Kalpa

by Shivani

Summary

It may take a community to raise a child, but what does it take to raise a Dovahkiin, and how far from home will Harry’s family have to go to find out?

Notes

Pairing: Harry/Viktor (this is not the only pairing, just the main one)

Beta: Batsutousai

Spoilers: PS—DH canon information as suits this plot, Skyrim

Warnings: AU, slash, het, OOC-ness, skippy, extreme canon mangling, improbable situations and reactions, cracked situations, cameo appearance by characters from FeS2, mentions of rape

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Notes: I did a lot of research for this one. And I had to, because I’m changing canon and I
needed something to back up that decision based on true events. Odds are that anything you think is a canon error/mistake is me doing what I want. This does contain certain elements—they always do, right?

And then (13 March 2014), I finally succumbed to the urge to do something with Elder Scrolls. It took me a long time (an hour, perhaps) to finally figure out how these two could be blended with any believability, with a lot of that depending on canon events in Elder Scrolls, even if we never actually saw such events happening. What I’m doing breaks canon, of course, because otherwise my explanation of the blend is impossible.

Some passages are lifted from Goblet of Fire for the applicable chapters. Some quests are borrowed from Skyrim (and official DLC), and at least one Shout from fan-made DLC (Wyrmstooth, which has a wikia), possibly spells as well.

And then (21 November 2014) I realized that I should point something out. After reading the odd article or three at BuzzFeed I must say I have never read *The Fault In Our Stars* nor seen the movie, so any and all similarities with “okay” is pure coincidence. And I’m mentioning it because I keep seeing that word pop up on Etsy-type stuff or whatever, so....

And, huh. I will state that I have played Skyrim and gone all three ways: no Civil War, Stormcloak, and Legion. Personally, I prefer playing the Empire side, because it makes more sense to me. But for the purposes of this story... well, you’ll see what I mean later, but Legate Dragonborn doesn’t sound nearly as interesting as Dragonborn Stormblade, and given the character’s fondness for enchanting weapons with Shock...

Oh, right. I took liberties with how Aura Whisper shows things, mainly because I was so used to my character wearing those Dwemer Goggles (a mod) and seeing specific colours that I unthinkingly had Aura Whisper work that way. Or something like that. I forget. (I don’t have it installed at the moment because it conflicts with the wear location of something else, so I can’t check.)

Uh, a non-English language while in Britain is denoted differently, mainly so you can tell when the Britons should be clueless as to what’s being said. So remember this, because I won’t put a key in every applicable chapter; if I can remember it so can y’all. 「Auf Deutsch.」 (Apologies to Japan, also applies to people speaking Japanese where applicable.) «En Français.» Also, apologies to anyone who uses a screen reader, because I’ve no idea how they’ll be interpreted.

I, uh, kind of gloss over the aftermath of the mentioned rape, though it does get mentioned more than once. I wanted it there for a couple of reasons, even if it’s not immediately obvious why.

The ending went right off the rails into crack territory... yeah.
Chapter 1

01

Riddle was a brilliant man; even Dumbledore would admit to that. So when his spy was able to return to him with the required information he played it safe. It was very late when he and Peter approached the Potter home. All the lights were out, and they were all probably sleeping, secure inside their secret. As it was, the two were able to quietly enter the home and proceed upstairs after a quick sweep of the ground floor, and James and Lily were placed under spells to prevent them from waking. He was there to deal with his prophesied foe, not indiscriminately kill fellow magicals.

The children were in the nursery. He almost smiled when he saw that one of them, the one with green eyes, had escaped his crib and was halfway to the next room. Such a pity a child had to die. “Peter, wait in the hall and keep watch. This will only take a moment.”

“Yes, my lord,” was the response, and Peter slipped back through the door.

Tom took a moment to close the door and looked back at the children. Twins, he understood. Since only the green-eyed child was actually awake it was to him he spoke quietly. “I don’t know which of you it is. I don’t condone killing children, but I cannot afford to have either of you lying in wait for the day when you’ll kill me. There is too much of importance I must accomplish. For what it’s worth, I am sorry.”

He lifted his wand, aimed, and spoke the fatal words.

He was not expecting the killing curse to rebound off the child’s forehead and rip free his soul. A few endless seconds later his body hit the floor with a thud and disintegrated, followed immediately by the clatter of his wand. The child had been knocked into the next room.

Peter arrived moments later and looked around, fear etching his features. He started when the ceiling started to crack and white dust began to rain down, and quickly snatched up Riddle’s wand, then fled.

And Tom, after a soundless snarl, followed him in spirit form, wanting to know where the little rat was taking his most prized possession. At least he was not exactly dead, even if his body was.

Albus shot awake when an alarm went off and rushed to clothe himself and fetch a number of items before hastening off to Godric’s Hollow. When he arrived the house was quiet, though he noted the roof seemed to be somewhat in disrepair. He shook his head and ran inside and up the stairs, pausing at the master bedroom, and waking James and Lily when it became apparent they were under a spell. They grabbed robes and wands and followed him to the nursery.
“Edward,” cried Lily as she rushed over to one of the cribs and began spelling debris away. James moved to help her and little Edward was soon safe in his mother’s arms, being fussed over as she dabbed at the blood on his face.

“Where is Harry?” James asked breathlessly, looking around and using his wand to vanish yet more debris as Albus used magic to shore up the ceiling. James was frantic when Harry was nowhere to be seen, but was quickly calmed when Albus pointed into the play room.

Harry was sleeping curled up next to some of the twins’ toys. James rushed in to pick him up and look him over quickly, then managed to almost smile. “He escapes every so often. It’s not the first time we’ve found him there when he should be in his crib.”

Albus nodded and smiled, then turned his attention to the set of adult-sized robes on the floor. “It appears that Voldemort was here. The alarm informed me of a death, and I think we can easily conclude who.”

Lily looked up. “Why didn’t we hear anything?”

“You were spelled asleep, my dear. It is obvious that Peter has betrayed you and must be found. But aside from that, judging by the amount of residual magic in this room, Voldemort came and attempted to kill the twins, and something went wrong.”

James shifted Harry in his arms and frowned. “Don’t think I don’t remember what that prophecy said, Albus. You said death, but is he really gone? And the only one in here was Edward, so . . . .”

Albus gave a mild shrug. “It appears, yes, that Edward has vanquished Voldemort. However, we have no way of knowing exactly what happened. Voldemort could have attempted to cast on Harry from this room. There is a clear line of sight.”

“No,” James denied. “It’s Edward who’s bleeding.”

“Albus, I can’t heal this,” Lily said into the silence. “It’s resisting my attempts.” And then she burst into hysterical tears, causing Edward to cry also.

James placed Harry in a crib and moved to wrap his arms around his wife. “Lily, it’s okay, we’re safe. It’s over. We’re fine, the boys are fine, there’s no need to cry.”

Albus mentally rolled his eyes; James never had been all that good at understanding people. “Why don’t we all go to Hogwarts so that Poppy can look everyone over. It may be that this atmosphere is tainted enough to prevent proper healing. And I’m sure you could both do with a night at the castle.”

Poppy was able to heal Edward’s wound with a bit of effort, much to the relief of a puffy-eyed Lily. Scans turned up nothing of particular interest, even for Harry, though Poppy was mildly concerned that the child had not awoken during any of the excitement. It was brushed off given everything else that had happened and easily forgotten.

Peter was tracked down several days later and immediately stunned from three sides. When questioned he tearfully admitted a number of things, such as how he had been recruited by Voldemort, unable to resist the man’s force of personality, and had willingly shared the Secret after gaining a promise that James, Sirius, and Remus would not be harmed.

Lily was particularly affronted by that, stepping up to slap Peter before James could get hold of her. Peter just sneered weakly at her and accused her of being a bad influence on his best friend. That time James was ready and kept her corralled within his arms.
“Albus, I think there’s something we should tell you.”

He gazed at James expectantly.

“I hesitate to do so, because, well . . . because. Peter is an animagus. If he’s sent to Azkaban . . .”

“I see,” he said, absently casting a quick spell on Pettigrew. “I suggest that you and Sirius take care of some overdue paperwork, then, and pay any fines as necessary.”

James flushed and nodded.

Harry was a very quiet child. He was withdrawn, almost never spoke, and he showed no signs of accidental magic, unlike his brother. James eventually came to the conclusion that Harry was a squib, and that it would be best if he was raised as a muggle.

Lily, of course, had a few things to say about that. “I don’t care if he’s a squib. He’s my son. And you’re proposing we ship him off and forget about him?”

“Lily, my angel, you must consider this logically. A magical education is closed to him. Even if he can learn about this world, it will be of little use. He would be far better off learning how to make his way in the muggle world, and not be here to suffer from envy and jealousy. Or do you think we should raise a child who will be lost here, and who cannot get any position of meaning? Would you have him be a stock boy? Work on the Knight Bus? Even clerical positions require magic.”

She huffed and shook her head. “So you think he’ll be resentful, no matter what we do? Do you have that little faith in our abilities?”

“It’s not that. Think about how much you suffered for being different and how cruel people can be. And think about how people react to squibs. There are plenty out there who still believe the proper thing to do is quietly arrange an accident, even if the child in question isn’t part of their family.”

Lily sighed, unable to refute that. The magical world could be barbaric.

“We could place him with your sister. That’s the only family either of us has left,” James suggested.

“Are you insane? She hates anything magical!”

“And he’s a squib. If she knows that she’ll probably treat him well. And, if by some slim chance he does get a Hogwarts letter, we’ll bring him back to us.”

“He might surprise you,” she insisted. “Surely we can wait longer before making such a major decision.”

James shrugged. “He’s already had many opportunities. Not even when he’s been startled does anything happen. Edward has been showing magic for a year now, at right about the same age I did. Look, I’m not suggesting we abandon him. He’d be going to family and we would pay for his expenses. And when he’s old enough we will pay for additional muggle schooling and give him money to start his life with. He would also be old enough then, an adult, to decide if he wished to be a squib in the magical world or simply live as a muggle.”

“I want more time,” she said stubbornly.

“All right,” he said placatingly.
“And what does Albus have to say about this? Have you even mentioned it?”

“Not yet. It wouldn’t be proper to say anything until we’d discussed it.”

Lily set her hands on her hips and glared. “Well, that’s nice. And since we’re discussing Harry, how about I point out that you’ve already been ignoring him? Strangely, you never seem to have time for him. Is it because he’s a disappointment to you? Is that it?”

James went faintly pink. “I wasn’t aware I had been.”

She stormed out of the room to go find Harry and spend time with him.

A year later he had still shown no signs of magic, not even a hint, and Lily had come to the conclusion that James would never treat him the same as Edward. And it appeared that Harry was aware of the differences already. While he would come to her when he wanted something he would never go to James. He also had a tendency to avoid Remus and Sirius, but she could not bring herself to find that surprising.

Sirius was raised in a Dark pure-blood family, so his views on squibs were not a shock. And Remus, dear Remus, had such a weak spine. It was one of the things she intensely disliked about him. He was so obnoxiously grateful for the acceptance of James and Sirius that he refused to make waves, just like in school. She would have a full time job just keeping their level of influence down. She did not need a cocky, cruel son. James might have mellowed out, but . . .

Albus was so disinterested in the whole matter it shocked her. He had vaguely mumbled something about some incident a century or so ago about how trauma had rendered one unfortunate girl unable to use her magic, then glanced at Harry and pronounced it was possible the boy was a squib. After that his eyes always seemed to pass over her son as though he was invisible.

In the end she decided that Harry would be better off with her sister, if only to prevent the menfolk from turning him into a bitter, resentful person. The magical world knew about the night that Voldemort had been defeated and it was already a struggle out in public what with how ridiculously people acted, squealing and shrieking any time Edward so much as was glimpsed.

She sat down with Harry one day, her heart heavy, and tried to explain. “Honey, I know you’re not really old enough to understand just yet, but there’s something I need to tell you. You’re going to live with my sister, your Aunt Petunia.” She paused for a reaction and received nothing, which made her shiver. “You know how your dad and I can make things happen? Edward can, too? It’s because you can’t that I’ve agreed to this. I want you to live a normal life, Harry, and you can’t do that here. People will treat you differently.”

She blinked when he nodded slowly, then sighed.

“You already see that, don’t you. I’m so sorry, love. I’ve written out a very long letter already which will explain things better that you can read when you’re older. And I’ll be writing so you know I’ve not forgotten you and that I love you.”

Two days later, on a Saturday morning, she brought Harry to her sister, barely holding back the tears. Petunia answered the door, the polite smile on her face immediately disappearing. “Lily.”

“Petunia. This is Harry. Harry, sweet, this is your Aunt Petunia.”

Harry gave a little nod and looked down the hallway.

“Come in,” Petunia said and stepped out of the way. “The sitting room is just through that door.”
Once they were inside she asked, “And do you have time for tea?”

Lily choked slightly and shook her head; she couldn’t bear the idea of sitting there and pretending she wasn’t about to give up her little boy. “Harry is very well mannered and quiet,” she said rather inanely.

“And he’s not like you.”

“No,” she confirmed, even though she had already explained everything the day previous.

“Fine. Well, let’s not draw this out. I have the conditional custody papers and he’ll be enrolled in school with my Dudley come the end of the summer. If things change you may be sure I’ll let you know.”

Lily nodded and slipped off the sofa to kneel in front of her son so she could hug him fiercely. “I love you so much, Harry. You behave for your aunt, okay? And I want to hear good reports about school.” She started crying again as she kissed his forehead. After another squeeze she got up and raced off.

Harry looked at his aunt curiously, knowing that she thought magic was freakish, and wondered if her opinion could be changed. What his parents did not know, and he had never bothered to tell them, was that he struggled daily due to that night so long ago. He was not yet old enough to properly understand the results of that confrontation, but he knew he was different—just not in the way they had assumed.

Even though his parents were always happy to see demonstrations of Edward’s magic, something in him prevented the desire to do likewise. Each day he spent most of his waking time assimilating knowledge not his own, which was far more interesting than listening to his father babble about things, or suffer being treated like a fragile piece of glass. Oh, he loved his mother, but she did tend to act as though he might break at any moment. He did not feel quite the same about his dad, as that man frequently forgot about him.

“Well, Harry, I’ll show you to your room.”

He blinked and turned wide eyes on his aunt, then nodded. “Yes, please,” he said quietly.

Petunia got up and headed through the hallway door, leading him up the staircase. She started pointing at doorways, explaining what they were, eventually ending up pointing at the door to the right of the staircase, on the same wall. “That will be your room. Come along.”

The window therein faced the street. “I’ll have Vernon bring up your things when he gets home.” Petunia turned to face him and asked, “Were you given any chores by your parents?”

Harry shook his head, but said, “I liked the garden.”

“We’ll see.”

Two years later Harry was accustomed to living in the muggle world and not seeing magic performed around him constantly. Petunia seemed to be quite pleased with his affection for plants and they would spend time together gardening, though he could not do nearly as much as she could. He was only just seven, after all. He neglected to mention he was encouraging her flowers in ways
she would not approve of.

And she must hold some fondness for him as she had told Dudley to keep an eye out for him at school and around the neighborhood because Harry wasn’t as “robust”. Dudley was so chuffed by his mother’s words that he did his best to make sure nobody picked on his smaller cousin. Unfortunately, it made the both of them a bit unpopular.

Vernon, however, looked at Harry every day with disdain and suspicion, so in some respects Harry was living the same life, just with the roles switched around a bit. His uncle was also displeased that Dudley was sticking up for Harry. Vernon felt it was improper, and did not think his son should be so kind to the “freak”, nor would he listen to Petunia telling him to stop talking that way.

Harry’s mother wrote every so often, but her letters were short and generally vague. The older he got the more he felt she had no idea what to say, and mentions of magic were stringently avoided, perhaps to stave off any bad reactions on his part to having been excluded from that life. She never visited, either, and never explained why, but was always free with praise for his accomplishments in school. His father never wrote.

Things changed when Vernon got the shock of his life on Bonfire Night. Dudley performed accidental magic when one of the fireworks they were playing with went off funny and startled the boy. Vernon bellowed in anger and disbelief, Petunia shrieked, and Dudley thought it was funny once he had calmed down. Harry simply thought it was interesting that his aunt had produced a magical child for no apparent reason.

After that Vernon was even more vocal, frequently blaming Harry for the freakishness of his son, and took to being a bit rough with the both of them as Petunia looked on in consternation. However, when her husband went so far as to backhand Dudley the next time he displayed accidental magic, she phoned a solicitor.

In less than a week she had chucked Vernon out of the house and petitioned for divorce on the grounds of “unreasonable behavior”. Harry came to learn that her parents had left her quite a bit of money and paid for the house, so she felt justified in evicting him, and Vernon seemed to be happy to get away from freakish behavior. By April Petunia was single again with custody of her son.

It was only then that Harry decided to level with his aunt. They were puttering in the garden when he asked softly, “Have you ever seen Diagon Alley?”

She said nothing for some time, seemingly intent on waging war against weeds, then nodded. “Yes, when Lily went the first time.”

“I wonder where other places are like that.”

“Why?”

He looked up and shrugged. “You don’t seem to be so upset that Dudley has magic.”

Petunia sighed and sat back on her heels, brushing the dirt from her hands. “He’s my son, and I love him. I won’t be like Vernon. How can I be when my parents were so supportive of Lily. It could have been me.”

Harry opened his mouth and thought better of it, closing it again quickly.

She seemed to understand what he hadn’t said. “I know, I was very unkind to my sister. Sometimes, Harry, I think you’re too old for how young you are.” She gave him a piercing look. “Why are you interested in other places like Diagon Alley?”
He bit his lip, wondering if it was a mistake to talk, then said, “Because, aunt, if you were seen there with Dudley it might get back to my parents. How would they react knowing you have a magical son, when they left me here because none of you were?”

“You’re worried they’d take you away and put you who knows where?”

Harry nodded.

“I’m not sure what to say,” she admitted. “Does it bother you that Dudley has magic and you don’t?”

He shot a funny smile at her. “Nobody ever asked me, you know? They just thought I was a squib because I never did anything like Edward did. But I like it here. Mum treated me like your fine china and dad just ignored me. I never got the same kind of attention that Edward did, and that hurt. You treat me the same as you do Dudley.”

Petunia’s eyes widened slowly. “Harry, can you do magic?”

“So far as I know, yes.”

“Why—no, never mind. I know why, since you’ve been here. You’re a very smart boy. But why not around your parents? Why did you let them think you’re a squib?”

“I wasn’t sure back then,” he said simply. “And after I realized I could, I decided not to say anything. I didn’t want to go back to that house, just to see my dad suddenly decide I was worth knowing again. And mum never writes about magic. She talks about anything but. I know she cares about me, but she’s got her hands full keeping dad and his friends in line.” He shook his head. “I can’t get over the idea that everything would change again, and knowing I still wouldn’t be treated the same by my dad or his friends, because I’m not the special one.”

Petunia sighed again and reached over to briefly clasp his shoulder. “You know it’ll change when your letter arrives. You can’t avoid that. And they will take you back.”

He shrugged. “I try not to think about it. I read that letter mum wrote for when I was older, and I get why she brought me here, but I think she gave in too early. I don’t hate them, aunt, I just don’t want to go back.”

Having finally become strong enough, and having paid Lucius Malfoy a visit, Tom was back in a corporeal body. He had been somewhat upset so many years ago once he realized what his diary had become, but it proved to be handy in the end. Otherwise, he would not have lived that night, and he would not now be once more alive.

He knew from his occasional wanderings in spirit form exactly where that child lived, and decided to visit. Invisibly, of course. Years of pondering the mystery of the prophecy had also brought to mind a number of interpretations, one of which was backed up by certain information he had stumbled over quite unexpectedly.

He was surprised to see just how mature the boy was for his age. He was also shocked to see the child conversing one day with a snake while a woman and another boy looked on in fascination; he couldn’t remember their names. How on Earth was the boy favored enough to—

“He says he’ll help keep pests out of the garden, so long as we remember he’s around and try not to step on him.”
The woman stared at the snake for a minute, then nodded. “All right, Harry. Please tell him thank you.”

“That is so cool,” the other boy said. “I wish I could do that.”

Harry relayed the message, then said, “Maybe there’s different kinds?”

“Like other animals?”

Harry nodded, then shrugged to convey his ignorance. “Maybe some wizards can talk to birds or dogs or cats?”

“Hedgehogs!”

The woman sighed. “I’m not sure how we could find out. I think you’re right, Harry, that we shouldn’t be seen in Diagon Alley.”

And why not? For that matter, why was the child here and not with his parents? He resolved to get one of them alone soon and find out, obliterating them afterward. He was given that opportunity a bare five minutes later, when the woman sent the children in to wash up. Her mind was completely unprotected, and bore ripe fruit. Ten minutes later he was away, to contemplate.

A week later he returned, this time as a snake. The other snake there only gave him passing attention, making mention of the deal he had made with the humans before ignoring him. That suited Tom just fine, as while he had no intention of actually catching vermin, he could speak with the boy without raising too much suspicion.

“You nest here?” he asked that morning as the child was weeding.

“Yes.”

“The other nestling is your sibling?”

Harry shook his head and replied, “No, he’s my cousin,” and proceeded to explain what Tom already knew.

“When do you nest here?”

Harry seemed not to find it strange to be telling a snake details of his life, and readily did so. “I wish sometimes that my mother had just forgotten about me. I’m sure my father already has.”

Were he truly a snake he would not wonder about the strength of a mother’s love. Thus, he nudged the child again.

“She cried when she left me here,” Harry confided. “She barely writes. Each time I think it must be the last. I don’t want to go back there. I understand why my mother allowed me to come here, but I don’t agree, and I don’t want anything to do with my father.”

“You speak, though. You are magical.”

Harry shrugged. “So is Dudley.”

Tom paused to think for a while, absently flicking his tongue about, then said, “If you could become someone else, would you?”

“That would require another magic user, wouldn’t it? And then someone would know. They’d try to
“send me back.”

“Not necessarily,” he argued. “Do you remember what happened that night?”

“The night that changed everything,” Harry replied. “Yes.”

Tom raised his head in mild surprise. Everything? “Oh?”

“A man came. I wonder what would have happened if I had already made it into the play room. Maybe he would have gone after Edward first? But then, if things were meant to happen, Edward would be dead and I’d be treated like a little prince.”

“Would that be bad?”

Harry shrugged again. “Maybe. I’m happy being treated the same as Dudley. I might not feel that way if I were still there and it was Edward in my place, but that’s not how it is. I just know that Edward is being treated so well for something he didn’t do.”

“Why did you not tell them?”

“I couldn’t. There was too much stuff in my head. Talking was hard to do, an effort. I think I got some of the man’s mind.”

It was a good thing that snakes cannot gawk or gape. “I see. So you remember that night.”

The boy chucked another handful of weeds into a basket. “The man apologized before he tried to kill me. It wasn’t until much later that I was old enough to understand what he’d said. Aunt Petunia thinks I’m very bright, but I never told her just what’s in my head. Some of it doesn’t help much with muggle stuff, anyway.” Harry turned to face him directly, a strange look on his face. “Are you that man? Or his emissary?”

“I am a snake.”

The boy frowned at him. “James and Sirius are animagi. Why can’t the man be one? Why can’t you be him?”

“And if I were?”

“I’d like to know why you tried to kill me.”

Several hours later the garden was looking immaculate and Tom had learned through careful questioning that the child had knowledge far beyond his years, and even contained information learned only by those who had studied the Dark Arts. In other words, from his own mind to the child’s, a transfer of knowledge, causing the boy to become withdrawn from the outside world as his body tried to cope and adapt to and assimilate the ‘gift’.

“There was a prophecy,” he eventually stated. “It led me to believe, when I heard it, that you, your brother, or one other child might be my downfall. So I took steps to prevent that from happening.”

“What was it? And why do you speak to me now? Do you plan to try to kill me again?”

Tom paused a moment, then said, “During my exile I had much time to ponder the issue. I think perhaps I was meant to make the attempt, but it is not me who should fear you. I believe my prophesied part in all this is done. So no, I speak to you to clear the matter up, and to assure you I have no intent to try a second time for your death.”
Harry was quiet for some time, idly playing with blades of grass and staring at the sky. “Exile?”

“I lost my body that night, but I have regained it. I shall return to my original plan of action, while keeping an eye out for whoever the real danger is. To you, I mean.”

“Huh?”

“I admit, I feel somewhat responsible. I am displeased at having been a plaything for Fate, but whereas I had no choice in that, I do in this. I did try to kill you. Therefore, I shall keep an eye out for the real danger to you.”

“And you’re a dark lord?”

He attempted to glare at the child, and failed. “I am. That does not mean I am devoid of emotion, or a code of conduct. Were I a lesser man I would try to kill you again simply because I failed the first time and was shamed.”

To his great surprise the boy giggled. “How can a snake sound so prim?” Harry asked, then giggled some more.
When Harry turned eight he received no gift from his mother, which set his course. On the other hand, Tom had come, in human form. His idea of a gift was rather different, though. “A new life?” he questioned.

Tom nodded, then glanced at Petunia and Dudley. “I am not unaware that Mr Dursley has been making life difficult.” He paused while Harry’s aunt gasped quietly. “I can offer you three a new name and a new life, away from here. You would not be found, and you could start over again.”

Petunia gasped again. “Why?”

“You do not like the idea?”

“I did not say that. Why would you make such an offer? Who are we to you?”

“It’s about a debt I have with Harry,” he said vaguely. “You are his family, thus you are included. This is sensible.”

“We need to think it over,” Harry said quietly, casting a slight smile at the man. “Either way, thank you.”

Even after the man had left Petunia seemed distracted and a bit awed. When Harry inquired she said, “I’m just so surprised. He knows so much and he’s willing to help? Just exactly what kind of debt does he have?”

He grimaced and considered the best way to explain that. “I may not have volunteered truths you were unaware of, Aunt Petunia, but I have never lied to you. What I would tell you in answer to that will be hard for you to understand or believe.”

A fleeting scowl crossed her face. She was, in her own way, just as stubborn as her sister. “I want to know.”

“That man was the one who tried to kill me as a baby.”

Petunia blanched and wobbled in her seat, listing a bit to one side. “What?” she whispered.

“He tried to kill me. Well, I think he intended to kill me and Edward, but obviously it didn’t work out that way. There was some prophecy. He explained, a bit reluctantly, that he thinks he was meant to make the attempt, but that the real danger was never between him and myself. There’s someone else involved, and even he doesn’t know who yet. And because of what happened, and the time he had to think while in—exile, he called it—he decided to attempt to make it up to me. I am in danger, he says, he just doesn’t know from who. So this is his way of trying to protect me, reparations for his actions.”

“And you—you just—you accept that?”

Harry shrugged one shoulder. “I believe he’s being honest. See, it’s a funny thing. He was a snake at
the time, and you can’t lie in snake language.”

“...I need to lie down for a while,” Petunia said faintly, then suited actions to words.

Harry watched as she carefully stood up and drifted off. She had taken it better than expected, actually. He was very surprised an hour later when the doorbell rang and it was revealed to him, on opening the door, that his mother had come to visit.

“Harry,” she said a little breathlessly.

He blinked at her slowly and stepped back, wordlessly issuing an invitation to enter. He rather thought she looked tired and harassed. Her eyes were shadowed and her face drawn, and for a woman who had always been pale she looked almost translucent. After closing the door he led her into the sitting room and finally spoke. “Would you like some tea?”

She gave him a teary look, then drew him into her arms.

Harry felt, he supposed, more than a little confused. He had honestly thought by this point that his mother had actually forgotten about him, and yet here she was, warm and soft and motherly. . . . “Er, mum, it’s not that I’m not glad to see you, but . . . well . . . I’m having a little trouble here.”

Lily drew back, her hands sliding to rest on his shoulders, and she smiled at him. It was a bit sad and uncertain yet unmistakably a smile. “Oh, Harry, I’m so happy to see you again finally. I love you so much.” She dropped a kiss on his forehead before saying, “Where is your aunt?”

He froze for a moment, unavoidably recalling recent events, and fairly certain that telling his mother about all that would cause an unholy ruckus. “She’s having a lie down. Dudley went off to the shops to get stuff for dinner this evening.”

Lily nodded and then furrowed her brow. “I assume Vernon is at work.”

One of his eyebrows slowly raised at this evidence of ignorance, though why he should be surprised by it was beyond his ken. “...Mum, Aunt Petunia divorced him a while back. He...” How on earth was he supposed to explain this?

“He...?” she prompted.

“Let me go make some tea first. Come with me?” he offered.

