilled, amused...? Okay, good. But let me know if you get twitchy, yeah? I’ll find someone—or multiple someones—for you to, er, play with.”

“And if I want to play with you?” he asked.

Harry blinked at him slowly, almost as if wondering if his friend really was that stupid. Then he said, “Well, I could dash off to a shop and grab some muggle games, I guess. Twister might be fun.”

He snickered. So clueless at times.

“What?” Harry sounded distinctly annoyed.

“Aren’t you ever curious?” he asked, reaching out to briefly run his fingers down Harry’s cheek, letting his thumb glide over his friend’s lower lip.

Harry’s eyes went wide. “Are you—are you propositioning me?”

“And if I am?” he asked smoothly.

“Are you even gay?” Harry asked incredulously.

“And if I am?” he repeated.

“I, er, well—what the hell? This is so very Gryffindor of you! I’m supposed to be the bold one!”

He chuckled softly; Harry was actually blushing in his confusion.

“You had better not be saying this just to mess with my mind,” Harry growled, his brows drawing down fiercely and his eyes beginning to glow.

“You have yet to answer my question,” he reminded his partner. “Aren’t you ever curious? Don’t you ever want to find out?”

Harry scowled and stood up—for a moment Voldemort honestly thought he might end up cursed—then came over and sat on his knees, facing him. “Well?” Harry practically demanded.

So he reached up and wrapped a hand around the back of Harry’s neck and drew him down, gently forcing Harry’s head to tilt even as he tilted his own, then kissed him. Harry’s lips were amazingly soft and felt plush, despite the fact that they were a bit on the thin side. He pulled back so he could look into Harry’s eyes, then heaved into a twist. Harry’s back hit the sofa cushion and he followed, slipping out from under his friend’s legs, until he was straddling Harry. “Do you want to find out?” he repeated.

Harry looked at him in shock, and slowly a faint smile curved his mouth. “Absolutely. I’d like to know what I’ve been missing.”

“Well, then,” he purred, a bit in shock himself at how fast things had escalated and with how unlike himself he was being. “How much are you curious about?”
Harry blinked at him, the smile sliding off his face, expression conveying a sense of being lost.

Oh. He nodded slowly. “Some, now,” he said quietly, and leaned in to begin kissing Harry again, this time being rather insistent on gaining access with his tongue. He took his own sweet time exploring Harry’s mouth and listening carefully to the sounds his partner was making, how his body was responding. One hand he kept planted firmly on the cushion, the other with his fingers around the back of Harry’s neck.

It was only when Harry began straining toward him that Voldemort changed position and began to go after his neck, being careful not to mark the skin, though that is not to say he didn’t bite. He kept himself rigidly under control. Harry was a virgin as far as he knew and could, at any time, backpedal on his earlier bold assertion, with uncertainty creeping in to smother curiosity and excitement. When it still seemed that Harry was very much into things he shifted again long enough to bestow a thorough kiss and then moved south.

A half hour later Harry was breathing heavily and Voldemort could almost feel just how fast his partner’s heart was beating. Harry had one hand still gripping the back of the couch and the other was thrown over his head. His eyes were closed and his lips parted slightly. He looked alluring to Voldemort’s eyes. So vulnerable, dewy with sweat, enticing, inviting more. But not yet.

He was startled out of his ruminations when Harry’s eyes flicked open to stare first at the ceiling, then at him.

“It may take a few times,” Harry said a bit breathlessly, “until I know for sure if I like that.”

He snorted in amusement. “Really now?”

In a gratifyingly short amount of time the *Daily Prophet* was screaming about the capture of Pettigrew, marked Death Eater, and any number of lurid details about his testimony. And, of course, that Sirius Black had already been removed from Azkaban and interrogated in front of the Wizengamot, just as Peter had been. Shock! Awe! Black was innocent of everything! Off he was shipped to St Mungo’s.

Harry rolled his eyes and tossed the paper on the table. “The sheeple are milling in confused circles, as expected. Either way, I can shortly go take care of my delightful sire.”

“You plan to wait until after Dumbledore acts, or . . . ?”

He shrugged. “Do you think it matters?”

“If you kill James now you’ll never know his reaction,” Voldemort pointed out, “unless you plan to use the ring.”

He shuddered at the idea of actually talking to his father and shook his head. “I’ll wait, thanks. I’ve only ever used the ring once and I’m in no real hurry to do so again.” After a split-second hesitation he added, “It was when I was going to my death, the one Dumbledore conditioned me to accept, at your hand. I called my parents and Sirius. Surprisingly, knowing what I know now, James was awfully kind. Maybe that version of him did actually regret some things.”

“I doubt this one will,” Voldemort said quietly.

Harry heaved a sigh. “I rather doubt it myself. It’s okay. He’s a right wanker and even my mother doesn’t like him. I will enjoy his death. We just have to wait until Narok gets in touch to share his
encounter with Dumbledore.” Then he started laughing. “I wonder how my brother will react when he realizes he’s alone, with no real name, no money, and only Dumbledore to look to.”

“Or Black, once he may realize that not only is his childhood home but a vague wisp of memory and that the family fortune is missing?”

He shrugged again. “It’s a crying shame. He still has Alphard’s money so it’s not like he’s poverty stricken. Anyway, once we’re finished breakfast do you want to hang around here or go check progress in Serpens?”

A week later Saen popped in with Harry’s post and handed over a letter from Narok. A quick scan showed that Dumbledore had shown up and that Narok had attached a vial to the bottom of the parchment filled with a silvery liquid: a memory. “Well now,” he said. “I sincerely hope this is amusing.”
Ever since viewing the memory Narok had sent—and oh wasn’t it lovely to see the shock and frustration on Dumbledore’s face at the realization that the vault was empty and that Narok was not about to “help” in any meaningful way because the owner of the vault having quietly emptied it was perfectly “legal”—Harry had been keeping an eye out for a visit by the old man to his sire.

Eventually the telltale he had added to James’s wards triggered and he stood, invoked the power of the Cloak, and shifted away. As soon as he arrived he sent, ‘Dumbledore is about to meet with James,’ to explain his abrupt departure, though he expected Voldemort had understood immediately.

He watched as the old man let himself in—the height of rudeness, really, or hubris—and strolled down the hallway after a quick spell. James was actually out back with Harry’s twin and on seeing Dumbledore said, “Okay, Dylan, I need to talk with the headmaster.”

His twin frowned and the corners of his mouth drooped, but he nodded and slouched off sulkily. Harry rolled his eyes in revulsion and followed the two adults. Once they were comfortably ensconced in a private room and set with a tea tray Dumbledore aimed a grave look at James. “I am sorry, my boy, to be forced to give you bad news.”

“What?” James said impatiently. “Something went wrong? Surely they didn’t question your authority in this?”

“No, that is not the issue,” Dumbledore said with a slow shake of his head. “No, it is that there is no gold in the trust vault. It is empty.”

“What!? The goblins confiscated it?”

Harry rolled his eyes; yes, as if the goblins were going to do so simply on the strength of a missing person report rather than trying to abscond with the money from convicted wealthy Death Eaters.

Dumbledore shook his head again. “They were just as surprised as I was. Apparently Harry decided to empty the vault at some point. Perhaps it is connected to his mysterious disappearance, though how he could possibly have arranged to escape his confinement during the second task, enchanted in sleep as he was, I do not know.”

“Timed portkey?” James offered.

“Perhaps. But when would a mere fourth year have learned such a skill? It matters not, my boy, in the long run. The money is gone.”

James sighed, almost bitterly it seemed. “Oh well. I really wanted to give that money to Dylan, but I guess that’s impossible. Do you think Harry is dead?”

Dumbledore shrugged. “I do not know. None of the spells I try are helpful. If he is that is one less concern.”
“Well, what about the Book of Souls? Would that show?”

The old man looked thoughtful at that. “I shall have to look.”

‘Derek?’

‘He will find no answers therein,’ came the prompt reply. ‘The issue will remain clouded.’

‘Okay, thanks.’ He waited around for a while and was preparing to leave when Dumbledore said something of actual interest in response to James’s vague query.

“Yes, I have continued to look for his suspected Horcruxes. I have leads on several possibilities.”

James smiled in relief. “So when he does come back, if we’ve already found them, we’ll be able to deal with him once and for all. Excellent.”

“Yes, but do not get too far ahead of yourself,” Dumbledore cautioned. “This is all predicated on the single reason I can think of and find which would explain why there was no body. And at that, until and unless we are certain that Harry is dead . . .”

James sighed and nodded. “Yeah, I know. None of this is certain.”

A few minutes later he had shifted back to № 12 and took a seat. “Okay, so, Dumbledore suspects you have Horcruxes, has some ideas on what they might be, and possibly where you might have hidden them. Not that it’ll do—oh.”

Voldemort gave him a look, part wary and part expectant. “I live in terror of those times when you get ideas,” he joked. “What is it?”

Harry grinned at him. “It just came to me, the most ridiculous idea,” he said and began snickering madly. “If we had Horcruxes from someone else and could transfer them to replicas of what you used. . . .”

Voldemort laughed delightedly.

Derek was a great help by answering a few questions and shortly after he and Voldemort had come up with a plan. True, they could puzzle out how to create a Horcrux detector or something and see if there were any just laying around, but it was far simpler to find several members of the community who were on the wrong side of evil and induce them to create Horcruxes and storing those fragments of soul into receptacles that they chose for them, replicas of the ones Voldemort had used all those years ago. Their victims then had their memories altered and the bodies from the process (also on the wrong side of evil) were taken care of.

The anchors were set aside until Harry had shifted to Dumbledore so as to get a look into the man’s mind, and were then placed appropriately, cursed to a fare-thee-well, and warded strongly.

“You realize, of course, that we will have to provide a dead Harry Potter,” Voldemort said after their little prank had been set.

“Yeah,” he replied with a sigh. “I’ll have to let Luna know ahead of time, but for all we know they won’t release that information to the public and it won’t matter.”

“What is it about this Luna girl?” Voldemort asked a bit demandingly.

He looked over with a slight frown. “She’s special. As Derek explained it she has this talent that’s a
bizarre combination of Legilimency and foresight that allows her to sort of read a person’s mind and then see parts of the future based on the information she’s obtained.”

Voldemort’s brow furrowed. “Derek?”

“Oh, sorry. Death. He told me he prefers Derek. Anyway, Luna is special. Sure, she was a bit wary of me when we first met this time around, mainly because I’m a psychotic whackjob, but she soon enough realized I was, well, nice mostly. I’ve kept in contact with her and I know she and her father are just waiting for the word to pack up and move. As to a body, maybe yes, maybe no. I’m thinking that if we did we’d have to screw with their minds to definitely not release that information so that they could still, if they wanted, pretend my twin is me for some reason.”

Voldemort hummed thoughtfully and nodded. “Leaving options open for them isn’t a terrible idea, especially if any of them come back to bite them.”

They talked for quite a while longer regarding their plans and the best order in which to proceed, but Harry eventually felt burned out and said, “Well, anyway, I think now that our prank is set up it’s time for a little celebration of that.” After getting a raised brow in response he said, “I think I’ll learn a new skill.”

“So I even dare ask?” Voldemort said a bit warily.

“Well,” he said, rising to his feet only to move to stand in front of his partner, kneel, and place a hand on the man’s thigh. “A new skill, yes.” His hand moved upward. “You interested in helping me?”

“Mwua ha ha!” Harry said.

Voldemort’s nostrils flared in annoyance. “Must you do that?”

“Hey now, I didn’t get to go to the Dark Lord Academy like you did, so I have to fake the whole evil laugh thing,” Harry retorted childishly, then pointed. “Ooo, hang on, you have that look in your eyes. Do I need to find you someone to torture?”

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Bloody man-child! If nothing else this sort of thing was good for teaching him to control his temper. Of course, with his luck, that was exactly why Harry kept doing it. “I am going to assume,” he said slowly, “that Dumbledore just found a Horcrux?”

Harry smiled at him and nodded. “The cup. He is presently blitzed out of his mind on that potion you had in the basin and James is struggling to get them both out of the cave, rather like what happened when I did it. You’ll be irritated to know that Dumbledore is still capable of casting fire whips even in his current condition. This is interesting, though. He didn’t find any of them until the summer before my sixth year—the diary didn’t count—so he’s getting along early this time. Maybe because I’m missing and possibly dead? I can’t very well do his dirty work if I’m not there for him to order around.”

That sounded like a rational extrapolation given the previous and present facts. Dumbledore had obviously woken up to the idea that he would have to stir himself to action, lacking a pawn who would have to die anyw—“Oh. I think I just got one of those ideas of yours,” he said a bit breathlessly.

Harry’s brows rose in interest. “Really? Tell me.”

“Harry needs to die for this prank to ultimately work, so, we arrange that. But—and here’s the fun
part—we arrange for Dumbledore to do the deed.”

Harry’s expression morphed into shock, then he began laughing madly. “Oh my god, that’s fabulous.”

“And if we work it such that it was some sort of accident he would never, ever breathe a word of it. That way your twin could still be pressed into duty if necessary, but Dumbledore would think all of the Horcruxes had been dealt with. Then, when we accidentally-on-purpose run into the man, well. . . .”

Harry swooped in long enough to give him a hard kiss. “Wonderful. I love it. Though, it’s a bit unfortunate we didn’t think of this earlier. Dumbledore being blitzed out on that potion would have been a fantastic excuse for Harry’s accidental murder.”

He started running the other Horcrux conditions through his mind, looking for one that might have the same result. “Perhaps that Harry somehow found out about the Horcruxes and was trying to destroy them himself,” he said, thinking out loud. “And he gets there too late to actually deal with it, but Dumbledore mistakes him for a foe and manages to kill him.”

“Yes, yes,” Harry said absently. “And he’ll never know for sure because ‘Harry’ is now dead. He’ll just assume. And then cover it up, of course.”

‘Okay, think,’ he said to himself. ‘The ring, the locket, the diary, the diadem.’ “The ring would be the most obvious by location, perhaps,” he said. “Possibly the one we placed behind that portrait in the Slytherin common room.”

“Yes, but you would have had to be completely off your rocker to put protections in place behind Salazar that could harm students of your house,” Harry pointed out. “Kind of hard to recruit them if they’re dead.”

He nodded. “And even most seventh years couldn’t manage to get the portrait to open. The locket is theoretically safe back there. People not in Slytherin can’t even see the portrait, though I have every expectation Dumbledore, having once been headmaster, can. McGonagall. Maybe Flitwick as deputy.”

“I don’t know which would make the most sense to him considering we put all the fakes in places that made sense to us by association. Maybe he’s starting early on in your life and working forward? That’s the only thing I can think of to explain why he went for the cave first.”

He nodded again. “There’s a certain logic to that, yes. Perhaps the locket would be best. As soon as he opens it it will attack and distort his perceptions.”

Harry snickered. “Imagine me, dead in the Slytherin common room. So . . . Mundungus Fletcher can play me, for the crime of originally stealing the locket from Grimmauld Place and trying to sell it in Knockturn Alley.”

“All right, so we need to not only permanently alter Fletcher’s face and body, but have him in place and ready to play the part. We can set up telltales in the castle to let us know when Dumbledore is heading toward the Slytherin common room. We can have Fletcher ready with a few comprehensive memory charms, some compulsions, and we should be able to just drop him into place.”

“And then the death I write would kick in,” Harry finished with a decisive nod. “The only quirk might be Dumbledore wondering where the hell Fletcher has gotten off to, but from what I remember he was known for drifting off to make shady deals, getting drunk, and other such fun activities.”
“I doubt very much he’ll go after either of the ones in the school until term ends,” he remarked. “I really can’t see the man sneaking in the Slytherin or Ravenclaw common rooms in the dead of night to deal with such dangerous objects. That means he’s likely to go for the ring or the diary.”

“Yes, I agree. Telltales will let us know, in any case, so—oh, no. I have a time turner. All we need is to know when Dumbledore is going after the locket. Then I turn us back, we deal with Fletcher, and get ready to pop him into place. So we don’t need to capture him early.” Harry smiled, obviously pleased with himself.

Lucius had finished his initial task so Voldemort set him to figuring out the situation as pertains to staff for the new school. “We’re starting with the UK first,” he said, “so what we need are English-speaking professors. We’ll worry about the other countries afterward. We want at least one professor for each subject.” He slid a list over (Muggle Studies was conspicuously missing) and continued, “Again, from amongst the Dark or Neutrals. We have no need for Light-minded fools. The only person I can think of offhand would be Quirrell, but that depends on whether or not he thinks he can evade the curse on that position at Hogwarts. Prospects with multiple languages are an asset, but not required to start. Questions so far?”

“You will be interviewing them personally, my lord?”

“Yes. Start funneling the names to me as you discover them and Harry and I will make arrangements for the interviews. Once we’ve found our staff you can move on to healers, craftsmen, potioners, farmers, shop keeps, that sort of thing. We want to have at least the basics in place before we begin moving the general public in. And then once we’re more or less done with the UK we can move on to another country, such as France, and start the process over again. Talk to the men in Serpens for ideas if necessary, even if I won’t be allowing any of them to come back to Earth.

“Barty has already been briefed on our plans so he’s been working on arranging for districts by language, at least in terms of housing, but anyone can live most anywhere so long as they can afford the swap. In terms of government workers, well, some of those will be your fellow Death Eaters. If there are any in the ministry here they will have to be carefully vetted. Part of the damn point is to have a consistent set of laws with consistent enforcement and punishment, not a bunch of nepotistic buffoons taking bribes hand over fist to arrange certain outcomes.”

He looked over at Harry and asked, “Am I forgetting anything?”

“Nothing jumps to mind,” Harry replied slowly, obviously searching his memory. “I suppose we could advertise for those positions. Dumbledore might become curious, though, if we did that.” He began muttering to himself, “School staff, hospital staff, farmers, crafts, shops. . . .” Then he said, “We could attempt to pinch a bunch of house-elves from Hogwarts on the strength of you being in the Slytherin line, I suppose. We already bought up everything available here and while they’re handling the farms right now we really need them elsewhere if possible. I think Hogwarts alone has like a hundred of them and we’re going to need a good number working at our school. Which reminds me, we really need to start naming things. The school, the hospital, the shopping district.”

Voldemort arched a brow, remembering something. “You may be right about the Hogwarts house-elves, but what about you? There’s been a rumor circulating that you came down the Gryffindor line.”

Harry blinked at him in surprise. “Has there really? I’ve never heard that. Have you, Lucius?”

The blond’s brows raised at the question. “I, er, yes. I have heard the rumor, my lord.”
Harry frowned; and then vanished. Voldemort assumed he only did so for Lucius’s benefit. A few moments later his partner flicked back into view and said, “Nope. Totally untrue. I’m closer to the Slytherin line because of the Peverell family.”

“Ah, yes,” he said. “I remember now. In any case, you may be right. We’ll have to check that out at an appropriate time.”

By the time June had rolled around Dumbledore had managed to track down both the ring and the diary. The warding and traps they had placed were done so with a mindset of arrogant insanity, so while they were tricky and dangerous, they were something Dumbledore would be able to manage with care and patience.

In that amount of time they had managed to hire on a surprising number of staff for the school. Apparently there were a lot of people out there who had wished to go into teaching and could not due to the almost nonexistent turnover at Hogwarts. And nobody really wanted the Defense position there. Quirrell had decided to join the exodus, so as soon as the school year was over he planned to turn in his resignation, stating his reason for leaving being the disappearance of Harry Potter, whose attendance he thought was the reason the curse had been in abeyance. And, after that first year when he had purposely been ineffective, his teaching of the subject had not been all that bad.

All of the people they hired were vowed to secrecy while on Earth, signed to binding contracts, and told to be ready to leave on the fourth of July, the day after the students left Hogwarts for the year. They would have all summer to work up their syllabuses and arrange the schedule of classes—subject to Harry and Voldemort’s approval, of course. They were also given copies of what Harry had pilfered from Hogwarts along those lines, including the book lists. If necessary they would arrange for a temporary book shop—assuming they had not yet acquired at least one real one, and a publisher—to sell the required texts to the incoming students for that first year.

The goblins had already done a massive amount of building, including any number of townhouse-type homes in the city, so any family of those hired on could live in those until their actual homes were built. Unlike Hogwarts they were not aiming for single people; staff would have plenty of opportunity to visit home if they were not already occupied in some task at the school.

Lucius had moved onto healers and potioners and was doing quite well in tracking down people they could use. The third task had gone off without a hitch, with Krum managing to be the craftiest of the bunch and pulling the win. Fleur came in second. Cedric, third, lived through the experience. The remainder lived, the purposely added champions, but had done nothing to distinguish themselves.

“We’re getting close to when he may move,” Voldemort said. “Perhaps a tracker on Fletcher?”

“Hm?” He looked up from the report he was reading. “Oh. Yes. Not a bad idea. We’ve only got a few days left before the next move. Guess we should be prepared to have to step out of one of the prep meetings for ‘a moment’. Suppose I could silently call a house-elf with a prepared message so we’d have the excuse. Er, oh. Okay. Elf with a message, I step out and shift over invisibly to see when exactly we need to get Fletcher in place, then return. Then after the meeting is over—again assuming we’re in one at the time—we can turn back and take care of that issue. And since I’d be there invisibly for only a short time it won’t cause any problems to be there twice.”

Voldemort narrowed his eyes in thought. “Are you capable of temporarily extending the power of the Cloak over me? Dumbledore might be addled at the time, but. . . .”
“Huh.” He bit his lip and shrugged. “Let’s find out.” He invoked the power of the Cloak for himself, then simply imagined it extending to cover his partner, not having any better ideas of how to test it. Thankfully it worked. He then let the image in his mind dissolve without changing his intention of covering Voldemort as well. The invisibility held. Ten minutes later it still held, so he dropped it. “I’d say that was a successful test. I mean, I already knew it could cover multiple people, but that was while it was still just a physical object, and while we were all much smaller.”

“It should be fine, then. I assume it dropped not because it hit some limitation but because you told it to.”

He nodded.

As it turned out they were not in a meeting when Dumbledore advanced on the Slytherin common room, making it simple for Harry to shift in. The moment the old man had figured out how to get the portrait open and actually started to he sent, ‘Tom, mark the time—now. He’s opening it.’ Then he shifted back and became visible again. “Okay. How long do you think we’ll need to go back? You’re doing the memory charms, so you’ll have a better idea of how much time we need.”

“To be safe, let’s assume two hours for that, plus extra time to get Fletcher. So, four, because Merlin only knows what might decide to go wrong and impede us.”

So back they went and Harry checked his tracker; Fletcher was skulking around in Knockturn Alley, which helped immensely. No one would think to report a kidnapping from there, assuming it was even witnessed. Fletcher was shifted to the Chamber of Secrets and he set about with the Elder Wand to alter the man’s features and physique. The face had to be perfect, but the physique merely needed to be an approximation. After all, it wasn’t as though Harry had made it a habit to parade past the headmaster in his pants, so the old man should only have a general idea to go on. He could have used polyjuice, he supposed, as Fletcher’s death would have locked in the change in appearance, but there was always the chance that someone—namely Dumbledore after he was no longer affected by the protections of the locket—might run some tests and discover the potion had been used, and further realize that he had killed some unknown and not actually Harry Potter.

Once he was done Voldemort moved in to begin the extensive alterations to the man’s mind, those to make him actually believe he was Harry for the relatively short amount of time it would be necessary, and suppressing his actual identity for that same time. They did a thorough search of the man, confiscating anything Harry would not have, including the man’s wand, and altered his clothing to resemble something Harry might reasonably wear after having been presumably kidnapped and possibly held captive for all these months.

If nothing else the changes, both mental and physical, should cause the man to move oddly, adding verisimilitude to the deception. They waited patiently until it was time to act, and then Harry shifted them all to just outside the Slytherin common room entrance. A quick hiss from Voldemort caused the door to open and Harry cast a compulsion on a now awake Fletcher. After that he quickly went invisible, extending the protection over his partner, and shifted them inside so they could watch.

Dumbledore had just removed the locket from the space behind Slytherin’s portrait, with James watching anxiously, and opened it, triggering the first layer of protection, when Fletcher stumbled into the room and down the steps into the immediate area of the common room. He tried to say “professor” and did, but it came out as something of a threatening growl.

James whipped around, too startled to go for his wand, while Dumbledore, under the influence and addled, already having his wand out due to his work in freeing the locket, spun in place and cast a stunner so robust that Fletcher was literally spun around from the intensity of it. He knocked into the back of a sofa, flipped over it, and landed on the coffee table. His back hit the edge so hard Harry
winced at the horrible cracking sound it caused. A closer look revealed that Fletcher’s eyes were open and glazed and blankly aimed at the ceiling. His chest was not moving.

James sucked in a noisy breath and covered his mouth with one hand, his gaze darting over to Dumbledore. “Oh, Merlin,” he breathed. “You just killed Harry.”

Dumbledore’s eyes were wild, a combination of the effects of the trap and the realization of his own actions. He stared at the body and began shaking his head slowly, denying the sight. “No,” he corrected quietly, the locket dangling from his fingers, “I just destroyed a Horcrux.”

That was apparently not quite good enough for James as he reached up to run both hands through his hair, but—“You’re right, of course. I lost sight of that for a minute. But we need to deal with this. Er, cover it up. Nobody aside from us can ever know what happened.”

Dumbledore eyed James for a moment, making Harry wonder if the old man was about to obliviate his sire, then raised his wand and transfigured the body into a small statuette. “Take that for the time being. We shall add it to our collection and it can be destroyed when all the others are.”

James nodded, clearly relieved that Dumbledore had made some sort of vaguely sensible pronouncement, and stepped over to gingerly retrieve the figure. Some quick work with his own wand fixed the damage to the table, and with that the two were ready to leave. On the way out James could be heard saying, “So just the diadem left.”

Harry shifted himself and Voldemort back to Grimmauld Place and dropped the invisibility. “That went even better than I expected,” he remarked.

Voldemort nodded, a faint smile on his lips. “Just enough befuddlement to not only help with the death, but enough to cause him to forget to question why getting it wasn’t worse. He’s left with a sense of being more clever than I with a distraction of accidentally killing another human being.”

“I have to wonder if he’s ever killed before,” he said. “He didn’t kill Gellert, and I’m not sure if anyone knows exactly who killed his sister. Something tells me he would not have revisited that memory later on in a pensieve to see for sure.”

“I don’t remember you sharing this with me,” Voldemort said slowly, so Harry gave him a precis of the event. “Ah, yes. I see why you would think that. Dumbledore fought against measures to give the aurors a wider choice of action during the war. While even I don’t think the old man is so incredibly naïve as to believe that everyone is capable of redemption, I know he wanted to keep options open on the off chance any of my people sought a second chance. The thought of him killing anyone except by accident is almost unthinkable.”

He snorted, a sound comprised part of amusement and part of exasperation. “Well. Snape did do a lot to advance the Light agenda in the second war, but he did a lot of evil, too, like murdering at least one Order member. That I can at least understand given his position at the time. But Dumbledore gave Draco chance after chance after chance, knowing the boy was supposed to kill him, probably knowing that Draco’s attempts caused near death experiences for innocents, and it wouldn’t surprise me all that much if he knew Draco had Rosmerta under the imperius.

“But no, even with that, and even with all the bigoted shit Draco spewed during school, not to mention plenty of others, he never once did anything that I was aware of to show these kids that decisions and actions have consequences. Instead of teaching them that they could go to him he was teaching them that they were free to do whatever the fuck they wanted and no one would say boo. And McGonagall as his deputy was equally as hands-off. Students knew that complaining got them nowhere because the staff, in general, would dismiss their complaints out of hand. Ah, hell, if I don’t
stop now I’ll spend the next hour ranting about the myriad faults of St Dumbledore,” he said with a shake of his head.

Voldemort gave him a rather understanding look before saying, “Yes, well. As Potter said, they’ve only one more to go. That means soon enough we can have our orchestrated little showdown to flummox the headmaster, and then you can move ahead with your plans for Potter’s freakishly bizarre death.”

“Mwua ha ha.”
They had just sent off the first family of emigrants when Saen popped in with the post. Harry quickly flipped through the meager offerings, handing a few envelopes over to Voldemort, when he noticed that one of them was from the goblins. More than a little curious he opened it and began to read, then looked up in surprise. “Flitwick wants a meeting.”

“Flitwick?” Voldemort replied skeptically.

“Yeah. Apparently his family amongst the Host has passed on a few morsels of information to him. He’s very interested in what they’ve had to say.” He nibbled his lower lip before adding, “Think we could get him as headmaster?”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Voldemort said reflectively. “He certainly has plenty of experience. Most of the people we’ve hired so far don’t.”

“And Flitwick could ride herd on them as an experienced educator,” he finished. “I wouldn’t doubt he has a lot of ideas about what not to do based on dealing with Dumbledore for so long. What do you think? Shall we go for it?”

Voldemort nodded. “Yes. Let’s see what happens.”

“Okay.” He checked his watch and said, “We have enough time before the next family for me to dash off a quick reply, so . . . .”

Fifteen minutes later Ambrose Dexter, his wife, and two children were being ushered into the room by Cael, along with two house-elves burdened with bulging satchels. Harry nodded a greeting, knowing Voldemort would generally never do so, and produced the linking book. “It’s up to you who goes first. You’ll be arriving at an interim location and I ask that you please keep your hands to yourselves until I join you. There are multiple links at the nexus and I need to direct you to the correct one. Understood?”

Dexter and his wife nodded, and Harry expected they would keep the kids in line. With that he set the book down and opened it to the linking image, and stepped back with a gesture toward it. Only a few minutes later he was in the nexus, Voldemort remaining behind with the book, and giving them a quick tour of the nexus set aside for non-goblins. Just minutes after that they all linked through to Ophiuchus and walked to the townhouse set aside for the Dexters.

“I trust this is suitable,” he said after urging them inside. “There is a floo connection for communication purposes, as promised, and it can still be used for travel if you really want to. Four bedrooms, the usual amenities, and a linking book to the nexus. But please be reminded that the book is protected,” he stressed. “And if any of you somehow manage to damage it despite that you’ll be paying a fine in order to get it replaced.”

Ambrose nodded absently while gazing around the entrance hallway. “And that was the public point for this part of town?”

“Correct. For linking and apparation. Once you’ve been up to the school you can get there either
way, to the courtyard set aside for it. Well, I’ll just let you get on with it. I’m sure you’re eager to get unpacked. For now, until things settle down, send a message to Barty Crouch if you need anything. He’s coordinating the initial subsidies, other duties aside.”

Dexter shuddered slightly, but nodded. “Of course. Thank you, on behalf of my family, for this chance.”

Harry nodded and exited, then shifted to the K’veer linking room and returned to Earth. “I wonder how long it’ll take for Flitwick to get back to us.”

“Hopefully soon, obviously,” Voldemort drawled. “The more quickly he can be installed the more quickly he can get a handle on the shape of the school. It will be easier in that there won’t be any silly hats sorting students or houses to create or contribute to a divisive atmosphere; and muggles are now irrelevant.”

“I guess it depends on just how close Flitwick is to his full-goblin kin.” He had a quick look at his watch and sighed quietly. “Incoming in ten minutes.”

’You have to admit, they were pretty clever to realize that they could say something to Flitwick,’ he sent as they were being escorted to Narok’s office, ‘on the strength of him being part goblin.’

‘True,’ Voldemort admitted. ‘I doubt it will result in any real problems, either. In that respect Flitwick is as bound to terms as his kin.’

Their escort waved them into the office and closed the door behind them. Harry’s gaze immediately honed in on Flitwick as he lowered his hood, but he directed his attention to Narok long enough for a greeting before taking a seat. It remained quiet until after Harry and his partner had fixed themselves tea, at which point he said, “Professor Flitwick. Lovely to see you again.”

The little man had had such a peculiar expression on his face the entire time, which finally smoothed out at his greeting. “I trust you are well.”

Harry grinned. “Oh yes. You? And please, allow me to introduce my partner, Lord Voldemort. I’m sure you’ve heard of him.”

Flitwick tossed a quick glance at Narok before saying, “Yes, I believe I have. I was not expecting. . . .”

‘Who we would be?’ Harry offered. ‘Yes, I can imagine that would be something of a shock. Now, you’ve indicated you’d be interested in our little enterprise. We’re prepared to offer you the role of headmaster of our school.”

Flitwick blinked in shock and looked at Narok again, who nodded calmly enough.

He decided to use his usual act and delved into his pocket, bringing out a selection of nibbles. Voldemort got a half dozen cherry Bakewell tarts, while savory onion and leek tarts were placed in front of Narok and Flitwick. For himself were the customary chocolate chip biscuits. “Wait!” he said suddenly. “I know what we need.” He looked at his partner. “Mwua ha ha.”

Voldemort groaned and palmed his face, much to Flitwick’s shock.

Harry concentrated for a few moments, then pulled a sphere from his pocket. Like the others he had used it was filled with a swirling mist. He set it on Narok’s desk and tapped it. Seconds later music
started. He jumped up and moved back behind the chair grouping, struck a pose, then started singing along as he danced in a generally uncoordinated mess of motion.

Voldemort just shook his head as he ate one of his tarts, looking anywhere but at Harry. Narok appeared to be incredibly amused. Flitwick, well . . .

“You might have heard I run with a dangerous crowd. We ain’t too pretty, we ain’t too proud, we might be laughing a bit too loud. Oh, but that never hurt no one,” Harry warbled in his best effort, slowly aging himself up and lengthening his hair to return to his now customary look. It was complete by the time the music faded out and Harry grinned like a loon. “That was fun. Gotta give the muggles that much. They make some seriously good music. The Weird Sisters are infants in comparison.”