His mother nodded and released him, following him into the kitchen and taking a seat at the table while he began preparing things. “I’m happy to see you, too, mum. Have you just come for a visit, or...?”

He was mildly surprised when his mother sighed heavily and slumped a little in her seat. “I don’t quite know how to tell you this, Harry, but seeing as how you’re not unaware that it happens, I guess I’ll just say it. I’ve left your father.”

Harry paused, lid halfway to the kettle, and turned to face her. “...Why?”

“I never agreed with him, never, about sending you here. I didn’t care that you were a squib, Harry. You’re my son and I love you. I tried so hard to make things work with your father and brother, with Sirius and Remus always hanging around, and I just can’t any longer. I’ve tried so hard to stop them from turning your brother into an arrogant little sod, but nothing I do works, or for very long, anyway. I’m done with it, I can’t bear it any longer. It’s making me ill.
“I love magic, and I love your father and brother, but now I can’t say I like them very much. So I left him, divorced him. James has sole custody of Edward and I have sole custody of you.” She looked around as Harry began getting the cups ready. “And if my sister is in the same boat, for whatever reasons, maybe the four of us can make a nice family. Maybe we can reconcile.”

“Maybe we can,” came Petunia’s voice, a bit rough in tone, her form revealed as she slipped through the doorway. “Hello, Lily.”

Harry thought it would be a very good idea to give the two of them time alone, so he fixed the tea, placed everything on the table, and ducked out into the garden. That is not to say he didn’t listen in, because he did. But the appearance of privacy was important.

James and his two best friends—brothers, some would say—had managed to raise Edward to be, by this point, arrogant and entitled, a boy who reveled in his fame and soaked up the adulation of the masses. Between her frustrating ineffectiveness at countering all that, her husband’s attitude toward squibs, their general patronizing attitude toward muggles in general—well, Lily simply couldn’t take it any longer.

It said much to Harry, even at such a young age, that his father put up only a token protest over the whole divorce. His mother had been given a very generous settlement, so they were in no danger of living in poverty.

And naturally it came out, during Petunia’s turn to unload, that not only was Dudley magical, but so was Harry, at which point his mother’s voice called out his name. He waited a little, to give lie to the idea he had been anywhere near the window, then returned to the kitchen. Petunia pushed a plate of biscuits toward him when he sat down and went to get another cup.

“You can do magic, Harry?” Lily asked, her eyes wide with wonder, and perhaps a bit of pride.

“So far as I know. I never told Aunt Petunia that I—” he shot his aunt an apologetic look “—had been, er, encouraging the plants in her garden to grow better and nicely, but it did come out after Dudley showed signs of magic that I didn’t think I was a squib at all. I don’t have bouts of accidental magic and it’s not like I’ve tried any spells, but I know I’m not a squib.”

“And you didn’t—no, never mind. I remember the things I explained to you, even after all this time, and I think I know why you—”

“Mum, I’m home!” called Dudley, the front door closing audibly down the hall.

Harry jumped up to go help, whispering once he got out there that his mother was visiting and for Dudley not to be surprised. Dudley fairly charmingly greeted Lily and went on with putting things away, making sure his own mother got receipts and the change, because they both knew she kept very careful track of their finances to ensure they would all be all right. “I’m going to go play my game if that’s okay,” Dudley announced, glancing at his mother for permission, then dashing off upstairs.

“Will you join us for dinner?” Petunia asked, rising to begin preparations.

A week later Tom returned. Petunia had answered the door and reentered the room desperately signaling with her eyes at Harry, who did not have enough time to figure out what she was trying to say before Tom appeared. His mother, after one look at the man, had gasped and jumped up, wand at the ready, making sure Harry was behind her.
Tom watched all this with a faint smile of amusement, not quite a smirk, and said, “Mrs Potter, a pleasure to see you.”

Harry snorted quietly and shuffled sideways along the sofa. “Hello, Tom. Your timing is either brilliant or really awful.”

“Oh?” Tom eyed Lily for a moment. “I am going to guess from this reaction that your mother is unaware of certain things.”

“Well spotted,” he replied.

“Harry? What the hell is going on?” his mother demanded.

“I’ll make some tea,” Petunia announced to no one in particular, then headed to the kitchen.

“Harry!?”

“Tom, please have a seat. Mum—this is complicated.”

“Well uncomplicate it!”

Tom took a seat and said in a terribly friendly manner, “I’m rather surprised you recognized me, Mrs Potter, after all these years. And I do look a bit different now.”

Lily shot him a wary look, wand still in hand, and replied, “It’s the eyes. There are some actors, on the television or in films, that you can always recognize, even if they’re disguised and their voices are changed. It’s all in the eyes.”

“How remarkable. Please do sit down. I assure you there is no need for violence.”

“Right,” she drawled, though she did sit down. Her wand stayed handy, of course. “Harry? Explain.”

“Well….” It took what seemed like forever to get through the story, but between Harry and Tom they managed. Lily continued to display a certain amount of wariness, but the combined efforts of the two, plus Petunia’s obvious ease, finally saw her tucking her wand away again and actually listening with a great deal more attention as opposed to rampant skepticism.

“So you’re telling me that Harry, not Edward, is the Boy-Who-Lived? And that he’s a parselmouth like you, and that he has a whole lot of your memories because of what happened that night?”

“Correct. I think I would know which child it was I tried to kill, after all.”

Lily scowled at him for the flippancy of the response. “And now you’re offering to remove everyone to another country, partly because Vernon is being a right pain, and partly to assist Harry in his desire to not go anywhere near his father again?”

“Correct,” Tom repeated. “As near as I can determine what little of the prophecy that was overheard lent itself to gross misinterpretation by all parties. Oh, not the part where Harry is involved, but the overall meaning. I am convinced that while I was meant to make the attempt and fail, I am not the dark lord in question who needs to be dealt with.”

“And you can’t lie in snake language,” Harry added, “so he at least honestly believes this to be the truth.”

“Oh dear lord,” Lily muttered, an expression of “why me?” on her face as she gazed at the ceiling.
Then she took a deep breath and said briskly, “Well. No matter what, James isn’t going to find out. He’s already made a royal mess of things with Edward and I can’t bear to think what he’d try if he realized that Harry was actually the Boy-Who-Lived. And Edward’s nose would be put seriously out of joint. He might even resort to backstabbing and sabotage after learning he was no longer the ‘important’ one. God, what a mess.”

“So you can see why I offered to relocate everyone?” Tom asked.

“Yes. It’s not like they’d bother to pay attention to who got into a different school. And it would also avoid getting Dumbledore involved.”

Tom sneered at the mention. “I assure you it would be no trouble whatsoever to ensure that Harry and Dudley were ignored by Hogwarts come time for their letters. Karkaroff may be a sniveling coward, but he will issue invitations for the boys.”

“And language?”

“Also not a problem. I wouldn’t be surprised if Harry can already speak any language I can. Gifting it to you, your sister, and your nephew is miniscule in terms of effort.”

“Even though my sister is non-magical?” she asked skeptically.

Tom arched a brow. “I believe you would find, should you speak to the goblins, that you are not a mere muggle-born. I have every expectation that you and your sister share magical blood somewhere in your ancestry. Petunia may not be able to express magic, but her son can, and that is not how it usually works.”

“You have a point,” she conceded.

“Naturally.”

Lily aimed a halfhearted scowl at the man as Petunia announced that dinner was ready.

A month later they had emigrated to Norway, near Trondheim. Lily arranged, after they settled in, for her accounts (and Harry’s trust) to be moved to the Gringotts of that country, and also to have tests done regarding magic in their ancestry. Riddle was correct on that point, though it was cold comfort to Petunia. Still, she was able to be given languages, not something possible had she truly been non-magical. Lily also had proper magical custody of Dudley, just in case.

Dudley, being very much the child his age implied, thought all of it was terribly fun. He did not have the enforced maturity of Harry and was therefore left out of a lot of discussions. It did not bother him in the least that his British citizenship had been switched to that of Norway; he was more concerned that some of his favorite sweets were no longer easily obtainable in their new home.

Harry had settled in expecting things to be normal, inasmuch as they could be, and was soon enough proven wrong. The change in climate meant that growing a garden was not the thing of ease it had been in England and he was inclined very soon on to “encourage” the plants his mother and aunt had laid out (with some input from Tom).

Three hours later the world shook.

That in itself was thought to be nothing more than tectonic activity, though the non-magical population was a bit mystified by the event and its short duration. Harry didn’t give it much thought.
—that is, until a dragon arrived and landed near their home, looking for all the world as though it had come for tea.

Petunia had shrieked like a banshee and fled inside, Dudley gaped in amazement, Lily had her wand out ready to strike at the slightest provocation, and Harry just stood there, eyeing the creature with a mixture of awe and trepidation. After all, dragons were said to be quite vicious, and even handlers on reserves were known to be injured on a semi-regular basis.

And then the creature spoke in a rumbling voice. “Krosis. I do not mean to cause alarm. Daar vahdin los kril. The woman is brave.”

Harry stepped closer, irresistibly curious at this seeming anomaly.

“Why are you here?” his mother asked shakily, reaching out her free arm to block Harry’s advance.

“I am called Paarthurnax,” it replied. “One here speaks the language of dov, dragonkind. The Thu’um, Shout, was heard by my kind, and that of those called the Greybeards. I come to investigate.”

“Shout?” she said. “You heard a shout? From here?”

“Geh. Yes. The words of my kind are laced with power. Even our names are so, and to Shout them on the wind is to call or direct tinvaak, speech, to the one named. A Shout originated from here not so long ago this day. Only mortals with dedication and fen, will, can speak such words and have them be heard. There is one other, but. . . .”

“From here?” she again asked.

Harry lost enough of his awe to roll his eyes and say, “Er, mum, you’re repeating yourself. Maybe you should send a message to Tom? He might be interested in joining, er, whatever this is.”

Lily seemed to collect herself and nodded. “Perhaps you’re right,” she replied, and suited actions to words with a patronus.

Harry addressed the dragon next. “Can you tell what kind of, er, Shout it was?”

“Geh. One rarely heard.” Paarthurnax paused for a moment as a crack announced the arrival of Tom, then continued, “It was to assist life. Haas dun daar.”

Harry wobbled, his eyes going wide.

Tom leaned in toward Lily and said quietly, “Care to fill me in?”

“I am Paarthurnax,” the dragon repeated, this time directed to Tom.

Harry had never explained to anyone what he meant by “encourage” when it came to plants. He just spoke to them, in what he had thought were nonsensical sounds. They had just. . . .sounded right. But this dragon knew precisely what he had said. And had heard it? From however far away? And from more of a whisper than a shout?

“Ah. I see,” Paarthurnax rumbled at Harry. “It is you. Dovah I may be, but I have kept company with certain mortals long enough to see this. Your expression is like jun ko vul, light in the dark.”

“Still waiting on an explanation,” Tom said a bit testily.

Lily turned to look at her son with an expression which may have been mild horror. “Harry? You’re
talking about my son?”

“Geh. It is so,” Paarthurnax replied. “I see now, looking deeper, that your kul, son, is dovahkiin, Dragonborn.”


This had the effect of snapping Harry out of it. “Mum, are you even religious?”

“. . .Well, no, now that you mention it, but some expressions are hard to stop using.”

“Still waiting,” Tom growled.

Paarthurnax turned his attention to Tom. “The kiir, child, is very special. He speaks the language of dov, dragonkind. It is possible for mortals to do so, but only with great dedication and will and study. But there are those special, those with the blood of the dov, gifted to them. It appears that this kiir is one such. The last dovahkiin was eons ago, in a previous kalpa.”

Harry noticed that Tom got a very peculiar expression on his face at that, part satisfied, part confused, and part . . . hungry. “Gifted by whom?” the man asked.

“One presumes Bormahu, father to dov, known also as Akatosh and Auri-El, first of the Divines.”

Tom nodded slowly. “Previous kalpa?”

Paarthurnax hesitated. “The world was eaten, then reborn.”

“Like the Midgard Serpent?” Harry piped up.

“Of a sort.”

“Harry,” Tom said in exasperation, “the Midgard Serpent doesn’t eat the world.”

“No, but he is supposed to be responsible for its end.”

“Okay,” Tom said, turning back to the dragon. “The previous world ended, but the . . . gods did not.”

“Geh. Aedra and Daedra, what you may call gods and devils, continue to exist, and they continue to rule their domains. But this world, once Nirm, is different. When Alduin, in his prophesied role, ate the world, it was born anew. Some of the powers prevented total destruction by taking parts of Nirm and . . . transplanting them into this new world. We, dov, are one of the races so saved. Another would be the Nords.”

‘Nords? Like Nordic peoples? Vikings?’ thought Harry.

“Only Bormahu is known to have gifted mortals as dovahkiin, and to do this there must be a reason. One set of survivors, the Greybeards, are able to use Thu’um, dov words of power, but they are not dovahkiin. The Nords believed that Kyne gave them this ability.”

“But what exactly is the difference?” Tom asked.

“Dovahkiin are gifted with the blood of dov. It is very easy for them to learn the words of power, to use them. It is a part of their rii, essence. He is ripe with lah, magicka, but . . . not necessarily of your kind.”
“What!?” Lily gasped. “What are you saying?”

“I am not a squib,” Harry protested quite firmly.

“The telling would be easier were you to have tinvaak, speech, with the Greybeards. I could take the dovahkiin—”

“I am not letting my son ride off on a dragon!” Lily interrupted shrilly.

“And it’s not like I know how to make a portkey—well, actually, I do, but I don’t have a wand, so . . . .”

Tom pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “I could go, see where I’d need to make a portkey to, then apparate back here. Then we could all go.”

Paarthurnax eyed Riddle. “This would be unprecedented.”

“Oh?” Tom retorted. “And what else would you suggest? That we drive there? Take a train? Ride winged horses and blow the Statute of Secrecy all to hell?”

Harry, for his part, thought riding off on a dragon would be a fantastic adventure, but he could see why his mother would object. But seriously, he sincerely doubted that Tom knew how to drive a car.

Eventually, after much discussion, Tom mounted a somewhat reluctant Paarthurnax and was flown away.

Several hours later, as they were all enjoying dinner, a crack signaled the arrival of someone, presumably Tom. And it was him, entering the room with a bemused look on his face.

“Did you meet them?” Harry asked eagerly, gesturing at one of the empty chairs.

Tom shook his head as he sat. “No. The dragon brought me to just outside. And as I presume it would still be considered bad manners to appear directly inside that is just as well. He told me he would inform the Greybeards to expect our arrival in the near future.” He accepted a cup of tea from Petunia with a nod and continued, “Apparently he is responsible for teaching these Greybeards the Way of the Voice, as he called it, which holds certain ethical standards for use of thu’um. I admit to being a mildly perplexed on that point. It sounded as though these people spend years learning to master this ability, but prefer only to use it in times of true need. These Greybeards seem to be pacifists.”

His mother looked confused by that. “But that’s like spending all that time at Hogwarts learning to control and use magic, only to never bother using it unless you absolutely have to.”

“You mean like martial arts,” Harry said, “except that they do use them during competitions because I think you have to compete for some of them to reach higher belt levels. Or something like that.”

Dudley grinned suddenly. “Learning martial arts is supposed to teach you control and discipline. In some ways being able to defend yourself using them is incidental.”

“At any rate,” Tom said, regaining control of the conversation, “I have been informed that the Greybeards have an extensive library in that fortress of theirs, so we should be able to become well acquainted with the history of Nurn. And, perhaps, to get an explanation of what he meant about Harry’s magic. On a side note, that earthquake you mentioned happened here wasn’t an earthquake. That was the effect of the Greybeards’ Shout, a summons for Harry to appear before them.”
“Remarkable,” he whispered.

“Personally, I find it rather presumptuous, summoning Harry like some servant.”

Lily gave a slight shrug. “I’m inclined to agree.”

“The thing I don’t get is that Paarthurnax said Alduin ate the world, that prophecy was involved. Doesn’t it kind of imply that it will happen again at some point?”

“We can’t know that, Harry,” his mother said. “But we can ask. I’d certainly like to understand better what he was talking about. And really, this is saying there really are gods, or god-like beings. Sure, we’ve all read about things like that in mythology, but this makes it real.”

“How on earth did you fly so far without being seen?” Dudley asked.

Tom eyed the boy with a touch of disdain. “Magic, of course.”

“So I suppose we should plan what to bring for our visit,” Harry said, mostly to get Tom’s attention off his cousin. Riddle might not be a psychotic, murder-happy dark lord, but neither was he particularly tolerant or patient.

His mother wrinkled her nose and glanced at Petunia, then Tom. “Is it still the custom to bring wine, do you think?”

That had not really been what Harry was thinking, but his mother did have a point. It was generally polite to bring a gift to present to your host(s).

“If these people are anything like the old cultures, then yes. They probably only drank wine, mead, and ale once they reached adulthood,” Tom opined.

“I suppose I could nip off and get a selection after dinner,” Lily mused.

While his mother was doing that Harry had every intention of tossing a bunch of notebooks and writing implements into a bag of some sort. And figuring out what, exactly, one wore to a meeting like this.

His mother found him rifling through his clothing some time later and said, “Harry, if they know about magic there’s no reason not to just wear a set of robes over something comfortable. Since we don’t know how long we’ll be there bring enough for a couple of days, just in case.”

“It’s just going to be you, me, and Tom?”

“Yes, I think so. Petunia would probably be bored and it doesn’t directly concern Dudley. They can have some mother-son time together. Besides, portkeys tend to make my sister feel so ill. I think she’d be highly embarrassed to portkey over there just to be sick in front of witnesses, and potentially strangers.”

Harry nodded and began grabbing several sets of clothing from his dresser. He would have to put his toiletries into a kit bag as well, though thinking about that did make him wonder just what sort of facilities these people would have. And what robes he did have were plain and utilitarian, mainly to wear to blend in while shopping in a magical community; he never wore them otherwise. That being the case packing took him all of fifteen minutes, with only his kit bag to be packed in the morning.

He had a lot of trouble getting to sleep that night and rather desperately wished that Tom had been able to bring back some of those books. On the other hand, if Harry had one or more of them he
might not have gotten any sleep at all. There was also nothing to say that they were in a language he could even understand. How frustrating to be left in such ignorance. He had to assume these people spoke a language they could understand, but did they also speak the language of their ancestors? Would it be something Harry could learn easily enough, or would he have to plod through books at a disgustingly slow pace, translating as he went along, just so he could get the gist of things?

Eventually, unable to quiet his mind even with meditation, he went to his mother for a mild sleeping potion, and woke up the next morning feeling mostly refreshed. Breakfast felt like a rushed affair even if it wasn’t and he hurried through his morning routine, his arrival back downstairs coinciding with Tom’s.

Tom noted the robes and the backpack hanging from one shoulder and nodded. “I will assume you are prepared, then.”

“As much as I can be not really knowing what to expect.”

“It is, unfortunately, quite cold where we’re going. You may wish to wear a cloak in addition to your robes.”

Harry frowned and dashed back upstairs long enough to grab the only one he had. His mother had bought it for him not long after they moved, one with charms on it to help keep him warm in addition to the fur lining.

“You look presentable,” Tom pronounced, once Harry was back downstairs. “And your mother—where is she?”

“Finishing up in her room. She should be down momentarily. Very momentarily,” he amended, hearing her at the top of the stairs.

“In that case, let us prepare to depart.” Tom pulled a small gem from his pocket and swiftly made it into a portkey.
Harry sat on what passed for a bed in this place—made from stone, of all things—and sighed. ‘Good lord,’ he thought, ‘these people are almost worse than pacifists. They are so depressingly strident about this Way. So to them I shouldn’t ‘encourage’ plants in the garden because it’s not true need. Yet I cannot learn more without using it. And since I’m dovahkiin I’m supposed to intuitively understand the language, unlike them, and therefore not actually need any practice. Rather like Parseltongue, I suppose. These men are monastic, which isn’t at all how I’d wish to spend my life.’ He looked up as Tom entered the sleeping area.

“We have permission to visit their library,” Tom said invitingly.

He stood up quickly, hoping as he did so that the books were something they could read. Tom led the way and shortly thereafter they were gazing around with a type of greed at the knowledge contained before them.

“They are arranged by category. History, fiction, and so forth. History should be over to the left.”

The actual arrangement was slightly more complicated than that. The Greybeards had copies of the original books on a higher shelf as well as translations into a more modern version of their language directly below on the next shelf. Thus, every other shelf could be more or less safely ignored. Tom and Harry shared a look and immediately began to devour the bounty in front of them.

Lily found them an hour later and shook her head in fond exasperation. Then she joined them, being something of a closet bookworm herself. Tom slipped them potions every so often, to increase their rate of retention, so that as little as possible would be blurred in their memories. This lasted all of a day before Tom shook himself free of his learning frenzy and began to do things the smart way.

A ward was placed at the entrance to the library to cause the Greybeards to avoid the place, and as it was wizarding magic they had little defense against it. Tom then extended a container to hold unimaginable amounts of goods and started to, book by book, create permanent copies. Gemino might have been fine for temporary ones, but those lasted for two weeks at best, and that was hardly enough time. He made copies of everything, old and new language versions, and faithfully tucked them away.

When that was complete the ward was removed and they continued to read. While the Greybeards were happy enough to explain about history and to an extent about Thu’um and the Way of the Voice, they were not in any way inclined to teach an eight year old child any words of power. No, he would have to be older, they said, more mature, able to handle the seriousness of such power.

‘I am so frustrated by their intransigence I could scream,’ he thought. ‘Or Shout. But I hardly think the one Shout I do know is going to get me anywhere except them saying I’m a child, again.’ The Greybeards had, however, extended an invitation for Harry (and an accompanying adult) to visit them for a fortnight each year, though he was not entirely sure what good that would do him. Unless, that is, he had some way to spy on their practices and pick up words along the way. Even then he was not sure how that would help, as the Greybeards believed that the only proper use for Thu’um was for the worship and glory of the gods. It did not seem to him as though that would produce
much in the way of practical Shouts for him to learn, but for the moment he could not say either way.

When they did finally take leave of their hosts Harry was so incredibly glad to be back at their own home, with proper beds, facilities, and food. They were in the middle of dinner (Tom having joined them for that) when Harry suddenly realized something. “They never did explain what Paarthurnax meant about my magic.”

His mother frowned and said, “You’re right, they didn’t. How did we not press that point?”

“I think we were all a little too determined to devour their library,” answered Tom. “However, we can certainly try some tests on our own. All else failing we can ask the next time we visit them.”

“Tests? Like getting a wand for Harry early and teaching him some things?”

“Perhaps. It is possible he is a good match for my own and openly flouting the system would be unnecessary.”

Harry scoffed quietly. “I’m sure you have contacts that could fit Dudley and myself with wands a few years early.”

Tom smirked. “True, Harry, true. But that option would have to be agreed upon by your mother and Dudley’s mother.”

“Oh, mum, please,” Dudley begged Petunia.

“If I say yes,” she said slowly, “if—then it will be both of you, not just one. You know I’ve never thought you two should be treated differently, even when I didn’t yet realize Harry had magic. And if I say yes, and we do this, neither of you will use wands without proper supervision. At any other time those wands will be put away safely.”

Dudley nodded and Harry eyed his mother.

“That sounds reasonable,” Lily replied. “And since an adult witch lives here the ministry probably wouldn’t pay attention to any practice going on.”

Petunia then raised another point. “School is also going to be starting soon, so it’s not as though you’re going to have all your days free for this.”

Dudley went so far as to pout. Harry knew that as much as his cousin loved fantasy video games he would be far more excited about the idea of doing magic himself rather than via an avatar in a simulation of sorts. Muggle schooling just paled in comparison to that idea, but even he recognized the validity and value of knowing how the other half lived. Not, he admitted, that he and Dudley were well versed at all in how magicals lived, though that would change. His mother had more than once been caught muttering about lecturing them on that, sort of a pre-school wizarding studies class. The information she could impart would not have the same depth as from, say, a pure-blood, but it was something. And even with Harry’s knowledge from Tom, that man was muggle-raised and was also somewhat lacking.

Tom arranged for them to be fitted several weeks before the school year started in a rather dodgy-looking establishment. Harry wasn’t even sure what country they were in. Back at the house they were given a set of books to read and told that theory came first. He and Dudley both chafed at this, though for different reasons, Dudley because he was impatient and Harry because he already knew the material. He resigned himself to making sure his cousin actually understood what he was reading above and beyond Lily’s efforts. Tom was taking no part in things, not having the patience to deal with an actual child.
And so it went. The two boys attended school, did their homework, read magical theory, were lectured about wizarding culture, and were occasionally allowed to actually use their wands. On top of that Harry was very busy in his sparse spare time steadily reading his way through the Hrothgar library.

His mother and aunt had finally smoothed off the last of the rough edges of their relationship and managed to become best friends with each other again. If nothing else they bonded over having magical children and jerks for former husbands.

The first thing Harry learned in his pursuit of wizarding magic was that knowing was not doing. All the memories he had were a valuable resource, but none of that automatically conveyed to him actual use, as he found out upon trying his first spell. It was the wand movements that kept tripping him up. Theory stated that the words and the movements were to “guide” the magical discharge (Dudley had sniggered madly over that statement) into a specific form to a specific purpose.

And yet Harry could not do it.

If he left out the movements and still said the words? It was fine. Something in his mind just refused to equate wand movement with an actual spell. It seemed nonsensical in the extreme to him and no amount of theory could make it right. It made him want to rant and throw things and act like a spoiled child. Tom tested him to see if he could do the spell wandlessly, and he managed to get a vague sort of reaction, which was excellent all things considered.

“So,” Harry said wearily, after he had gotten his temper under control. “How is this going to affect me at Durmstrang? And what if there’s more?”

“Were you any other child it might affect you very badly in terms of grades. Wizards expect things to be just so, and that you can’t be what they expect. . . . However, as Karkaroff is the headmaster I can ensure that you will not be penalized for this oddity. As to what else might be off—I cannot say. Only time will tell. The best I can suggest for now is to get each spell you practice mastered, then try to add in the wand movement, but if it never works, it never works, and you can be pleased to not have to actually do that part, though I expect for the purposes of exams you will need to know them.”

Harry rolled his eyes in frustration, something he felt quite often. “All right.”

Dedicated study on his part (and even Dudley was joining in) eventually saw Harry able to read and comprehend the older form of the language, which, considering what they were speaking currently was just an ‘evolved’ version of it, wasn’t too much of a surprise. He also expected he could speak it without mangling pronunciation too badly.

It was therefore of great use further along during one of his visits to the Greybeards. Harry had been interested in the dovahkiin of Nirn considering he was one himself, and especially interested in the so-called Last Dragonborn. She had, apparently, failed in her role, mainly due to being assassinated. The book detailing her life once revealed as the Last Dragonborn was unfortunately very sparse on the details, especially on why anyone would want to assassinate the person supposedly meant to defeat Alduin and prevent the destruction of Nirn.

As it turned out she had been entombed right there at High Hrothgar and the Greybeards finally thought to mention this after one too many rounds of Harry questioning them about the various dovahkiin. And, while Harry honestly did not expect to get much out of the experience, was perfectly happy to visit the tomb.

Harry hadn’t really been sure what to expect of this tomb. Would it be plain, elaborately carved, have
a relief in the guise of the **dovahkiin**? As it turned out her resting place reminded him rather too much of one of those fairy tales. She was laid out like any other dead, but covered in a thin layer of what looked to be enchanted ice. It shimmered faintly blue in the flickering torchlight of the room, casting an odd play of shadow and light on the body beneath. Dark hair, pale skin, and she looked every inch a warrior.

“She’s beautiful,” he whispered.

**“Drem yol lok,”** said a hollow female voice, causing Harry’s head to whip around wildly, looking for the source. “And thank you.” Slowly a figure began to materialize over the tomb, a ghostly version of the Last Dragonborn.

“Oh my god,” Harry whispered.

She smiled faintly and tilted her head. “Have you never seen a spirit?”

“No,” he replied, then glanced at the room’s exit. “Do the Greybeards know you can do this?”

Her smile widened. “No, they do not. I do not particularly like them, after all. But you are **dovahkiin**. To show myself to you is worthwhile. I had always wondered if I escaped Alduin’s hunger after my death because of some other duty to be assigned to me. I wonder if it is you.”

Harry thought that through for several moments. She knew he was **dovahkiin**, but how? From spying on the Greybeards when it may have become apparent that something of import was happening? “either you can see I am just by looking, or you occasionally keep an eye on them. . . .”

“Not by looking,” she said. “Though it is said we carry the blood of dragons we do not have the same sight as one. What Paarthurnax can see is one thing. Though we can absorb their souls it does not mean we are dragons. But yes, it is true that I sometimes leave this place and see what they are up to, and it is how I learned of you.”

It was about then that Harry realized they were using the older form of the Nord language. He also remembered something she had just recently said. “You don’t like them?”

She shook her head slowly. “They are very rigid, do you not think? So many rules and restrictions and so much devotion and worship.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yes.”

She smiled again, and he got the impression it was not something she often did in life. “They are very attached to Paarthurnax, and I suppose I can understand that. He is a nice enough dragon with a code he lives by. The Blades, on the other hand—they would have wanted Paarthurnax dead. Any dragon should die, by their reasoning, even ones who have developed a conscience and no longer prey upon men. I could not much like either group. Both were very intent on ‘guiding’ me toward their ends.”

“So what happened? I’m afraid the books are rather lacking.”

“Ah,” she said, “because I doubt they knew the whole truth of the matter. It would be satisfying to tell my story to one who is willing to listen.”

“I would love to—er, would it be all right if my friend listened too?”

“The man who came with you? It is fine.”
Harry grinned. “I’ll be right back,” he promised, and headed out to find Tom. The man would probably threaten most convincingly to kill him if not afforded this opportunity. He found him quickly enough and tugged on his sleeve, drawing him away from the library and back to the tomb, where he promptly sat down and looked at the Last Dragonborn in anticipation.

Tom, apparently realizing this was a unique event, swiftly cast a few spells to deter the Greybeards should they come looking for their guests.

“My story begins after I had crossed over the border into Skyrim, unfortunately much too close to a group of Stormcloaks, the warriors of Ulfric Stormcloak. At the time there was a war going on between the Imperials and Ulfric, who had recently killed the High King of Skyrim using Thu’um. Imperials captured us and brought us to a town called Helgen to be executed. One was dead and I was on the block when Alduin attacked.” She paused for a moment, perhaps inviting questions, then continued, “I escaped with the help of some of the Stormcloaks and eventually made my way to Whiterun, to speak with the Jarl there about the dragon attack on Helgen.

“I was sent on a mission for the court wizard and it was there, in Bleak Falls Barrow, that I learned my first word of power and Shout, but I was unable to use it until later, while helping with a dragon attack at a watchtower near Whiterun. When the dragon was killed I absorbed its soul. I did not understand what had just happened, but the guards with me called me Dragonborn and asked me if I had used my power. I tried, and on my way back to Whiterun the world seemed to shake with such force from voices Shouting, ‘Dovahkiin’. It was the Greybeards as I later learned, summoning me to High Hrothgar.

“This is how it all began, and if you wish I will give you a detailed recounting later on, but for now a more abbreviated telling will suffice. The Greybeards did indeed begin to instruct me in the use of Thu’um, and during one of their quests I made contact with the one of the last remaining Blades. My role, apparently, was to defeat Alduin, World Eater. I would have to become much stronger and gain more power before I could do so. What the books won’t tell you is that I amassed much power during my journey and made many enemies, foremost among them the Imperials and the Thalmor.”

Harry half raised a hand and she paused, inviting his question. “This may sound silly, but . . . the books never gave your name.”

That odd smile broke out again before she replied, “Valdis, later known as Valdis Stormblade, Ysmir, Harbinger, Arch-Mage, Guild Master, Nightingale, Listener, Member of the Bards College, Member of the Dawnguard, and Stormcloak.”

Harry whistled lowly. “That’s a lot of names.”

“I was easily distracted,” she said, a look of amusement on her face, “and quite unable to stick to a straight path. You wish to know what they mean?”

“Please.”

“Very well,” she said with a nod. “Stormblade was given to me by Ulfric Stormcloak for my part in the war. Nords do not generally have more than the one name unless they do something to deserve it. The Stormcloaks won against the Imperials and I was very useful to Ulfric, thus the naming. Ysmir is another way of saying I am dovahkiin, Dragon of the North.

“Harbinger is the title for the de facto leader of the Companions of Jorrvaskr in Whiterun. For a while I was even a lycan, but decided to seek a cure after the previous Harbinger, Kodlak, expressed his deep desire to be cured himself, as he felt he would never see Sovngarde due to Hircine’s claim on his soul.”
“There’s a cure?” Tom asked, clearly startled by this information.

“Ah, lycanthropy on Nirn was caused by a pact with a particular clan of witches, a pact which they were not entirely truthful about. It was not a condition you could easily obtain, such as by being bitten by one, and we had control of when to change shapes. From what little I have been able to learn from here your idea of a werewolf is not the same.”

“No, it is not, but perhaps we can explore the differences in more detail later on. Please do continue.”

“Very well. Arch-Mage was as the leader of the College of Winterhold, a group of mages who were not, I admit, entirely trusted. Nords have a tendency toward something of an aversion to magicka, and they certainly did not appreciate the mer who resided there. Through my services to the College I was eventually elevated to Arch-Mage.

“Guild Master because that is what I became for the Thieves Guild.” She paused again, a slight smile on her lips. “I see you are surprised. It gets more interesting, I promise. Nightingale, again due to the Thieves Guild. The Nightingales were sworn to the Daedric Prince Nocturnal. It is only my unusual circumstances which have prevented me from that expected service in death.

“Listener because . . . of a guild of assassins, the Dark Brotherhood, and the highest mortal rank.”

Harry glanced at Tom to see a look akin to respect on his face.

“The Bards College was minor, but the Dawnguard was a group dedicated to the eradication of vampires, though not all vampires could be considered evil. One was a dear friend to me and often accompanied me around Skyrim. I was also named Thane in every hold for my services and had homes in each hold, plus one on Solstheim.

“From the Companions I learned that my way of fighting was considered only proper for hunting and otherwise cowardly, rather like using magicka, but from my point of view I was hunting my enemies, so the use of a bow was fine. I did not grow up in Skyrim so I was not raised with the values of Nord culture.

“From the College I learned spells I could not learn elsewhere, though some I picked up during my travels. From the Thieves Guild I learned all there was to know about being stealthy without the use of spells, how to pick locks, and so forth. From the Dark Brotherhood I learned how assassinate people, but as I was already accustomed to killing stealthily I did not learn quite so much there. What made me stronger and more effective was of value.

“To bring this back around to how I was killed, however. . . . involves several factors. For one, the Thalmor of the Aldmeri Dominion, the collective name for the mer of Summerset Isles, and de facto leaders of the Dominion. They were upset with me for several reasons, one being that I was a Stormcloak. It was to the Dominion’s advantage that the war in Skyrim continued on with neither side gaining any particular advantage. They wished to control all Tamriel and the war served to weaken the strength of those they would conquer. By being of such service to Ulfric Stormcloak I painted a target on my back.

“The Imperials were upset with me because I was a Stormcloak and the Last Dragonborn. From the time of Alessia the rulers of Cyrodiil and the Empire were Dragonborn. When Martin Septim, the last of that line, died to save Cyrodiil from Mehrunes Dagon’s invasion, the throne was passed to a different family, not so blessed. The emperor of my time, Titus Mede II, was assassinated—by me. I expect they were concerned that as dovahkiin I could have laid claim to the throne. Also, the leader of the Dark Brotherhood betrayed us, aiming to sacrifice me in order to ensure the safety of the guild. This backfired, but it is not out of the question that the Imperials knew enough about my activities to
send the ‘official’ assassins guild after me, the Morag Tong.

“In point of fact, after I had easily dispatched any number of them during my travels, Thalmor, Imperials, and Morag Tong, I was ambushed by two score. Not even I, with all my powers, could stand against so many at once. So I died. And with my death came the end of the world, as there was no one to stand against Alduin. I assume I was preserved to be of further service, and as you are dovahkiin. . . .”

Harry decided to let all that digest in his brain for a while and said, “So you used a bow?”

“Yes. It was my weapon of choice, along with the Aura Whisper Shout. It was useful to know where my enemies were, usually what, and to be able to kill from a fair distance. Spells could be noisy and very obvious, and using a blade meant getting into the thick of things and possibly being overwhelmed, though I did carry both dagger and sword. Many Shouts are offensive, but you cannot use them one after another like you could with spells or arrows or even the swing of a blade. Best used for specific situations. A bow also meant that I could fire one off to distract my enemies. While they were looking for the source of the sound I could very easily pick off several and they would often still not know where I was. Given that I usually worked alone it was to my advantage to be stealthy. I tended to use spells more when I was in the wilds, or a blade. It so often snowed in Skyrim that visibility was poor and it was hard to hear over the hiss of the storms.”

“What about that vampire friend you spoke of?”

“Ah, Serana. She was a dear friend to me and I miss her sorely. She was highly skilled in spells and a very effective fighting companion, often realizing an enemy was nearby before I did due to her exceptional hearing. But . . . she was very aggressive, too often alerting enemies to our position. Still, she inadvertently taught me what to listen for and I could tell what awaited me by the sounds that came to me—if I just listened hard enough.”

“How did the spells work?”

Valdis tilted her head to the side. “I suspect how you learn spells and how we did differs.”

“Not as such,” Tom said. “Wizards learn the theory behind each spell, but they are mostly constrained to using a wand to cast any.”

“The wooden stick you used earlier?”

“Yes. Each wand contains material from a magical creature, to help channel the magic from the wizard into the desired spell.”

Valdis furrowed her brow. “I find this to be very odd. Yes, there were staffs that could be used, enchanted with spells, but any mage could learn most any spell if they were skilled enough and simply cast them. A staff was useful for something you had not learned or did not want to use your magicka for, but . . .”

“Paarthurnax said there was something different about Harry’s magic. It has already been demonstrated that he cannot cast wizarding magic using the usual methods, though he can cast. I must wonder if your method of magic would be open to him given his status as dovahkiin. Could you describe your method for us?”

“Very well. To learn the spell one acquires a book for it. This could be through purchase from a wizard at the College, from the wizard of a Jarl, or even found in some shops and ruins. One reads the book to understand the spell—what it does, how it should feel, how it should be shaped—and
then one….” She paused, one of her hands fluttering around like a confused bird. “Should you choose to cast you will it to be so, you ‘prepare’ it, then release it. I often kept spells at readiness, one of them for healing if I wielded a blade and suffered the possibility of harm at close quarters, or to make myself invisible to get past creatures of the wild I had no wish to harm.”

“So you could cast equally well either hand,” Tom stated, his eyes narrowed.

“Yes. Some were skilled enough to be able to cast through a blade, though that only ever seemed to work with the right hand for some reason. It was one of those things people generally never thought to question, and I had weightier things on my mind.”

“Do you think any of those books you copied are spell books?” Harry asked Tom.

“I know there were,” Valdis answered. “The Greybeards would find it remiss of them not to have stored those as well. There is one thing. The spell books are not like normal books. They are made through a magical process, and this process helps the reader to understand the feel of the spell it aims to teach. This attribute may not exist in the copies you made, depending on how you did so.”

Tom looked thoughtful at that, then said, “You mentioned enchanted staffs. Enchanting was common, then?”

“Very much so. The Nords may not have been very comfortable on the whole with spells, but enchanting was very common. It was used to augment their armor or weapons.”

“Can you tell us some examples?”

“Very well. I will use my own as examples. Once I learned the art of enchanting I customized mine. For my weapons I added enchantments to cause shock damage and for soul trapping. For—”

“Soul trapping?” Tom interrupted, one brow arching up.

“Yes. To enchant something one needs a filled soul gem. The quality and content of said gem helps determine the value of the enchantment. Soul gems are further used to re-power a weapon as the charge lasts through only so many uses. Regular soul gems can be filled by any non-sentient creature. Black soul gems are required for sentient souls.”

“So… a rabbit or bird could work with a normal one, and a person for a black soul gem?”

“Yes. To enchant something one must first know the enchantment. This is done by disenchanting an existing item, though outside Skyrim one can be taught the process without that step, simply by knowing a spell of the type you wish to use.”

“And your other things?”

“I used enchantments to speed up how quickly I healed, regained magicka, to allow me to breathe underwater, to muffle the sounds of movement. Ones to increase my resistance to the elements, and ones to increase the damage I did, such as with my bow or blade. Because I was also an assassin I had enchantments to increase the damage I did from stealth attacks. Unfortunately one of the items I wore is most likely useless now as the effects it was linked to—the source physical object—most likely no longer exists.

“All right,” Tom said slowly. “And how did you do the enchantments? I ask because enchanting among my people is an extremely difficult prospect and consequently quite rare.”

“I see. We used something called an arcane enchanter. The Nords brought to this world may have
some still, perhaps in their ruins. As I understand it they changed and evolved while the Greybeards mostly stayed the same. The Greybeards may have examples hidden here somewhere, as part of their efforts to preserve the past.”

“Just weapons and armor?”

“No. I enchanted several rings, an amulet. . . . They are all here. When I was entombed many of my possessions were entombed with me. I expect, however, that certain artifacts I earned or won were retrieved by their respective Daedric Lords.”

A look at Tom’s face told Harry that the man was thinking furiously. Aside from very old objects wizarding enchantment was more of an issue of placing spells on things and renewing them when they wore out, and he wasn’t aware of anything that could augment someone in the way she had described, a potentially fundamental difference in the two worlds. This other style of enchanting sounded permanent. “Soul gems?” he asked, wanting clarification.

“They are found by mining geode veins,” she replied readily enough. “I mined quite a few personally. The best ones to use are grand soul gems, filled with grand souls. Large creatures. If you did not have a weapon with Soul Trap on it you could use the actual spell, but it was far more convenient to me to enchant it onto my weapons.”

“And people didn’t find the trapping of souls to be particularly . . . evil?” Tom asked.

Valdis shrugged fluidly. “We eat their flesh, tan their hides, use their parts in alchemy. Why not use the power of the soul as well?”

Harry was surprised to see Tom blink in . . . well . . . surprise.

“Even of men?” Tom persisted.

She looked thoughtful for a moment, then shrugged again. “As it was always the souls of bandits or my enemies, those trying valiantly to kill me, often when I had done nothing to provoke them. . . .”

“Huh,” was all Tom said to that.

“Wouldn’t that prevent them from going to some afterlife?” Harry asked.

“Interestingly enough, they do go to a place, but not to a place they would expect. A sentient, man or mer, trapped in a soul gem, goes to a place called the Soul Cairn. It is a bleak place indeed. But on the whole I would say that deathly existence is more boring than hellish. The souls I encountered mostly sat around complaining, though there were a few who did not even realize they were dead.”

“So you’ve visited,” he said dryly.

“Yes, actually. It is possible for the living to visit the Planes of Oblivion or the afterlife. I even encountered a dragon in the Soul Cairn. He named me Qahnaarin after I defeated him.”

He was definitely going to have to devote time to getting the full story of her travels at some point. All these tidbits were tantalizing. He didn’t think any book could be so enthralling, and she was so oddly matter-of-fact about things.

“Unfortunately, I am coming to the end of my limits right now and will have to retreat for a time. I suggest you question the Greybeards about an enchanter if you can do so without arousing their suspicions. Another time I will share more, and perhaps show you how to access my belongings.”
Harry nodded. “Thank you very much.”

“You are welcome. Su'um ahrk morah.” And then she faded from view.
Chapter 4

It was two days later before Valdis could manifest again, but she was able to still speak prior to that without using up more than a trickle of energy. Harry spent a lot of time with her listening to tales of her exploits, rather than sticking with Tom in his efforts to track down an arcane enchanter for their use and to see if the books he had copied were viable. If they weren’t then Harry was going to have to go through the original set here at Hrothgar. And for that, assuming they could find a working enchanter, Soul Trap was a priority as well as finding soul gems.

Valdis also showed him how to access her belongings—or as some called them, the relics of the Last Dragonborn, something she could not even say without snorting. “The armor would not suit you, obviously,” she allowed. “I do not think you would go about in a woman’s clothing, though the boots are a possibility, and the jewelry.”

Harry half rolled his eyes at her. “I’m a little surprised there isn’t more jewelry here. I mean, it’s lightweight and if it can be so easily enchanted. . . .”

“Ah. I wore as much as I thought I needed to wear, that is all. But I suppose there is also the point that if you wear metal it matters to a degree if you plan to be stealthy or not. Shiny metal reflects light and may give you away if there are no strong shadows in which to hide.”

“I see. So if you could dull it down. . . .” His mind drifted off to numerous items he had seen in shop windows, precious metals with dulled or grained surfaces. Still attractive, he supposed, but definitely not shiny.

“Of course, if you are a typical Nord warrior that would not bother you as you’d be rushing into the thick of things to flail around with a blade. I had a companion like that briefly. Always rushing in, setting off traps, but it did mean they usually didn’t notice me, so I was able to kill fast enough to keep him alive.”

Harry pulled the bow out, with difficulty given just how large it was, and experimentally tried to pull back the string. He grunted with the effort and gave up soon enough; he simply wasn’t strong enough.

Valdis laughed lightly, but not in an unkindly way. “If you wish to learn I suggest getting a much smaller bow to practice with and build up the calluses and strength you need. You are also much too small as of yet to use a bow that size.”

“What is it made of?”

“Bones and sinew, from one of the dragons I slew. The sword and dagger are also from dragons. It seemed fitting. But it took me a long time to learn how to smith well enough to make them, and just as long to learn enough to enchant them.”

She was right about the clothing. The boots and gloves might work, but the rest of it? No. And all of it looked like something one of those Goths around Surrey would wear.

“Ah, that is armor from a vampire lord. I liked the way it looked and it provided good coverage.”
“No helmet?” he asked, not seeing anything resembling head armor.

“No. I did not like to restrict my field of vision or my hearing.” She gave him a considering look. “If you are able to acquire the use of an enchanter, the use of the necessary spell or ability with the dagger, and soul gems, you could at least begin to learn that craft, perhaps on pieces of leather to tie around your wrist. Eventually you would be able to enchant your own. And with enough practice you could use the bow to gain large enough souls to enchant strong effects.

“You say you will be attending a school for magic so it is not outside reason to enchant your clothing with resistances to magicka. And as you can see, light armor can be mistaken for clothing, so the people you will have to deal with may not even realize you are so well protected.”

He nodded thoughtfully. Some might consider that cheating, but he considered it the intelligent thing to do, and he suspected Tom and his mother would as well. Enchanting was all but lost among the wizarding populace and being able to do this would grant them a serious advantage.

“There is so much here I never got around to selling,” she pointed out. “You could learn much by disenchanting those things.”

“But wouldn’t the Greybeards notice that I took any of this?”

Valdis shrugged. “They never come here. They are too busy with their practice and study and worship and devotion. You could probably take everything in here, including my sarcophagus, and they would never notice.”

Now there was an idea. Except, of course, he rather doubted his mother and aunt would want a corpse on their property. Much better to ask Tom if there was a way to ward the room to cause the Greybeards to avoid the place, not realize there was anything going on in there, and possibly even forget about it. With a supply of portkeys Harry could visit as often as he liked. Maybe later on, if they survived whatever it was that approached, and when he had his own home, he could remove Valdis. He knew she did not like the Greybeards and it was extremely likely that being here was something she would never have chosen of her own will.

“For now, let us try an experiment. Do you see that dagger over there, that looks like a stylized bird? Take it in your hand, close your eyes, and concentrate on it. Try to ‘feel’ it with magicka. Tell me if you can sense anything from it.”

After fifteen or so minutes—random thoughts kept breaking his concentration—Harry said slowly, “There’s a strange roaring sound and it feels hot, almost like it’s burning.”

“Very good. It is very likely enchanted to cause fire damage in addition to whatever damage is caused by a stab or slice. Now try my dragon dagger.”

“. . .It crackles, like one of those plasma globes. I assume that’s the shock damage. And this other sensation I can’t describe, but I would know it again. That must be the Soul Trap.”

“I know not what a plasma globe is, but yes. Try one of the pieces of jewelry or armor.”

“. . .A sense of well-being?”

“I would say either to fortify your health and make you able to take more damage, or something to make you heal faster. The only way to tell right now without an enchanter would be to give yourself a small wound and wear that. If it heals we know it is regeneration.”

Harry was curious enough to try, so he slipped the ring on his finger and felt around for a weapon
with no enchantments on it. He placed a careful and very shallow cut on the back of his left hand and
waited.

When nothing happened Valdis nodded. “Fortify health, then.”

Harry went on to check a few more items, but he was tiring very quickly. This kind of sensing was
more fatiguing than he would ever have expected. He supposed that, as with other things, practice
would alleviate that aspect and allow him to assess any number of potentially enchanted items with
little to no effort.

Tom arrived shortly thereafter and listened to the quiet conversation between Harry and Valdis for a
few minutes before easing his way in during a lull. “According to the Greybeards, after I asked about
where they even come from, there are more than a few settlements in this general area that remain
more or less true to the old Nord ways, though they lose more and more young people each year to
the modern world. I plan to visit to see if they will sell or trade an enchanter to me. I expect, if they
still practice enchanting, they will know where to obtain soul gems. I have to wonder if those are
even necessary, but we shall see.”

“Did you want me to accompany you?” Harry asked, rather hoping not to.

Tom arched a brow at him and shook his head. “Considering you look as though you might fall
asleep at any moment, no. I will be fine on my own, I assure you.”

It was not until several days later, back at the house, that Tom was able to report on his findings.
Yes, he could trade for an enchanter, and they had given him a rough idea of where to find the gems.
But, as it turned out, they were nothing more than amethysts in this world. The smaller and paler they
were the smaller the soul they could handle. Only the very deeply-coloured gems could handle those
of sentient beings. Thus, the issue was not so much there being any particular trouble in obtaining the
gems, but in making sure that more modern methods had not been used to improve their appearance.
They needed uncut, untreated, virgin crystals.

Harry intended to try what Valdis had suggested, to enchant strips of leather that could be worn
around the wrist. If something went wrong and they were ruined it would be no great loss, and if it
worked it would give him experience toward being able to eventually place more than one
enchantment on an item. He would have to find out from Tom exactly what the rules were with
regard to magically-enhanced clothing at Durmstrang, but expected he could probably slip in a
number of things regardless.

It was absolutely not a bad idea for all of them to try to learn, and for all of them to wear items geared
toward their protection. His Aunt Petunia may or may not be able to work the device (and he
sincerely hoped she could), but she would derive benefit from wearing enchanted items. And for all
he knew, she might be able to use an enchanted staff; the power came from the charge, not the user,
and she was not a muggle.

Valdis had, after being questioned, promised Harry she would begin teaching him the Shouts she
knew, all twenty-something of them, assuming he had permission from his mother and Tom. Due to
the sheer effort it would take on her part it would mean one word per moon cycle with a transfer of
understanding midway between. “I have many, many dragon souls attached to mine I can give to
you. Since I do not expect you to be slaying dragons any time soon this would simplify matters
greatly. But, please do ask your friend Tom about hiding this place from the Greybeards. They will
otherwise know immediately what we’re about and most likely try to prevent us.”

Lily and Tom agreed with the provision that one of them be with Harry during any learning or
practice, and Tom proceeded to obtain ward stones to protect both Valdis’s room and an area of their
property. And with that Harry began his education in earnest. Muggle school, Thu’um, enchanting, archery, and magicka spells. Alchemy was added in once Tom realized that the Nords also practiced it and in a way that was somewhat similar to wizarding potions. Dudley also learned archery, and all of them learned alchemy and enchanting. By the time Harry and Dudley were to begin at Durmstrang they each had numerous enchanted items to protect them should they be subject to magical attack. All of their school clothing was also enchanted, including—after Tom’s experiments finally yielded success—ones to protect their minds from outside control.

Harry continued to have the same problem with wand movements, but not once did any of the professors say a word. Obviously Tom’s instructions to Karkaroff (which probably included a great deal of intimidation enough to also ensure that the man never revealed that Voldemort was technically back) had been dutifully relayed to his staff. As a school it was very . . . stiff. Perhaps it was something about the cultural mindset of the Germanic and Slavic wizards. Harry and Dudley both were pleased that they could share a room. He knew from Tom that at Hogwarts you were sorted—by a hat, of all things—and placed into one of four houses, and then had to share a room with everyone of the same gender in that house for your year, which could mean as many as ten other boys (though that had not happened in quite some time).

Their mentor, for each room shared the advice and guidance of an older student, was a fourth year named Viktor Krum, from Bulgaria. “We of fourth year are old enough to be of help, but have not yet started the push to prepare for our OWL exams,” Viktor explained, “and later our NEWT exams. By the time you two are getting closer to your own OWL exams, and may be mentors to first year students, I will be able to give you proper advice about them.”

Harry and Dudley exchanged a look before Harry asked, “Are the exams the same every time or do they change up the questions and tasks?”

“They differ some,” Viktor replied. “Otherwise an enterprising and dishonorable person could potentially make a fortune selling the information for others to memorize.”

Harry nodded in satisfaction. He was firmly of a mind that his accomplishments should be ones he earned though actual understanding and effort. It was bad enough that Valdis was essentially giving him her hard won knowledge about Shouts, but there truly was no other way. There were no Word Walls on Earth for him to learn from and no ready supply of dragons to be defeated. To do it the way the Greybeards did would mean decades and he doubted he had that much time.

And at that, because of how it was being done, with her being a spirit, he had plenty of time to meditate on the meaning of what she was teaching him before he could even think to use any of it. As it was, the process would not be complete until he was sixteen, perhaps a little earlier. His visits to her during the school year were to be kept quiet, Tom having given him portkeys that would work even to and from Durmstrang, and it helped that the actual visits only took minutes unless he wished to stay and simply converse.

“So we should expect,” he said, “to know that certain types of things would be covered, but no real idea of exactly how the questions would be presented. That’s fine, and it makes sense.”

Viktor nodded back. “Exactly. If you have made the effort and you understand the material, it should not be an issue. Obviously, if there are areas of magic you struggle with it will not come so easily.”

Harry grimaced, thinking about his “disability”.

Viktor gave him an awkward pat on the arm and something approaching a smile. “They may mark you down a bit, but if you can show you know the correct movements even if you can’t use them. . . . It is not something to worry about so early on.”
“I heard that Headmaster Karkaroff changed things here so that muggle-borns aren’t invited,” Dudley said. “Is that true? Do you think people will give us a hard time because our last name isn’t a recognizably pure-blood one?”

“I have heard this, too, but no, I do not think so. There are always some who believe in the superiority of being pure-blood, but I cannot say I have noticed it too much here. If that is true—and I admit I never actually checked to see if it was—I suppose since this is not a free school that those in charge have the right, morally sound or not as a decision.”

Harry felt confused for a moment, then remembered something his mother had said. “Oh, right. Hogwarts isn’t a fee-paying school, is it. Their ministry subsidizes it along with donations from alumni. They would have to take in students of every kind—unless someone was very, very clever to find a way to suddenly no longer have room for the muggle-borns. And I heard that Hogwarts is the only school over there, so . . . .”

Viktor nodded. “Yes. I do not know exactly what the fees are here—my parents have not told me—but those who do not wish to or cannot afford to come here go to the smaller ministry-subsidized schools in each country. You know that we have students from many countries here for a singular education, one that gives us more than simply the mandates for passing the standardized tests.”

“You mean like what I heard about the Americans,” Dudley said. “How they teach kids to pass tests, not to actually learn anything.”

“That is my suspicion, yes,” Viktor said with a slight sneer. “You will find quickly enough that our professors expect us to understand magic, and understand how it can be both good and evil in its use. They expect us to mature and make informed decisions, not just parrot what our elders say.”

“You would think that fewer students would grow up to join dark lords, then,” Harry commented.

Viktor shot him a surprised look. “Here? Not so much. Grindelwald attended this school until he was expelled for his activities. Those who ended up following him came from the local schools. The most recent one is suspected of having attended Hogwarts and rallied the pure-bloods to his cause, those who felt their power base was being eroded by the muggle-borns brought in with their incessant demands for change and the half-bloods with pure-blood ties.”

“Demands for change?” Dudley asked.

“Oh, yes. Because too many countries do not do enough to bring them into our culture. They are adrift in these changes and given no real reason to understand why our traditions are important to us. With this lack of understanding comes the idea that they are obviously not important and therefore muggle ideas are superior and enlightened. For example, they look at house-elves and see only slavery, not the reasons why the relationship exists as it is.

“Another would be how I hear that Hogwarts has Christmas instead of Yule, Halloween instead of Samhain. They are degrading our history and traditions by catering to the muggle-borns. The muggle-borns say we are backward and stagnant, and in some ways we are, but they fail to see how little of a negative impact we have on our lands. We do not rape the soil, either of nutrients or trees, we do not—what do they term it?—‘strip mine’ for metals and gems, we do not taint the air with the burning of coal or the use of their vehicles, and we do not taint the waters with the output from their facilities. Is it any wonder so many of the pure-bloods and those raised in our culture are incensed?”