“At least now I know one of the places you disappear to,” Voldemort said dryly, giving him a vaguely exasperated look. ‘I suppose that’s one way to break the ice.’

Harry nodded and resumed his seat, pocketing the sphere. “Hey, I need an intact music collection and I had a lot of free time on my hands when I lived with the muggles. Maybe I can start a club in Serpens. I could call it The Wasted Years.”

Voldemort gazed up at the ceiling, then looked at Flitwick. “Professor. As my exuberant partner mentioned, we are prepared to offer you headship at the school. While we have already done most of the hiring in terms of teaching staff we have yet to find someone, until now, who might suit for headmaster. You have decades of experience in education, plus having been the head of Ravenclaw and Deputy Headmaster. We believe you’re capable of not only thriving in the position, but also of guiding the staff. Many of them are people who greatly wished to go into teaching and had no particular outlet aside from tutoring positions, so they will need help in a formal classroom setting. Granted, I could do it myself, but I have far too many other things to be doing.”

“It would be nice if you could decide quickly, though,” Harry said. “We’ve already shuffled all of them over and they need a strong hand on the reins. I don’t doubt the Host has been helpful in explaining their position, as otherwise I can’t imagine why you would have wanted to speak to us. You’ve probably even seen memories of them being on Ophiuchus. You’re an intelligent man; you know we’re legit. I know, it sounds like I’m rushing you badly, but we have only so much time to give today. I can give you an hour or two, a visit to Ophiuchus, but . . .”

“But you’d need to be under vow,” Voldemort said quietly but firmly.

“In case I decide against this?” Flitwick asked just as quietly.

Harry shook his head. “No, more for when you’re on Earth. Even if you come take a look and say yes, you’d have to come back here to pack your things—quietly, preferably—and send a letter of resignation before returning to Ophiuchus.”

Flitwick nodded thoughtfully. “I’m aware that you’ve treated fairly with my kin, so yes, I would like to see for myself.”

“Great!” He turned to Voldemort and asked, knowing he would decline, “You coming along, or . . . ?”

“Only as far as the meeting room,” Voldemort responded. “I’ll keep the book safe and wait for your return.”

Harry nodded and pulled his hood up. “All right. Shall we?”
Ten minutes later they were at their little hole-in-the-wall meeting room. Harry turned away and produced the book, then set it down. He opened it and gestured. “After you.”

Flitwick pressed his hand to the image and disappeared, Harry following seconds later. “This, as you should know,” he said, “is a nexus. The public one, not the one set aside for the Host. The book we want is over here.” He strolled over to one of the alcoves and indicated the book for the school, which they had named Corvus Academy. Seconds later they were in the courtyard and Harry was leading his erstwhile professor inside. “It’s set up as a boarding school,” he remarked. “People are used to their children being gone most of the year, but I suppose it could be a day school. Or maybe where students could return home at the weekend so long as their assignments for the week were completed and turned in.”

Flitwick cleared his throat and said, “Mr Potter?”

“Yes?”

“Just how long has this been going on?”

“Which ‘this’ are you referring to?” he replied.

“Your partnership with the Dark Lord?”

“Oh, that.” He hummed. “Well, he tried to kill me more than a few times my first year, but we started the process of talking during the summer. He was more or less fully on board sometime during my second year.”

“Why?”

“Oh,” he said with a low chuckle, “you make that question sound so simple. To respond in kind let me say that a whole lot of people failed the child who became Voldemort, just as a whole lot of people failed me after I became the Boy-Who-Lived. We’re a lot alike. Birds of a feather and all that, don’t you know. And look what came of it.” He swept a hand out dramatically. “A whole new world, just for us, the magical peoples, and for the creatures, and the plants. No muggles, ever. No factories or strip mines or nuclear power plants.”

“And squibs?”

“What about them? They’re still a part of the magical world. Squibs are welcome. Squibs eventually produce those with free-flowing magic. Where else do muggle-born come from, after all. People have been throwing away their own kind for how many generations now? Due to shame? Rather than wising up and not breeding so closely? And then they have the presumption to bitch and moan about that magic finally blossoming again, probably because the couple involved both descended from those squibs? Idiots, the lot of them.”

He drifted to a stop and opened an ornate door, gesturing Flitwick in. “This is the headmaster’s office, by the way. Room for staff meetings. Private quarters.” He turned to face the smaller man directly. “What people don’t understand is that Voldemort is very much capable of being rational and reasonable. He’s capable of sharing power, though I doubt he would share it with anyone but me. Delegate to underlings? Sure.”

“And Dumbledore?” Flitwick looked genuinely curious.

Harry laughed and shook his head, stepping over to the desk long enough to pick up one of the parchments there. “Come now, professor. I know you were never a part of his little play group, but. . . . Without looking deeper I have no real idea just how accurate or skewed your view of the
man is. Maybe later, if you decide to head up this school, you and I can talk about Dumbledore and some of the things he’s done. But for now, let’s keep moving. I’ll show you a bit of town.”

As they walked around and Harry pointed various things out Flitwick came up with another question. “What if any of the people you hired object to a part-goblin headmaster?”

He snorted. “Unlikely to happen. Part of what we’ve been looking for is tolerance, even amongst the Death Eaters who are here or will be. If a person doesn’t fit the criteria I have we don’t talk to them. It’s something I insisted on from the start, even before we had a place to move to, just like the laws are intended to be fair regardless of race, with certain exceptions built in for unique abilities.”

“Such as?”

“This might have already come up in your talks with the Host. The examples I gave regarded veela and vampires. A veela who deliberately uses allure to break the law or a vampire who goes after the unwilling. If they’re immature that’s one thing, but an adult would see the full force of law. Let’s face it, allure is analogous to amormentia, and potions like that are illegal for a reason—or should be. It’s just another vector for rape, like that one muggle drug. For that matter, the vampire ability which allows them to hypnotize people can be badly misused.”

He handed over the parchment he had taken from the school. “This is a list of the subjects. If you take this on and have suggestions I am always open to hearing them, and, depending on what they are, quite possibly implementing them. I’ve long thought that it’s ridiculous that Hogwarts has no education for the muggle-born or muggle-raised on culture, etiquette, and so forth, that we were made to celebrate muggle holidays—things like that. So if you think of something I may have overlooked, well…”

Flitwick stopped walking so he could read through the list. When he looked back up he did not comment on it directly, but instead said, “I should like to point out, because it may have slipped your mind, that should my kin wish to depart Britain entirely, they could not due to the treaty in place with the ministry.”

Harry frowned at the little man in consternation. “You’re correct. I hadn’t thought of that. However, there are ways around it. We’d just need to arrange for the ministry to break the treaty.”

Flitwick chuckled at that. “I am tempted to ask a potentially stupid question, but considering all that I’ve learned in this very short amount of time I expect you can do a whole lot more than most are capable of, so arranging something of that magnitude would probably be easy for you.”

He grinned.

“Professor!” called someone from behind them, causing Harry to pivot. It was Jacob Collins. The man reached them and stopped, breathing a bit heavily. “Potter,” he said in greeting, then focused on Flitwick. “Good to see you again, sir, though I admit I wasn’t expecting it. What are the odds you’re here about the school, because we could really use your help. Someone needs to keep everyone on track and moving in the same direction.”

“I am considering it, yes,” Flitwick admitted.

“I’ll beg if you want!” Collins pleaded, somehow managing to look pathetic, sheepish, and obscenely excited at the same time.

Harry grimaced slightly and averted his gaze. “Ah, Collins, let the man make up his own mind. You’re reminding me a little too much of certain people I once knew and it’s distressingly icky.”
Collins blushed and looked down at his hands. “Well, I’ll let you get on with it. It was nice seeing you again, sir.”

Flitwick nodded and Collins scurried off. “I admit, a part of me expected to see Dark Arts on this list.”

Harry shook his head. “See, that’s part of the problem. While it is true that there are a number of Dark spells that are called so for good reason, people keep ignoring that plenty of Light spells are deadly. Education shouldn’t be about putting spells into convenient categories. It should be about making people aware that their intent is usually the deciding factor. Most people just don’t want to think that hard. They’ve spent most of their lives being taught to simply accept. I could kill a person with a painting spell.”

Flitwick adopted a thoughtful look, then slowly nodded. “Yes, I see where you’re going with this. Something tells me that the Offensive Magic course would draw from all currently accepted disciplines.”

He smiled, pleased. “Yes. And you saying that makes it even more clear to me that you’re the kind of person we want heading the school. Anyway, you’ll notice that the main shopping district is practically on the school’s doorstep, so even if the children do board they’ll have a treat fairly close by without having to hop in a carriage or link to it. We’re hoping to get craftspeople and merchants in here soon. Everyone will be subsidized until after we’ve got a fair amount of people moved in, so food and supplies won’t be an issue while the economy settles into some kind of pattern.”

“I had been wondering about that. There is nothing yet here to suggest that anyone has normal avenues.”

“Well, we have house-elves currently working the farms and we can always import for a while if necessary. But the sooner we’re self-sufficient the better. The only people visiting Earth will be myself and Voldemort; this is a one-way trip otherwise, and the only people so far given the opportunity to scope this place out without a definite commitment have all been of goblin heritage.”

“I suppose you could have approached the dwarves,” Flitwick mused. “They also have quite a reputation for construction.”

“True, but not for banking. We thought it was a fair trade to get both in exchange for the island. Besides,” he said, glancing around to make sure no one was nearby, then said in a conspiratorial whisper, “Your kin seemed almost turned on by the architecture we wanted them to base everything on. It was creepy, really creepy.”

Flitwick started giggling madly, his hands coming up to clutch at his stomach. “Oh my,” he said after a minute, finally getting himself back under control. “Something tells me that while the two of you are both probably quite loopy, you are and will remain the more personable of your partnership. I have decided to take you up on your offer, Mr Potter, though I suppose I should actually be asking about salary.”

Not long after Flitwick had done a runner and left McGonagall in a lurch Harry had made the rounds of every ministry worth visiting in order to buy up any available house-elves. Every last one of them, bar two, were sent on to Ophiuchus for Saen and Cael to supervise. Best of all, being house-elves, they could all speak any language Harry knew, which meant all of them. After all, what use was a house-elf to its master if they could not communicate? That relieved some of the burden and allowed him to move on to other things, such as the interviews of the people Lucius kept finding for them.
It was looking like the absolute earliest they would be able to make a mass move would be during the winter holiday, and even then it would probably make more sense to wait until the summer following.

“It’s better to do this properly rather than rush things,” Voldemort opined, and Harry had to agree with him. “A slow but steady leak from the populace here might be noticed, but it’s very likely anyone paying attention will assume these people departed for another country. And for some reason that reminds me—is Black even yet out of the hospital? Has he noticed huge piles of gold are missing?”

Harry shook his head. “Nah, they’ve still got him in there. Takes a while to try to fix over a decade’s worth of mental damage. It didn’t matter so much with some of the Death Eaters because they weren’t exactly right in the head to begin with and could bear up better. That said, we’ll still have to isolate the ones we spring for some time. Mind you, it’s not like I ever called for a pause in the war last time so I could inquire about that very issue with you, but I expect given how long it was before anything super nasty happened they had five or six months to recover.

“I’ve actually wondered about that. I mean, being in Azkaban, dementors roaming around. What would the average Death Eater have for shit memories? You doling out another round of crucio? Of course, I’d expect someone like Bellatrix to be conflicted because she struck me as the type to enjoy pain—certainly as inflicted upon her by you.” He tapped his lower lip with one finger thoughtfully.

Voldemort’s gaze dropped to the floor. “You have no idea,” he muttered almost too quietly for Harry to hear.

He smiled, almost gently. “People with power attract loonies.”

“That says a lot about you,” Voldemort riposted.

He smiled more widely. “Yes, it does. I have you for a friend.”

Voldemort growled softly.

Harry chortled and moved to sit next to his friend on the loveseat, angled to face him. “I know, it’s terrible when you have a friend willing to tease you. We’re getting much closer with the second tier, so that means supply lines will be evening out soon. The craftspeople can build up a stock. The farmers can get their herds and fields in order. The shops arranged and ready to go.”

“We’re still missing a publisher,” Voldemort reminded him.

“Yes. But Lovegood might be able to handle that aspect. He knows how to run a printing press, so if we got him extras, and if he could recommend staff to help him, he could oversee things and still be able to produce his paper.”

Voldemort eyed him for a moment, then said, “Why don’t we just go visit them now and work that out? Talking about it is all very well, but it’s close to meaningless until we have some sort of agreement worked out.”

He nodded. “You’re right. That would be more productive. Okay, let’s go.”

Five minutes later they were walking along the beaten path toward the Rook. They had just made it to the region of the front door when it opened to reveal Luna. She was wearing a vague smile on her face. “Harry,” she said brightly. “Harry’s friend of indeterminate name. Please come in.”

And so they did. Harry only vaguely remembered the interior of the house, but he knew enough to
realize they were being led to the kitchen. Luna waved them into seats and grabbed an already prepared tea tray. That went onto the table and she quickly poured out cups and doctored them with the correct mix of sugar and milk for each of them, not bothering with the usual bit about asking their preferences. Harry just smiled and shook his head slightly.

“So, Harry, you’ve decided to come speak with me and daddy about publishing,” she said, gazing at a point midway between him and Voldemort.

“Of course,” he replied, reaching for a lemon tart.

“Well, daddy has a list of people who could help, though he’s not quite sure why he made it up. But if an extra press or three should happen to fall into his possession that would be excellent. The biggest problem would be the paper supply, as I don’t think you have anyone yet who knows how to make it.”

Voldemort frowned.

“Even daddy didn’t think of that, though he did include people who know how to bind books,” she continued. “Also, I realize it’s going to be a while yet, but you should consider having a crew of muggle-born or half-bloods that aren’t quite suitable and yet can be trusted to keep an eye on those raised in the muggle world. You know, for abusive situations. You’re very powerful, but it would stretch you too far to do so personally.”

He arched a brow at Voldemort. ‘She has a good point there.’

‘Yes. And I see what you mean about her. It’s almost refreshing.’

“That I don’t automatically cower in blind fear before you?” Luna asked, now watching a bumblebee buzzing around the room.

Voldemort scowled at her; Harry laughed and asked, “Do you have any suggestions for a paper maker?”

“Hm?” She looked at him directly. “Yes.” She reached into a pocket and produced a slip of parchment, then slid it over. “Do you think perhaps daddy and I can have a holiday on the other side? I know I can’t live there yet, but it wouldn’t hurt for daddy to get everything set up. We don’t get a lot of visitors here.”

“. . . And he can transition to creating the Quibbler there, and I arrange for the usual delivery on this side?”

“Or he has privileges to come and go to maintain the façade, at least until it’s time to move for real,” she countered, holding out her hand so the bee could land. “You’re such a cutie, yes you are,” she cooed to it. It buzzed its wings and took off, her gaze following it. “That would present problems, I realize, but it would look a bit odd if he wasn’t seen occasionally when I was still out in the open. He could set up a mail drop to handle that side of things.”

He arched a brow again, watching Voldemort in his peripheral vision, not speaking, not even thinking at the man.

“I think we can come up with an applicable vow,” Voldemort said into the silence. “Having Lovegood there already means he could keep the people of Ophiuchus informed of changes as they happen. It would also mean he has access to the—”

Luna jumped up and clapped once in delight. “Oh, you wonderful men!” she cried. “Daddy will be
so thrilled.” Then she paused, frowning slightly. “Maybe too thrilled. I’ll just have to get him to promise a few things to me. We might lose track of him for ages if I don’t, and I can’t let him have all the fun.”

Voldemort sighed almost soundlessly. “Of course, Miss Lovegood. And where is your father?”

“Oh, he’s at the press. I told him he needn’t be here to begin with.”

“Is he like you?” Harry asked curiously.

She met his intense gaze and shrugged. “Sort of? Not exactly. I think I’m a combination of my mother and father in that respect. Perhaps if mum and dad had switched their talents she would be alive right now.”

He nodded, remembering she had died when Luna was nine, from an accident.

“No, Harry,” she said suddenly, before he even had a chance to begin to think the thought. “No.”

He shrugged. “Your choice, for or against. You know it only matters to me because it matters to you, one way or the other.”

She smiled, her eyes shining. “I know. You’re a singular friend.”

He gave her a slow wink and replied, “Now, how about you find your father and we take you on a holiday?”

Once she was out of the room on her errand Voldemort heaved a sigh and said, “That girl is very, very strange. But also devoted to you.”

Harry smiled at him. “Because I’m a true friend to her. I’ve defended her even before I ‘met’ her, simply because what they were doing was wrong. They merely think she’s crazy, which is absurd. They have and had no idea the psychotic one was always me.”

“They being the other students in Ravenclaw, I assume.”

“Yes. Had I not stopped it word would have spread. Malicious gossip. And then far too many would have treated her badly, all because she can see things they cannot. Still, I suppose many people would be afraid of one who isn’t blind. One who sees too much.”

Voldemort got a look on his face that made Harry realize the man was thinking about Derek in some part. ‘Yes, well, thank you for deliberately not seeing too much.’

He just knew Voldemort would never likely say words like that out loud.
Xenophilius and Luna were pleased to lay claim to one of the estates Barty had marked out, but for the time being they were staying in one of the townhouses. Mr Lovegood had already provided a vague description to the goblins of what sort of rooms he would like, but had asked that they design something “whimsical”. Harry had to wonder what would come of that considering that “whimsical” was the last thing he would ever accuse a goblin of being. The two were also excitedly making plans to attract certain creatures to their estate, though Xeno had spent a fair amount of time outlining to Harry what would be necessary for not only the Quibbler but also printing books.

Harry had every intention of just “stealing” many of the existing ones and using them as templates for Lovegood. Proceeds would go toward materials, salaries, an additional cut for Xeno, and the rest straight into the treasury. That is, unless, one of the actual authors were to come with them, in which case it would remain their intellectual property. If he thought he could do it himself he would write new books for many of the subjects. And on that thought he turned to his partner and asked if he had any intention of writing some.

“. . . Perhaps,” Voldemort said slowly. “As it is, we’ve already provided the staff with an outline for each year and chosen the books from what’s available already. As to your friend’s suggestion about an oversight committee, I am not against it, but I should point out that even if the parents are abusive and we take the children. . . . Things have changed from when I was a child. Muggles take far more notice now of births. The average wizard would be unable to erase all signs that these children ever existed.”

He sighed. He knew that very well. Computers, digital cameras, CCTV, governments keeping records in multiple formats—none of that was conducive to snatches. “Yes, but it might be possible to create fake bodies that appear to have died due to the abuse. We get the children and the abusers may well end up in prison. I know the muggles do autopsies, though, so they’d have to be very good fakes. That right there would bypass almost every obstacle, and so long as we were alerted I could shift in long enough to effect a switch. I’m willing to consider setting up an oversight committee, but until we have people living here who can actually care for any children we take, there’s no point in getting too worked up about it.”

“All right. Then let’s talk about removing my other followers from Azkaban. They’ve been there more than long enough.”

“Sure. I’ve never been to Azkaban, have you?”

Voldemort favored him with an exasperated look. “Of course I have. I did occasionally have to break followers of mine out during the last war.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “So sorry,” he drawled. “I understood the first time around that nobody had ever been broken out until Sirius did it, though they didn’t realize for some time that Barty Snr had gotten his son out well before that. Please give me a memory? If I know where to go, I can shift us there. And once we know who we’re rescuing we can arrange for doppelgangers. Or just steal them, whatever. Depends on whether or not we want people to know something is up. I know from before
that Fudge used to do inspections.”

Voldemort looped a memory free and offered it up, so Harry grabbed it with his wand and assimilated the silvery strand. “Hn. Okay. When do you want to go?”

“Tonight.”

He nodded. “Fine.”

“Let’s provide bodies. We can polyjuice people and kill them, leave them in their place. I’m sure they’ll find it very peculiar that so many Death Eaters all died at the same time, but that can’t be helped.”

“So similar to what I did when I stole Bella and the others.”

Voldemort arched a brow inquiringly.

“I did a permanent transfiguration on some criminals and wiped most of their minds. They just sit there and whimper. I assume the aurors assume the dementors finally broke those prisoners.”

“That would be fine, too,” Voldemort said with a shrug. “It’s not like anyone is going to check if they’re magical or not. They’re only interested in when they die so they know when to haul the bodies out and toss them into the sea.”

Harry wrinkled his nose, then produced his wand and cast the patronus charm. He stepped back in surprise when it was not Prongs, but rather a serpent—a basilisk, in fact. “Okay, I wasn’t expecting that change, but it makes sense. Message to Luna Lovegood: We’re heading back for a while to take care of some business. If you need anything get in touch with Barty.” He nodded and the serpent slithered off through the air.

“Your previous patronus?”

He frowned and shook his head. “It was my father’s animagus form: a stag. Needless to say I’m glad it’s changed. Shall we?”

A few minutes later they were at № 12, lounging in the library. They would leave at midnight to check the condition of the imprisoned Death Eaters. They could always steal murderers from a muggle prison to use as doppelgangers if he had trouble finding enough options wandering the streets of London.

‘Harry, while you were off-planet Dumbledore and James went after and obtained the Ravenclaw Horcrux,’ Derek said.

He blinked. “Well I suppose that makes a certain kind of sense. Magic is fantastic and all, but considering where we were. . . . Thank you, Derek.” He looked at Voldemort and relayed the message, adding, “I’ll just have to pop in soonish and check to see if we can get along with taunting the ever-loving fuck out of them with a bit of the old ultra violence. But I think we need to speak with the goblins again. I think we should talk about breaking the treaty, because once I make off with the Potter money, they’d be left to blame. Getting everything to happen at once will take serious planning. Kidnapping my mother and sisters, killing James, absconding with all that money, the goblins in Britain.”

“Agreed. Since we have time before we can head to Azkaban, let us go now.”

Narok had to know it had been coming ever since Harry had jokingly talked of robbing the bank
blind—or more accurately, the ministry. As it was he sighed and tried hard to suppress the smirk threatening the corner of his mouth. “The timing would be very tight.”

“Yes,” Voldemort agreed. “But we have access to a time turner, among other things.”

One of Narok’s brows shuffled up in mild confusion, then lowered. “I’m sure you realize that our volume of traffic is much lower in the evening and overnight. So long as we can agree on a date the Host can arrange for all goblins to be on Ophiuchus prior, with only the absolute essential staff here for the event. With you arranging for a break in the treaty at the right time we can far more easily evict any customers present and close the bank in response. In the meantime we can come up with something suitable in terms of a press release. Still, I must wonder, how will this affect those you have yet to recruit?”

Harry and Voldemort exchanged a look.

“Okay,” Harry said. “The money I plan to take—that which prompted us to come visit regarding the treaty—would technically, at that point in time, be under the control of an adult. Said adult could conceivably have come in here personally to empty out the account, even though it would be me doing so. You play along on that point and there wouldn’t technically be anything the ministry could do. We could save the treaty issue for later.”

Narok nodded. “And this mysterious adult?”

He shrugged carelessly. “Lily Potter. James Potter is going to suffer a freakishly bizarre accident sometime in the future, you see, and since she can’t stand my twin and wants nothing more than to get away from her husband and keep her daughters protected—well, I plan to help her.”

“Kidnap her, you mean,” Narok said dryly.

Harry smiled. “Why yes; and make sure she and my sisters have money. As it stands, James has blocked her from accessing the Potter vault, so she has to go crawling to him if she wants money to buy anything. I refuse to let it stay that way, or let my idiot twin take control of all that wealth.”

Narok nodded again. “When it does come up we’ll be prepared. Just let us know before you force the treaty to be broken.”

“Naturally,” Harry said agreeably, then stood. A few minutes later he and Voldemort were back at the house. “So much for that,” he commented. “But just as well he pointed out that wrinkle.”

“You realize you practically shouted at him—and Ragnok, by extension—that you arranged accidents for two goblins that day,” Voldemort pointed out, the corner of his mouth quirking up.

“Er, no, I hadn’t,” he admitted with a vague pout. “What’s done is done. That little tidbit of news should only serve to reinforce our earlier message of not fucking with us.”

Voldemort got a peculiar look on his face and Harry was almost tempted to peek. He was distracted from such contemplation when his partner said, a sudden faint malicious smile gracing his lips, “We could use Barty Crouch Snr as one of the doppelgangers.”

“Oh. Okay. It’s not like we necessarily need him anymore, and it would be a deliciously nasty thing to do to him.” He smiled, showing entirely too many teeth, and began chuckling softly at the idea. “We could also get rid of Rowle and Macnair.”

Some hours later he shifted them to Azkaban, then ceded ‘control’ to Voldemort as he knew his way around. He knew there were at least twelve Death Eaters his partner wanted to rescue; there were
others the man was not so certain of, but all would be checked. Voldemort led them quietly to each cell of importance, pausing long enough for Harry to be able to check them—it was faster that way, after all—and eventually indicated that they were done. Harry took Voldemort’s wrist and shifted them back to the house, then immediately grabbed some parchment and his fountain pen so he could jot down his findings.

“Fourteen?” Voldemort asked.

“Yes. The others were either completely messed up or unsuitable,” he replied, sliding the list over. On it were the following names: Antonin Dolohov; Sydelle Galvan; Rava Jansky; Frasher Kozyra; Rabastan Lestrange; Rodolphus Lestrange; Euphrates Melkanson; Nigel Mulciber; Bryana Pyke; Augustus Rookwood; John Travers; Yuhidu Wallander; Keiran Yaxley; and Faina Yoss.

“All right. So, ten males and four females. Shall we go trolling through London to find the bodies we need, then?”

He was, he admitted, quite admiring of just how easily Harry shifted them to the seedy underbelly of London after taking care of Barty Snr, Rowle, and Macnair, and of how easily his partner could find candidates just by staring at them. He took care of stunning the targets and portkeying them to the meeting room they normally used for interviews. When the last was sent they returned and began getting them ready, Harry by altering their features, and him by obliviating large portions of their memories. Harry then shifted him to Azkaban, to the first cell, then left long enough to bring in the first substitute. Spells ensured that clothing was swapped (and, indeed, levels of hygiene, or lack thereof) and after moving to the next cell, his partner would start over again, this time shifting the rescued and stunned Death Eater back with him.

The ministry would probably never realize what they had done.

Back at the meeting room Harry produced a linking book and Voldemort went on ahead. He called a house-elf to fetch Barty for him and waited a bit impatiently. Part of him just wanted all of this to be over with, so they could get on with watching what happened to the Light, but even so, the journey was interesting, not to mention the company of his partner. Barty slid into the room a minute later and bowed.

“Be right here on standby. We’re sending through your fellows from Azkaban,” he ordered, idly wondering what would happen if he were to charm the floor so that it still looked polished, yet would prevent sliding—would people like Barty in their haste to answer his call then faceplant?

“Yes, my lord,” Barty said promptly. “Are they awake, or. . . ?”

“Unconscious. We will follow the last one. Just be here to keep an eye on them.” He turned and made for the linking room. Ten minutes later he was back, eyeing the untidy prone gathering. Barty had thoughtfully moved each one out of the way as they arrived. Harry arrived all of thirty seconds behind him and chortled for some reason, then skipped over to Barty and handed him a small package.

He summoned another elf and asked about the readiness of the room he had requested, then told it to gather up nine other elves to help transport his minions. After it popped away he levitated one of the bodies at random, absently noticing that Barty was having raptures over whatever was in the package, and headed off.

When they grouped up again he saw that Barty was munching on a Jaffa cake as he directed his
Death Eater onto a bed; he rolled his eyes, but truly, he could not fault Harry for his kindness, or even fondness for the blond—just so long as that was all it was. As soon as all of them were laid out he woke them up and waited.

Rookwood was the first to become marginally coherent and seemed almost unerringly to seek him out in the room. The man tried to get up so he could bow, but Voldemort waved him down.

“Welcome back, Augustus. You are safe.”

Harry walked over and peered at the man closely, then said slowly, “You seem to be all right. Think you can keep anything down? Maybe some soup?”

Like Barty had been, Rookwood seemed confused and looked to his lord. Voldemort nodded faintly, and Augustus looked back at Harry and said hoarsely, “Yes.”

Harry nodded and summoned Cael. “Bring enough chicken broth for all of them, maybe some crackers, and water.”

“Right away, master,” Cael said and vanished.

Harry helped Augustus sit up, saying, “We can get you all properly cleaned up soon enough. For now let’s just get a little something in you.”

Rookwood still seemed confused, but possibly simply because he had no idea who this man was who was being so solicitous. Voldemort repeated his words to each of his people as they became aware enough to comprehend, and Harry made sure they had food. Selwynn was called in to do a rudimentary assessment of their health and write up a list of potential potions required, though as Lucius had managed to steer more than a few people to them for the hospital it was only an interim measure.

Harry pulled Barty off to the side and said, “Okay, the usual deal. You’re riding herd, but obviously Selwynn will be helping, and the elves. Get someone here from the hospital if necessary. If you can coax blueprints out of any of them, great. I expect they’ll all be a bit loopy for a while—stop snickering, damn it. I didn’t mean my kind of loopy. Keep that up and I won’t bring you more cakes.”

Barty ducked his head, shoulders still shaking, and nodded. “Of course, Harry.”

“You’re lucky I like you, Barty,” Harry said with some amount of exasperation.

“I know, truly I do. Considering how effectively you cursed Jugson I should hate to ever get on your bad side.”

Harry nodded. “Let us know through the usual channels if one of us is needed.”

‘Let’s go,’ he sent. Harry nodded again and moved to join him. Together they walked to their common area and took seats. It was only then he said, “So we can move forward with Dumbledore, and then Potter.”

“Yes. Lord knows I’d like to get our tasks in the UK over and done with. I love my home country, but at the same time I despise it. A bunch of whiny, entitled, back-stabbing idiots run the place.”

“Mm. Well, I’m for bed. I’ll see you in the morning.”

At breakfast Harry gave him a peculiar look and said, “How about we do a practice duel?”
A what? “For what purpose?”

“For when we go surprise the pixies out of Potter and Dumbledore,” Harry explained cheerfully. “It can’t hurt for you and I to have an all-out duel—I’m sure Derek will step in if one of us actually gets hurt—and then we’ll both be at least somewhat familiar with each other’s styles. Even better, we could have it in front of your minions. All any of them have ever really seen me do is crucio someone and they have no idea why the hell I’m your partner.”

He could feel the corners of his mouth droop down as he considered the idea. It was true none of them had a clue, and also true that he had no idea just how skilled Harry was. Realistically they were going to have to decide just what kind of spells they would use against the old man and Potter, so as not to actually kill them. Maybe they could stun Potter in some way so he could only watch helplessly, in delicious agony at being unable to assist the man he so admired. “All right,” he said. “It’s a good idea. We can get everyone assembled to watch, and pound it into their heads that we’re unkillable. Never a bad idea. But afterward I suggest we sit down and talk about how we’ll handle the real duel.”

Harry nodded, a smirk forming, then returned his attention to his breakfast.

Voldemort rolled his eyes at his partner’s continuing obscene obsession with bacon and focused on his own food. An utterly absurd thought entered his head, causing him to wonder what would happen if he were to wear bacon-scented cologne. Would Harry jump him? His gaze flickered over to rest on his partner’s face for a split second. He had very much enjoyed what little they had done together, but that was the thing—it had been very little. He was unused to this uncertainty when it came to base needs, perhaps because Harry was no simple warm body. He was shaken from his contemplation when Harry spoke again.

“I can’t decide if I should be pretending you’re Dumbledore or Remus.”

His brow slid up in mild confusion. “I thought Remus was just spineless.”

“Oh, he is, but that’s not what frosts my cookies. See, back then, my cousin—I forget the exact relationship—Tonks was completely in love with the man for some reason. Obviously she was also a sufferer of the Black insanity. Anyway, she eventually got him into a relationship, despite his customary whining, poor me routine, and eventually they married. She got pregnant. It was around then that Remus came to me at the house and asked to come with us on our Horcrux hunt. He was still rabbiting on about not being worthy or whatever, or maybe he was just so spineless that he crumbled under her assault. Doesn’t matter. He was trying to abandon his pregnant wife to go on a potentially lethal journey. And then later, the both of the idiots participated in the big blowout battle at the end and died, leaving behind my godson Teddy as an orphan. He wouldn’t even stay behind to protect his child, or demand that Tonks did, so that he would have one parent at least. I was so disgusted.”

There were some really pathetic people on Dumbledore’s side it seemed. “How about you imagine me as Remus or Potter and I imagine you as Dumbledore.”

Harry glanced up momentarily and then nodded. “Okay. Derek confirms he’ll keep us from any permanent consequences should we nail each other. The same for the confrontation. We’re good to go.”

An hour later they were standing about twenty feet apart in a very large room they had yet to designate for anything. Up above them, in the gallery which encircled the room, were the Death Eaters. Some of those rescued from Azkaban had to be helped there and even propped up so they could watch easily enough, and all of them looked fairly excited. They were high enough up that the
chances of any of them being hit was next to none, and there was no particular reason for either of
them to aim so high to begin with.

Harry grinned at him and produced a mist-filled sphere, tapped it with his wand, and threw it
upward. It hung there, well out of reach, and started blaring muggle music. “Shall we, dear boy?”

For a moment he felt a spike of white-hot anger at the use of Dumbledore’s favorite appellation, but
he relaxed almost immediately and smiled back. Harry had said all-out, and he knew a killing curse
would be ineffective, so he started things off with an organ rotting curse. Harry laughed as he
skipped out of the way and retaliated with what he suspected was a blood boiling curse. Naturally,
he moved before it hit.