Harry was nodding along at the impassioned speech. Viktor had a lot of good points, though he had no doubt many muggle-borns would decry the logic. Yes, it was a little strange to be using quills, but it also meant using more of an animal killed for food or for potions, feathers that could not be used in
something like a feather mattress or bed covering. Parchment was a little strange, also, but was it truly any more strange than wearing leather? Their food was grown in protected fields, so there were no chemicals or pesticides, and regularly rotated and enriched. Many families kept gardens and sometimes greenhouses to grow food, and whatever they had excess of they traded with another for something they wanted, or sold it to market stalls or restaurants. Still, it *would* be nice to have things like computers to ease research and provide entertainment.

The best he could manage on those terms was the beneficial side-effects of Occlumency. Tom had provided enchanted items to protect them, but should anyone ever figure out what they had and wrested the items away they would still need to be able to protect themselves. Due to their Occlumency training he and Dudley had much faster and more reliable recall abilities. One could consider the brain and a computer analogous. The obvious drawbacks were missing data because of not having read about a particular subject, and a lack of understanding if they merely stored the information in memory rather than taking the time to explore it more fully.

Viktor, being raised as a wizard, was a font of information for the cousins. Even Tom, for all his intelligence and drive to learn, could not provide certain data in the way one raised in the culture could. Tom and Lily had done their best to give the boys the best background they could on wizarding culture, but they were still, essentially, outsiders. Tom had found most of his information from books, and books never really covered the essential, “everybody knows” aspects. And Tom had wanted to know enough to know how to manipulate people, not because he necessarily wished for a true understanding.

Things had been going well so far at Durmstrang. No one gave them grief for their obviously not pure-blood family name. With Viktor’s mentoring it would only become increasingly more likely they would fit in smoothly. However, that also meant they might be guided away from things which might be equally useful, so Harry posed a question. “Is there anything in the curriculum that teaches non-magical skills?”

“Such as?”

“Well, stealth without employing disillusionment or the like. I mean, why waste magical energy you might really need for something else if you can manage to sneak around mundanely.” Valdis had pointed out to him that he could go one of two ways: learn how to do it properly, including using more than just his sight, or rely on spells or enchantments for invisibility (which would fail for a short time if he did more than simply move around) or an analogue to disillusionment. The chameleon spell in their lexicon was very similar to disillusionment, but a strong enough application (or use of enchanted items) made it as visually strong as invisibility without the drawbacks.

“If you take a course in fighting,” Viktor said slowly. “Not dueling, for that is formalized and follows certain strictures. You can take fighting starting your sixth year and it tries to teach at least the basics of real-world tactics.”

Harry frowned. “Seems to be leaving it a bit late. The earlier you start the more of a reflex it all becomes, right?”

“Perhaps. Yet, most people do not go to school with the idea that they will become fierce warriors,” Viktor pointed out. “They instead expect some teaching to show them how to defend themselves if necessary. This is why the fighting classes are elective. People come to school to learn about their gifts and how the world is.”

This, of course, sat badly with Harry. He could understand Viktor’s explanation, but for someone like himself, someone linked to a prophecy, not training early on was a bad idea. Already he was much better at archery, even if he was not yet capable of drawing the dragon bow. How was he
going to train himself at mundane stealth? Should he just discard that idea and go with a chameleon set?

He brought it up during his next visit with Valdis, wondering how she would respond, and a funny look he could not interpret crossed her face before she said anything. “Even with a full chameleon set there are other considerations, such as sound and scent. If you can’t walk silently—or near silently—and if you aren’t as scent-neutral as possible. . . .”

“Oh,” he said slowly. “I see what you mean. I think.” Actually, he was thinking that the original Nord society probably wasn’t big on daily bathing and wondering how exactly did that play into things. Perhaps it did not matter so much around humanoid targets? So he asked about that, too.

Valdis smirked. “I am glad to see your reasoning capabilities are doing well. Now, it is true you could use your wizarding spells to cover those two aspects. But this goes back to not using more energy than you need to when possible. So, to the first that does mean, yes, keeping yourself tidy. It also means not wearing scents, not heading out to be stealthy after downing onions or garlic or other strong-smelling substances. If the setting is outdoors you try to stay downwind, especially if you’re hunting actual game, or offside.

“You use the shadows when possible, and cover. You step carefully—something you can practice at any time—even in those enchanted boots of yours. What is not fine is relying on those boots so much that you forget there are things underfoot which can make noise, like snapping twigs or accidentally kicking something. The boots will help muffle that sound, too, but often not enough.” She then proceeded to give him a demonstration, though more for form’s sake given her general inability to physically interact with anything.

Still, Harry thought she almost glided around in that crouching stance she used, and it lent itself well to shoulder rolls. An illusionary bow in her hands demonstrated the usage difference while trying to sneak around. “Your leg will be in the way if you try to hold it as you would normally,” she said as the bow disappeared and she stood back up properly. “The point is that not being seen is only part of the challenge. Even your breathing can give you away.”

He went away from that session very thoughtful and determined to practice being unnoticeable and stealthy. As a result, he became somewhat obsessed with how he inhaled and exhaled, among other things.

Later he asked her about magic—rather, magicka—and how she wielded it.

“Yes, they would.”

“Obviously a different case with magicka because no tool is required. Magicka spells, however, tend to be more limited in scope than wizarding spells. Just as alchemy is superior in some ways to potions if only because you can create them anywhere so long as you have a few small tools and the ingredients, which is not something you can do for a potion. However, potions can do things
alchemy cannot, and the reverse. All have value, magic, magicka, potions, alchemy, enchanting, and weaponry. Use the most efficient option. And preferably the least noticeable one. After all, if you want something someone else has, it is easier to get away with stealing it over killing the person and looting the body.”

He was startled for a moment, then began snickering. “Um, yeah.”

Valdis shook her head in fond exasperation. “This is funny, yes, but at the same time it is not even close to being so. Aiming your bow at a rabbit and taking it down is one thing, but a person? If you are involved in taking down a mad man and his followers—dovahkiin are born during times of need, Harry—trust me, it is an entirely different prospect. Expect to be actively ill the first time, at the least.”

Harry sobered up at that. To have to kill another human being. . . .

“This is one example of where wizarding spells can be more useful. You can use those to capture a target. Assuming whoever is in charge of justice is not corrupt the targets would be jailed, presumably in such a way that they cannot easily escape. And let me say, the jails in Skyrim were ridiculously easy to break out of. You being incapable of using the wizarding motions is a plus, especially if you are capable of not saying the incantations. Can you explain to me why?”

“Er. . . . No wand movement means they can’t tell what spell it is based on that, and the same if there are no words. Tom and my mother say they teach non-verbal casting starting sixth year at Hogwarts. I’d have to ask Viktor about Durmstrang.”

“Very good. You already know that magicka spells require nothing more than preparation and release, but they might not be effective in a given situation.”

“Capture, like you said, being one. Or transfiguration.”

Valdis nodded. “Something to keep in mind as you continue to learn Shouts, my type of spells, and also the wizarding ones. You have a very good mind, so try to categorize them based on their best uses for what you may be facing. Do not use a Shout where a wizard on any side of the conflict might witness and live to tell about it. From what Tom has told me your magical governments can be a bit hasty and jump to conclusions.”

“Then why am I even learning them?” he asked, rather bewildered.

“Harry. . . . First, because I wish to pass on my knowledge to one of my own. Second, because some of them, such as Dragonrend or Aura Whisper, can be of immense value to you. Do not use something like Disarm unless you intend to kill, or are capable of using that magic spell to alter memories of the event. If there is enough action and noise you could probably get away with it. Cyclone, Dismay, Battle Fury—all useful. Become Ethereal, preferably without witnesses, again, but it could, in theory, save you from one of those spells Tom calls Unforgivables. You cannot harm or be harmed while ethereal. But if some officious person who lives and breathes the law, or even fears anything they do not understand, were to witness some of what you can do, you might find yourself hauled off under charges of using ‘dark’ magic.”

Harry returned to Durmstrang that evening with a whole lot of thinking to do.
Harry was pleased that their “defense” class—more aptly named Offensive and Defensive Magic—started out with a clear message that just about anything could be used as such, though they would be learning the traditional spells and tactics. Perhaps they would get the other stuff as extra credit work, assuming they did that sort of thing at Durmstrang. He was struck again by his professor’s opening statements in Charms class, then Transfiguration. Each class involving wand work began with an overview that made it very clear what constituted a type of spell, though the definition was understandably a bit fuzzy for offense and defense.

Yes, they were learning the theory behind each spell they were to perform, but there was also always a discussion about how a spell could be improperly used. Viktor was correct about how their teachers expected them to do more than rote memorization; they wanted critical thinking. It was a wonder that Durmstrang had such a reputation for teaching the Dark Arts; apparently anyone who did not follow the model of general British-European thinking was to be feared and slandered and possibly even outlawed. Perhaps it had something to do with Merlin, regardless of what the man had actually been like. His home country did have rather a bit in the way of “British is Best” mentality.

After all, Merlin might be part of the British mythos from a thousand years or so back, and his legend overshadowed quite a lot of what came before—certainly for the Britons—enough that many blithely brushed away the fact that there had been witches and wizards in places like Egypt thousands of years earlier, but unless Merlin was secretly an alien with untold powers (none of which the current populace seemed to be capable of) and had literally created the “modern” forms of magic . . .

Harry rolled his eyes at the thought and set to work on his homework load for the evening. Viktor was once again with them to lend a helping hand if necessary, answering questions with a rather absentminded air.

“Is having trouble with this one,” Dudley said, sounding a bit frustrated. “I’m supposed to find three ways to misuse Lumos, but I can only think of two.”

“And those are?” Viktor asked.

“Er, to blind someone, possibly permanently, and to aid in depriving someone of sleep.”

Viktor nodded approvingly. “Those are good responses. Were you aware that there are people who are allergic to sunlight or are afraid of it?”

Harry paused at that; although his homework targeted different charms, something in the memories he had gained from Tom spoke up. “Heliophobia?”

Viktor nodded again.

“Okay,” said Dudley. “So you could, in theory, torture either one of those with the charm. Thanks.”

Harry finished off his own Charms work and moved onto Transfiguration. And that, unlike Charms, had started off with a long overview of the course all the way through seventh year. They were given to understand that they would start small, transfiguring between similar items, until much later on
they could transfigure just about anything to anything else with far fewer restrictions. Professor Klein had likened it to flexing a muscle, both of casting and knowledge.

To Harry that only made sense given the lectures Valdis had subjected him to topic of gaining proficiency in schools of magicka. The more you used a spell—Ice Spike from Destruction, for example—the more you became attuned to Destruction spells overall and how it felt and what you were thinking, though gains in experience lessened over time unless you learned and began using a higher level spell in that same school. The spells would become stronger and more efficient with practice.

He could understand, with that example as a guide, how it made some kind of sense that they had finally begun practical lessons by trying to transfigure between a matchstick and a toothpick. The same material, similar sizes, with a difference in shape and the relatively minor obstacle of the coating at the end of a friction match. Later lessons would incorporate the same basic concepts in a slightly different manner, such as a hedgehog to a pincushion based on relative size, spikiness (though the “spikes” for a pincushion were obviously separate), and so on. Once you gained proficiency, things were a bit less restrictive. It was the concepts you were trying to etch into your mind, the mindset, and the feeling of doing it.

His homework asked for misuses of Transfiguration in a general way, as opposed to the more specific examples for Charms. That being so, Harry put down ideas such as transfiguring an item into a copy of something else so you could steal the original, leave the copy, and leave no one the wiser until the spell wore off, or muggle baiting by doing something like transfiguring some minor part in the engine of someone’s car to cause it to fail to work or even possibly ruins other parts or catch fire, depending on what you did. Even he had heard of the old sugar in the petrol tank “prank”.

A part of him wondered how many students took these lessons and examples as a way to go right ahead and misuse magic, but Durmstrang did seem to be trying to bash its students over the head with the concepts of ethics and intent, so . . .

“I heard you’re on the quidditch team,” Dudley said conversationally, still busy writing away.

“Since my first year.”

“That’s different from how Hogwarts does it, then,” Harry said. “I understand you can’t try out until your second year and their teams are based on their houses. How does it work here? Because I’ve not seen anything yet about it on the notice boards.”

“Anyone wishing to try for a spot on one of the teams must first show they can actually fly a broom, so for some students that means learning to use one. Not everyone who has the inclination has had the opportunity. So, that is first, and once it is done there is a general tryout for positions, with members of the teams watching. How well or badly a team did in the matches the previous year determines who gets first pick of the students trying out.”

“Oh, oh!” Dudley said. “I get it. It’s like draft picks for muggle sports teams. Worst goes first to pick, then up to best, and back to worst and around until they have everyone they want. And then the teams can arrange for trades.”

Viktor looked slightly puzzled by the wording, but still nodded. “Yes. As for the teams themselves there are four, which works out to six matches per school year. Any student can be picked, but first and second years are usually reserves unless they show phenomenal talent. But since reserves make up a secondary team they get plenty of experience during practices.”

“And how often do those happen?” Dudley persisted.
“Full practices are Saturday and Sunday in a block of two to four hours, so two teams have Saturday, one morning and one afternoon, and the other two on Sunday. Additional practices are during the week, but only one per team and only for two hours. This is a school so learning comes first, not sport. Games are done in sets of two and take the place of a full practice day.”

“So, the teams playing might play on Saturday and the other two practice Sunday, so they aren’t having both a practice and a game the same weekend,” Harry guessed.

“Correct. The notices should go up soon.”

Dudley still had that look in his eye, making Harry think his cousin wanted to try out. “Which team are you on?” his cousin asked.

“Falk. The others are Adler, Szarka, and Utkin.” On noticing the politely confused looks he was getting Viktor added, “Named after the original captains, back when the school was established and the teams formed.”

“Ah,” Harry mumbled. He wondered, given that Viktor was not exactly what anyone would call handsome yet still seemed to have plenty of girls giggling around him, if Dudley thought playing quidditch would increase his own chances of being a babe magnet later on. Then again, they were only eleven and maybe Dudley hadn’t had any thoughts like that yet. Perhaps he just wanted to look “cool” and have the admiration of his peers. There was a paucity of sport options in the wizarding world, after all, and Europeans did not go in for quodpot.

That night, as he was lying there trying to get to sleep, he was surprised to realize his thoughts were wandering in the direction of his brother. According to his mother Edward was arrogant and too much like his father at that age, so Harry expected he would not get along with his only sibling. Yet he wondered how Edward was doing at Hogwarts. Did he have real friends, or just hangers-on? Was he doing all right in his classes and with his professors? Was he already making enemies?

He was going to have to have a long talk with Tom once they got home. It was the end of their third year and Harry was already packed. He was overseeing to make sure Dudley had found all of his things to put in his trunk. It was amazing how things could get misplaced in a room the size of theirs. One would think there were secret cubbies everywhere and nasty-minded little non-garden gnomes hiding things in peculiar places the way Harry was frequently amazed at where belongings turned up. By the time they had found every last item and were ready to go it was an hour past when they should have left, which meant (more than likely) that their mothers might start yelling about how they did worry.

And they did, but Harry was wise enough (or was that devious enough) to let Dudley shoulder the blame. It had mostly been his fault anyway. His mother and aunt eventually wound down and then the hugs were given out, trunks were shuffled off to bedrooms and opened so that their clothing could be removed and diverted to the laundry area, and then everyone sat down for some tea and nibbles and a nice long chat.

It was later on, after Tom arrived, that Harry managed to get him and his mother off away from Petunia and Dudley. They were seated outside near the archery area when Harry began to explain, with some embarrassment, the problem he was noticing. “It’s not coming as easily as it used to,” he said, “the wizarding magic. I could do everything they taught this year, but I’m having to work harder than Dudley does at it.”

Tom arched a considering brow as his mother frowned.
“Paarthurnax said I was different, I remember, but I admit I was hoping it was just the wand movements.”

“And yet you have had no issues thus far with the aetherial spells.”

Harry nodded at Tom. “Right. With enough practice, anyway. Valdis did say it took a lot of practice to gain proficiency, because practice and understanding and feeling were all part of it. I’ve been applying that to the wizarding magic, too, but it’s not quite the same thing, though it is helping.”

Tom eyed Lily for a moment. “There is a test we can do. . . .”

“That you didn’t bother to mention until now because. . . ?” she said, with just a touch of acid in her voice.

“Because unless Harry experienced any difficulties there was no particular point. In some ways that would be like shoving a book detailing diseases and other medical conditions at a hypochondriac and expecting them to not panic over the several dozen issues they suddenly think they have. However, now that Harry has recognized that something is, indeed, amiss, the test I refer to may explain or rule out one possible cause.”

Harry rather thought his mother did not look entirely satisfied by that answer, an impression only compounded when she drawled, “Right.”

Tom looked frustrated and on the verge of rolling his eyes. “Let me put it this way. We all already knew that something was off, but had no real idea what. We’ve never particularly discussed it, either, and for good reason. There was no point in putting ideas into Harry’s head.” he practically hissed. “There was no point in throwing out speculative ideas and leading him, however inadvertently, toward falsehood and the possibility of a self-imposed restriction.”

Harry blinked, then said, “Oh, I see. Like how you only heard part of a prophecy and jumped to conclusions and—”

“Yes, Harry,” Tom said a bit sharply.

“All right,” Lily said slowly, “I see your point. And if I’d spent too much time thinking about it I might have done or said something to—whatever.” She fluttered a hand around.

“Precisely.”

“So this test?”

“Is up to Harry. It would show us his mean core strength. Wizards replenish spent magic in part from our environment, and the size of that core helps determine what level of spell casting we can aspire to. Aetherial spells rely entirely on an outside source—the stars if we are to believe what Valdis has told us, as conduits to our plane of existence from the aetherial one. Assuming this to be correct, a wizard is limited by what he was born with, but can make up some of any ‘deficiency’ by knowledge, training, and finesse.

“There is also the issue of puberty, and Harry has already gone through the worst of the initial surge. The next change, as you know, comes at around sixteen for females and seventeen for males, but we have several more years yet for that. So this test would give us some idea of what’s going on, though it is mildly unfortunate we do not have the results from before.”

“And there was no reason to before, because everyone thought he was a squib,” Lily said sadly. “I wonder by what process the system works at Hogwarts. I know that children who express magic in
the UK are added to the book, but . . .”

“Born with, incidents of accidental magic (or thought to be accidental), and being present in the country at the time the letters are set to go out,” Tom replied. “In other words, getting in the book initially is not enough to guarantee a letter, not unless a child has been specifically tagged. As an example, a child like Edward Potter would have been tagged due to his presumed importance, in part so that should he be, say, kidnapped and removed to a different country, a letter could still be generated and give officials a clue as to where the child is. In theory, anyway. I’ve no doubt there are ways to fool the Book of Souls.”

“So a child born here, with magic, would probably not get an invitation if their family had moved to another country prior to that point,” Harry said, looking to Tom for confirmation.

“Correct. It would be assumed they would be invited by a school in their current location.”

Harry eyed the man suspiciously. “So did you actually do anything to the book after we moved here? Because based on what you just said you wouldn’t have needed to.”

Tom gifted him with a rare smile. “It was not a necessity, but I did anyway, just to be certain.”

“Right. So about this test?” Lily prodded.

“Give me a little time to gather the requirements and we can do so,” he replied, his gaze switching to Harry, who nodded.

He felt a lot like crying—or part of him did. Part of him was desperate to sob and wail like a heartbroken animal. His natural reserve forbade that. His intellect pointed out quite ruthlessly that there was no point blubbering over the results, especially when hard work would mitigate some of the problem, and he was blessed (or cursed?) with the ability to not only use aetherial spells, a form of magic he could not be disarmed of, but also magic in the form of the draconic language. He was also receiving an education in more mundane skills, something that most people in the wizarding world avoided unless it was, perhaps, the noble art of fencing.

‘So,’ he told himself briskly, ‘I will just have to work that much harder at it. I’m already doing something similar for aetherial spells and I’ll keep applying that methodology to the wizarding ones. I’m sure if I ask Tom he will agree to help me.’ On that note he straightened his back, lifted his chin, and walked off to find the man and present his request.

“Of course,” Tom said straight away. “Anything else would be foolish. I’m sure you understand that it will mean an exhausting amount of effort, more so than just taking up the majority of your summer. If your mother approves we can both simplify and complicate things with regard to the amount of time you will need to allocate to this undertaking.”

Harry almost nodded immediately, but instead sat back to actually think about what Tom had just said. He was hinting at something, obviously, and his gaze drifted off to the right as he rifled through his mind’s ‘database’ to figure out what the man could mean. Eventually he looked up. “A time turner?”

Tom graced him with a pleased smile. “Yes. One constructed to do more than just a few hours. If you truly wish to push the limits of your wizarding magic you will need enough time to practice your control and finesse for each spell you already know, spells that will be taught in upcoming years, and to also have time to rest from these exertions.”
“So, in theory, I could spend a day at school and a duplicated day here, or in a special area of the school.”

“I think spending duplicated days here would probably be excessive. However, it would make sense for the weekends, at the least. If this goes the way I think it will, based on your mean core strength, you will need to start learning spells well ahead of when they would be taught. I can get that list from Karkaroff. You and I can go over a selection each weekend, here, and the rest of the week you can practice at the school. I will have to ‘visit’ during this break to select or create a suite of rooms for you there, ward it, and make sure it is adequately provisioned.” Tom paused, his eyes narrowing slightly. “I think, also, a house-elf would be wise, in the event that something untoward should occur.”

“That sounds reasonable,” he said slowly. There was a reason why children were not supposed to practice their spells without supervision, so the addition of a house-elf to alert Tom to a need for intervention made sense.

“I will speak to your mother, then. On to other things,” Tom said briskly. “I suppose you and your cousin would like to attend the Quidditch World Cup.”

Harry laughed. “Dudley might well faint from sheer excitement. I think it’s an all right game, though I expect that professionals would put on a better show than student players.”

“You will be pleased to know I have already arranged for tickets. I have heard far too much from the ladies about your cousin’s excess of admiration for the sport. I could have obtained top box seats, but decided that might prove to be troublesome in the event that your estranged father and his cronies, not to mention your brother, would be seated there. Even so, you have four tickets in a very good location, a private box not far off center.”

“On the Bulgarian side, one assumes,” he said teasingly.

“Yes, of course.” Tom arched a tolerant brow at him. “Heaven forfend you should sit closer to the Irish goals. Krum might well crash into the stands in protest.”

Harry snickered, then sobered. “It’s a bit sad. It’s his last year and I’m going to miss him. He’s been a good mentor to us, even with all this quidditch stuff going on. I know he’s good and all, but I still have trouble believing he was picked for his country’s team.” The look on Tom’s face in response made him very suspicious. “What do you know that I don’t?”

“Ah, according to my sources, something that has not happened in hundreds of years. Specifically, the Triwizard Tournament.”

Harry searched his acquired memories. “Because of the death toll, right. They’re having one this coming year? And you think Viktor might decide to try?”

“Well, even though this is his NEWT year, he does have what looks to be a promising career already. He can probably afford to not be as diligent as usual in his schoolwork. And, should he decide to enter, he would be at Hogwarts for the year, not Durmstrang, as the tournament is being held there.”

“Ugh!” he replied inelegantly, not at all pleased about the idea that he might not have his mentor any longer. True, he and/or Dudley would probably be mentoring this year, but he had become very fond of Viktor and admired him a fair amount. “How does that work? Do some of our professors go to teach them on-site, or do the students who go have to integrate into the Hogwarts classes?”
“It is my understanding that a selection of the more widely-educated professors will accompany the contingent of students who wish to make the attempt and continue their education without having to rely on the substandard teaching at Hogwarts. You know very well by now the differences.”

He made a face. Yes, he did know, based on a comparison of Tom’s memories of Hogwarts against his own at Durmstrang. “And I suppose we’re not supposed to find out until after we get to school. When would they be leaving to go to Hogwarts?”

“Right before Samhain, and they will be staying until the end of the year.”

Harry sighed and nodded. He would just have to take the example Viktor had shown them and use it when he mentored whomever he was assigned to. He just hoped he didn’t get anyone too jumpy or excitable. Maybe they took personality into account? But then how would they know the personalities of the incoming students? Harry shrugged a little and said, “So, okay, you’ll talk to mum?”

“Indeed,” came the ready response, and then Tom took his leave.

Tom returned a few hours later to explain how things would work and that he would see him the next day, so Harry spent the rest of his day generally being lazy. After breakfast he joined Tom out back in the practice area—the entire property was heavily warded, so it was not as though anyone would notice—and sat down.

“The simplest explanation of how this will work is to say we’ll start from the beginning, from first year spells, and you will improve your casting of them. Not in sheer power, obviously, but your control,” Tom explained. “The more control you have, the greater your finesse, the fewer visible signs there will be that a spell is even being cast.” Tom turned slightly and cast something at the nearest target.

Harry watched intently and realized that all he could discern was a ripple in the air. Whatever Tom had cast—he could not tell because the target showed no visible reaction—could not be determined by the passage of magic itself, because there was no colour to give him a hint. “And that’s control.”

“Yes. Consider the light usually given off by a spell to be waste, or leakage. It’s not like your aetherial spells, which are always going to be colourful. A wizarding spell you have taken the time to master is almost invisible. A side effect of that mastery is a stronger spell for the same amount of effort. You may never be able to cast higher level spells, such as the Patronus, the Fidelius, or even the Unforgivables, but with hard work you can make the absolute most of what you are capable of casting. Creativity also plays a part in this.”

“Like how they always want examples at Durmstrang about how spells can be misused, which can be further twisted into how to use spells against their stated purpose.”

“Such as?” Tom challenged.

“Um . . . you could use the summoning charm to try for someone’s eyeballs. A drought charm might be capable of dehydrating a person to the point that they start throwing up. Assuming the location is right a tickling charm could kill someone by falling, or if strong enough it could cause them to pass out. A stretching jinx—”

“You obviously have the idea,” Tom interrupted. “So, make a list, pick a spell, and start practicing.”

He nodded and got up, ready to get a notebook and pencil, then paused. “So,” he said teasingly, “does this mean you never mastered the killing curse?”
Harry stood up properly from his landing crouch and looked around as Dudley scrambled up to help his mother to her feet. To the side were two tired and grumpy-looking wizards, both dressed as muggles, though very inexpertly. One wore a tweed suit with thigh-length galoshes and his colleague a kilt and a poncho. They very obviously failed at understanding muggle fashion.

Lily picked up the portkey and handed it over to the kilted wizard, who threw it into a large box of used portkeys beside him; Harry could see an old newspaper, an empty drinks can, and a punctured football. “Good morning,” she said in English.

“Morning,” replied the kilted wizard. “Let me find your campsite. Evans . . . Evans . . .” he said as he consulted his parchment list. “About a quarter of a mile’s walk over there, first field you come to. Site manager’s called Mr Roberts.”

Lily smiled and thanked him, then began to usher her sister along, clearly expecting the boys to follow as the two women set off across the deserted moor, unable to make out much through the mist. After about twenty minutes a small stone cottage next to a gate swam into view. Beyond it, Harry could just make out the ghostly shapes of hundreds and hundreds of tents, rising up the gentle slope of a large field toward a dark wood on the horizon.

His mother gestured for them to wait and approached the cottage, to speak with a man standing in the doorway. Given the way he was dressed Harry knew this must be the only real muggle in the area. A minute or so later, after Lily had received a map of the campsite with their space marked and paid for the use of said space, they continued their walk.

They trudged up the misty field between long rows of tents. Most looked almost ordinary; their owners had clearly tried to make them as muggle-like as possible, but had slipped up by adding chimneys, or bellpulls, or weather vanes. However, here and there was a tent so obviously magical that Harry could hardly be surprised if Mr Roberts kept getting suspicious and required regular obliviations. Halfway up the field stood an extravagant confection of striped silk like a miniature palace, with several live peacocks tethered at the entrance. A little farther on they passed a tent that had three floors and several turrets; and a short way beyond that was a tent that had a front garden attached, complete with bird bath, sundial, and fountain.

“Why am I not surprised,” Lily said wearily. “No damn common sense, the lot of them. Sometimes I think magic rots the brain.”

Petunia let out a sound suspiciously like a snort and quickly covered her mouth.

They found their spot not long after, marked by a small sign hammered into the ground. Lily quickly set about getting the tent out, a very plain affair outwardly, but fine enough inside he knew. Dudley and Harry jumped in to help with the poles and pegs and they were shortly inside and putting their overnight bags down by their beds.