They battled it out for an hour, frequently using short-jump apparition to try to get the upper hand,
though Harry had a tendency to dance his way around to the music. He was honestly impressed,
almost awed, by how incredibly well Harry dueled and the sheer abundance of spells he knew from
having become Death’s Master. It was . . . sexy. Half way through Harry started laughing; it seemed
he was enjoying himself immensely. In return, he found it hard to prevent a smile from coming to his
face due to his own enjoyment. Oh, magic, in all its glory, to be used so fluidly, like a joyous
extension of his soul—it was exhilarating. Merlin help him, it was fun.

‘As much fun as I’m having,’ Harry sent, ‘I think that’s enough for now, yes?’

He nodded and aimed his wand at the floor, while Harry retrieved his orb and shut off the music.
“We should do that more often,” he said with a grin. Then he looked up into the gallery and waved
his hand dismissively as he called, “Show’s over!” He walked over to Harry and slung an arm
around his shoulders, gently guiding him away. He almost stopped in surprise when the sound of
applause came to him, but continued on nevertheless. “I guess they’re impressed.”

“I guess so,” Harry replied. “So, we have to plan this out, to make it look like we’re trying to kill, yet
somehow not quite managing it. I know Dumbledore is an excellent dueler if last time is anything to
go by.”

“And I think we ought to keep Potter out of it. I think it would be both hilarious and cruel to make it
so he can only watch.”

Harry chortled and nodded. “Definitely. I suppose we can sort of wing it at first, go kind of slow, to
see just how good he really is, then speed things up a bit if necessary. There can be a whole lot of
near misses, but some of the less important stuff can get through. Though I wonder . . . If I mostly
stay out of it, ostensibly keeping guard on Potter to make sure he can’t interfere, I wonder if
Dumbledore would take a pot shot at me.”

“Well, we can always find out,” he said with a shrug. “If he does it will show something else ugly
about his nature.”

“Oh. Oh my,” Harry said, angling his head to aim a nasty smile his way. “I have an idea.”

By the time they were done eating lunch they had more or less fleshed out their plans for the
encounter. Harry adopted a look of concentration while chasing down the last few chips on his plate,
then said, “I think Elphias Doge. He’s part of the original Order, Dumbledore’s age, trusts the idiot,
and we could arrange with a compulsion for him to not only stumble over us but send a panicked
message to the old man to come deal with the situation.”

That evening after dinner Voldemort did the unthinkable and spelled himself to smell like bacon, but
subtly. It wasn’t long before Harry started inhaling rather more obviously than usual, his nostrils
flaring, and eventually migrated to sit beside him, a curious smile on his face. “May I ask, my dearest friend, why you have decided to wear such an unusual, er, cologne?”

“Is it?” he asked innocently.

“I do believe you’re trying to tempt me,” Harry asserted.

“Am I?” he replied, leaning closer.

Harry leaned in as well, that funny smile still on his face. “I wonder if you taste as good as you smell.”

“Perhaps you should find out,” he suggested, his brows flirting upward, then reached up to wrap a hand around the back of Harry’s neck and pull him closer. Their lips met and parted, tongues met and slid across each other.

Harry pulled back a bit and looked him dead in the eye. “I think I’d like to learn the rest of it.”

‘Okay,’ he sent. ‘Potter and Dumbledore are having a little meeting about you and they’ve barely started. You put on your Voldemort face and I’ll go toss a compulsion at Doge. I’ll join you in just a minute.’

‘I’ll be waiting.’

Harry activated his listening charm and shifted away to where his tracking charm told him Doge was. After a quick spell on the man he shifted away to join Voldemort, wearing his Yuki form. The two of them began battling it out, managing to look deadly serious in their fake attempts to kill each other. Doge showed up minutes later, squeaked, and apparated out.

‘Hold,’ he sent, his wand tip dropping to aim at the ground. He heard a patronus arrive for Dumbledore with a panicked message, telling the old man and Potter exactly where Voldemort was dueling with an unknown man of obviously Asian descent.

“We’ve got to go!” James insisted.


Yuki raised his wand and nodded to Voldemort, then started in again. Several minutes later of trying hard and managing to keep his enjoyment hidden, Potter and Dumbledore appeared. They immediately assumed that Yuki was against Voldemort and came to his aid, and were subsequently very surprised when Yuki slid to one side and dropped James with a series of spells, then dragged him over to be propped against a tree.

Voldemort, in all his snake-faced glory, turned to face Dumbledore, his eyes glowing a sullen red. “Is there some particular reason you decided to interrupt our exercise duel?” he asked, then sent a what Yuki knew was an overpowered stinging hex at the man in chastisement.

Dumbledore actually looked surprised for a moment, but quickly rallied and began sending spells at the Dark Lord, spells, he noted, of a non-lethal variety. He almost rolled his eyes. The whole point was for the old man, having dealt with all the Horcruxes and being in a position to render the Dark Lord’s reign over, to try and to realize that Voldemort could not be killed. Moron. He stood a bit off to the side, away from Potter, just in case the old man should go ahead and take that potshot at him, and let his eyes glow the sickly green of the killing curse.
He was pleased to note that his partner was doing an excellent job of making it appear that Dumbledore was doing well in just barely avoiding being hit by any of the presumably lethal curses being sent at him. Oh, Voldemort had managed to do quite a bit of damage to the old man’s ridiculously colourful robes, but that said much about the man’s skill and finesse. Dumbledore finally began to get serious, sending more than his usual pathetic incarceration-type spells, and the glow in Voldemort’s eyes increased, the only sign of his amusement.

“Having fun down there?” Yuki asked Potter quietly, a faint smirk showing. “You must really suck if I could take you down that fast.”

Potter was distracted from the duel and got a look of indignation on his face. The gag Yuki had spelled onto him prevented him from speaking, but not from making muffled noises to go along with his expression.

“Oh, I agree,” Yuki said cheerfully. “The old man there should have spent more time teaching you rather than basking in your unconditional reverence. You’d think a man of his advanced age would know better, but I guess it takes all kinds. Delusional leaders, delusional minions. Honestly.”

Several minutes later it happened. Dumbledore got frustrated enough to cast a fire whip and lash Voldemort with it. His partner simply laughed, unscathed, and broke Dumbledore’s left arm in retaliation. “Is that the best you can do, old man?” Voldemort taunted, then threw a killing curse at him. More taunts followed, becoming more and more derogatory.

Ice; nothing. Wind; nothing. Earth; nothing. Dumbledore finally stepped over his self-imposed line and aimed a killing curse at the Dark Lord. The old man’s jaw dropped when it had absolutely zero effect other than to make Voldemort laugh again. “What?” he said. “Did you think destroying my Horcruxes meant anything at all? I felt my soul stitch itself back together as you did so. And I found another, better way to immortality, old man!”

Dumbledore had, for a split second, a look of despair in his eyes. He then apparated to James, grabbed him, and apparated them away.
“Can’t be too careful with your company. I can feel the devil walking next to me.” — Murray Head, One Night in Bangkok

“What the hell!” James said.

“I don’t know,” Dumbledore said wearily, shaking his head. “I have no idea how he could have protected himself against even the killing curse.”

“How the hell are we supposed to defeat him? He even admitted we got his Horcruxes.”

‘They’re stumped,’ he sent, then settled in to listen to quite a bit of useless dithering around. Potter looked almost betrayed by his mentor’s lack of knowledge, or progress on this conundrum. Eventually he got bored and shifted back to Voldemort, who had returned his features to normal. “Useless, both of them.”

“But we like them useless.”

He smiled. “True. You were very impressive, by the way. I know just how much skill it takes to judge things so finely.” He squeezed Voldemort’s wrist briefly, warmly. “Now we get to set up an even more fun thing!”

“How long do you want to wait?”

“Oh, not too long. Maybe a week. There are some things I need to take care of first. Want to come with?”

Voldemort nodded so Harry shifted them to the linking room and linked through to K’veer. After that they went to the new bank and were immediately ushered off to the office of Ragnar, Narok’s brother.

“What can I do for you, gentlemen?”

“I need three accounts set up,” Harry said. “A main vault for my mother, then trust vaults for my two sisters. I will take care of getting the money there, but I need them ready for that and need to see the insides. I’ll take possession of the keys in the interim so I have them ready to give to her.”

Ragnar looked the slightest bit uncomfortable at that, but nodded. “That will be easy enough to set up. I can have things ready for you by tomorrow. Perhaps 10 o’clock we could meet again?”

Harry smiled. “Sounds fine. Thank you.” From there he hunted down Barty to get a listing of town homes in the city, and chose one based on the requirements he had in mind. “All right. Mark that one off as occupied, then. We’ll go take care of the warding and see about furnishings. Thanks, Barty.” Shortly thereafter they were standing in front of a town home not all that far from the shopping district. Inside was a fairly typical layout, with four bedrooms (each with its own en suite bath), a kitchen, parlor, dining room, library or study, and a guest loo, as well as a tiny front garden and a much larger one at the back. It should certainly be more than enough for his mother and siblings. He and Voldemort split up and began carving the necessary anchoring runes, then converged on the keystone to set up the parameters and create the linkage. When he did deliver his family to the house
he would complete the keying; for the time being it was only himself and Voldemort allowed access.

“I wonder what kind of furniture I should get her?” he muttered.

Voldemort took a few steps back and shuddered theatrically. “I am absolutely not the right person to help with that.”

“Christ.” Harry rolled his eyes. “I’m thinking of what size beds, stuff like that. I suppose I can just get the same for all the bedrooms, with neutral bedding. Same with the rest of the house. She can always change the colours herself.”

Voldemort nodded. “Sounds reasonable.”

“I’m going to think about it some more, go look at some shops in London,” he said, eyeing the stone walls.

“Ah, then I think I shall turn my attention to other things,” Voldemort replied. “If I go there for some reason I will leave a message with the elves to that effect.”

“Okay. I’ll be back whenever.” He shifted to the linking room and returned to Earth, to London, to track down some furniture shops. He eventually decided on the frames he wanted and accoutrements, basic gear for the kitchen, furniture for the other rooms, and so forth, and had a clerk give him a total for the lot. “All right. I’ll be back shortly. You have all of this in stock, correct?”

“Yes, sir,” the clerk assured him.

“Right. Back in a bit.” He swiftly left, first to get the money he would need (a Gringotts teller was helpful in converting the funds), and then to purchase a toy delivery van. In back of the store he cast a few wards and expanded the toy to full size and opened the back. Inside he found the same clerk and pointed out where his vehicle was so other workers could begin loading and stopped at the till to pay, forking over a hefty amount. After that he supervised the loading, making sure everything he had purchased was included, then thanked them. The moment they were gone he reduced the van back to toy size, placed it in his pocket, and moved along to other shops.

Eventually he returned to Serpens and the house, not bothering to enlarge the toy. He simply used his wand to remove items from the van one at a time, which caused them to poof up to normal size once fully in the room, and set them in place. Rugs were scattered around and the walls, after spells to protect the runic carvings, were all plastered except for a strip at about head height. The plaster was “painted” cream. All of the wood was stained a dark brown that worked well with the walls and bedding. Once everything was set he stopped in at the school to visit with Flitwick, who greeted him cheerfully.

“How are things going?” he asked.

“Very well, Mr Potter. I would like to speak with you about matters of discipline.”

His brow rose. “Like points and detentions?”

“Of that nature, yes. We will not have houses here, so points in the accustomed sense are useless.”

“I would think,” he said slowly, running options through his mind, “that points should be assessed individually, and if the balance at the end of each week for a student is negative that would earn them a detention. More normal detentions would also apply, such as for starting a fight, horrible disrespect toward a member of staff, and so forth. As for the actual detentions, I think I’d prefer something useful. Because really, writing lines doesn’t do anything except bore people to death. Making a
student work in the greenhouses, or as floor demo model in class, something along those lines.”

“Floor demo model?”

He nodded. “Say in offensive magic. Rebellious student is the target for others practicing hexes and isn’t allowed to cast back. After all, in numerous cases, it helps children to understand exactly what happens when a spell is successfully cast. Being nailed with a trip jinx repeatedly for an hour has got to be a bit humiliating and far more of a deterrent than writing ‘I will not be a twat’ five hundred times.”

Flitwick chortled and nodded. “I see what you mean. Keep any punishments divorced directly from their grades?”

“Oh yes, absolutely. Well, if you catch someone cheating that’s one thing, but otherwise the one should not affect the other. Someone who—” He looked off to the side, remembering Draco. “Someone who tossed extra ingredients into another child’s potion might still properly do their own and be graded accordingly, but could be punished by ingredient harvesting, making potions under supervision for the infirmary, or being the test subject for generally harmless potions a class is making.” Then he added, “Of course, it would be best if the person or persons teaching Potions teaches the students how to protect their workstations.”

Flitwick nodded again, but said, “Some parents might object to their children being used that way, or for the pain they might feel.”

“So?” Harry shrugged a careless shoulder at his erstwhile professor. “Every child out there with a wand is dangerous. If they don’t understand what a spell does, well, it could be potentially catastrophic. Being nailed with a stinging hex—something even a parent might do as discipline—gets some of the point across, as opposed to being hit with a blasting curse. Even so, having the professor transfigure up some rabbits and using them as the targets? Okay, so some kids get traumatized when little Fluffy splatters over a wide area.”

“But they’ll know just how serious the matter is,” Flitwick said agreeably.

“If there are any really bad eggs and you just can’t quite decide how to handle the situation, let me know. I don’t ever want any student to get the idea that daddy can buy their way out of trouble, or that their wealth in general means anything. You go to school to learn and better yourself, not to kick other people off the edge into the bog so you look better in comparison. And, let’s face it, Voldemort and I are pretty fucking scary. Most people would back down when faced with one of us.”

Flitwick quirked an inquiring brow, making Harry realize the man had never witnessed him duel.

“Ah, right. Next time Voldemort and I have a duel I’ll invite you to watch. It’s ridiculously fun, and it would give you an idea of just what I’m capable of. Not to scare you, of course. We’ve only ever had two, and one of those was in front of the Death Eaters we brought here. They actually applauded,” he said with a grin.

“And the other?”

“Oh, well, that was for the benefit of Dumbledore and his little friend. I’d like your word on something,” he said seriously.

“You have it.”

“My mother and father are not dead.” He paused when Flitwick gasped in shock, then continued, “I also have a twin and two sisters. Dumbledore’s little friend is James Potter, though he goes by a
different name now. We staged a duel for those two. But—I’d rather not talk about him right now. Just the thought of him makes me rage inside. My mother, on the other hand, you should expect to be seeing fairly soon. I plan to kidnap her, my sisters, and bring them here.”

“I remember Lily very well,” Flitwick said pensively. “And how could I not, with you sitting before me looking so similar. I would be pleased to see her again, and to try to help her adjust to her changed circumstances.”

“I appreciate that. I get the feeling you’ll be one of the few people she’d consider trusting. I’m not sure how many people we have here that she’d know, but even if she does, none of them were ever authority figures in her life as you were. Even if she doesn’t realize it consciously, her subconscious will have its say in how she reacts to you.”

“Yes, you’re most likely right.”

“Oh,” he said, remembering something. “I’ll still invite you to a live duel, but I know I made sure there was a pensieve here for the headmaster’s use in case one was needed for seeing the events of a student conflict. I can give you a memory of the one we had at K’veer to watch when you have an hour to spare.” He dug around in his pocket and produce a vial, then thought back and looped a memory copy into it, and sealed it, handing it over.

“K’veer?” Flitwick asked, tucking the vial into the pocket of his waistcoat.

“My and Voldemort’s house. And, technically, a living and meeting place for Death Eaters, though the living part is only temporary. Quite possibly temporary on the meeting part, as well. It’s that really large, sort of bizarre building in the distance rising up multiple storeys. People without a Dark Mark are gently encouraged to go elsewhere. Personally, the only one I don’t much mind being there is Barty, but we sort of have to house them somewhere for the time being, especially the ones we broke out of Azkaban. I don’t really like my home being Death Eater central, but needs must and all.”

Flitwick sighed, his expression grave. “I expect there are things we all dislike and endure. I don’t suppose I’ll ever know exactly how you two accomplished all this?”

Harry grinned at him and shook his head. “Newp. The knowledge is just too dangerous. We are not the only ones who know how, but—those others are not native to Earth. We decided fairly early on that only we two amongst our peoples would know. Besides, we have what we need now. There is no reason to do more. Well, maybe a prison, but we’ll worry about that when it comes up. Anyway, just wanted to check in. Shoot me a message if you need anything.”

He allowed Flitwick to escort him out of the office and returned to K’veer. The next morning he met with Ragnar and was shown the three vaults, very quietly leaving an invisible dead leaf stuck to the wall in each. The vaults were so new and so clean that he wanted to be sure he could shift in, and he wasn’t about to scrape skin cells off his arm in full view of the goblin. When they reached the ground floor he said, “Thank you, Ragnar. I will take care of things from here, though I expect you’ll be getting a visit at some point from her.”