“Hm, there’s a well marked here,” Lily said, scanning the map. “Good thing I brought bottled water, right? Still, we aren’t all that far from the stadium. It’s just through those woods, so we won’t have far to walk.”

“Not until dusk, though, right?” Dudley said. “May Harry and I go look around?”

Lily and Petunia exchanged a look. “You know the rules,” Lily said.

“At the first sign of trouble return immediately,” Dudley recited, sounding a tiny bit exasperated.
“Uh huh.” Lily sounded unimpressed by the attitude. “Be back for lunch. And here,” she said, taking a moment to duplicate the map, “take this just in case.”

Outside they walked around a bit aimlessly, seeing many odd sights. Three African wizards sat in serious conversation, all of them wearing long white robes and roasting what looked like a rabbit on a bright purple fire, while a group of middle-aged American witches sat gossiping happily beneath a spangled banner stretched between their tents that read: The Salem Witches’ Institute.

Another patch of tents were all covered with a thick growth of shamrocks, so that it looked as though small, oddly shaped hillocks had sprouted out of the earth. Farther on was a large patch of tents where the Bulgarian flag—white, green, and red—was fluttering in the breeze. The tents here had not been bedecked with plant life, but each and every one of them had the same poster attached to it, a poster of a very surly face with heavy black eyebrows. The picture was, of course, moving, but all it did was blink and scowl.

Dudley pointed and laughed. “Proof he really does hate having his picture taken.”

“Well—”

“Krum!” said a nearby voice. “Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian seeker!”

Harry turned and looked, spying a red-haired boy about their age, a brown-haired boy, and . . . Edward. He nearly groaned in dismay. It wasn’t that he hated his brother—he didn’t personally know him well enough to hate him—but the last thing he wanted to do was run into him. Edward was so self-absorbed that he might not recognize his own brother, but Harry would prefer not to take that chance. He grabbed Dudley’s arm and motioned for silence, then pulled him away from any possible confrontation.

“What was all that about?” Dudley asked quietly once they were far enough away that Harry had released him.

“My brother,” he replied in German. “I don’t even know if he remembers me, but if he’s around here, that means James is, too. Let’s be careful, all right? I mean, my father might not even recognize me, but he will recognize mother, so I’ll be sure to tell her. Chances are, with so many witches and wizards here, we won’t run into him, but she should know. And your mother doesn’t like him, either.”

Dudley nodded and replied in kind. “All right. We’ll keep an eye out on the way back.”

Lily sighed when they told her. “I hope you’re right and we don’t bump into him.” She blinked and looked a bit annoyed with herself. “I didn’t tell you, did I. Your father got remarried to some French witch he met at a ministry function.”

“Didn’t take him long, either,” Petunia said snidely.

Dudley looked surprised, but Harry shook his head and said, “I know, it was in one of the papers. The society section. Pascale Maçon. She’s very, well, French.”

Petunia got a pinched look on her face and turned away, saying, “Lunch, boys. Go wash up.”
They were back at the tent having a late snack, Dudley going on and on about the game. Even Harry felt like talking about it, but that was more due to Viktor’s incredible catch. He felt bad for his friend, his team having lost despite that catch, but at least the Bulgarians lost with some dignity. And luckily he had most of the action captured in his omnioculars, so he could always re-watch it later and at a slower speed.

He had, as he was watching the game, had occasion to turn far enough to capture James, Sirius, Remus, Edward, and who he assumed was Pascale up in the top box, but suspected given their clear absorption in the game they had not noticed him or the others, for which he could only be grateful. The walk back to their tent was almost as loud as the game had been, because like Dudley, the people simply could not stop talking about it.

“All right,” Lily said, interrupting Dudley’s continuing game-related babble, “I know you’re still very excited, but it’s time for bed. And that doesn’t mean you lie there in the dark and keep talking about it. I’ll come in and dose you with a sleeping potion if I catch you at it.”

Dudley scowled, opened his mouth to speak, evidently thought better of it and closed his mouth, and nodded instead before getting up and wandering off to his bed. Harry followed and ran through his usual night time routine, and was shortly asleep.

He awoke with a start to the sound of screaming, took a few moments to assure himself it was not some weird dream, and then leapt out of bed. As he dashed out to the common area he nearly ran his mother down. “Mum! What—?”

“There’s some kind of attack going on,” she said quickly. “I stuck my head out and it looks like Death Eaters! Hurry. Go get Dudley up and step outside. I’m going to pull stakes and portkey us all out of here. We are not sticking around for any heroics.”

He nodded and ducked back into the bedroom to get Dudley up as his mother, he assumed, went to get Petunia. Once outside his mother quickly used her wand to free the tent from the ground and roughly fold it, heedless of the poles still strung through and of the pegs she’d be leaving behind, and shoved it at Dudley to hold. “Everyone, touch the portkey!”

The moment they were home Lily dashed to the fireplace and called through to Tom, who apparated in moments later. “What is it?” he asked, appearing a bit disgruntled at being rousted from bed at such an hour.

Lily threw him an angry look before saying, “A Death Eater attack at the World Cup, that’s what. A whole bunch of them decked out in the usual raiment, torturing what looked to be the muggles who own the fields. We were woken by the screaming and used my emergency portkey to get out as fast as we could.”

Harry watched as the expression on Tom’s face became positively chilling in its angry intensity.

“Dudley, come along,” Petunia said. “Back to bed. I’ll give you a sleeping potion to make sure of it.”
“Aw, mum,” Dudley whined, grudgingly allowing himself to be led away.

“I have to assume you had nothing to do with that,” Lily continued. “You wouldn’t possibly be that stupid.”

“You assume correctly,” Tom said frigidly. “I will take care of it.”

Harry actually shivered at the sound of the man’s voice; he sounded altogether furious.

Tom did not bother with niceties such as thanking Lily for the warning and abruptly disapparated.

“Well,” his mother said, staring at the then empty space. “Do you want a potion for tonight?”

“No, it’s fine,” he assured her. He stepped up and kissed her cheek, then headed off to bed. The morning paper carried a story about the attack in the international section, including quotations from people who had been there, all of it sounding panicky. Harry could only assume that some of the less intelligent Death Eaters had gotten a bit tipsy and decided a round of muggle baiting was a glorious idea. He also assumed that once Tom figured out which ones had done it there would be rather a lot of pain being meted out for their stupidity, if not death.

Though, considering that Harry doubted Tom had bothered to clue in most of his Death Eaters about his return, he had to wonder exactly how the man was going to handle the situation. He didn’t find out until a week later; Tom had been mysteriously absent all that time, and Harry had been practicing his wizarding magic mostly alone, his mother occasionally wandering out to see how he was doing and trying to make suggestions.

The paper ran another story about happenings in dear old England, but this time it reported on a mysterious explosion that not only flattened an isolated and assumed abandoned house, but also the deaths of a number of pure-bloods. Strangely, no mention was made of any of them bearing the Dark Mark, which made Harry curious. Perhaps the explosion had burned the men so badly that any such markings were indistinguishable? Had the Dark Marks been removed before they were killed?

Tom obviously did not want the general public to know he had returned from his exile, though he had never outright stated so. In point of fact, Harry realized he had very little idea what the man did with his time, aside from that which he gave to Harry and his family.

The week after that the paper broke a story that floored Harry. Durmstrang had been attacked and even with magic it was going to take months to repair the damage. “What the hell are we supposed to do?” he asked of no one in particular.

His mother gave him a pointed look for the language and held out a hand for the paper. “Oh dear lord,” she said after a moment, still scanning the article. “And it doesn’t even say for sure who did it, though they’re blaming the Death Eaters.”

“Obviously untrue,” Harry said unnecessarily.

Dudley stumbled in, took one look at their faces, and said, “What’s wrong? What’s happened now?”

Lily explained quickly and added, “I guess we’ll just have to wait to see what comes next. I expect Tom is busy tracking down the details.”

All they received that day was a short note saying, “I’m looking into it.” A week later Tom finally showed up and led Harry and Lily out back again after getting Petunia to keep Dudley busy. “You will be getting a letter soon regarding the upcoming school year. Given that the Triwizard Tournament is being held this year Karkaroff negotiated with Dumbledore to set aside part of the
castle for all Durmstrang students and teaching staff. I suppose you could have been sent to Beauxbatons, but they were never a large school to begin with and Hogwarts does have a great deal of unused space, both for sleeping quarters and classrooms.”

Harry wasn’t quite sure how to react to that, but his mother made her distaste clear by cursing under her breath. “That’s just fantastic. I hope to hell that none of them realize who you and Dudley are. What about the attack on the school—were you able to find anything out?”

“So, yes. Despite what the papers had to say, the eyewitness I ‘questioned’ saw only a single unidentified person. If that is true, and based on the damage I saw, I imagine the culprit set explosives. Though why Durmstrang... A person of the same ilk as Dumbledore would be unlikely to conceive such a thing, and someone of the Dark should have no reason to go after the school.”

“Someone with a grudge?” Lily hazarded.

Tom shrugged.

“At least it happened out of session so the kids weren’t endangered.” Lily suddenly made an odd, almost growling noise. “I just thought of something. Snape teaches at Hogwarts.”

Tom arched a brow in response, which did not help Harry’s confusion.

“Severus used to be my best friend. We knew each other before Hogwarts and he was the one to tell me I was a witch after witnessing some accidental magic I did.”

“Which would explain why he begged me to spare your life.”

Lily blinked slowly. “Did he really? Well, we were friends though most of school, despite me being Gryffindor and him Slytherin. But James and his friends were really mean to him and a lot of hatred built up. It was one of the reasons why I so disliked James for so long, his casual cruelty to other people with what he called ‘pranks’. Anyway, our friendship ended after OWLs. I came upon James and his cronies tormenting Severus again. I guess he was so mortified at what I witnessed it that he just lost it. He called me a mudblood when I tried to defend and help him.

“I was already having doubts by then simply because he was getting deeper and deeper with the pure-blood bigots, but I kept hoping he’d wise up. Nagging didn’t help, that’s for sure. I guess they just made him feel good about himself, puffing him up, making him feel important. Me being his exception just wasn’t good enough. Maybe I could have handled it better in the aftermath, but I’d only just turned sixteen and we’re all frequently a bit stupid at that age.

“The point is, I assume he still loathes James with all his being, and Sirius, and Remus. Probably Edward as well. I’m just worried he’ll actually notice Harry—because you do look unfortunately like your father, dear—and make the connection, and then find a way to cause an upset.”

Harry frowned. He had seen his brother and father just a few weeks ago and she was right, but to change his appearance now would confuse the heck out of his fellow Durmstrang students. And besides, even if Snape said nothing there were plenty of Hogwarts students who might notice the resemblance without any prompting and start asking questions. “This may be a royally stupid question, but... is it possible to Fidelius a person’s identity?”

Tom’s brows rose in understated surprise. “Exactly how do you mean?”

“Er, something along the lines of Harry Evans’s birth identity was Harry James Potter? And then at Hogwarts I maybe pretend to know very little English?”
“We could try, but that would not alter your looks in any way.”

“No, but it should prevent people from making that connection, despite the resemblance. They might just think maybe we were distantly related and it’s a quirk I share as many features. The ‘fact’ that I barely speak any English would be a point in my favor. James may assume, should it come to his notice, that someone a few generations back spawned the odd bastard child and that ‘branch’ ended up on the continent.”

“That’s pretty good thinking, Harry. Well done,” Lily complimented, causing Harry’s face to heat up in a kind of pleased embarrassment.

“I think,” Tom said slowly, “assuming something of that nature can be hidden, that the logic is sound. We’re not trying to hide that Harry Potter exists or existed, just that this boy, Harry Evans, could possibly be Harry Potter. People’s minds would shy away from the direct association.” Then he looked at Lily. “I do not recall. Did you change your son’s middle name?”

“Er, no, actually.”

Tom shook his head after a moment. “It should not be a problem to correct that first, then attempt the spell. I’ll do some research first, though. Changing the name properly, as done before, will update his paperwork, so do not concern yourself over that aspect.”

Harry had sat through the Fidelius attempt just moments ago, not that he remembered why he had. Lily then arched a brow at Tom and asked him a question. Even Harry was confused as to why she was asking such a silly thing. A moment later Lily said in a hushed voice, “The birth identity of Hadrian Wyn Evans is Harry James Potter.”

‘Oh!’ he thought. ‘Right. We borrowed mum’s father’s middle name for my new one. How very peculiar that was.’

Tom simply nodded. “I suppose you wish to tell your sister?”

Lily hesitated, making an abortive attempt at a shrug. “If I told her it’s not like anyone could get it out of her, but is it something she needs to know? I’m just not sure what kind of conflict it might set up in her mind, not knowing, since she would still know Harry is my son, her nephew, and that I was married to James at one point.”

“And you think the same would not happen to James, because it’s against odds he would even see you with Harry.”

“Right,” she said with a nod. “Oh, sure, maybe at the platform, but I could always wear a glamour or use polyjuice, or even ask that nice Viktor to keep an eye on the boys those times. Portkey in and out —er, wait, are they taking the train or . . . ?”

Tom nodded. “To my knowledge, yes, the train. It will be expanded to accommodate the additional influx of students. The staff will arrive at the school a week or two early to inspect things and settle in.” He looked at Harry. “There is every chance you will have to share a full dorm with your year mates instead of as you do now, but I trust that you can maintain privacy.”

“Of course,” he said. “But what about my training this year? You were going to set up a suite for me and that’s not possible now. Not at Durmstrang, anyway.”

“No, unfortunately. I could attempt to sneak into the castle and ward something, but I suspect that
Dumbledore’s nerves are even more tense for the lack of anything of import these past few years. Now that some of my more idiotic minions have disgraced themselves, well, the old man will be even more alert. The warding of the castle itself may be drastically altered this summer and it is not a chance I wish to take.”

“All right,” he said in disappointment. Using the time turner was one thing, but sneaking out of the castle to use it, and then back in, was potentially problematic.

“I will have to think on it,” Tom eventually said. “There may be something I can do.” He left shortly thereafter and was not seen again for a week.

In the meantime the letters from Durmstrang came, explaining the extent of the damage and plans for the upcoming year. “‘We will make every possible effort to accommodate you as you usually are at Durmstrang’,” Harry read out loud, then looked at Dudley. “So we might get lucky and have it still be just us two in a room.”

“I really hope so,” Dudley said fervently. “I like the rest of the guys, but I don’t want to room with them if we can avoid it. Hm, this says we can portkey to the station or arrive there the muggle way, but preferably early so all of us can be situated in the extra cars before the Hogwarts student rush begins.”

Harry nodded. “I think that sounds fine. Though, thinking about it, I wouldn’t doubt the Hogwarts students’ curiosity on this. I expect they’re all getting letters, too, to inform them about the change, so we may get a number of people wandering through.”

“Mum,” Dudley called.

Petunia bustled in a minute later, an expression of inquiry on her face.

“Durmstrang sent our letters. May we go shopping soon, please?”

“I don’t see why not,” she said after a moment. “It’s not any different really than earlier years. So long as you have your emergency portkeys it’s fine with me. I’m sure my sister will agree.”

“Agree with what?” Lily shambled into the kitchen and fumbled around for a cup for morning tea. Their house-elf, only with them for a few short weeks so far and not quite linked up to knowing how to anticipate their needs, popped into view and presented the red-head with one, who received it gratefully. “Oh, thank you, Mary.”

“Mistress is welcome,” replied the diminutive creature before popping away again.

“The boys have their letters and would like to go shopping. I don’t have a problem with it. Do you?”

“Um, no. Tom gave us all those wristbands, so it should be fine.”

Harry glanced down at his wrist. Tom had designed and enchanted flattened lengths of silver, then secured them together, and Harry’s band was more complex than the others. One strip was a portkey to the house, another to Valdis’s room, and another to his room at Durmstrang. Four more strips were enchanted with Protean Charms so he could send and receive messages with his mother and Tom. Dudley’s band only had two portkeys and a set to communicate with his mother and aunt. Tom had used a variant of the Protean Charm for the Dark Marks, but he was hardly about to use enchanted tattoos on the Evans family, and this was the compromise he had come up with.

In addition to the bands, Tom had promised a little something more. He had been eyeing Harry’s boots at the time, which rather confused him. As it turned out, Tom had constructed a new set of
boots, almost identical to the ones Harry already used, but with the semi-decorative metal pieces not in place. After Harry had enchanted the new set to match his original, Tom had enchanted the metal parts into additional portkeys, this time to Platform 9¾, a house in Hogsmeade, and a back-up portkey to the house. These were added back to the boots and Harry had been wearing them instead, getting them broken in and properly scuffed up so as not to appear brand new.

All of it, the bands and the portkeys on the boots, was blood-bonded to the owners so that no one else could make use of them. He had promised, for later on, to create something a little more encompassing for Harry given the likelihood of him never being able to apparate on his own. When he told Valdis about it she was torn between envy and thinking it was a bit too much. She had to travel everywhere with no convenient shortcuts, and that meant walking or running, riding a horse, or taking passage on a wagon or ship. Even so, she did agree that given the general nature of wizards it was not a bad idea.

“I wonder, at some point,” Tom had said musingly that day, “if I could come up with a way to use runic tattoos on you to draw in magic from your surroundings to augment your core. If so, you would be able to learn to apparate and possibly do higher level magics.”

“Oh maybe I’ll take what I already learned from you and try to work it out myself so we’d have two minds exploring that possibility.”

“Mm, perhaps. But never for general consumption. The last thing we need is for someone of Dumbledore’s ilk to cotton on, assuming we could manage it, and make himself even more powerful. Your mother might like to help as well.”

And that was the end of that conversation for the time being, but it sat in the back of Harry’s mind as a project for what spare time he had.

“You want to go today?” Dudley asked, shaking his letter.

Harry blinked away from his thoughts and nodded. “Yeah, sure. And we can stock up on sweets we won’t be able to get there. Speaking of which—mum? Do you think we’ll be able to visit the village there near the castle?”

“Er. . . .” Lily blinked a few times and had more of her tea. “I can’t imagine why not. There isn’t anything about that in your letters?”

Petunia, on seeing that her sister was slightly more with it, slid a piece of parchment in front of her. “The letters we got—I assume yours is the same as mine—mentioned that specifically. We have permission slips to sign.”

“Oh, okay.” Lily smiled a bit muzzily. “I vaguely recall they were once a month, maybe every other month. It’s been a while. But you kids may or may not be held to the same schedule as the Hogwarts students. Still, it’ll be nice for you to have a place so close by to visit.”

It would, he thought. The most Durmstrang had was a small shop on the ground floor for the students, and it never seemed to have much of interest, just supplies they could buy on the spot instead of writing home for more. It was better than nothing, he supposed, just not very exciting.

He and Dudley set off a bit later on and got their shopping out of the way. It thankfully wasn’t much due to the way Durmstrang taught classes. The most he had needed to buy for new books had been the year previous when they began electives. Aside from that the books they had were intended for use up to through OWLs. Once he moved into NEWT preparation—for whichever classes he felt confident he could pass—he would have to purchase more. Subsequently, school shopping was
more topping off consumables, stocking up on sweets, and replacing outgrown clothing.

When they returned Harry wrote a letter to Viktor, to see how he was taking the news. He wanted to ask if he would try for the tournament, but that was not a topic Harry felt comfortable discussing considering he wasn’t even supposed to know about it. The day he got a reply was the same day that Tom showed up with a trunk for Harry.

It was of a make that was obviously meant to stand on end, and once Tom began explaining its features it became clear why. “The more simplistic compartments contain drawers,” he said, opening one to demonstrate, “for your supplies, sweets, and so on. The next can hold the fruits of Herbology or Potions ingredients, and the next holds your personal library. The special compartment, however, appears to be a walk-in dressing room with storage for your clothes.”

After a pause Harry asked, “So what’s the catch?”

“Come inside and I will show you,” Tom invited, switching to the compartment in question and entering.

Harry followed and saw drawers for socks, underthings, t-shirts, and jumpers, bars with hangers for his robes, trousers, and button-up shirts, a full length mirror, a padded bench, and a rack for shoes, everything you might want in a dressing room. He knew there had to be something very special about the space, though, and consequently studied everything carefully, trying to figure it out.

Underfoot was a plush carpet, and the walls looked to be plasterboard (which he found surprising, as he would have expected wood panels) painted cream with thin blue vertical striping. He paused mentally and moved closer to the far wall to examine it more closely, and the mirror attached to it. The mirror was not, as he had assumed, placed on the wall, but rather it sat flush. “Is this a doorway of some kind?” he asked Tom’s reflection.

“Very good,” Tom replied, “and yes. But first you need to cut yourself and smear the mirror with your blood. We can do the externals a bit later. Once the blood has taken push the mirror on both sides at about mid-height.”

A minute later Harry was staring into another room entirely, this one of a decent size and fitted out as a practice room. The far wall had a door on the right and a frame on the left. Moving inside he saw that the frame led to a small kitchen and guessed offhand that the door led to a bedroom and bath. “I see. I can come here, turn back, work on my spells—of either kind—and return without anyone being the wiser, assuming I close the compartment to, er, preserve my modesty while I change clothes.”

“That was the idea.”

Harry turned to look back at Tom with a smile. “Thank you. And with this you won’t need to worry about Durmstrang next year. Brilliant.”

Back outside Tom led him through keying the warding and then showed him how it was intended to be moved. Rather like muggle luggage, actually, he thought, with a retractable handle at the top and wheels at the bottom back side. It could not much be reduced in size—only enough to make it easier to transport—but it was enchanted to limit the overall weight and to prevent the contents from shifting around in transit or if it was knocked about from the outside.

“I have one for your cousin as well, but not nearly so elaborate, as he does not need it.”

Harry blinked in surprise, then smiled. “Well, Aunt Petunia rather does like to try to keep things
even, so I’m sure she’ll appreciate the gift almost as much as Dudley will. Have you found out anything more about the attack on Durmstrang?”

“No, and not for lack of trying. I haven’t the faintest idea yet who it could be or for what reason,” Tom said, frustration bleeding through his normally even tone.

“Well, if I think of anything that might help, avenues of research, things to scrutinize, I’ll let you know straight away. I admit I haven’t thought of anything yet. It just seems so random. I know a lot of people think Durmstrang is a ‘Dark’ school, but those who profess to follow the ‘Light’ don’t do that kind of thing. Well, not of Dumbledore’s sort, anyway. ‘Light’ people who injected a little something called logic and common sense might pick a few fights, but even then it doesn’t make much sense to me except for the part where it was done out of term.”

He went away with an interesting puzzle and no real idea as of yet which direction to strike out in; and while he rather doubted it, perhaps Dudley would have some ideas.

「Tell me again why there’s a train?」 Harry asked his mother in an aside.

Lily, who looked a bit different than normal, looked over and said, 「Well, the accepted theory is that it gives the returning students a chance to get a lot of the ‘what I did this summer’ conversations out of the way, and the speculation about what’s to come for the year, who will be the new Defense professor, and so on. Basically, reconnecting after the holiday. And for the incoming students, a chance to make friends with other first years before they get shuffled off into houses and more or less trained to stick with their own.」

「And it has nothing to do with a society drowning in tradition?」 he asked, one brow raised in an eloquent gesture of sarcasm.

「Naaah,」 his mother said.「Couldn’t possibly be it. Mind you, the accepted theory does make a lot of sense—something you often don’t see in magical folk. But even then the kids are usually still quite hyper during the sorting and the feast.」

Harry shrugged and eyed the gleaming scarlet train. 「Has it always been that colour?」

「It was when I was a student. So very Gryffindor, don’t you think?」

「So very prejudicial, you mean,」 he replied, noticing his mother made no attempt to deny it.「I don’t see Viktor yet,」 he said, casually searching the platform.

「He’ll be along soon enough, I’m sure.」

He sighed faintly and looked around some more, absentely noticing that his cousin was being fussed over by Petunia and looking mightily annoyed by it, being such a big strong man and all. A number of his year mates had turned up and were scoping out the carriages set aside for the Durmstrang students. This was, to most of them, quite a novelty given that they arrived at and left their school by portkey. Britain’s Hogwarts was remarkably out in the open compared to Durmstrang, and even Beauxbatons was a bit leery of being easily accessible.

He was pulled from his reverie by a set of fingers curling over his shoulder and a warm greeting from his mentor, causing a smile to appear.

「Are you ready to board?」 Viktor asked.
Harry shivered lightly as Viktor removed his hand, his friend’s fingers brushing against his neck, and nodded.

「Viktor, there you are,」 his mother said. 「Please say you’ll continue to keep an eye on the boys this year?」

A somewhat odd and fleeting expression crossed Viktor’s face. 「Of course I will. And help them with any problems they may encounter while mentoring whoever they’re assigned to.」 He looked, momentarily, like he might say something more.

「Thank you,」 she replied, aiming a grateful smile at Viktor. 「Well, I think we’re good to go, then. Harry, try to have a good year, and...」

「Yeah, I know.」
They settled into a compartment easily enough; they all looked like they could seat six, assuming no one was overly bulky. Harry grabbed a few things from his trunk before setting the locks and shoving it under the seat; his mother had warned him that house-elves would be moving their trunks to quarters at the end of the ride, so he made sure to get out whatever he thought he would need for the journey. Various items found their way into the pockets of his robes, pockets that had been extensively modified from their default state by Tom.

「How long of a ride is this supposed to be?」Dudley asked.

「Er, mum said we leave at eleven and don’t get there until around six, so seven hours.」

Dudley rolled his eyes and looked out the window at the people still milling around on the platform. 「What a waste of time! We could have been playing games or practicing or—!」

「I know. Instead we’re stuck on this train for half the day.」On realizing that Viktor was still in the compartment he said, 「Not that I mind you being here—you know that—but I would have expected you to go sit with your friends.」

Viktor nodded thoughtfully. 「While I doubt your mother meant for me to watch over your every moment, I do get the feeling she is worried about her former husband and her presumably estranged child. At least one of them will be on the train and I expect the curiosity of the Britons will be felt today.」

He furrowed his brow as he gazed at his friend and mentor, wondering just what exactly was going through his mind. The Fidelius would prevent Viktor from making the Harry Evans is Harry Potter association, but it would not prevent him from seeing the evidence before his eyes, or remembering that Lily had been married to James, or that she somehow had two sons—or three, depending on how one looked at things—and only one of them was with James.

Harry leaned over to whisper in his cousin’s ear, 「Er, Dudley, there’s something I need to talk to Viktor about privately. You okay with me throwing up a muffling charm while I do that?」

Dudley pulled away slightly and turned his head so he could whisper back. 「I guess so. At least you said something first and didn’t just do it and leave me all confused.」

Harry nodded. ‘And hurt,’ he thought, before moving to sit next to Viktor. After a quick spell he said, 「You seem to have some suspicions.」

「Of course I do,」Viktor replied. 「The look on your mother’s face was not that of a woman with natural worries about her child being so far away. These worries she has I have to assume are connected to her former life. I cannot quite make sense of how and where you fit in as her child, but. . . . I suppose she could have blood-adopted you, but that would not explain the resemblance to Potter. Well, as I said before, her concern makes me concerned for any interaction between you and her estranged family. Perhaps they will not notice just how much you share in common with the Potter boy, but it would be unwise to assume so.」
Harry was impressed. But since he was not the Secret Keeper he could not share said Secret, and instead said, ‘It’s not something I can freely talk about, but I share those concerns. Of course, people might end up too busy gawking at you to notice me.’

Viktor scowled and shook his head.

Harry grinned in response. ‘Can you blame me? Still, I hope that people don’t go crazy finding out that you’re going to be there. You might be a famous quidditch player already, but that doesn’t mean you’re not still just a student trying to finish up school. Maybe they’ll behave themselves and not be screaming fangirls and fanboys?’ he said a bit uncertainly.

Viktor scowled again. ‘I have seen how these people react to the name of Edward Potter, and they and their families were not even badly impacted by the last war. And my sister goes all googly-eyed over that Lockhart fellow, the one Witch Weekly keeps featuring.’

‘Your sister reads Witch Weekly?’

‘Yes. She claims it is to improve her English,’ Viktor replied, more than a bit dubiously.

‘Uh huh, like I believe that,’ he said, glancing out the window. He took down the muffling spell before saying, ‘Oh dear, here come the Hogwarts students. How long before we’re invaded, you think?’

Viktor looked at his watch. ‘We still have a bit to go before leaving. I would think perhaps after everyone is settled in and their trunks stowed.’

Dudley suddenly got a weird look on his face. ‘Why aren’t the firsties we’re supposed to be mentoring in here with us? Surely they already worked that out? So why don’t we know and why aren’t they here? And besides, it would fill out the compartment a bit and prevent any Brits from trying to sit with us.’

‘That’s a really good point, Dudley,’ Harry said, and looked at Viktor for a possible answer.

‘I think because of the changed circumstances they did not think to tell you ahead of time. Normally we find out after that first lunch. You remember, do you not, how they held back all first and fourth years to get things arranged? We also don’t know if we’re being paired this year or having to sleep as groups.’ Viktor grimaced, as did Harry and Dudley.

Harry did some quick math and frowned. ‘I heard that Hogwarts has about a thousand students, but that doesn’t make sense.’

‘What do you mean?’ Viktor asked.

‘Well, my mother told me it was pretty unusual for there to be more than about ten students per year per house on average, and that only works out to two hundred eighty, but I’ll be generous and say three hundred. They also only have one teacher per subject and very little other staff, just the caretaker and groundskeeper that I know of. Twelve subjects plus flying means thirteen teaching staff, plus the two I just mentioned, and a whole lot of house-elves. If they had a thousand students that would mean just under thirty six students per house per year, and there is no way a mere twelve professors could handle that load, not without using something like a time turner. So I don’t buy it.

‘That being said, the castle is huge according to my mother, so I don’t doubt there’s a ton of space they can use to house us. I don’t think it’s too unlikely we’ll be able to room by twos still, especially since it’s rumored that the castle can move things around on its own. Even if we assume a baby boom happened after the war was over it wouldn’t account for it. A boom wouldn’t have started
happening until late 1981 or early 1982, which means those extra students would be born as early as 1982, and be first years last year. That’s just two years of extra students and still nowhere near a thousand total."

Viktor appeared bemused by his argument and Dudley just looked a bit lost; maths never had been his cousin’s strong point.

"Perhaps," Viktor said finally, "but even if the castle can adjust itself, why go to the bother of accommodating our 'peculiarities' instead of just patterning our housing on what it already does?"

"Er, I dunno," Harry said with a shrug. "Wishful thinking?" And he certainly did wish; the fewer people who knew about his spiffy new trunk the better. At best they might only want to know where they could get one for themselves, and at worst they would want to know what exactly all its features were. "You know, it’s just occurred to me. What are we going to do about quidditch this year? Hogwarts only has one pitch and now there are eight teams needing to practice."

Dudley let out a heartfelt (and slightly frightened) groan and clutched at his hair. "But I finally got moved up from reserve! What if they don’t figure this out?"

Harry turned away and discreetly rolled his eyes. Even Viktor wasn’t that quidditch mad. He was about to turn back when the compartment door slammed open and a blond boy about his age stepped in; behind him were two brutes. Harry exchanged a look with Viktor after glancing at his watch.

"I heard that Viktor Krum was on the train," the blond announced, somehow pompously. "Oh for—! Is he really so mental that he expects all of us to speak his language?" Harry complained, more to get in a word before one of them did actually speak English and give up the game. "Because sure, every country in the world obviously thinks their native languages aren’t good enough."

Dudley snickered and Viktor had a faint look of amusement going.

"You’re Viktor Krum," the blond said, pointing. "You are very rude," Viktor responded, then said to Harry and Dudley, "Are they all taught in this country to be so, well, mannerless? He just barged in, and now he’s pointing. He did not even introduce himself."

"Judging by his clothing I’d say it’s more that he’s from a wealthy family and expects people to ignore his blatant flouting of common courtesy and societal rules."

Thankfully, the boy had yet to take his eyes off Viktor but for a quick glance at the other two occupants, so Harry expected to go mainly unnoticed for the time being as a visual oddity.

The blond scowled and said, "Don’t you people speak English? You’re going to an English-speaking school!"

"Oi, Malfoy, who are you bothering now?" came a voice from the corridor.

‘Oh, hell,’ Harry thought and turned to look out the window. The reflections showed him that Malfoy had stepped back out of the compartment to deal with someone he obviously considered an interloper. Viktor took that opportunity to produce his wand and shut the door, then lock it. He noticed, though, that they could still hear what was going on quite easily.

"Maybe Durmstrang isn’t such a great school after all,” Malfoy was saying, “if they let your sort of
riffraff into their part of the train.”

「 Do we have guards nobody told us about?」 Dudley muttered.

“I’ll have you know my father is a pure-blood of better lineage than yours and I am the Boy-Who-Lived!”

「 Maybe we should if just anyone can trundle this way.」 Harry said. 「 I mean really, this Malfoy person is clearly an idiot if he thinks we’re attending Hogwarts. Did he honestly think we’d be in the same classes he is?」

Someone scoffed, presumably Malfoy. “Oh, honestly! You can’t possibly believe that a dirty little half-blood imbecile like you could possibly have had anything to do with that.”

「 I know this name, Malfoy,」 Viktor said musingly. 「 Very wealthy, yes, and the father is a suspected Death Eater.」

“My father isn’t a Death Eater who groveled at the feet of a mad man!”

「 Please notice he did not address the actual comment.」 Harry said with a smirk. 「 Please also notice that both of them are yelling in the corridor like barbarians.」

“Don’t be ridiculous! My father was under the Imperius Curse, you oaf.”

「 Ah, so assuming that’s even the truth he’s admitting his father is weak-minded,」 Viktor commented.

“That’s what you’d like everyone to think, but people with brains know he just bribed his way out of prison!”

“Yeah,” said a third voice, “everyone knows he’s just a slimy snake like you.”

「 None of this is making a good impression on me,」 Dudley said. 「 Do they want us to think they aren’t civilized?」

“Hey!” shouted a new voice, an older voice. “What are you lot doing here? Don’t you know these cars are for Durmstrang? Go now and don’t come back here and maybe I won’t bother to put all of you in for point deductions once we get to the school.”

“Vile slander!” Malfoy screeched. “When my father hears about th—!”

“Right, that’s it. A definite point deduction for you, Malfoy. Stick around and yell some more, why don’t you.”

“Yeah, snake,” voice three said smugly, “you and your stooges should run along now.”

“And that’s points gone for Gryffindor, Weasley. All of you, Slytherin and Gryffindor, back to the Hogwarts cars. Now!”

After some scuffling noises silence reigned again, but only briefly. The sound of compartment doors being opened and people stepping into the corridor took over, not to mention rather a lot of murmured conversation.

Viktor removed the locking spell from the door at that point and rolled his eyes. 「 Are these people not required to learn etiquette? And we’re heading toward what is supposed to be a first-rate school?」
If people acted like that at Durmstrang they’d be in detention for ages! Dudley pointed out. On the other hand, the entertainment portion of our journey just got shuffled off.

Shortly before they arrived announcements were broadcast throughout the train, one in English and one in German, the common language of Durmstrang. “We will be at Hogsmeade shortly. All Hogwarts first years please remain seated on arrival. You will be notified when it is your turn to disembark. Hogwarts years two through seven disembark as usual and make your way to the castle in the carriages. Your trunks will be brought to the school for you and placed in your dorms.”

The Durmstrang students got, “We will be at Hogsmeade shortly. Please remain seated on arrival until after the majority of the Hogwarts students have disembarked. You will be notified when it is your turn to do so. Once off the train please take one of the carriages to the school. You will be met by some of your professors and directed to the Great Hall and where you will be seated for meals. Your trunks will be brought to the school for you and placed in your rooms.”

Harry, having both Tom’s memories and his mother’s reminiscences to go by, expected something of that sort, though he wondered exactly how the seating would work. Even so, apparently they had decided it would be less confusing for everyone involved to separate the schools for the short trip to the castle. So that meant... what?

Once they arrived, sodden from the rain steadily drumming down, Professors Byquist and Krupin were waiting in the entrance hall, ready to direct them all. “Students, please head to your right, through those large doors. There are four tables set up for our use, the ones closer to the doors. Ignore the closest table as that is reserved for Durmstrang staff. The tables farther away are reserved for the Hogwarts students.”

‘Well okay, then,’ he thought, following his cousin and Viktor and taking the first available seats. The Great Hall was still very much like the one in Tom’s memories, just much larger, and the Hogwarts tables went, from left to right while looking at the far head table, Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor. He supposed part of that was to keep the two warring houses as far apart as possible.

The head table for Durmstrang was perpendicular to the student ones, but not on a dais like the Hogwarts one was. The arrangement made sense to him except for one minor thing, that students of either school would have to flow around either side of the Durmstrang head table to get to their own. If the Great Hall was turned by a quarter it would not matter, but it wasn’t, so the minor inconvenience stood, though he did wonder if Dumbledore had tried to convince the Durmstrang staff to share an expanded version of the original head table.

He also wondered if they would continue to eat in the Great Hall, or if that would simply be too much work for the kitchen staff for them to eat elsewhere. People had some funny ideas about Durmstrang, most of which were predicated on the simple fact that Durmstrang didn’t teach down to its students or teach with the idea in mind that it was best to produce sheeple rather than functioning adults. That sort of training was, apparently, “evil” at its finest. Those ideas might cause problems with them eating in the same hall.

Harry snorted quietly. People here thought Slytherins were evil, and it seemed as though too many of those were so hyped up on their family wealth and influence and supposed blood purity that they wouldn’t last a week at his school before being viciously slapped down, probably by their own mentors. Evil? Probably not in most cases. A party to the Old Boy Network? Absolutely. If they had been American muggles they’d be Republicans. From the South.
His thoughts were interrupted by someone nearby moaning, “Oh hurry up, I could eat a hippogriﬀ.”

The words were no sooner spoken than the doors of the Great Hall opened—and when exactly had they closed, Harry wondered—and silence fell at the Hogwarts tables, quickly followed by those of Durmstrang. A female, Professor McGonagall according to what his mother had told him, was leading a long line of drenched ﬁrst years up to the top of the hall. All of them were shivering with a combination of cold and nerves as they ﬁled along the original staff table and came to a halt in a line facing the rest of the students—all of them except the smallest of the lot, a boy with mousy hair, who was wrapped in a coat so big that it looked as though he were draped in a furry black circus tent. His small face protruded from over the collar, looking almost painfully excited.

Professor McGonagall placed a three-legged stool on the ground before the ﬁrst years and, on top of it, an extremely old, dirty, patched wizard’s hat. For a long moment there was silence, and then a long tear near the brim opened wide like a mouth, and the hat broke into song. The Great Hall rang with applause—though it was noticeably lacking from the Durmstrang students—as the hat ﬁnished. The professor unrolled a large scroll of parchment and said, “When I call out your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool. When the hat announces your House, you will go and sit at the appropriate table. Ackerley, Stewart!”

「I wonder how it works,」 Viktor said quietly.

「I’ve heard,」 said Harry, 「that the founders of this school put a little something of themselves into it to help with the sorting, but it was Gryﬃndor who actually created it.」

Some time later, with “Whitby, Kevin!” (“HUFFLEPUFF!”), the sorting ended. Professor McGonagall picked up the hat and the stool and carried them away.

Professor Dumbledore got to his feet, smiling around at the students, his arms opened wide in welcome. “I have only two words to say to you,” he told them, his deep voice echoing around the hall. “Tuck in.”

「Oh thank goodness,」 Dudley said as the empty serving dishes ﬁlled magically before their eyes. 「Lunch feels like it was forever ago.」 He ﬁlled his plate immediately and set to eating.

Harry ﬁlled his plate, as well, feeling slightly annoyed that all of it was standard British fare. 「I do wonder, though, who ends up leaving ﬁrst. It’s not like we have a clue where to go.」

A clang sounded from not far away at the Gryﬃndor table. A girl with bushy brown hair had just knocked over a golden goblet. She was staring, horror-struck, at a ghost. “There are house-elves here? Here at Hogwarts?”

“Certainly,” said the ghost, looking surprised at her reaction. “The largest number in any dwelling in Britain, I believe. Over a hundred.”

“I’ve never seen one!” said the girl.

“Well, they hardly ever leave the kitchen by day, do they?” said the ghost. “They come out at night to do a bit of cleaning . . . see to the ﬁres and so on. . . . I mean, you’re not supposed to see them, are you? That’s the mark of a good house-elf, isn’t it, that you don’t know it’s there?”

The girl continued to stare. “But they get paid? They get holidays, don’t they? And—and sick leave, and pensions, and everything?”

The ghost chortled so hard that his ruff slipped and his head ﬂopped off, dangling on the inch or so of ghostly skin and muscle that still attached it to his neck.
Harry took a moment to wonder what the poor man’s story was. He also made the assumption that the girl was muggle-born.

“Sick leave and pensions?” the ghost said, pushing his head back onto his shoulders and securing it once more with his ruff. “House-elves don’t want sick leave and pensions!”

The girl looked down at her hardly touched plate of food, then put her knife and fork down upon it and pushed it away from her.

“Oh c’mon, 'Er-my-knee,” said a red-haired boy, accidentally spraying Edward, beside him, with bits of... something. “Oops—sorry, Edward—you won’t get them sick leave by starving yourself!”

He sounded suspiciously like the Weasley boy with Edward right after Malfoy had barged into their compartment.

“Slave labor,” she said, her chest heaving with presumed outrage. “That’s what made this dinner. Slave labor.”

「Don’t they teach people anything at this school?」 Dudley asked.

「Apparently not,」 Viktor said with a frown. 「She seems to have no idea about the creatures. One more reason to be grateful we were not born in this country and made to attend this school.」

Dudley nodded. 「I hear you.」

「Hey, pass the bread?」 Poliakoff called from down the table.

Bergfalk laughed. 「You can use it to wipe up the sauce you’ve already managed to spill down your front.」

「Oh, not again!」 Poliakoff moaned, taking the basket passed to him. 「I swear, my nerves always make me twitch at exactly the wrong moments. Karkaroff is sure to bitch at me again,」 he added in a whisper.

「Then use a cleaning spell, you idiot.」

「You know, it is things like that which make me almost understand why Karkaroff does not want muggle-born at Durmstrang,」 Viktor said quietly.

「Yeah, there’s just one problem with that,」 Harry said disapprovingly. 「It’s one thing for a class like Muggle Studies to be an elective, never mind that most people consider it an easy O. After all, most wizards are condescending and patronizing toward muggles, thinking they’re little better than clever talking monkeys or something. Personally I think that’s a hilariously stupid attitude to take, but then I’ve lived years in the muggle world and know better. The problem here is that wizard born and raised people piss and moan about those disrespectful, ignorant muggle-born, but they almost never do anything to correct it.

「Are there classes for these children to help them to understand the wizarding world? Our culture? Traditions? No. Are there books in the libraries? Can any be purchased at a book shop? That girl is just going by what she already knows, and that means slavery is illegal and immoral. She has no idea why house-elves are as they are. So the real question, for this specific example anyway, is whether or not she will bother to investigate with the elves themselves, if there are even resources here for her to consult, honest ones, or if she’ll jump straight to trying to free them all.」

「... I see your point,」 Viktor said after a pause.
Harry nodded. 「We have our problems with muggles, yes. I vaguely recall us talking about that not long after you became our mentor. I saw your points and even agreed with them, but my resources up until then were muggle-raised, so...」

「Ah.」

Forty-five minutes later the meal (and pudding) was over and the plates seemed to clean themselves as Dumbledore got to his feet again. The buzz of chatter filling the room ceased almost at once, so that only the howling wind and pounding rain could be heard.

“So!” said Dumbledore, smiling around at them all. “Now that we are all fed and watered I must once more ask for your attention, while I give out a few notices.”

Harry only half-listened as the man went on about the latest in a long line of Defense professors, forbidden items, forbidden forests, and the nearby forbidden village (to first and second year Hogwarts students, anyway). It was when the man announced that there would be no quidditch that year that many students erupted in dismay, anger, or in the case of some, relief.

“This is due to an event that will be starting in October, and continuing throughout the school year, taking up much of the teachers’ time and energy—but I am sure you will all enjoy it immensely. This year at Hogwarts we have the honor of hosting a very exciting event over the coming months, an event that has not been held for over a century. It is my very great pleasure to inform you that the Triwizard Tournament will be taking place at Hogwarts this year.”

“You’re joking,” said a redhead loudly from the Gryffindor table.

Dumbledore chuckled. “I am not joking, Mr Weasley, though now that you mention it, I did hear an excellent one over the summer about a troll, a hag, and a leprechaun who all go into a bar—”

McGonagall cleared her throat loudly.

“Er—but maybe this is not the time, no. Where was I? Ah yes, the Triwizard Tournament. Well, some of you will not know what this tournament involves, so I hope those who do know will forgive me for giving a short explanation, and allow their attention to wander freely.

“The Triwizard Tournament was first established some seven hundred years ago as a friendly competition between the three largest European schools of wizardry: Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. A champion was selected to represent each school, and the three champions competed in three magical tasks. The schools took it in turns to host the tournament once every five years, and it was generally agreed to be a most excellent way of establishing ties between witches and wizards of different nationalities—until, that is, the death toll mounted so high that the tournament was discontinued.

“There have been several attempts over the centuries to reinstate the tournament,” Dumbledore continued, “none of which has been very successful. However, our own departments of International Magical Cooperation and Magical Games and Sports have decided the time is ripe for another attempt. We have worked hard over the summer to ensure that this time, no champion will find himself or herself in mortal danger.

“The head of Beauxbatons will be arriving with her short-listed contenders in October, and the selection of the three champions will take place at Halloween. An impartial judge will decide which students are most worthy to compete for the Triwizard Cup, the glory of their school, and a thousand galleons personal prize money.”
“I’m going for it,” the same red-haired Gryffindor hissed at his table mates, and students all over the hall began whispering fervently to their neighbors.

“Eager though I know all of you will be to bring the Triwizard Cup to your school,” Dumbledore went on, “the heads of the participating schools, along with the Ministry of Magic, have agreed to impose an age restriction on contenders this year. Only students who are of age—that is to say, seventeen years or older—will be allowed to put forward their names for consideration. This”—Dumbledore raised his voice slightly, for several people were making noises of outrage at his words—“is a measure we feel is necessary, given that the tournament tasks will still be difficult and dangerous, whatever precautions we take, and it is highly unlikely that students below sixth and seventh year will be able to cope with them.

“I will personally be ensuring that no underage student hoodwinks our impartial judge into making them a champion.” Dumbledore’s eyes flickered over a number of mutinous faces. “I therefore beg you not to waste your time submitting yourself if you are under seventeen. As you already know from the notices sent out over the summer, we are hosting Durmstrang this year after the attack on their school. Beauxbatons will only be bringing a selection of students, though we will still be hosting them for the remainder of the year after their arrival.

“I know that you will all extend every courtesy to our foreign guests while they are with us, and will give your wholehearted support to your champion when he or she is selected. And now, it is late, and I know how important it is to you all to be alert and rested for the morning. Due to the sheer number of students unfamiliar with the castle we will delay the start of classes by a day, until Wednesday.” He paused a moment to look straight at the Durmstrang staff table, nodded slightly, and continued, “Hogwarts students, for this evening only we will be exiting the Great Hall by table. Slytherin, please exit out on your right, and Hufflepuff please exit out on your left. Once they are out Ravenclaw and Gryffindor may exit. Please do not dally, and remember to keep an eye on your first years.”

Fifteen minutes later they were finally alone in the room. Headmaster Karkaroff waved disinterestedly at his deputy, Professor Kozlov, and headed out. Kozlov looked at them a bit sternly and said, 「 All right. Follow me to your quarters for this year. Once we arrive you’ll be assigned to your rooms. And pay attention to our route. There are no maps of this place as the castle apparently has a habit of moving rooms around. 」

They trooped along behind him up various staircases, along various corridors, until they arrived at a large painting of Heinrich Agrippa. Harry raised one brow in appreciation; at least the portrait guarding their part of the castle spoke German as a native.

Kozlov stopped at the portrait and turned to look at them. 「 The password is ‘the will to power’. Remember it. 」 The portrait popped open and Kozlov led the way.

They emerged into a fairly large room, but it was totally unsuitable for the entirety of Durmstrang. Harry suspected it had been temporarily enlarged for the moment given how the amount of furnishings was not nearly enough for such a space and the room looked almost barren in consequence.

Kozlov pulled a sheaf of parchment from his robes and thrust them at Krum. 「 Here. You deal with this. Now, before I go, understand that this part of the castle has seven levels. This here is the entrance and also a common room for the seventh years. Each level is the same in this respect. To the left on each are the rooms for the boys, to the right for the girls. Sixth years on the first floor, fifth on the second, and so on. 」 He glanced at Krum, gave a sharp nod, and then left.

Viktor gazed up at the ceiling, as if asking “why me?” before checking the parchments. 「 All right. I
want the fourth and first years to remain here. Everyone else can head up to their rooms. You have
the same assignments you’ve had before, so just find which room your trunks are in.」 He waited
until the majority of the student body had shuffled off before continuing。「Fourth years, you can go
up, but stay awake a bit longer. I’ll be with you shortly to hand out mentor assignments. First years,
you’ll come with me in a minute so I can get you sorted out。」

Harry exchanged a look with Dudley and followed the rest of his year mates.
Dudley ended up with two charges, Erik Weiss and Tibor Kadlec, from Germany and the Czech Republic respectively. It was not explicitly stated, but most certainly implied, that Harry had not been chosen due to his “disability”.

"But you’ll help me if I need it, right?" Dudley asked him immediately.

"Of course,\" he promised.

Dudley acted, without ever needing to discuss it, just as Viktor had with them, though they had the added complication of being housed in the wrong physical structure. These poor first years would have to learn all over again come the following school year how to get around. Of course, all of their people had to learn how to get around Hogwarts, so it worked both ways, Harry himself excepted.

The next morning they all shuffled down to the Great Hall, Harry casually in the lead, though Dudley was doing just fine in that respect due to his Occlumency training. He was very pleased when Viktor chose to sit next to him at breakfast, though he admitted to himself that he wasn’t sure why. Viktor had many friends amongst his own year group, after all. Then he remembered his mother’s request and felt obscurely disappointed. "Good morning, Viktor,\" he said, fairly cheerfully.

"Yeah, morning, Viktor,\" Dudley said, then immediately launched into a rant about quidditch. "I don’t see why some compromise can’t be reached."

Viktor sighed and shook his head slightly. "Dudley,\" he said very firmly.

"What?"

"That is being seen to. Karkaroff has managed to negotiate a deal for us to use the pitch near Portree. We will still have our practices and games."

Dudley gaped for a bit, then grinned madly. "By portkey, then?"

"I assume so. They will schedule around the events, I suppose."

Harry discreetly rolled his eyes and tucked into his meal, surreptitiously eyeing the Hogwarts students. Edward was holding court at the Gryffindor table, but looked to be upset. Quidditch again, perhaps. Malfoy was holding court at the Slytherin table, and also looked a bit off. He wondered if either or both of them would be trying to get around the protections Dumbledore planned to place in order to try to be chosen, despite only having (that anyone knew of) three years of education.

Dudley’s two mentees were sitting across the table from him and down a few seats from Viktor so he said, "Weiss, Kadlec. I will get together with you tonight to talk, all right?" They both nodded so Dudley turned back to their conversation. "Hopefully not all the Hogwarts students are as bad as the ones on the train."

Harry shrugged. "And maybe the ones we saw weren’t being at their best.\"
His cousin gave him a very skeptical look.

「Okay, one of them, perhaps,」 he amended.

「Do you plan to enter?」 Dudley asked Viktor.

Their mentor frowned and raised his left shoulder in an elegant shrug. 「I think perhaps. It might be very interesting, do you not think?」

「Well, do you think they’ve gotten any better at creating challenging tasks that hopefully won’t result in a lot of death, either for the champions or the audience?」 Harry replied. 「Because really, I would be very unhappy if something happened to you.」

「Oh, you just love me for my quidditch prowess,」 Viktor teased.

He rolled his eyes. 「Yeah, right. I’m not the quidditch fanatic, remember? That’s Dudley.」 He dished up a few things onto his plate and glanced around again. 「The Hogwarts lot seem awfully noisy.」

Viktor gave him an odd look, then nodded. 「Yes, but I am sure we will get used to it. It will only be a year.」

At that Harry had to sigh again. He was just eating a piece of bacon when the blond boy from the train appeared behind Dudley, making him blink in surprise.

“Good morning,” Malfoy said. “I’m afraid I did not get the chance to introduce myself yesterday. I’m Draco Malfoy. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Viktor shifted in his seat and eyed the boy. “Viktor Krum, as you presumed,” he said a bit gruffly, then gestured. “Harry Evans and Dudley Evans.”

Harry nodded a greeting, as did Dudley, and Viktor continued, “Is there something we can do for you?”

Malfoy produced a tight smile and replied, “As there are no classes today I thought I would offer to show you around the castle, to give you some help finding your way.”

「Well, this is a bit of a change from yesterday,」 Harry stated. 「He’s suddenly all polite.」

「You think he realized how awful he was being yesterday?」 Dudley asked. 「Or maybe he was just so excited at meeting a celebrity that he forgot his manners?」

Viktor snorted and looked back at Malfoy. “That would be helpful, yes. I understand we are to have our classes near where we are housed, but aside from that we would not know how to navigate, such as to the library.” To the two of them he said, “And try to remember the English, yes? We have been working on this.”

Harry smiled and nodded, thinking it was clever of his mentor to give them leeway in such a manner. «It would be easier if everyone knew French,» he commented with a rueful shrug.

Malfoy perked up at that. «I do, so I will still be able to understand you if you’re having issues with English.»

“That works, too,” Viktor said.

“Well, I’ll let you finish your breakfast,” Malfoy said. “Shall I return at the end of the meal?”
Viktor nodded and turned back as Malfoy wandered back to his own table. 「You may well be correct, Dudley. I suppose it is possible that he went to write home and realized how upset his father would be at his behavior, and that he needed to try to make up for such a bad impression.」

「Guess we’ll see,」Dudley said, then applied himself industriously to his food.

「I wonder if we can figure out how to get non-British food at our meals,」Harry said. Even though he was more than all right with the offerings, he had become accustomed to different foods at school, and rather missed some of them. 「I’m being a bit pissy,」he thought.

「Bear with it,」Viktor advised. 「Only a year.」

「A year that will probably feel both like forever and much too fast,」he said a bit gloomily.

Krum gave him another curious look, but continued to eat his breakfast. A short while later they were finished and Malfoy had popped up again and waited patiently without saying a word.

“We are—” Viktor started to say.

He was interrupted by Edward, of all people, who had popped up to his other side and was sneering at Malfoy. “What are you doing here, snake? I’m sure someone like Krum wants nothing to do with a slimy little junior Death Eater like you.”

“What the hell?” Harry muttered. “There are too many crazy people in this school.”

“Who asked you?” Edward retorted, then did a double-take. “What on Earth—? Why do you look so much like me? Trying to cash in on my fame, are you? Merlin, the nameless masses really will do anything to get a little attention!” He turned to Viktor while everyone was trying to assimilate that and said, “So, I’m Edward Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. I’ve come to give you a tour.”

Viktor blinked slowly at the boy as he stood. “Not on your life, child, not after you just insulted a dear friend of mine, and not after you’ve showed that your manners have not improved in the least since yesterday. I don’t have time for obnoxious, arrogant, entitled little boys such as you. Please leave.”

While Edward was sputtering at the rebuff Viktor gestured to Malfoy, who quickly led them away.

“Wow,” Malfoy said quietly. “I know I was a bit of an ass yesterday, but. . . .” He eyed Harry for a moment and said, “Okay, so you look a bit like Potter, but that’s no reason to accuse you of that kind of thing.”

“Thank you,» he replied softly. His brother really was oblivious, it seemed, or he had been away for long enough that Edward had forgotten the details. True, he was prevented from making the essential connection, but surely he remembered he did have a twin? Or maybe it was just that said twin was a shameful squib and absolutely could not be some random boy from Durmstrang?

“Anyway,” Malfoy said, “I’d like to apologize for yesterday. I was just so excited. Father had thought to send me to Durmstrang, you see, but my mother insisted on Hogwarts. I’ve heard so many good things about Durmstrang and really wanted to be enrolled there. And then when I realized you’d all be coming here for the year. . . . So, I apologize. I was very rude. Didn’t help that Potter showed up. He always sets me off.”

“I take it that ignoring him doesn’t work?” Harry asked.

Malfoy laughed mirthlessly. “No. Would you like to see the grounds or the castle first?”
Viktor glanced at him and Dudley, then said, “The grounds, if you please.”

“All right,” Malfoy said with a nod. “This way, then.” He showed them the courtyards, the covered bridge, the way to the lake and where the first years had their flying lessons, the greenhouses, and of course, the quidditch pitch. “It’s really depressing that we aren’t playing this year.”

“I don’t see why your headmaster can’t arrange something like ours did,” Dudley said.