That taken care of he met up with Voldemort again. The look on his face must have said something.

“So . . .”

“So. . . .”

Voldemort rolled his eyes. “Fine.”
He grinned. “Okay. This one is going to be weird.”

“Most of them are,” Voldemort pointed out. “So, it seems to me that we can be there to witness it, then turn back, steal the money, then do the kidnapping.”

“Yes. I just need to get the trunks ready to hold the money. One each for the girls for a trust fund, with at least as much money as Dylan got, and after I take my cut, the rest goes into the main vault for my mother’s use. The house is done, though decidedly bland. And I spoke with Flitwick, so he knows she’ll be around soon and can try to ease her mind. Maybe even help her to decide what to do with herself.” He shrugged.

Harry and Voldemort lounged at a table outside Fortescue’s, casually working their way through their ice cream concoctions. Harry had brought along some Cadbury Flake bars to crumble over them as an additional treat, and Voldemort had made vaguely happy noises over the inclusion.

Down the street a little way could be seen one Ludo Bagman, wearing his Wimbourne Wasps uniform (which fit badly), white gloves, makeup on his face, a dashing beret, and an accordion strapped to his back. Voldemort had huffed a laugh on seeing the man. ‘A mime?’

Harry nodded. ‘He, er, got the idea from that last trip of his to Paris.’

A short distance away, in the other direction, but still with a clear line of sight to Bagman, were the Weasley twins. They were eyeing the man intently, anticipatory smiles hovering at their mouths.

Harry had another bite of his treat, humming happily at the combination of ice cream, banana, chocolate, salted nuts, and real whipped cream, then perked up, causing his partner to also come to attention. James Potter, in his usual disguise, was just then heading their way from the direction of Gringotts. Bagman was beginning to act strangely, his gaze darting around in a way that would have done Moody proud, and eventually alighted on Potter.

As Potter drew closer, without any warning, Ludo reached back and shoved his hand into the accordion, proving it was nothing more than a bizarre backpack, and pulled out an enormous olive loaf. He then cackled wildly, began shouting something about the Rotfang Conspiracy, and whacked Potter so hard across the face that James twirled like a clumsy ballerina and hit the pavement.

Bagman darted closer and started wailing on the man repeatedly, bludgeoning his chest with brutal force.

Harry could actually hear his father’s ribs splintering and mentally congratulated Ludo on keeping up with his strength training, even if it had done nothing for that jiggly gut. And, incidentally, watching the man’s belly wobble and bounce around while clothed in black and bright yellow stripes was making him feel a little ill; he pushed back his treat in consequence. A quick look down the street revealed that the Weasley twins were open-mouthed in their shock.

The aurors finally arrived, but by then Potter was most assuredly dead; his glamour had failed, for one thing. Shacklebolt took one look at the wildly cackling Bagman and directed his team to subdue the man, but when he got a look at the victim his skin went a bit grey.

‘All right,’ Voldemort sent. ‘This is hilarious, but yes, I would really like the rationale.’

Harry glanced over to see that his friend had one hand over his mouth and his shoulders were shaking, then returned his gaze to the crime scene. ‘Well. As for Ludo, he’s in trouble with the goblins because of his gambling. He was taking bets at the World Cup and the Weasley twins were
some of those takers, but he screwed them over when they won, along with a lot of other people, I imagine. So, that gave them a reason to use him as a test subject for one of the pranks they’ve been developing, which resulted in what you just saw—with my help.’

Kingsley had sent off a patronus, probably to Dumbledore, and indeed, the man arrived in no time flat.

‘As for the death itself, I read this comic quite a ways back that factored in. It involved a main character being stalked by a mime and in the end the character snapped and actually beat the mime with an olive loaf. It came to mind because in a way James has been a mime, you know? Concealing his identity behind a glamour, never speaking up as James Potter, being deceptive, and so forth. With a little twisting it suited well enough for my purposes.’

Voldemort’s shoulders finally stilled and he sat up straight again. Dumbledore looked very upset, especially when Skeeter and Bozo showed up to cause trouble. Even so, many, many people got a good look at the victim’s face, had witnessed the glamour’s collapse, so there was no way Dumbledore could cover this up.

A still cackling Bagman was hauled away by two of the aurors, yelling, “I’ll eat the evidence! You’ll never prove a thing!”

Kingsley and the remaining team member moved to get the corpse ready for transport, Dumbledore watching on with a mournful expression. Another auror team showed up, and Kingsley directed them to start questioning witnesses, so Harry and Voldemort quickly abandoned their table and moved farther down the alley. Just before they left entirely he saw Skeeter urging her photographer to get the film to the paper.

Once back at the Black house Harry produced the time turner and spun them back several hours. They collected the trunks for the theft and he shifted them into the Potter vault. A fair amount of time was spent on that alone, for the Potter wealth was not insignificant, and then he shifted them to Dylan’s trust vault. A few spells revealed that his twin had much more of a head start than he had ever been given, and Harry aimed to fix that. More money was pinched before they shifted to a protected linking room, where the trunks were brought through to the linking room at K’veer.

Back on Earth they waited patiently enough for the time to be right, then Harry extended the power of the cloak over himself and Voldemort, then shifted them to his parents’ home. As soon as James had apparated out they swung into action, knocking Lily and the girls into unconsciousness, along with the family house elf. Dylan was located and knocked out, and left to later wake up or be found in the back garden. Voldemort kept an eye on the females and elf while Harry swept through the house, looking to take anything that might hold significance for them, such as clothing, jewelry, books, and mementos. After all that was safely stored away he came back to rifle through his mother’s mind, then made a second sweep to gather up the things he had missed.

‘Okay,’ he sent. ‘Think I got everything. We can portkey them now.’

‘All right.’ Voldemort grabbed a few odd items and spelled them, then laid them on each body and activated them.

The two shifted to follow, then Harry brought out a linking book and opened it to the image and held it while Voldemort forced each of the females and the elf to link through, then followed them. Harry returned the book to safety and linked through using a different book, then shifted to meet his partner. Lily and the girls were each levitated onto their new beds, the elf to the parlor sofa; Voldemort left at that point.
Harry heaved a sigh, staring at his mother, who even unconscious looked tired and harassed. He walked away and fiddled with the warding, then headed downstairs, where he sat at the kitchen table and started writing a letter to her. Attached to it, once he was done, was each of the three vault keys. He left the trunk with household items on the floor nearby and shifted to the bank. Each trust vault got a healthy amount of coin and, after he separated out his share, the remainder went into the main vault.

Finally, he shifted to the school and went to see Flitwick, who welcomed him with a smile and an offer of tea, which he gratefully accepted. “So, they’re here now,” he said after having a sip.

“How long before they wake?”

He shrugged. “I’m not entirely sure. A few hours, perhaps. The spell on my mother was weaker so the girls wouldn’t wake up and be scared out of their minds, especially with their mother out cold still. I left her a long letter, vault keys, and a trunk with a lot of stuff from their house. She’ll know about you, so expect a visit soon or some kind of message.” In point of fact he had left behind a listener, so he would know when she woke and what approximate state of mind she was in. He still couldn’t decide if she would flip out at her baby boy’s current “occupation” and choice of partners, but hopefully she would at least be relieved to be free of James.

“Should I send a message to you when she does show up?” Flitwick asked curiously.

“Ah, probably not. I’d like to stay out of things at first and we’re still really busy most of the time, finding people, interviewing them, ferrying them here, etcetera. If she does want to get in contact with me you can send a message to that effect and I’ll make the time, but I would prefer she be the one to initiate things. She hasn’t seen me since I was barely over a year old. She doesn’t know me. She won’t have a real clue who I am or why I do anything.” He shrugged again.

Flitwick nodded, then smiled. “I loved the duel. It was an amazing display of skill and you were both clearly enjoying yourselves.”

He grinned. “Oh, I had a blast! Though, with the music it’s easy to slip into a habit of acting to the beat. Definitely have to keep doing that. Maybe I’ll ask the Host to construct an arena of sorts for dueling contests. It was fine inside K’veer, but doing it outside opens up a lot of additional possibilities for tactics.”

“Oh yes, indeed,” Flitwick agreed. “It’s educational and far more interesting than formal dueling.”

Harry rolled his eyes and faked a yawn. “Snooze fest,” he said. “Okay, time to go. Let me know what happens, please.”

Flitwick hopped up and escorted him out, and Harry returned to K’veer, though outside. He spent some time looking around at first, then began summoning rocks to himself and transfiguring them into curving, transparent walls, twenty feet high. Those he sank into the ground five feet deep off to the left of the manor, out of the way of normal foot traffic. The interior would be the slightest bit blurry from the outside, mainly due to the thickness of the walls, but anyone watching should be safe.

He would have to make good on his suggestion and ask Ragnar about a proper structure, but for the moment this would do. People weren’t getting into it unless they flew in because he had not bothered to leave any kind of door. He stared at it for a minute, then nodded. It would do for the time being.

Later that day he received a quick patronus message from Flitwick stating that Lily had indeed sought him out, but no particular details had been given, which was fine. At breakfast the next
morning he mentioned the enclosure to Voldemort and asked if he would be up for another duel.

“Yes, of course,” Voldemort replied. “We have some people scheduled for this morning, so how about after lunch?”

Messages were sent to Barty and Flitwick about it, and they got on with their work for the day, eventually returning to Ophiuchus for lunch. Afterward they went outside, the Death Eaters living in the manor following them and arraying themselves outside the walls. Harry shifted the two of them inside, double checked with Derek about their safety, and then pulled the music sphere from his pocket. He activated it, tossed it into the air, and stood ready.

Voldemort opened with something nasty (no doubt) and Harry responded by aiming an overpowered percussion spell at a point midway between them, causing the earth to ripple and heave. Voldemort grinned as he evaded the wave headed his way and sent a spell that essentially mowed the grass beneath Harry’s feet, sending up a blizzard of grassy debris.

Part way through the duel he noticed Flitwick watching, a broad grin on the little man’s face, and waved cheekily at him before evading a conjured panther. It was only a short time after that, as he short-jump apparated to a new position, that he saw his mother standing there, mouth gaping open in shock.

‘Huh. My mother is here,’ he informed his partner, sending and managing to nail Voldemort with a bone breaking curse, which was hastily repaired.

‘No fair distracting me,’ Voldemort replied with another flick of his wand.

Harry had to leap to one side like a coked-up squirrel to avoid rock spikes which erupted from beneath him. In retaliation he began warbling along with the current song, perfectly aware that he was slightly tone deaf and anyone listening would be unappreciative of his efforts.

Voldemort’s reply was to send a brace of killing curses his way; he laughingly avoided them and kept right on singing. Half an hour later his partner sent, ‘Hold.’

They both immediately aimed their wands down. Harry extended his left hand up and called the orb to him so he could shut it off and tuck it away. Then he walked up to his partner, grasped his extended wrist, and shifted them outside the enclosure.

After a moment of silence wild applause broke out. Harry bowed floridly, throwing his arms out to the side, then yelled, “Thank you, thank you! We’ll be here all century,” in his best Elvis impression.

Flitwick scurried up, a grin on his face. “Wonderful!” he enthused. “Even better than the last one!”

“Thanks!” he said, reaching up to brush his hair back from his forehead. “Did you like my singing?”

Flitwick rolled his eyes playfully. “You should be on the stage. Maybe in that club you joked about making.”

“Oh, hey, I could make it into a karaoke bar. Then everyone with less than stellar voices could sing along badly and torture their friends,” he replied.

Voldemort just shook his head. “So long as I never get dragged there. It’s bad enough having to listen to you. How are things going, professor?”

“Oh, they’re fine so far. Everyone seems to be shaping up well and they all seem fine at taking direction. They’ve been coming to me with their questions and don’t seem to be reluctant to. I expect
that owing to you two probably not being able to bring many students in for this upcoming year classes will be a lot more fluid and more time can be devoted to individual needs, but it will still be excellent experience for them without being overwhelming.”

Harry nodded, exchanging a look with Voldemort. ‘Maybe we should just pull the Death Eater families, the Lovegoods. . . .’

Voldemort nodded back. ‘We already have the families of the workers, so we may as well.’

“Sounds good,” he said to Flitwick.

“Harry?” came an uncertain voice from behind him.

He turned to see his mother standing there. “Hey.”

“And on that note,” Voldemort said, “I have things to do.”

Harry turned back and nodded. “All right. See you when I do.” Voldemort nodded and apparated away, so Harry turned back to his mother.
Harry sidestepped a little and turned, placing himself into a rough triangle with Flitwick and his mother. “You look no worse for wear,” he said to Lily. “House all right?”

She blinked at him. “Yes, it’s fine. So, you’re my son.”

He nodded. “Your eldest son.”

“He smiled coyly. “Ah, I don’t know you nearly well enough to answer that. Let’s take a walk.”

The crowd was dispersing slowly, many of them chattering away excitedly and making wild gestures.

“Let me know when the next one is,” Flitwick requested.

“Of course! Maybe in your spare time—after I get an arena constructed—you can toss together some kind of annual dueling competition. I know you were quite the stud when you were younger.”

Flitwick giggled merrily and left with a backward wave, so Harry focused on his mother again. “A walk?”

“All right,” she said softly.

He offered his arm to her, waited until she took it, then led her away. “Elf watching the girls?”

“Yes. I’m not sure what I would have done if Briar hadn’t been brought along.”

He nodded, not minding that this was likely to be a circuitous conversation. “What do you think of Serpens so far? It’s a little underpopulated at the moment, but that will change. Oh, hang on.” He reached into his pocket for his other music sphere and brought it out long enough to activate it and adjust the volume. “I always thought life should have a soundtrack.”

“Instrumental music?” she asked. “After what you were playing earlier?”

“Sure. I don’t really think it’d work for dueling, but I do enjoy it nonetheless. Good vocal music, though, can make you smile despite yourself.”

“So far the city is nice, though I don’t recognize the style. It’s interesting, though.”

“It’s alien,” he said bluntly, “but only two people have any clue where it came from, and I’m one of them. Not to sound too much like dear old Dumbledore, but no one else needs to know the details. Flitwick cracked up when I told him his kin seem to be more than a little aroused by the architecture.”

She twitched and shook her head. “That was some duel.”
He hummed in agreement. “It’s a lot of fun. Being able to go all out against a worthy opponent is a joyous thing. The rush is incredible. Last time we did it inside, but I thought outside would be nicer. More options, you know. It just took more thought on my part to come up with a way for people to watch and not be in any danger.”

“I see,” she replied. “And what do you do with your days?”

“Go over the recommendations for people to move here, interviews with them, helping them to move. Once we’re done with the UK we’ll move on to another country. The more people we get here the more who are saved when the inevitable happens.”

She turned her head toward him for a moment, part way, then said, “What do you consider to be the inevitable?”

“Somewhere, at some point, someone is going to screw up so badly the muggles will know by the hundreds or thousands or millions, depending on how it comes out. Already there are camera systems out there on the streets that most wizards aren’t aware of, or even a lot of muggles. People have digital cameras, video cameras—not everyone, but I know it’ll happen, just like televisions exploded into households. Something is going to happen and we can’t stop it. Someone will use accidental magic to defend themselves, or some criminal will be spotted while baiting muggles.”

He shrugged. “The ministry won’t be able to obliviate everyone. And when that day comes, what happens? The muggles welcome us with open arms and say let’s be friends? Or do their scientists all flail around in ecstasy and work that much harder to find us, to see how it works, to see if they can replicate it. Before that day comes—well, we’re working very hard on this exodus, to become a self-sustaining population here on a world where the muggles can’t reach us.”

“And where you don’t have to deal with people like Dumbledore?” she asked.

“Of a certainty,” he replied. “Dumbledore is a bleeding-heart apologist. He’s so busy not calling other people into account for their actions nor teaching them the meaning of responsibility that he’s letting who knows how many people fall by the wayside who are essentially innocent. The people we’re choosing are Neutral or Dark, ones who are tolerant of other races and blood status. I would rather have a Dark-oriented neighbor who understands just how dangerous Light magic can be than a Light-minded fool who refuses to see beyond the surface of the propaganda they’ve been spoon fed. When people take the word of a reporter like Rita Skeeter as gospel I cannot help but call them all sheeple.”

“Somehow you knew we were alive.”

“How?” he echoed. “And once I did I made it my business to find out more. I stepped in after certain things came to light. You may or may not consider my actions in that regard to be highhanded, but I saw no point in leaving you there to continue suffering.”

“Even though you don’t know me?”

“You’re still my mother. You didn’t agree with what they planned. You fought for me. My sisters are innocent in—”

He broke off as a serpent patronus slithered up and hissed, “Here’s an opportunity for you to retreat if your current conversation is becoming uncomfortable.” It faded a moment later, and he assumed Voldemort did it that way so as to leave Lily clueless to the actual message.