Malfoy gave him a sharp, inquisitive look.

“According to Viktor we’ll be using the Portree stadium for our practices and games. And I’m glad, because I got moved up from reserve this year.”

“Oh? What position do you play?”

Harry hung back with Viktor, rolling his eyes discreetly. 「Quidditch mad,」 he muttered.

Viktor chuckled at him and slung an arm around his shoulders. 「You poor thing. Does this mean you won’t be taking advantage and coming to watch us practice?」

「Oh, maybe now and again,」 he replied, thinking that it would be so much easier to slip away from there to have his lessons with Valdis than from Hogwarts. 「Not every practice, I don’t think. With both of you as starters, though, I have to show some kind of support, right?」

「Absolutely. I would be very disappointed if you did not.」

He felt awfully warm inside at that and wasn’t sure why. Then he frowned. 「But doesn’t that mean any Durmstrang student could go watch? I mean, you already have a ton of groupies vying for your attention.」

Viktor shook his head. 「You are allowed because you are cousin to Dudley and I am your mentor. And I don’t want groupies,」 he said with a scowl.

Harry smiled at him and almost asked what he did want, but refrained. A listen ahead proved that Dudley and Malfoy were still rabbiting on about quidditch, which made him sigh.

Viktor squeezed his upper arm. 「What is it?」

「Ugh. I’m just being silly, I guess. It’s your last year and you have this great career ahead of you. I’m going to miss you, that’s all. At least next year we’ll be back in familiar territory, instead of in this strange place. Not sure I like the idea of a castle that likes to move its rooms around, has staircases that shift, has trick doors and trick steps. Like I said, I’m being silly.」

Viktor squeezed him again. 「No, I don’t think so. A bit petulant, perhaps, but not silly.」

He gave his mentor a gentle elbow to the ribs. 「Beast. I’m a bit sulky, fine.」 He shook his head slightly and changed the subject. 「Somehow I’m not surprised I wasn’t made a mentor, but I think it’ll be good for Dudley. You’ve been really great and a good example, and I think the responsibility will help him mature.」

「There are times when you sound much too old for your age,」 Viktor commented. 「And I see we are approaching the castle again. Maybe after lunch we can come back out again. It would be silly to waste such a lovely day.」

Harry nodded and smiled up at him.
“Something tells me you interrogated your mother for information about the castle,” Viktor accused.

“Who, me?” he replied. “I have seen some memories of the place,” he admitted.

Up ahead Malfoy was saying, “I don’t think there will be much of interest for you guys aside from the library, though we can check out the area around where you’re being housed. Merlin knows there are plenty of empty classrooms and offices. The library is on the fourth floor.” He led them up the main staircase and off to the right, into a very tall room ringed with staircases, some of which were moving. “They move, obviously,” he said, pointing up, “but it’s not usually a problem. And some of the steps are tricky, but you learn which ones those are quickly. Even so, I wouldn’t recommend racing up or down, because there’s always the chance you might forget and end up breaking an ankle.”

“I wonder if our infirmary staff came with us,” Harry commented quietly.

Malfoy paused, angling his head back long enough to say, “I’ll show you our infirmary just in case, then. It’s on the third floor.” Up three sets of stairs and straight ahead brought them down a wide corridor with large windows gracing the left side. On the right was a set of doors that Malfoy waved at. “We have Madam Pomfrey in charge of the infirmary, and she’s all right. I suppose if it’s closer she’s not going to turn anyone from Durmstrang away, though I’m not sure if she speaks anything aside from English.” He shrugged his ignorance and turned back toward the stairwell.

One more set of stairs and a turn to the right brought them to the library entrance, another set of doors, though these were far more grandiose. “Madam Pince is our librarian and she’s a bit of a bear,” he warned them, opening one of the doors for them to pass through.

“What year are you?” he asked, thinking he really ought to contribute at least something occasionally, then took a step back at the poisonous glare coming from an older lady at a circular desk.

“Yeah,” Malfoy whispered, “she’s really that bad. It’s like she doesn’t want anyone to even look at the books, never mind touch them or read them.”

“Is there a system set up?” Dudley whispered.

Malfoy nodded and veered off to the left, farther away from Pince, and behind a towering set of bookcases. “All the cases have labels on the sides, but basically—left to right, starting with wand disciplines. Defense, Transfiguration, Charms, then Potions, Herbology, and so on. The far right is miscellaneous stuff. I’m not sure anything here is in anything but English, though.”

Dudley frowned and Harry turned to Viktor, asking, “Do you think they’ll change our lesson plans because of this? I kind of doubt they managed to bring the entire library, assuming it even escaped the damage.”

Viktor exhaled heavily and shook his head. “I doubt it, too. They’ll probably adjust the lessons for some of the essays. Some of us can read and speak English, but not everyone. I’ll see about asking Kozlov. Same with the infirmary situation.”

He nodded and reached out to squeeze Viktor’s forearm.

Malfoy’s gaze followed the movement, but he quickly enough looked back up. “So I know you’re a seventh year,” he said to Viktor, “but what about you two?”

“Fourth years,” Dudley said.
Malfoy looked confused by that.

Dudley then went off on an explanation of the mentor system as the blond led them back out of the library and up another staircase. They slowed to a stop near the portrait of Agrippa, mainly due to Dudley, who then looked down the corridor. «So, down that way?»

Viktor shrugged. «I can only hope Kozlov says something after dinner, but if not I will make sure he tells me. Honestly. I wonder about them at times.»

Malfoy glanced at his watch and said, «It’s almost time for lunch.»

«I will be right back,» Viktor said. «There is something I wish to get from my room.» He stepped over to the portrait and whispered the password, and disappeared inside.

Dudley immediately started up quidditch talk again, so Harry leaned against the wall with a faint sigh. He almost couldn’t believe his twin had been so crass! His mother had told him just how much of a mess their father had made of things, but—well, he would have something to include in his letter home that evening. His mother would probably roll her eyes so hard she’d give herself a headache and Aunt Petunia wouldn’t be too far behind.

Viktor returned so they all made for the Great Hall. Dudley was already making plans to spend time with Malfoy that afternoon. Thank heavens Viktor was not the sort to talk quidditch all day every day; it was simply something he excelled at and looked to provide a living. There were fixings for sandwiches this time so he assembled a couple of bacon sandwiches for himself. As an afterthought he added some chips, dashed them with salt and pepper, and sprinkled malt vinegar all over them.

Dudley just seemed to pile whatever on his plate, speaking animatedly with a girl in their year named Ilsa. Viktor filled his own plate with a selection of vegetables and some beef, then said, 「I would kill for a decent sauce. Maybe if I complain to Kozlov while I’m asking about the other things he might manage to get some changes made, like some of the Durmstrang elves helping out in the kitchens.」

Harry grinned. 「Please do. Oh, please do. It’s not that I dislike British fare, but, well, it’s kind of bland.」

Viktor nodded and began eating, so Harry addressed his own food and swiftly worked his way through it. Once they were both done they headed off together, drifting outside and down to the lake. Viktor found a likely tree and sat down after casting a charm on his robes, using the tree as a backrest. He cast the same charm on Harry’s robes and patted the ground beside him. Harry took a seat and leaned against Viktor, staring out at the lake where several tentacles were lazily waving in the air.

「So what did you get from your room?」

「Ah, a history book with information about the tournament in it. Maybe I can find information about what the tasks were like so I have some idea what I might be facing if I enter.」

He huffed. 「Okay. I’m not saying you shouldn’t enter, but I am wondering why you’d bother. A thousand galleons isn’t all that much money, especially compared to what I know you’ll be making. You’ll be far more famous as a quidditch player than as a Triwizard winner. I just don’t get it. What’s the allure?」

Viktor slung an arm around his shoulders again, making him feel warm inside. 「It’s not about the money or the fame. It’s more about the idea that I can prove that I’m more than just a quidditch
player. It’s a career, yes, but it won’t last. I was thinking of trying for a mastery in Defense.

「Really? I had no idea. I knew you weren’t quidditch mad like Dudley, but I had no clue you wanted so much more. How do you even get a mastery?」 It was not something Tom had ever been particularly interested in.

「That depends. You can apprentice to an existing master as one option. Go to a higher-level school especially set up for them. Or three, Durmstrang. It has programs for them.」

He gasped softly.

「Yes, Harry, I plan to go through Durmstrang. I take it that makes you happy.」

「Well, yes.」 He was smiling foolishly for some reason.「Yes, it does.」

Viktor squeezed him, then used his other hand to flip open the book and glance at the table of contents. After a minute he flipped to the fourth chapter and began scanning the text. Harry tilted his head so he could read, as well, seeing that it was an overview of past first tasks.

「So some large, dangerous creature,」 he said a while later.「One that could, improperly handled, kill half the audience.」

Viktor snorted softly and nodded.「I am starting to think they would use a larger creature they could keep chained, so as to minimize the potential damage. This cockatrice they mention—too small to do such with easily.」He paged ahead to the next chapter.「I’m not sure I like the sound of this part,」 he said some minutes later.

「It rather sounds like they would force champions to rescue someone,」 Harry said uneasily, then he laughed.「Can you imagine someone like Potter being a champion? He could go rescue his ego or sense of entitlement.」

Viktor began snickering. From the next chapter on they got the sense of some kind of maze, perhaps originally based on the labyrinth for the minotaur of Crete.「So, plenty of nasty things and a very confusing profusion of paths.」

「Well, if you end up being set on entering, and you get chosen, you know I’ll help as much as I can,」 he offered.「I know you can’t get help from the teachers, but I don’t remember anything about help from fellow students being off the table.」In fact, should Viktor be chosen, he had every intention of giving his mentor a few special gifts to subtly protect him. Anything he could not manage he thought he could get Tom to do for him, such as protection from things like Legilimency and mind control. He could not do anything for Viktor’s birthday, as that had been months ago, but he could give him a gift if he was chosen, another before the first task, and so forth. In some respects it depended on that the tasks were.

「I would appreciate that,」 Viktor said, breaking him out of his thoughts.「You have always been surprisingly knowledgeable for your age and I expect you will have some excellent ideas.」

He grimaced faintly and replied,「I think had I been schooled here at Hogwarts I’d be a Ravenclaw, maybe. I very much like to read and understand things, but you already knew that.」

「Or Slytherin,」 Viktor pointed out.「From what I have heard many Durmstrang students would slot into that house, if only because we’re taught to refuse to accept things on face value or let some person high up the scale think for us.」

「True, but Slytherin also has a reputation of being the house of blood purists and bigots. I don’t
really like these houses. People change. People are more than just two or three traits. My mother told me all about the rivalry and even outright hostility between Gryffindor and Slytherin houses, how Ravenclaws are often seen as book nerds with no real emotions, and how Hufflepuff is seen as a house for duffers. I can’t imagine living like that. Durmstrang is a utopia in comparison.

Viktor snorted quietly. 「I would not go that far, but yes. Though, having come here for this year, I am starting to see some things which disquiet me. Karkaroff and Kozlov seem to be awfully disinterested in doing their jobs. I don’t mind some of the responsibility they landed me with, but I am a student, not a member of staff.」

Harry hummed in agreement. 「I don’t think it’s necessarily that much different here. My mother told me that in some respects the staff here are rather hands-off about some things, and Dumbledore hasn’t taught in decades. She said, looking back, that he seems to play favorites.」

For some reason that statement made Viktor groan. 「I just know if I am chosen that Karkaroff will become a bit unbearable.」

「You mean because he already sucks up to you because you played for Bulgaria? Yeah, I could see it happening. Something to keep in mind if you decide to enter.」A part of him wondered if the headmaster would go so far as to ensure all names from Durmstrang students were actually Viktor’s, but . . . to what end? The most he would get from that is additional media attention. Without any guarantee that Viktor would win the man would be unlikely to place bets on the outcome.

He looked out over the lake and watched ripples form on the surface; he knew they were caused by a giant squid. He still felt absurdly warm inside and tried not to think too hard about that. Perhaps he could talk to Tom about things, or his mother if necessary. And on that thought he poked around in his pockets for some paper and a pen and set about writing to her, intent to let her know what Edward had done.

Later that evening, about an hour after dinner, Viktor called a meeting in the seventh year common; it had been expanded again to accommodate the number of students. 「All right, everyone, settle down please. Our classrooms for this year are all on this floor, to the right as we exit this tower. Signs will be posted outside each of them to help you figure out where you’re to go. Also, I’m asking that all mentors stay behind so I can show them the way to the library. While I realize that not everyone here can read English, some of you can, so you may get use out of the place. Mentors can assist their mentees or, indeed, anyone else who needs help with that.

「I have also requested that some of the Durmstrang elves help out in the kitchens so that more of the food we’re accustomed to is served, but we’ll see what comes of that. If anyone has questions bring them to your mentors as usual, and if they do not know, they can come to me. I’ll do my best to figure things out. I was given everyone’s schedules, as well.」Viktor paused to produce a sheaf of parchment. After separating a set from the top he said, 「Seventh years?」Eventually all of them were distributed, so he asked for the mentors to follow him, leading them out of the tower.

Harry wandered up to the room he shared with Dudley and found an envelope for his letter, addressed it, then tied it to his falcon’s leg for delivery. 「It’s to my mother, Bjarte. Safe flight.」He opened the window long enough for the bird to fly away, then left it cracked open. Unless someone scaled up the side of the castle to sneak into the room he rather doubted it was a risk not closing it. After that Harry scanned his schedule so he would know what books he would need the following day, got his satchel ready, and selected one of the books to read.

Viktor stopped in some time later—by then Dudley was back from spending time with his mentees—to check to see if they needed anything, then headed off to his own room. Harry checked the time and sighed faintly. 「Dudley? You ready for bed?」
His cousin got up to take care of certain things and was shortly back and sliding beneath his covers.

The next morning he yawned his way out of bed and into his trunk, closing the outer door before activating the mirror and stepping into the hidden suite. A house-elf trotted in from the kitchen and bowed. 「Master Harry.」 he was greeted. 「Master Tom has suggested that you turn time in the bathing room, go through your morning ablutions, then come out for food before starting your practice for the day. Pelk will help you to keep track of the days and watch over you.」

He nodded and yawned his way into the bathroom, checked the time with a tempus, made a note of it, and turned back twenty-hour hours. A half hour later he was in the kitchen being fed breakfast. Pelk had something of a schedule for him, one that Tom had written up, and Harry saw no issues with keeping to it. He spent the first hour working on Occlumency; normally he did that in the evenings before bed, but he had been distracted. After that he began with the first spell on the list, and he quickly realized that the only reason he could even start was due to Tom’s memories. He would have to go over the entire list just to make sure there was nothing unfamiliar.

Harry sighed heavily. So much damn work, all because his mean core strength was lacking.

By the time Samhain rolled around he had gotten through any number of spells, though not all of them had been mastered. One day each was not even close to enough for that. Still, he knew he could cast everything four years were expected to learn in wand classes. He had also been to visit with Valdis, Tom having given him an additional portkey to bring him back to a warded spot at the Portree stadium. He considered using his time turner to extend those visits, but knew that turning twice into the same time period was not a good idea, and would likely get him thrashed should Tom, his mother, or his aunt find out.

Dinner was a mixture of nervous and excited chatter with pockets of strained silence. Even Viktor was acting a bit moody and scowling more often than usual. Dumbledore finally closed out the meal and after blathering at them for a while had the castle’s caretaker bring the Goblet of Fire over. After a dramatic darkening of the lighting in the Great Hall the goblet spit out the first name.

"The champion for Durmstrang," Dumbledore read, in a strong, clear voice, “will be Viktor Krum.”

Even as he started clapping Harry felt anxious and sad. Viktor gave his shoulder a squeeze as he rose, then headed off toward the room the old man had indicated. Soon enough a Fleur Delacour was announced for Beauxbatons, followed by Cedric Diggory for Hogwarts. Dumbledore started rabbiting on about support, but was cut off when the goblet shot out red sparks a fourth time and released another slip. “Edward Potter.”

Harry glanced at Dudley with a grimace, unwilling to actually say anything surrounded by so many people. Silence lay over the Great Hall like a smothering blanket. He looked back over his shoulder to see his brother grinning smugly as he stood up. Muttering began to arise amongst the Durmstrang students, then Beauxbatons, and finally Hogwarts as Edward joined the three champions.

「I hate to say it, but this looks like some stupid publicity stunt,」 he said to Dudley. 「And for someone who is already famous. Didn’t he already have enough? Was he afraid of being overshadowed by a competition that had nothing to do with him?」

Dudley shook his head slowly. 「Well—」

「Durmstrang students!」
Harry turned to look and saw Kozlov.

「You will now return to your tower. You can congratulate Krum once the officials are done with him.」

He heaved a sigh and got up, waiting his turn to file out of the Great Hall. Twenty minutes later he was sprawled on his bed. By now Viktor should already have some idea of the first task, and he wouldn’t be the least bit surprised if many of the Durmstrang students were having a bit of a party. He lifted his left wrist and started tracing a message onto the silver for Tom. Hopefully he would provide what Harry wanted without too many questions, the first of the gifts.
Chapter 9

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09

He stayed in his room, not bothering to join in the merriment, reading; not for school, though, rather fiction. He already spent his extra days on magic so his free time was spent on relaxation.

Viktor showed up at ten, looking harassed. 「 Karkaroff was oozing over me, 」 he complained.

「 You knew it could happen, 」 he pointed out unhelpfully, then reached out to tug on Viktor’s sleeve. His mentor sat down beside him and scooted back so he could use the wall as a backrest. 「 Are they still celebrating down there? 」

「 Yes, and that’s fine. They are our school mates and there is nothing wrong with it, I suppose. But — 」 Viktor stopped, worrying his lower lip between his teeth.

「 But you aren’t the partying type, I know. So what did they tell you? 」

Viktor snaked an arm around Harry’s shoulders before saying, 「 Ah, about what I expected. The task is to test our daring, our courage in the face of the unknown. We are not allowed to ask for or accept help from our teachers, and we are supposed to go into it armed only with our wands. 」

Harry frowned. Maneuvering around that might take some doing, and that was assuming Viktor would accept his well-meant gifts; and also assuming he knew what the actual task was in time to do anything about it. 「 Okay, 」 he said slowly. 「 What about Potter? 」

Viktor snorted inelegantly. 「 That arrogant ass. He boasted that he’d be in no trouble because his father would handle things. I got the impression that his father is the one who fixed things so his son would be chosen. 」

「 Do you know how they got around it? 」

「 That was not made clear, but I suspect the boy entered himself under a different school name so he would be the only one available for that school as a contender. So for all we know he used one of the area schools, or perhaps Salem. As to how they got the cup to choose a fourth? I was unable to study the cup in any detail, but I did notice etchings on it. Maybe one of them was altered, if they were runes of some kind? Maybe a spell, but I cannot think of anything offhand that would work. 」

He sighed and rolled his eyes. 「 Try to ignore him? Because really, if he ends up winning it’ll either be because his father meddled or the tournament tasks were dumbed down too much or are too random to really matter. Wow. I just—I don’t believe it, and yet I’m not surprised. I’d heard plenty of stories, but the reality is worse than I expected. 」

「 From your mother, 」 Viktor stated.

Harry noticed that the corners of Viktor’s mouth were turned down unhappily and wondered if this was entwined with the Secret of his full identity. He glanced down at his wrist and saw that Tom had responded with “I’ll take care of it” and wondered how the man would react to him wanting for Viktor to be clued in. And also, while Pelk was there to help and keep an eye on him, what would happen if he was injured beyond the elf’s abilities to correct? It was not as though Tom could just
stroll on in as he could at Durmstrang.

"Yes," he replied. But even if he could tell his mentor—or rather, have him told by his mother—unless Viktor wanted to turn back days with him he could not always be there to help him as he had classes of his own. He pushed down another sigh and dropped that part of the idea; he would simply have to exercise due diligence when it came to his safety. Hell, he wasn't even sure how much or how little repeating days was affecting him. Was he older than he ought to be? Did it not count? Would he catch up to Viktor in age?

Viktor muttered something he could not quite catch and probably was not supposed to, then said, "Well. How is your work going? Is there anything we need to go over?"

The next day—normal time—he received both a small package and a message from Tom, delivered by Pelk. The package held the earring he had requested for Viktor, enchanted to protect his mentor's mind. True, he probably could not wear it for the tasks, not unless he summoned it before each one, but odds were against him needing it for those. Well, unless there was something planned along those lines for the possible maze.

The letter seemed a bit exasperated in tone, but Tom did allow that Lily having asked Viktor to keep an eye on her child (and nephew) had produced some conflicts in the man’s mind that were, as it stood, irresolvable and something of a constant burden. Tom let him know that during the next visit to Hogsmeade Harry would be able to meet up with his mother again, and she could take care of it then. They would be able to go again in approximately a fortnight, so not much longer, thankfully.

Classes and his practice days flowed by and it was soon enough time for Durmstrang students to visit the village. He had brought his cloak with him to breakfast, not wanting to bother with an extra trip of ten staircases. When they did eventually arrive in Hogsmeade Harry led them to the cottage his mother and aunt were staying in. Dudley ran ahead and whipped open the door, calling out as he stepped inside, "Mum! Aunt Lily!"

Harry shook his head in fond exasperation and gestured for Viktor to precede him. "Your mother lives here?"

"Only during visits. A friend of the family owns the place and has lent it to us. Otherwise they’re at our home in Norway." He smiled happily as his mother appeared from the sitting room and came up to give him a hug and a quick kiss.

"Viktor," she said, giving him a warm smile, "I’m so pleased to see you. Harry, I want to speak with Viktor for just a moment so go on ahead." She arched a brow at him meaningfully.

He nodded and removed his cloak, hanging it on one of the hooks, and ducked into the sitting room where he was able to give his aunt a hug. Despite being very tempted to eavesdrop on his mother and Viktor he refrained and instead took a seat, availing himself of the amenities on the tea tray. He was happily noshing on his third cherry Bakewell when Viktor took a seat next to him and reached out to squeeze his arm. Harry looked over and smiled, then gestured at a cup he had already prepared for his friend. Talk about the Secret could wait.

His mother, however, did have something to bring up. "Has there been any change?" she asked.

"Anyone . . . who has noticed anything?"

The dark look on her face made him realize who she meant. He shook his head and replied, "None of them. I think we’re just two random Durmstrang faces, if that makes any sense."
「I have not noticed anything.」 Viktor offered.

His mother nodded, seeming pleased. 「Good. How are your studies going, Harry?」 That sort of look came back to her face.

He blinked slowly at her and said a bit wearily, 「They’re going as well as can be expected. All of them.」

「Good,」 she repeated, then led them into a more conventional conversation of lighter topics.

An hour into their visit he could hear someone at the door and Mary trotted in moments later to whisper something to his mother, who blinked, whispered back, then said, 「Harry, you have a visitor in the kitchen.」

He frowned and got up, wandering out into the hall and down it to the kitchen. Once through the door he saw Tom and smiled. “Hey. I wasn’t expecting you to visit. What’s up?”

Tom pointed at a chair before saying, “Pelk has been giving me reports on your progress, but I wanted to hear it from you.”

He nodded and took a seat. “I’ve been very careful. It occurred to me at one point that I might get into trouble that Pelk couldn’t fix, and it’s not like you can charge in to help me, not like if I was at Durmstrang. Aside from that I’ve been doing the usual, following the plans, and trying very hard to master these spells and stay ahead of what will be taught this year. I haven’t had as much time for the aetherial spells, but that’s because some of them don’t really—” He paused, trying to find the right words. “Er, they don’t really give experience if they aren’t being used for real? It’s not like I can grind Conjuration or Destruction in the trunk, and Restoration only works in conjunction with draining myself with an Alteration spell. After all, it’s less painful to do that than develop an obsession with cutting myself.”

Tom exhaled heavily, a frown wrinkling his forehead. “As much as I would prefer to tell you to stop with Restoration until breaks or the summer, it is important that you master it. Just, limit how much you do per day, all right? Your mother will do her best to murder me if you get hurt. I assume you’ve kept up with your visits to Valdis.”

“Of course, though I can’t stay for more than a few minutes,” he said sadly. “I’m using the portkey you sent me and so far no one has noticed I’ve been disappearing.”

“I know you’ll continue to be careful, if only to spare your mother worry,” Tom replied, then eyed him. “The first task is dragons.”

“What!” he said, half rising from his chair. “What the hell?”

Tom glared at him and said coldly, “Moderate your tone.”

Harry felt his cheeks burn in shame at the well deserved reprimand. “I apologize.”

Tom nodded after a moment. “You might consider warning your friend. However, that is not why I’ve told you.”

He sighed and bit his lip. “You don’t think they’ll notice anything, do you? I’d just be sitting there in the stands.”

“I don’t think they will,” Tom replied with a shake of his head. “Still, it’s best that you know beforehand, just in case. If something should happen while your friend is facing his…”
Harry rolled his eyes up toward the ceiling even as he acknowledged that he could easily let something slip if worried or frightened enough. “True. I will do my best to lock down my emotions for the task. I should hate to do something stupidly—apologies to my mother—Gryffindorish.”

Tom smirked a bit nastily, then stood. “I’ll see you later.”

“Oh, wait,” he said. “I just had a thought about something enchanted for resistance. I don’t know if Viktor would accept it, though, and I know it’d be cheating if he actually wore it before the task began.”

“The rules state a champion’s only arms can be their wand. They say nothing about armor,” Tom pointed out. “Elemental resistance is defensive.”

He thunked his head against the table at his stupidity. “I swear that place is making me lose brain cells,” he muttered. After sitting back up properly he said, “Okay. Since I can’t get to an enchanter in time, will you come up with something that’ll mitigate fire and frost damage? Maybe not fully, because that might be a wee bit suspicious.”

“Yes. Now, I must be going.”

He waited until Tom had apparated out, then returned to the sitting room and resumed his seat next to Viktor. Their cups were enchanted to act sort of like a muggle thermos, so his tea was still wonderfully hot.

It wasn’t until they were back at the school that Viktor got a look on his face that demanded they talk, so he led his mentor to the room he shared with Dudley (who, as far as he knew, was palling around with Malfoy).

“Can you toss up some wards?”

Viktor nodded and did so, then sat down beside him. “I understand now. Edward is your twin.”

“Yes,” he said with a sigh. “My father decided I must be a squib because I never showed any accidental magic and consequently started to ignore me. His friends did, too. They all concentrated on Edward and made a huge fuss about him. You can see how well he turned out. Well, my mother was very upset about that, and eventually, because she was spending so much time trying to prevent my twin from turning into a berk, she agreed to send me to live with my aunt, her sister.”

“And yet now they’re divorced.”

“It was making her ill, their actions, their attitudes, and just how little my father bothered to even pretend to listen to her. So she left him, making sure she got sole custody of me. It was then that she learned I wasn’t actually a squib, and not long after that the four of us moved to Norway thanks to a friend of the family who wasn’t about to tell anyone what we were up to.”

“The same friend whose cottage that was?”

He nodded. “I am capable of telling you who he is, but I’d rather not. That’s who came to visit me while we were there. I’m not quite sure how I’d define him—certainly not a father or uncle. Maybe kind of a mentor and protector?” He wrinkled his nose thoughtfully. “My aunt’s ex-husband was causing trouble, which was one of the other factors to us moving, the first being that we didn’t want to end up at Hogwarts.” He laughed a bit mirthlessly. “Sucks that we’re here for a year, but at least we have our proper instructors.”

“So your father has no idea,” Viktor prompted.

“Right. We avoided them at the World Cup and I haven’t actually seen him here, but I expect he’ll
show for the first task. I’ll be sitting with Durmstrang so it shouldn’t matter. The whole point of using the Fidelius was to prevent people like him from ever quite being able to make the connection. Edward taunted me for looking a lot like him, but that was as far as it went. And after you cut him down so handily he’s stayed away.

Viktor nodded and sat back, using the wall as a backrest, and pulled Harry back as well, slinging an arm around his shoulders. 「 Well, now I understand better why your mother wanted me to keep an eye on you two while we’re here. I get the feeling there’s a lot more to it, though. 」

Harry snorted softly. 「 Er, yes. Won’t say, though. I’d catch holy hell if I did. 」

「 I can’t say I like that, at all, but as I am not a member of your family I guess I will just have to deal with it, 」 Viktor replied, tilting his head so it touched his briefly.

「 I have something for you, by the way. I’d have given it to you a lot sooner, but it slipped my mind. And I will have something else soon that I hope you’ll consider using. 」 He reached into his pocket and removed a small box, then handed it over.