“Hm. Well, that’s interesting.”
“You speak Parseltongue?” She still had not looked at him directly since they began their walk. Perhaps he looked too much like James, eyes and hair aside, for her to be comfortable with.

“Yes. A little gift Voldemort left behind that night. ‘And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal’,” he quoted. “‘But he will have power the Dark Lord knows not.’”

Lily made a funny noise in her throat. “I’ll say. I’m going to guess and think that you had everything to do with him being more or less sane at this point.”

He nodded. “Well, he’s not sane, exactly. I mean, if your definition of sane includes things like ‘does not kill when pissed off’, then he’s still insane, though he hasn’t killed anyone recently.”

“And you?” she asked. “Sane people don’t laugh when someone sends so many killing curses their way.”

“Not even close to being sane, but that doesn’t mean I’m not a functioning member of society. For instance, there was only one student at Hogwarts who had any idea I’m not a quiet little Ravenclaw, and she’s one of the people building a home here. You’d like her, I think. One of the teachers now at Corvus knew, and Flitwick has known I’m not exactly right in the head since a bit after my disappearance. But as Flitwick has pointed out, I’m the friendly one.” He slowed down, drifting to a stop, saying, “This is far enough, I suppose.”

Lily tensed up like a frightened rabbit about to bolt. “For?”

He gently reclaimed his arm and produced his wand. “I don’t know about you, but I’ve just been dueling the past hour and I’d like a bit of a rest.” He transfigured a rock into a table as he called for Saen.

Lily twitched as Saen popped in.

“Be a sweetheart and fetch some butterbeers and nibbles for us? Oh, and I baked some biscuits this morning, so include some of those.”

“Yes, master,” Saen said, and popped away.

By the time he had transfigured two comfortable chairs and a wide sun shade Saen was back with a tray. “Thanks, Saen,” he said with a smile, taking a seat, and reaching out for a butterbeer. The little elf nodded and departed, and Harry grabbed one of the biscuits to nosh on after a deep pull at his drink. “Yeah, that’s better.” He glanced up to see Lily was still standing. “Take a seat?”

She did so, taking a butterbeer for herself, though she cradled it in her hands rather than drinking from it. “Is James dead, then? There have been a lot of bizarre deaths in the past few years.”

“Him? Oh yes. Very, very dead. And hey, shock! His glamour failed right there in Diagon Alley. Everybody knows that James Potter didn’t really die that night. Wasn’t a thing Dumbledore could do about it, not with so many people present, not with Rita Skeeter and her photographer there to take pictures and assault the witnesses with questions. You, my dear mother, are a widow. You are free to do whatever it is that interests you, be it continue as a stay-at-home mother, become a teacher, start your own business. . . .”

He grabbed another biscuit and ate it, followed by a lemon tart, brushing the crumbs away where they fell on his shirt. He drained his butterbeer, gazing out over the landscape and enjoying the fresh, clean air. A light breeze had picked up, making conditions that much more comfortable. Lily quietly sipped at her drink, and she chose only sweets he had already chosen from. He considered being offended on behalf of his house-elf, but knew she was simply being cautious.
When she did finally speak it was to say, “You bake?”

He huffed a laugh. “I had no choice, growing up, but to learn how to cook. Besides, the house-elves never get them quite right for some reason.”

Lily sighed. “Petunia was a nightmare, I’m guessing.”

“Yes. And Uncle Vernon. They taught their son the same. But once I learned a few things Vernon suffered a freakishly bizarre accident at work. Petunia and Dudley left me alone after that and I was no longer their little slave. I was eight, I think. But yes, I cook, I bake, I like to bring nibbles to my friends.”

“Do you have many friends?”

“Hm. Some. Voldemort, Barty, Luna. I’m friendly with Flitwick, Kevin, and Neville. I’ve been considering kidnapping him and his parents. Augusta has been trying to make Neville into a Frank clone for years now and even after it was proven that Neville isn’t a squib they’ve continued to be abusive. Him going into Hufflepuff didn’t help, I expect. It upsets me. Neville is a good kid and he’s been coming out of his shell since he started school. Luna won’t be there any longer to keep an eye on him. If I did I’m reasonably sure I could heal Frank and Alice, and they could stay with the Lovegoods for the moment. Don’t really know how they’d react to the knowledge that they’ve been whacked in the head for years and have a son who’s almost grown, or that family has been entirely too cruel to their boy.”

Lily opened her mouth to speak, but closed it when a loud crack heralded an arrival. Luna was standing there, looking around vaguely, a faint smile on her lips.

Harry promptly made her a chair. “Hey. Why am I not surprised you already know how to apparate?”

Her gaze wandered in his direction as she replied, “Daddy made sure I could in case I needed a quick escape during one of our zoological trips. So this is your mother.” Her gaze wandered that way, not quite looking at Lily, and she took the open seat. “You’re very pretty,” she commented. “I quite see where Harry got his looks. Speaking of which,” she said, her gaze turning back to him, “the old man does, in fact, plan to toss Dylan into the school as you.”

Harry frowned and shook his head slightly. “Why? What could he possibly get out of that?”

Luna tilted her head. “To look like he’s in control. He managed to find the mysteriously missing Boy-Who-Lived. He’s taken a nasty blow with what you did to James, and what the two of you did during that duel. His confidence is severely shaken and he needs something to make it look as though he’s still in control.”

“Even though, if things were different, it would make Dylan a target for murder?”

Luna shrugged. “He doesn’t care about Dylan. James is dead and he’ll soon enough find out all the money is missing. The Potter family is of no use to him now. If anything, he’ll consider targeting Stubby Boardman.”

Harry laughed merrily. “Yeah, because Sirius has suffered enough brain damage in Azkaban to think teaming up with Albus is a good idea.”

“Now that he thinks he’s killed you he can—”

“Wait, what?” Lily interrupted.
“Dumbledore thinks he killed me. I arranged for an ‘accident’,” Harry said to her, complete with air quotes.

Luna nodded. “He sees no problem with bringing Dylan in because of that. It’s not like you’ll pop up to cause problems. Also, I think you should go ahead with kidnapping Neville and his parents. Frank and Alice could be excellent aurors again, after a little therapy and being brought up to speed. I would leave the rest of the family alone, though. Better to leave it in doubt, despite what they’ve done. Neville isn’t as pragmatic as you or I. And,” she said, pausing for several moments, “I think, after some thought, Kevin, too.”

“But—oh, it’s like that, is it? I know he’s muggle-born.”

Luna nodded sadly. “Much like Neville has refused to speak of what he goes through, Kevin has kept it all behind a wall. He and Neville could stay with me for the time being—daddy won’t mind—and you could set up a trust vault for Kevin so he has something to fall back on.”

“And the family?” he asked, eyes narrowed.

“It’s an uncle, actually, but his parents just look the other way. They can’t explain why Kevin is different, but that’s no excuse for not defending him. The uncle is wealthy, you see.”

He rolled his eyes and reached out for another butterbeer. “And how does Kevin feel about this?”

She shrugged. “It’s not like I asked directly. He loves his parents, but the resentment is building hard and fast. If something doesn’t change, soon, well—what I’ve seen isn’t good. For all that you and Voldemort took care of any number of the more fanatical blood purists there are still people lurking around with that mindset. Kevin could very easily become a victim to one.”

“Okay. I’ll get vaults set up, get Barty to reserve a townhouse for Kevin for when he’s older, see about blueprints for a manor for the Longbottoms and start that process. . . . We’re going to set up an oversight committee, but not just yet. Until we have something in place to handle any children coming in or people to adopt them I’m not sure of the point.”

“That’s fine. I just wanted to make sure it was lurking in that brain of yours somewhere. Daddy has been in raptures since we got here,” Luna said with a wider than normal smile. “It was really very kind of your friend”—she glanced skyward—“to help with that part.”

Harry grinned. “Voldemort got a bit pissy over that set of inclusions, but that was before he actually met you.”

Luna gave him a knowing smile; she obviously knew the real reason. “I will let him know when I see him next that we’ll be moving straight away rather than waiting. I’m sure you’ll get a more ‘normal’ set of journalists at some point, but for now he can put out something to keep people updated.”

“All right. I can send over some house-elves with him to pack up and transport everything. I have to get those presses anyway, set up the supply line, blah blah blah.” He slumped in his chair and took a long pull at his butterbeer.

“Now, Harry, you should have known being a dark lord was hard work,” Luna remarked. “But a good support staff is priceless. Delegate some of it.”

“I suppose I could intimidate Lucius again, but he’s already doing quite a bit. We don’t have a lot of people on that side to delegate to.”
Luna sighed. “True.”

They sat there thoughtfully—though what Lily was thinking was debatable—enjoying the day. Something popped up in Harry’s peripheral vision, causing him to sit up properly. Barty trundled up, smiling; once he got close enough he said, “Fantastic duel! Wish I could be even half as skilled.”

“If I’d known you’d be showing up I’d have made sure to have Jaffa cakes waiting,” Harry replied, transfiguring another chair in invitation and expanding the sun shade.

Barty shrugged and sat down. “You’re very good to me, my lord, but I don’t really expect you to carry them everywhere you go.”

Harry smirked. “You holding up okay?”

“Yes. I never thought I’d end up an administrator, though. I’m surprisingly good at it, I think, which is interesting. It’s also a bit hilarious that I stand above men so much older than I am.”

“Yeah, well, I know I can trust you. I’m not so sure about the rest, and Voldemort doesn’t really trust anybody terribly much.”

“Except you.”

“We’d be piss-poor partners if we couldn’t trust each other.”

“How did that happen?” Lily asked quietly.

“Oh, right,” he said. “Barty, my mother, Lily. Lily, Barty Crouch. And as to how that happened, ah, let’s just say that after trying to kill me a dozen or so more times when I was eleven, Voldemort finally decided to listen to what I had to say. We talked, hashed things out, and formed a partnership eventually. There were plenty of snide comments, sarcastic wit, and the usual taunting before we got to that point. But hey, I’m such a lovable fellow.”

Barty laughed. “You’re a psychotic, mass-murdering whackjob.”

“Your point? Doesn’t mean I’m not lovable.” He shifted to his Yuki form and aimed a sultry look at Barty, who shuddered and held his hands up in surrender.

“Don’t do that. You make me question my sexuality.”

Harry smirked again and shifted back. “Oh, you poor foolish man. Once you come to the dark side there’s no going back,” he purred, flirting his brows up briefly.

Barty shuddered again. “I do not want to know about your sex life.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll find a nice girl at some point, crank out some babies, learn the joys of crying at all hours and spitting up and puppy dog eyes,” he teased.

Barty looked thoughtful at that, and a little scared. “Is it really that bad?” he asked Lily.

She actually smiled. “Oh yes. It’s not for the faint of heart.”

“I guess I’ll find out eventually,” Barty said with a shrug. “So why are we all sitting out here in the middle of nowhere?”

Harry snorted. “Hardly the middle of nowhere, and it’s a beautiful day. Why not sit outside and enjoy the sun and the breeze?”
Barty looked up at the sun shade. He shook his head and looked at Harry again. “I could use some lower level administrators,” he said, scratching the side of his nose, “if you can find some. Secretarial sorts.”

He pulled a normal notebook from his pocket along with his fountain pen and started making notes so he wouldn’t forget anything. “All right. I’ll get Lucius looking for people we can interview. I can’t remember offhand if he’s winnowed through the British ministry complement yet. Can always go after disaffected half-bloods and muggle-born since I expect half or more of the people at the ministry got their positions through nepotism anyway. Yay for the Old Boy Network.”

Luna snickered madly. “Harry, please do remember you’ve been shoving your partner’s Death Eaters into government positions?”

He sighed and palmed his face. “Okay, yes. You’re absolutely right. But those people know I will torture them until they beg for mummy if they fuck up. I can’t do that with, you know, normal people. So it’s best to get qualified people hired on to fill all the gaps, people who might only need a sharp verbal reprimand if they do something particularly stupid. I don’t want to have to babysit these people. I do want regular reports that Voldemort and I can go over. If we have to we’ll get involved and I expect nobody will like it if we do.” While he was thinking of it he also wrote down a note about Greyback. Nothing special was needed there, just a quick death. He barely knew the man aside from his tendencies to prey on children so he had no particular reason to set up anything elaborate.

Voldemort’s patronus showed up again. “I’m bored. Come amuse me.”

Harry arched a brow and smiled in amusement, then tucked his notebook and pen away. “All right, kids, I need to get going. Something’s come up. I’ve got your issues noted and will take care of those as soon as I can. Luna, be prepared for guests. Barty, I’ll get with Lucius. Lily…” He shrugged, stood up, and shifted away. He found Voldemort in their shared area and aimed an inquiring look his way. “Bored, huh? Do you have any suggestions as to how I can help you with this state?”

His partner was sitting there, arms resting on the arms of his chair, one leg crossed over the other, giving him a hungry look. “I am mildly upset, it turns out, that you left so quickly after our duel.”

His gaze shifted off to the side, wonderingly, then looked back in amusement. “Are you saying that our duels turn you on?”

“Yes.” Voldemort said it flatly, almost as if he was afraid of censure for admitting it.

Harry nodded and stepped closer. “I must say, I get a serious charge out of them myself, though I don’t know that I’d want to do that every time as a bizarre form of foreplay. Because really, often enough just looking at you is enough to make me think of the two of us in bed.”

Voldemort uncrossed his legs and pushed, standing up. “Really.”

He smiled and nodded again. “Of course. I seem to recall telling you before that you were a handsome devil—and are again. Well, come on, then. Let’s go get clean so we can get dirty again.”

Some time later he wrote out a simple death for Fenrir; no sense wasting brain power for that beast. Voldemort gave him a disgruntled look. “Do you really have to do that now?”

Harry finished writing and put the pen aside, letting the book return to him. “I wanted to get it out of the way. Greyback is probably already dead.” He rolled onto his side and propped his head up on his hand, reaching out with his free hand to trace a line down Voldemort’s chest. “I can’t really think of
many more people to kill anyway, though there are a few more people to kidnap.”

Voldemort’s gaze skimmed his own body briefly, watching Harry’s hand, then said, “And these are?”

“Hm, Luna suggested I kidnap Frank, Alice, and Neville Longbottom, as well as Kevin Entwhistle. The two adults will probably have a serious problem with the Lestranges, but I’m sure something can be worked out,” he said, using his index finger to glide around the edges of his partner’s abdominal muscles, watching as Voldemort’s penis began to slowly thicken and lengthen.

“And Barty.”

“Mm, true. Perhaps I should ask Luna about her rationale on that one.” His fingers dipped lower and skimmed down his partner’s nearest thigh and back up. “You’ve got an amazingly fine ass, you know?”

“Is that a hint?”

He met Voldemort’s eyes and shook his head slightly. “Not especially. Don’t know if I want to go there, actually. Would you like me to?”

His partner rolled his head toward Harry. “No.”

“That’s fine.” He smiled suddenly. “Besides, you end up doing more of the work.”

Voldemort rolled his eyes, but surprisingly enough said, “You do more of the work overall, so I suppose that’s only fair.”

He dragged his fingers lightly back up Voldemort’s chest, scratching gently, then swept them back down to palm his partner’s cock and give it a few teasing pulls. “Well, experiencing you ‘work’ is a glorious thing. I very much enjoy your masterful handling of those situations.”

“And I am enjoying your current handling of things,” Voldemort replied.

“Oh?” Harry used his fingers a bit more strongly, then scooted down the bed and leaned over to take Voldemort’s cock in his mouth.

The kidnappings were a simple enough endeavor. He simply shifted into St Mungo’s in the dead of night, verified that no staff were in the room, and shifted the two out. Cael was set to watch them while he went to kidnap Neville and one of the family elves. Once those were handled he checked with Derek on Kevin and nabbed him, too. Trunks had been made up to hold a varying selection of goods, and those were linked through along with the “victims” and brought to Luna’s current residence. The adults could stay in one room and Neville and Kevin could share the other extra.

He consulted with Derek after ensuring that all four of them would stay asleep until a reasonable hour and proceeded to “fix” Frank and Alice. They would still be disoriented for some time and need to build up muscle mass, but what he had done should see their mental and physical states mostly normal.

Luna wandered out of her room right about the time he was done and preparing to leave, so she walked with him downstairs and into the sitting room. “About how long?” she asked.

“They shouldn’t be waking up until nine, I’d estimate,” he replied with an offhand shrug. “Plenty of
time for you to get some more rest and be ready to contain the potential screaming hysterics.”

“Sure, leave me the hard job,” she teased, tapping him playfully on the arm. “Has Barty set up a house for them yet?”

He shook his head. “They’re going to need a week or so to get used to being up and about. But after that it should be fine. I wasn’t able to get blueprints for their manor, but I’m sure they can figure something out and live in a townhouse in the meantime. I think the one next door might be open. Guess I could have Barty reserve it.

“And speaking of Barty, just how exactly does that work out in your head? The only one of that bunch who we killed was Bellatrix, and the other three are part of the damn government. I rather expect Frank and Alice to kick up a major fuss once certain truths become known to them.”

Luna just smiled. “It will work out. And the sooner you get people over here the better. There are other things you need to be doing.”

Harry was extremely tempted to do some digging to see what she meant. Instead he heaved a sigh, kissed her on the cheek, and shifted out. A note was left on Barty’s desk about the housing request before he returned to Earth and looted the Longbottom fortune and Neville’s trust. He could drop those off after putting in a request for vaults to be assigned, plus one for Kevin. And while he was there, talk to Ragnar about a dueling arena.

Things went surprisingly well over the next few weeks, even with the addition of the Longbottoms. Luna was handling things with aplomb in her airy, sometimes nonsensical way, and had managed to convince Alice and Frank that staging an attack on K’veer, or indeed, any of the Death Eaters, was the greatest of folly. That she diverted them with far too many stories about their son might have had something to do with that. Their focus of anger went from that of more than a decade ago to Neville’s treatment over the years instead. Luna was a clever little thing, he knew.

His mother had left him alone in that time. His monitors told him she was simply trying to settle into a new life, make some kind of sense of what had happened, what her eldest child had turned out to be, and where she could fit into this new life, with this new freedom. That Dark Lord Voldemort was a part of it all? A trifle at that point.

Nearly every day he and Voldemort were bringing in more people, slowly stripping the best from Britain. Dumbledore might be wondering what was going on, but the thoughts and theories of the old man could wait. Given the multitude of disappearances back during the first rise of Voldemort, Dumbledore might be given to the belief that the same thing was happening, just without the additional complication of the flashy attacks by Death Eaters.

By the time the new year rolled around perhaps they could move on to a new country. He was slouched in a chair in the reading nook in his room going over various ideas when Derek smoked in, causing him to look up in surprise.

“Master,” Derek said. “I thought you might be interested to know that in your original dimension another dark lord has already arisen.”

Harry rolled his eyes so hard he almost gave himself a headache. “So in a mere fifteen years?”

“Ah, not exactly. As you know the ritual you concocted did not send you the way you’d intended, but even so, it was not back. It was . . . diagonal.”

His brows went up. “Okay. Are you saying that even a straight jump between dimensions is likely to
result in a different year of landing?”

“Yes. To answer your question, it has been thirty years since your departure.”

He sighed. “Even that is fairly bad. One thing for that Voldemort to come back in such a short time; he was just taking up where he left off. That’s sad. And I expect if I had stayed I’d have been expected to take care of the problem. Anyone I know?”

Derek paused, shifting in place minutely. “Colin Creevey.”

Harry threw back his head and laughed, then laughed some more. It was that or cry.
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“If I’m alive and well, will you be there holding my hand? I’ll keep you by my side with my superhuman might.” — 3 Doors Down, *Kryptonite*

“As hilarious as this is, I have to wonder if there’s something else,” he said, eyeing Derek. Derek shifted again (giving Harry the impression of a naughty school boy) before saying, “I was wondering if, at times, you would be interested in helping out in other dimensions when problems arise.”

He sat up straight, a bit in shock at the very idea. “Help?” he asked, looking for clarification. “And sit down, damn it. Staring up like this is making my neck hurt.”

Derek seemed taken aback by the order, but did as asked, floating gracefully into the companion chair to Harry’s own, though why he had originally put in two he could not remember.

“Not in an instance such as your original dimension,” Derek said. “You left that place and it would be cruel of me to even suggest it. Some dimensions, however, produce some interesting situations. Now, under normal circumstances you would see an agent of mine when you witnessed someone dying, but given that those you have witnessed of late were ones you requested I took care of them myself. These agents take on different forms depending on the dimension and the makeup of the belief systems of the sentient beings.”

His eyes crossed trying to figure that one out. “So, like, a Christian here might see an angel—assuming they could see them at all? Or the personification I’m used to hearing about, which is what you usually look like.”

Derek nodded. “But not all dimensions have a race with belief in Yahweh or God, or Amaterasu, or Odin, and so forth.”

“Or magic?” he asked.

“Or magic of the sort you are familiar with. Or beings.”

“But death is a constant. Okay, but what do you mean by help? Me actually jumping dimensions? Wouldn’t that screw up what I’m doing here? And what about Tom? I can’t just—” He stared at Derek, brows drawing together.

“Yes, I could facilitate a few changes there, if you truly wished it,” Derek admitted. “It is entirely possible that he will become . . . resentful, otherwise.”

Harry nodded. “The power imbalance.”
“As to helping, allow me to give you an example. In more than one dimension there is a similar but not identical Earth, where angels and demons and reapers are wandering around. The magic of that world generally consists of humans who make deals with demons to gain ‘magical’ abilities, at the cost of their eventual ‘home’ in Hell, or those who have become werewolves through a cannibalistic process. There are vampires and ghosts and various other beings, but most of them are hostile to humans. In some of those dimensions there is a fight between Michael and Lucifer.” Derek paused.

“Yeah, angels, got it.” Harry waved his hand.

“Lucifer wants to destroy the world and Michael wants to allow the apocalypse to start so he can defeat his brother.”

“Uh huh,” he said, unimpressed. It was funny how one’s world view changed upon becoming immortal, and crazy. “And prove what a big stud he is. So?”

“In most of those dimensions I really can’t be bothered to care,” Derek said, “but every so often I run across one where a pissing match would negatively impact someone of importance, or someone who will become important.”

“Which explains why you might wish to meddle,” he replied. “Or get me to do it. Is that example real?”

“Oh yes. In order to effect the apocalypse Lucifer has to gain the cooperation of the four horsemen.”

“But I’m conveniently your master, so you don’t have to listen to him. But before we get further into that, let’s get back to Tom.”

“All right,” Derek said. “Through you I can give him certain powers, with your permission, subject to immediate revocation should he go, as you might put it, batshit insane.”

Harry spun the index and middle fingers of his right hand in circles impatiently.

“Languages, essential immunity to death, morphing, and shifting, plus a variant on the wand and cloak.”

He arched a brow at those last two.

“Meaning his wand would be unbreakable and always return to him, and he could use true invisibility, though you would always be able to see him, as would I, since it is not the actual cloak. Only you can use that and he would remain incapable of seeing you while you were cloaked.”

He considered that for a bit, then said, “And the telepathy?”

Derek nodded. “Though I don’t expect he would use it for much more than you do. Well, perhaps to scare his minions. There is no reason for any of them to know the extent of the ability aside from possibly coming to the conclusion that he has learned to project thoughts via some application of Legilimency.”

“Okay, let me ask him to come here, then,” he said, then sent, ‘Tom, would you be so kind as to join me in my rooms? I have a gift for you.’

‘. . . All right.’

He flipped his wand back toward the door to open it and waited. Voldemort swept in minutes later, jerking to a stop on seeing Derek, but recovering quickly enough. Derek got up and waved
Voldemort to the seat, then moved to stand at a point equidistant from both men.

“Derek and I have been chatting about, well, a certain imbalance, amongst other things,” he said, smiling inwardly when Voldemort perked right up without visibly doing so. “This probably would have come up anyway, but since Derek has asked if I might like to give him a hand in the odd alternate dimension it seems a whole lot more relevant now. So.” He quickly explained, watching as his partner practically burned with interest. “Are you interested?”

Voldemort gave him one of those looks, then nodded. “Yes,” he said simply.

“If you would, Derek?”

Death nodded and glanced at Voldemort with glowing eyes. His partner went through a full body shudder, then settled down, his eyes a bit dazed.

“So, getting back to this helping bit,” he said. “We are kind of busy here.”

Derek nodded again. “You could think of it as having a bit of a holiday on occasion. It depends on whether or not the situation appeals to you and how involved you’d want to be. You may as well assume that the number of dimensions is infinite, so it is not as though it is essential for anyone to meddle. There are simply times when I feel that desire, to preserve something special.”

Harry narrowed his eyes at Derek. “And would any of those dimensions happen to include a me that could use the meddling hand of Death?”

Derek nodded. “I can think of one right now coming up in the near future that will fall apart should your counterpart not be given a helping hand.”

“Any other examples?”

Derek appeared to consider, then said, “In one dimension there is a situation where the reapers—sometimes called Shinigami, or Death Gods—have become ridiculously bored and like to meddle in the affairs of the living. They use books much like you do. In fact, it was what I created for you that gave me the idea.”

His eyes crossed again. Death obviously did not operate with the same connection to “time” as mortals.

“Correct,” Derek said.

“Every time you introduce a concept like that I can feel my sanity fracturing that much more,” he complained.

A grin seemed to appear from under that hood. “Sometimes one of the Shinigami becomes so bored they allow their Death Note to drop to Earth to be found by a mortal. Their books have clearly defined rules to them, written inside, and the mortal who finds it learns of them that way. However, by taking possession they also invite the near constant companionship of that Shinigami.”

“I can almost see where this is going,” Voldemort said dryly. “Aside from going just a bit mad over the situation, plus from the power they’ve found. . . . But why would Death Gods need the books? Why not just take people when they die?”

“Ah,” Derek said. “They are not gods, obviously, but agents of mine. They have a . . . limited tour of duty, shall we say, but the Death Notes can be used to extend that period by taking the lives of humans before their time. The balance of time goes to the Shinigami.”
That did not exactly answer the question, Harry thought, but was nevertheless interesting. “If they’re so bored why would they bother to extend their duties?”

Derek tilted his head. “Does being bored make you wish to die?”

He snorted; point taken. “Okay, so in one of those dimensions there may be a situation with a mortal holding a Death Note.”

“Yes. Again, normally I would not care, but in a particular dimension is a soul I would much like to see continue, though you may have other ideas once you were to see the situation in full.”

“Getting back to my earlier question,” he said, “I guess it wouldn’t be much of a burden if things were slow and we treated it like a holiday. You would facilitate the jumps because I can’t see me coming up with another ritual every time and the variables involved are staggering. All I was trying to do was go back, but you’re talking about pinpoint insertion.”

Derek nodded. “Yes, master.”

He eyed Voldemort for a moment, then sank into consideration of the request again. A part of him was wondering what he could get in return for agreeing, though another part of him was forced to compare that desire to the many advantages he already had by being the Master of Death—and wasn’t it a bit selfish and greedy to want more?

“I can arrange for you two to return mere seconds after you depart if that would be preferred,” Derek offered.

Harry eyed his partner again, wondering what he thought of things. Voldemort eyed him back, neither of them trying to get into each other’s minds (not that Voldemort could), and eventually said, “I think it might be interesting. We are essentially immortal and while our minds might be able to adjust and step out of the confines of a mortal mind, we will not forever be doing what we are now. Meddling in other dimensions might well be extremely enjoyable, and we can do things Death should or could not do.”

He grinned, nodding. “Just think, Tom, we could fuck with people’s heads in innumerable dimensions! Possibly arrange for a multitude of freakishly bizarre accidents!”

It finally happened.

He and Tom had spent the last five years working on the exodus in and around making sure things were running properly on Ophiuchus. He had built and maintained a rather distant relationship with his mother and sisters, not that he really expected anything more. The two of them had also been taking monthly “holidays” at Derek’s behest. Some of them lasted all of a few hours, while others lasted weeks or even months. But as they always returned a few seconds after they left it had virtually no impact whatsoever on their self-assigned duties as sovereigns of their world.

As more and more Neutrals and Darks (and even open-minded Lights) had emigrated, from all over the Earth, Dumbledore had become suspicious, worried, and pleased, all at the same time. Those who remained behind were either too psychotic, close-minded, complacent, or members of Dumbledore’s Cult of Personality.

And it finally happened.

Some damn fool muggle-hater used his wand in London, in front of a whole mess of cameras. True,
it was twilight, and the quality of the cameras wasn’t the best, but it started people watching. They started to amass a number of pictures and videos of magic being used. It began being featured in newspapers, on the radio, the television, and the internet. The muggle police could not do much about the occurrences, not unless they happened to be right there at the time. And even then, there started to be evidence of those same officers suddenly knowing nothing about what they had witnessed.

Average citizens were prepared and armed, even if not with something like guns. The magicals stupid enough to think they could get away with magic in the muggle world found out that Tasers and similar weapons worked just fine on them. Muggle law enforcement wondered about those damn sticks, and then didn’t when Ministry Obliviators swept through, and then did again when the computer records were looked through. How had they forgotten? Where had their prisoners gone?

Harry glanced up reflexively after reading the latest imported newspaper. ‘Derek? Just to clarify, did I find and remove every single book from Ae’gura? Anything and everything at all that could in any way give hints as to the descriptive and linking books?’

‘You did, yes. You even found that hidden cache under the Guild of Writers.’

Derek did not ask why and Harry knew why not. After all, Death could read anything in Harry’s mind that he wanted to. He turned to Tom with a sigh. “Well,” he said, tapping the newspaper. “I am thinking that maybe it’s time to put Ae’gura back to use.”

His partner arched a brow at him before glancing at the paper. “A fall back location for the idiots on Earth?”

“Essentially. I checked with Derek and he’s confirmed that we got everything that could in any way suggest where we went or how we did it out of that cavern.”

“And the tunnels?”

He blinked and glanced up again.

‘The tunnels are fine. The only thing there are the marks you yourself left before you started mapping.’

“Okay,” he said. “The tunnels are fine. But that does bring up a point. If we offer Ae’gura to the remnants, do we mark the way, or do we let them bumble around on their own to find the city?”

Tom looked conflicted. There was a long silence before he finally spoke. “If the path is marked it would allow them to find the city more quickly, true. But if the muggles ever managed to find out where they went. . . .”

“Well, a language the muggles wouldn’t know? Though I’m having a little trouble imagining Dumbledore as a damn tour guide because we did it in Mermish or something. Except the part where they don’t have a written language. Sounds? Tones? I mean, we could use something that in theory only someone magical could see, but if the muggles get far enough ahead they’d be able to eventually sense that, too.”

“Last names of famous people?” Tom suggested. “Like Waffling, Bagshot, Jigger, and so on.”

He looked at his partner a bit suspiciously. “Are those surnames of people who wrote books used at Hogwarts?”

Tom nodded. “Runes would be useless. Even muggles know of those. Hardly anyone knows
Gobbledygook, written or spoken. House symbols would be way too obvious and there are only four of them. Even with this idea it’s limited by the fact that all the names are from English books, but I suppose every group going in could have at least one Briton in it to puzzle out the way.”

He nodded slowly. “I suppose we could also possibly use spell names, but anyone familiar with Latin might get ideas from those. Other famous names, certainly. We also need to get the Ministry to break their side of the treaty with the goblins so the Host can emigrate. I just know the shit is going to hit the fan and I want them off Earth. Even if half or more of the remaining magical population hikes off to Ae’gura, you just know the fuckwits of the British Ministry are going to stick around thinking they’ll be just fine, so we can’t count on there no longer being a ministry and the treaty falling apart due to one of the signatories no longer existing.”

“I agree. We should talk to them about that, warn them, and put the plan into action. Then, of course, they can evacuate.”

In the end they found something better for the markers. Derek suggested a compound they could use as a kind of invisible ink to paint symbols or runes with, on the correct doors. The trick was that any group making the journey would need a specific kind of plant with them, one which within a certain range of the compound would chime softly. It required no magic whatsoever, so even a child could be guided with one.

The tricky part would be the base of the Great Shaft, where Harry had originally had to puzzle out how to continue on. That far down it should be more than safe to use magic, so anyone going would simply have to be warned to “lift the lift”. Beyond that point, in the next set of tunnels, the compound and plant combination should again suffice, though the lift itself at the base of the shaft could be painted to make the plants react.

Once any of them got down to the city, well, they could figure it out on their own. They weren’t leaving any linking books for any of them to find. When he or Tom needed to visit Earth they would just have to link in to some other bizarre location, such as the Amazon, and maybe with Death’s power protecting the location even from muggles. ‘Hopefully there will come a point where we won’t need to ever come back,’ he thought. ‘I am not about to put myself out too far for a bunch of imbeciles who were too stupid to wake the fuck up and come with us in the first place.’

He realized that thought had been a little loud when Tom snorted in amusement.

“The question is,” Tom said, “do we just send the man a letter or visit him in person?”

“How about we spy on him first?” he suggested.

They determined that Dumbledore, while old, was still reasonably sane and rational. Or at least, rational enough to do the job. With that having been established they put together a package of muggle newspapers with prominent stories regarding the losing battle of the secrecy of magic, and included a letter. It basically demanded that Dumbledore pay attention, read the damn papers, and be prepared to lead the remnants into hiding, plus a bare explanation as to how to get to the city. It closed off with, ‘We’ve already done our part in saving the magical population, those bright enough to see far enough ahead to realize what was coming, the inevitable clash between magic and technology. You get to deal with those who remained. Farewell.”

— “So this is the end of the story.” — Goyte, Eyes Wide Open —
Works inspired by this one: Stand Against the Moon by Batsutousai

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