Viktor gave him a curious look as he reclaimed his arm and took the box. He wedged a nail in under the top flap and forced it open, then tilted his head on seeing the contents. A few moments later he pulled out a single earring, a small hoop, fashioned from white gold. 「 I like it, 」 he said, setting the box aside.

「 It’s enchanted, 」 Harry said softly. 「 It will protect your mind against Legilimency and forms of mind control. 」

Viktor pulled away so as to face him. 「 How did you manage to get something so rare? 」

He smiled a bit ruefully. 「 It’s a secret. I’d have made it myself, but I don’t have access to my, er, tools here, 」 he said, eyes cutting off to the side a bit shiftily.

「 And the other gift you hope I’ll use? 」 Viktor asked intently.

Harry reached up to brush his mouth with curled fingers, almost as though denying he was about to speak. 「 I know what the first task is, 」 he admitted, 「 but I don’t want to say unless you want to know. The other gift will help with it, defensively, though I don’t know what form it will take yet. I was reminded that you can only be armed with your wand; the rules say nothing about bringing defensive items with you. 」

A slow smile broadened Viktor’s mouth. 「 I won’t ask how you found out. You obviously have someone with pull on your side. The thing is, Karkaroff had something to say just recently. Didn’t even give me a choice, he just blurted it out. Dragons. I really like that you offered me a choice. 」

His eyes went wide. 「 But that—he’s not supposed to do that! 」

「 I was told, 」 Viktor said dryly, 「 that cheating has always been a part of the tournament. 」

He shook his head in denial. 「 So? It’s one thing if you find out from a fellow student—and the headmaster is not my source, by the way—but to just up and tell you? 」 He shook his head again.

「 I suppose that means the other three will know, too. 」

「 So this other gift—it protects against something? Dragon fire? 」

「 Yeah. Fire and frost. Maybe more. But I asked for it not to be the best resistance because if you do get—well, it would look strange if you could walk through lava with barely any damage. And it
shouldn’t do anything for physical harm. It’s a help, not a surety."

Viktor reached out with one hand and wrapped it around the back of Harry’s neck and gently pulled, bringing their foreheads together. ‘Thank you,’ he said quietly.

Harry could feel his cheeks heating up a bit and dropped his gaze in mild confusion. Viktor drew back and released him. ‘I wonder which ear I should put this in.’

A few days later Viktor had pierced his right ear and inserted the hoop. And by then Tom had delivered the other item via Pelk. Harry opened it during one of his repeat days just to see what form it took. It greatly resembled chain mail, he thought, in bracelet form. The links differed in colour, though the base was plain. Some were faintly red, some blue, some purple. A note included with it read: “The colours should be obvious. I have included additional links and it will be a simple enough effort to replace the plain links with more of the enchanted ones to increase the level of protection.”

He also noticed, after a much closer look, that some of the links were not actually metal, but of some stretchable substance. Sizing would not be an issue, then. ‘I’ll give it to him tomorrow,’ he thought. ‘And I’d like to believe that the non-metal links are unbreakable, because otherwise this could get caught on something and snap. I hope he likes it.’

The next morning he yawned his way through breakfast and held a desultory conversation with Dudley and a few other of their year mates, as Viktor was sitting with his. Classes went well enough, but even with all his extra preparation it was tiring and a bit disheartening. He looked forward to taking his OWLs so he could, if he chose, drop the wand classes and study those independently instead.

After classes ended for the day he went for a walk with Dudley and Malfoy, whom by then they were both calling Draco, despite it being awfully cold outside. Draco liked to complain about Dumbledore not having arranged for Hogwarts quidditch teams to use one of the stadiums to continue their season. He argued that for players in their final year it meant they lost out in terms of experience and any scouts had to go by what little they knew from before.

“I agree,” he said. “People play quidditch both because they enjoy it and because many of them are looking at it as a career option. Cavalierly pushing it aside for the year is just rude and dismissive.”

Draco smiled at his support. “At least I have three more years to play and improve. Are you two looking forward to the first task?”

Dudley rolled his eyes and exhaled loudly. “I’m looking forward to it being over, actually. People are being nuts about Viktor and it’s annoying. Groupies are all over the place, girls squealing and blushing.”

Draco laughed softly. “And he’s not the sort to enjoy any of that. He’s amazingly humble for a celebrity.”

“Unlike some people,” Dudley muttered.

“Oh, don’t get me started! Tell me more about your classes,” Draco urged.

“Well. . . .”

Viktor showed up at his side before he managed to get out of the Great Hall after dinner and steered him off for a walk, this time just rambling aimlessly inside the school. He passed on some of the jokes his year mates had been bandying about, though Harry thought they were a little too vulgar even if they were funny.
I get the feeling Dudley will be gaining a pen pal once this year is over. He spends a fair amount of time with Draco, he commented.

Well, he did redeem himself after a bad start, and those two do like to talk about quidditch incessantly. Though from what I’ve overheard I think it’s also the differences between how we’re taught. I expect that Draco is upset that his mother won that argument.

Hm. That would be interesting if Draco could convince his parents to transfer him. Well, assuming they aren’t worried about the school being blown up again. I should think they’d like to get their only child away from Dumbledore. Except he doesn’t speak German, which is a bit of a sticking point.

Possibly. Anyone else of interest? Viktor asked casually.

Dudley was telling me about this blonde girl he met from Ravenclaw, a year below us. He says she’s a bit loopy, but in a good way. I haven’t met her yet, but he’s more complimentary of her than he is Ilsa, if that says anything. I’m starting to wonder if he has a crush. And, get this, she already knew he could speak English perfectly well without him ever saying a word. Oh. He remembered the gift and was about to pull it out, but also remembered things his mother and Tom had said. A look around showed far too many paintings in the vicinity for his comfort.

What is it?

He shook his head. Too many potential watchers. After we finish our walk?

Of course.

So how does this mastery thing work in around quidditch?

Ah, half my day will be practices with the team and then I return for lunch and work on the mastery.

So they’re going to work you like a dog from both ends?

Yes, pretty much. But I think it will be worth it in the end. I want something for the time when I have to retire. If nothing else a mastery would qualify me to teach.

That would be interesting, he said with a grin. They continued to amble around for a while and eventually repaired to Harry’s room, whereupon he pulled the bracelet from his pocket and handed it over. Protection against fire, frost, and shock, and I have pieces to make it a lot more effective for later on with a few adjustments.

Viktor slid it on, his brows rising at how it expanded to fit past his hand and wrist bone, and nodded. I like it. It’s stylish and the colours are subtle enough. Thank you, Harry.

He smiled happily. Have you figured out what you’re going to do?

I can go two ways, to different strengths. I can try to make the dragon dizzy by flying, or I can use spell work.

Except that summoning your broom would sort of scream that you had foreknowledge, he said thoughtfully.

Exactly. Therefore I need to use spells.

Well that kind of sucks. He told what the task was, or just that it’s dragons?
Viktor took a seat. 「Get past the dragon to grab a golden egg. Points off for things like harming the eggs, harming the dragon, getting hurt, and so forth.」

「Unfortunately I don’t have a dragon keeper in my pocket I can drag out and interrogate,」 he joked. After sitting down he flopped back. 「I almost think I’m more nervous than you are about all this. You seem so damn calm about the whole thing. I don’t know. Maybe it bothers me so much because I don’t have your skill and know I never will.」

Viktor shifted to face him better and frowned. 「What? You’re just fourteen, Harry. You have plenty of time to mature your magic.」

He grimaced. 「No, not really. You already know I have problems, but you don’t know that it’s a lot more than just not being able to use the wand movements. My mean core strength isn’t even average. I’ll never be able to cast the higher level spells. I have to work twice as hard as anyone else to manage as well as I do.」 He blinked a few times against the sudden sting in his eyes and cursed himself mentally; he thought he had gotten past this already.

「I take it back. Maybe you would have been a Hufflepuff.」

Harry snorted in amusement.

He was strongly considering the merits of taking up the habit of biting his nails when he remembered what he said to Tom, and instead worked on locking down his emotions. His mother seemed to know what he was doing and patted him on the leg. They were sitting with Durmstrang, on the edge of their section. Viktor’s parents had been unable to get away, so it was just students and his mother there as Viktor’s supporters. Aunt Petunia had heard the word “dragon” and responded negatively to coming. Or, as she said, “I had enough of a fright with a calm, human-friendly one. I don’t want to see barely adult students going up against ones that probably aren’t. I don’t think my heart could take it.”

Diggory went first against a Swedish Short-Snout and used Transfiguration to try to distract the dragon; he was only partly successful, but did manage to get his egg. Delacour came out next against a Welsh Green and used some kind of charm; the dragon looked to be very sleepy after a time, but as she was going after her egg it released a gusty—and fire-laden—breath that set her robes alight. Still, she did succeed.

Then came Viktor against a Chinese Fireball. Harry was even more glad he had arranged for the bracelet when he saw the dragon. His mother reached over to grab his hand and squeeze. Viktor scanned the stands and his gaze stopped on Harry with a faint smile; he did his best to smile back. When the task began Viktor stood there for a span of seconds, gazing intently around the arena.

Then his wand came up and he was quickly transfiguring rocks at his feet into replicas of the dragon’s actual eggs, a vivid crimson speckled with gold. He also summoned something from the direction of the forest, but given how tiny whatever it was was Harry could not figure it out. Within seconds, however, there was a small drift of squealing pigs racing off to a point midway between Viktor and the dragon and farther on, to form a kind of triangle.

While the dragon was distracted Viktor cast a spell at his boots and levitated his fake eggs, then began walking along a somewhat curved route toward the golden egg. Every time the dragon started to notice he was getting closer he would roll one of the fake eggs toward the pigs and distract her again. He did attempt to summon the gold egg, but it was obviously warded against such measures.
Viktor kept up the same strategy even after he obtained the gold egg, this time backing away while he kept the Fireball distracted, and got through the task without ever being flamed or in any way hurt. Harry was so relieved. Even though the bracelet turned out to be not needed he did not regret having given it to his mentor. He squeezed his mother’s hand happily and joined in with the other Durmstrang students in standing up and cheering Viktor’s success.

After the scores were totaled up Viktor had forty-six; Bagman had scored him oddly low in comparison to the others, especially for a champion who really did nothing wrong. ‘What the hell?’ Dudley muttered. ‘Bagman is blind!’

‘While I agree with your sentiment,’ his mother said, ‘I do wish you’d take more care with your choice of language.’

‘Sorry, Aunt Lily,’ Dudley said in a subdued way.

The dragon keepers finally got the Fireball away and moved the final dragon into place, a Hungarian Horntail; it looked far more vicious than the others. ‘Oh dear,’ his mother said, ‘I’m not sure if I can stand to watch this.’

‘We could always go join Viktor instead,’ he suggested.

His mother hesitated, then nodded. ‘Let’s.’

They were almost down to ground level when Edward came out, and as they walked toward the tent Viktor was in Harry could see that his brother had chosen to fly. He laughed to himself and shook his head. ‘Just take out an advert in the Daily Prophet why don’t you?’ he thought. Just before they ducked into the tent he saw his brother fling something at the dragon. ‘Merlin, he’s not actually using prank products, is he?’

Inside he oriented on Viktor, who smiled once he saw them. Harry’s mother dashed forward to give Viktor a hug. ‘Oh, you were wonderful! Excellent job, Viktor. You deserved such a high score.’

Viktor seemed almost embarrassed by the praise, but nodded and said, ‘Thank you.’

His mother gave Viktor what Harry thought was an odd look, and Viktor responded with a slight shake of his head. He frowned at this unspoken communication between the two. Instead of calling them on it he said, ‘I expect there’ll be another party in the tower tonight.’

Viktor rolled his eyes. ‘Can I hide in your room again?’

Harry and his mother laughed.
Edward was even more insufferable in the days following the first task, and it seemed not to bother him one iota that most of his fellow Hogwarts students openly displayed contempt for him. The only ones who stuck by his side were his two cronies, Weasley and Longbottom. Harry could only assume, without having actually asked—and he never would—that those two had been warned that James Potter was going to pull a prank in order to get his son into the tournament.

From what little he had witnessed it seemed as though Weasley was the sort to veer into jealousy and envy at the slightest provocation, so Edward had to have done something to head that off. Longbottom, however, was self-contained enough that Harry had trouble reading his character. Still, he did not seem to be the general sort of hanger-on, so he wondered why the boy was friends with his brother. Perhaps his mother could scare up an explanation should he ask her?

Viktor began joining him in the evenings, three times a week, for an hour before bed. He had asked again about the earring, and Harry had been moved to ask if his mentor wanted training in Occlumency. Viktor had been pleased to say yes so Harry started walking him through the process and how it could differ from individual to individual. 「So few people know Legilimency—that anyone is aware of—that I am not surprised our instructors don’t cover this.」 Viktor commented, 「and it’s not like people regularly stumble over someone who’d try to use the imperius on them.」

「I think it goes back to what you said to me way back. Durmstrang doesn’t make an effort to teach much more that isn’t in the mainstream. I mean yes, they teach what they do very differently from places like Hogwarts, but. . . . Maybe they teach this at mastery level?」

Viktor looked thoughtful at that, and nodded slowly. 「Perhaps they do. And if so, I’ll be ahead of the game. Harry—」 Dudley came in, causing Viktor to bite back whatever it was he wanted to say. 「Dudley, how are the mentoring sessions going?」

「Oh, they’re fine. Any time I start wondering I just think back to how you’ve acted,」 he said, smiling. 「Don’t worry! I’ll come to you if I need to. I want to be as good a mentor to them as you are to us, so if there’s anything I can’t handle I’ll ask.」

‘So much for that conversation,’ Harry thought. He loved his cousin, really, but there were times when he wanted to strangle him. And that right there made him sit back in confusion. Why? Why was he being so touchy over his quiet time with Viktor? Their mentor.

Two regular evenings later Viktor was back, and this time he launched into whatever it was Dudley had interrupted previously. 「Harry, there’s going to be an announcement tomorrow about the tournament.」

「About the second task?」 he asked, thinking if so it would be weird to do so.

Viktor shook his head. 「There will be a ball on the twenty-fifth, that evening. As a champion I am required to have a date.」 He paused, his eyes intent.

Harry frowned, his upper lip twitching at the idea of Viktor having to escort someone and dance with that someone in front of hundreds of people. ‘It should be me,’ his mind whispered; and then he
promptly blushed. ‘Oh wow. So that’s what’s wrong with me. I like him.’ His gaze slid up to meet Viktor’s and the heat in his cheeks increased.

Viktor smiled slowly. 「Will you be my date, Harry?」

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak, but a smile began to creep in.

「Your mother already knows I meant to ask,」 Viktor said. 「I asked her some time ago, even before she told me the Secret. The age difference between us might have been cause for concern in her eyes so I wanted her permission first.」

His eyes went wide at the knowledge and his smile became a lot broader in consequence. 「I like that you did. And that you were interested even before then.」

Viktor nodded. 「I thought you would appreciate knowing. And now we know why we were asked to bring dress robes this year.」

Harry nodded, too. 「Oh. So that’s why. . . .」 「That’s why he keeps putting his arm around me like that,’’ he thought. He blushed again and swallowed.

Viktor arched a brow, his expression conveying amusement.

He reached out and playfully smacked Viktor on the arm. 「Stop teasing me.」

「But I like teasing you,」 Viktor protested. 「You blush so cutely.」 He shifted on the bed, putting his back to the wall, and extended his arm invitingly. Harry slid into place and leaned into Viktor’s side. 「I have not yet seen what robes you have,」 Viktor continued.

「Oh, er, mum got me dark green ones. You know, to go with my eyes. I think it’s a girly thing, this matching business, but don’t tell mum I said that.」

Viktor huffed a laugh. 「Well, my parents got me robes in black, so it will be fine. Perhaps we can add some green to them. Perhaps silver as well, and some to yours. That ought to be a pleasing combination. I am certainly not going to be wearing the blood red of Durmstrang.」

Harry grimaced. 「No. I don’t mind the colour, but it does rather clash with my eyes, and it’s too similar to Gryffindor scarlet. Viktor, can I kiss you?」

Viktor twitched in surprise, then said, 「Here, where Dudley could walk in at any moment?」

He hesitated, shrugged, and replied, 「Kiss, Viktor, not make out.」 He angled his head to better see, then smiled as Viktor shifted a bit and leaned in to place a lingering yet chaste kiss on his lips. 「Does that mean this is more than just a date to the ball?」 he asked softly, a bit of uncertainty creeping into his voice.

「Yes,」 Viktor replied firmly.

He smiled almost shyly in response. 「Are we going to be open about it?」 He would be fine either way, though he admitted to himself it would make him cranky if people kept flirting with his, well, boyfriend.

「I wish to be,」 Viktor said simply. 「You?」

He nodded straight away. 「Of course. I’ve always liked you, Viktor. It’s just been recently that it’s been a different kind of like and me actually understanding what had changed.」
Viktor leaned in and gave him a quick kiss, then said, 「Okay. We should get to work.」

「Okay.」

When Dudley had come back, and after Viktor left, he said, 「Viktor told me there’s going to be a ball on the twenty-fifth. I don’t know yet if it’s everyone or what year up. You might want to consider finding a date.」

Dudley blinked at him.

「He said the champions have to have a date, so I’m thinking that it’s fourth year and up—because of our letters.」

His cousin narrowed his eyes. 「And you? You’re not exactly a social butterfly, Harry. You’d take Valdis if you could get away with it.」

Harry laughed. 「No! Viktor asked me; I said yes. It’s a good thing our mothers insisted we learn how to dance. I wouldn’t want to embarrass him or myself in front of so many people.」

「Oh, wow! Congratulations, Harry. So you’re dating now?」 Dudley came over and gave him a companionable slap on the back.

「Yes,」 he replied, feeling his cheeks heat up again a little.

Dudley grinned, then asked, 「Does he know? About the extra training, I mean.」

Harry shook his head. 「Just that I’m not much of a wizard and I work twice as hard, that’s all. I expect that’ll change in time, assuming nothing goes wrong. I’d like for him to know, but it’s not entirely my decision. Us dating complicates things.」

「Yeah, I can see that. Well, now that you’ve warned me, I think I’ll ask Luna tomorrow as soon as I see her. If it is fourth year and up she wouldn’t be able to go otherwise.」

「And you like her,」 he said, grinning.

「Yeah, well... Right, time for bed.」 Dudley turned away, blushing a bit himself, and started to get ready for sleep.

The next regular morning Viktor sat with him at breakfast, giving his hand a squeeze before loading up his plate. Dudley showed up several minutes later and nodded at Harry. 「She said yes.」

He grinned. 「Excellent. I bet it’ll be a big scramble when it’s announced.」 He leaned closer to Viktor and whispered, 「He asked Luna Lovegood of Ravenclaw.」

Dudley looked shifty for a moment and said quietly, 「I warned Draco, but he already knew.」

Harry glanced down the table at Ilsa. 「Is he...?」

「I think so,」 Dudley answered, then began loading his plate.

By the time the weekend was upon them Draco had asked Ilsa and she had accepted. They, Harry, Viktor, Dudley, and Luna were preparing to leave the Great Hall after breakfast when a girl also heading for the doors stopped when she got close enough. She saw that Harry and Viktor were holding hands and frowned.

“That’s—that’s not right,” she said. “You shouldn’t do that.”
Harry and Viktor exchanged a look. «Don’t tell me, she’s one of those.»

«Seems so,» Luna commented.

«Let’s go,» Draco said. «We don’t have to listen to rubbish like this.»

«Hey!» the girl said sharply. «Don’t you just walk away. I’m telling you, it’s not right.»

Harry squeezed Viktor’s hand and said, «Let me ask you something. What is your opinion of Headmaster Dumbledore?»

«What has that got to do with anything?» she said dismissively.

«Humor me,» he insisted.

«He’s a great man,» she answered. «Very powerful, intelligent, and a hero.»

Harry grinned knowingly. «I see. That pretty much says it all, then.» He shot an apologetic look at Draco and said, «She has no idea the old man is homosexual, or bisexual at least.»

Draco blinked. «He is?»

«When did you—?»

Viktor scowled and shook his head. «Come on, let’s go. There’s no point in staying here to be harangued by a girl who can’t take the time to get her facts straight. What a waste of magical talent.»

The Beauxbatons champion swept by with her entourage, casting a look of cool contempt at Granger, and continued on out; she had obviously overheard the exchange.

They left Granger’s sputtering self behind, aiming for the carriages which would take them all to Hogsmeade. Viktor and Harry got into a carriage with Poliakoff and Bergfalk and they both endured some good-natured teasing along the way. Once in Hogsmeade they joined back up again, though Draco and Ilsa took off on their own. They strolled along with no particular haste, talking about which shops they planned to visit, when Harry noticed his mother approaching.

He smiled as she came up and hugged him. She was in the process of hugging Viktor after Dudley when a nasty voice came from behind him. “That’s pathetic.” Harry turned and saw Edward, his brother’s cronies not far away. “I can’t believe you changed his looks after you adopted him,” Edward said. “Missing me so much, mother, after your abandonment?”

Lily actually sneered. Harry watched with some wonder as his mother discreetly produced her wand and cast something at Edward, then tucked it back away. His brother got a confused look on his face.
and slowly turned, walking a bit unsteadily toward his friends. It was then, as he was witnessing that event, that he became aware that another person was approaching them: Professor Snape of Hogwarts. His hand tightened on Viktor’s and he exchanged an uneasy look with Dudley.

“Lily?” the man breathed.

Harry shifted so he could better observe; his mother had wiped the sneer from her face and adopted an almost annoyingly blank expression.

“Lily?” Snape repeated, almost pleadingly.

His mother turned to look at Dudley, then Harry, and said, 「I suppose I’ll have to deal with this. Why don’t you all continue on? I’ll see you back at the cottage.」

「Are you sure you don’t want us to stay?」 he said a bit anxiously.

「It’s all right,」 she replied softly, gesturing with a tilt of her head. 「Go on.」

Harry heaved a sigh, stole another look at Snape, and nodded. He let Viktor lead him away toward Honeydukes, his boyfriend saying quietly, 「She’ll be all right.」

「Well if she’s not I know who’ll fix it,」 Dudley threatened.

Luna shook her head. 「She’ll be fine. Tom won’t need to intervene. Professor Snape is going to grovel and apologize, something he never thought he’d have the chance to do.」

Harry eyed her anxiously. 「And?」

She smiled at him vaguely. 「I think you may end up with a stepfather, Harry.」

Harry stopped dead, almost pulling Viktor off balance, who said, 「Hey. She said ‘may’, not ‘will be’.」

「A stepfather?」 he mouthed in surprise.

Viktor chuckled and tugged on his hand. 「Come on.」

「Wait a minute,」 he said, staring at Luna again. He knew she was, as Dudley termed it, a little loopy, but the idea that she might be a seer of some sort was pinging away in his head right then. How else could she make such statements, and with such certainty?

She eyed Viktor for a moment and shook her head. 「No, I don’t think he’d appreciate if I said any more.」

Harry waved his free hand around impotently. 「Chocolate. I need chocolate.」

Some time later, after Harry had managed several bars of Honeydukes best, and after they had stopped in to pick up some things to perhaps add to their dress robes, the four of them headed to the cottage. Professor Snape was there in the sitting room with his mother, but his aunt was nowhere to be seen.

「Mum?」

She smiled and said, 「Dudley, your mother is in the library if you’d like to take Luna to meet her.」

Dudley nodded and led his date and possible girlfriend away while Harry and Viktor slid onto a
loveseat.

「Harry, Viktor, I’m not sure if either of you have been properly introduced.」 She switched to English at that point. “This is Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master for Hogwarts. Severus, my son Harry and his boyfriend Viktor Krum, both of Durmstrang. Dudley is my sister’s son.”

“A pleasure to meet you, professor,” he said in deliberately heavily-accented English. Viktor simply nodded.

Snape eyed him strangely, obviously never having particularly noticed him before. His gaze went to Lily’s face, back to Harry, then to Lily. “His eyes. . . .”

His mother rolled hers. 「You always were too smart for your own good,」 she muttered. “They’re green, yes. Should I alert the media?”

Snape looked confused for a split second, then conflicted, then his expression cleared. Harry assumed the man decided there was no point arguing the matter at present. He glanced at Viktor, smiled, then asked his mother, 「Would you like us to remain?」

She shook her head. 「It’s not necessary, no. Be sure to say hello to your aunt.」

He nodded and stood, then crossed over to kiss her cheek before exiting into the hallway with Viktor. 「Wow,」 he said quietly. 「Forgive me if I’m still a little rattled at the idea of a possible stepfather.」

The front door opened and Tom stepped inside, then paused on seeing Viktor. One brow quirked up. Harry was at a bit of a loss as to how to react, so he smiled.

“Harry,” Tom said, then eyed Viktor speculatively. “What do you think?” he finally asked, shifting his gaze back to Harry.

He smiled again. “At some point, I’d like it, yes.”

Tom nodded, eyed Viktor again, then gestured toward the door into the kitchen. Harry shrugged and headed through, taking a seat at the table there. Viktor sat beside him and Tom took a seat across from them after throwing up warding. “I’m willing to allow the dissemination of the story if, and only if, your friend here is willing to make an unbreakable vow. He is not, after all, a member of the family and I have no particular reason to trust him.”

He felt a stubborn spark of hope bloom in his chest and looked at Viktor hopefully.

“This has to do with the things you will not say, following on from what little you have said of your difficulties,” Viktor said slowly.

Harry nodded, then swiftly looked back at Tom. “Er, Snape is in the sitting room right now. Thought you should know.”

Tom’s brow arched again. “He must have seen Lily outside.”

“Yes. Luna said he was going to grovel and apologize, then she told me I might end up with a stepfather,” he replied with a shrug.

Tom exhaled in a gust. “Merlin. I wasn’t expecting that,” he muttered, then nodded and tilted his head at Viktor.
“Oh, right. Viktor, I would so very much like to be able to tell you everything. You have that earring to protect you and we’ve been working on your Occlumency, but . . . This is just too important. Even my cousin doesn’t know all the details; he’s just not mature enough. You are, and I’d like to think we’d stay friends even if this dating thing doesn’t work out. You don’t have to, really. I’ll still be your friend and all, I’ll just have to continue to refrain from ever mentioning certain things, that’s all.”

Viktor sat there for several minutes, his gaze falling somewhere in the vicinity of Harry’s face, and eventually nodded. “I will make the vow. It is not good to have a relationship with so much concealed. It will cause problems in the end.”

Tom nodded and rose, gesturing for the two of them to take their places. A minute later the vow was complete and they were seated again. “First, Harry, can you go ‘borrow’ your mother? Tell her it will only be a minute.”

“Oh.” He jumped up and returned to the sitting room, smiling apologetically. “Mother, I am sorry to interrupt. Someone needs you in the kitchen for just a moment.” He gave her a meaningful look.

“Oh,” she said in surprise. “I didn’t realize he was here. Severus, excuse me for just a minute. I’ll be right back.”

Snape could do little but nod agreeably; his gaze followed Harry’s mother as she left, then shifted to look at him instead. “Harry, was it?”

“Yes, sir. My mother has told me you and she were great friends during much of her time at Hogwarts, and even before,” he said rather coolly.

“I see. Are—”

His mother breezed back in, cutting Snape off. “Thank you, sweetheart. I’m sure Viktor would like you back now.”

He nodded and left, returning to the kitchen and to his seat next to his boyfriend.

“Now,” Tom said, “how are your studies progressing?”

“Same as before,” he replied. “I am limiting my Alteration-Restoration trick just as you asked. Sometimes I wish I could just put Valdis in my trunk. At least then I wouldn’t have to keep portkeying to Norway, and if I neglected to mention it to mum she wouldn’t find reason to object. That and I have to wonder if we could get some kind of nasty beast in an unbreakable cage or something to put in there so I could at least practice some Destruction and Conjuration.”

Tom looked thoughtful, but shook his head slowly. “No, we will work on those two over the summer. And unless I re-ward the trunk there is no point in moving Valdis. The Greybeards will ‘hear’ you, remember?”

He grimaced, shaking his head. “Morons,” he muttered.

“However, speaking of Valdis, I believe I have located Serana.”

“What?” he breathed. “Seriously? I—it never occurred to me that—oh my.”

“Neither to me,” Tom said. “I have been canvassing various vampire clans and happened to overhear a mention of the name, so naturally I inquired. I did not meet this Serana, but I did prepare a message for her. If it is the same person what I wrote should be more than enough evidence for her peace of
mind, and I expect I will be contacted.”

Harry swallowed heavily. “Should I tell her? Or wait until you know for sure?”

“Wait,” he advised. “In other news, I still have no idea who tried to destroy Durmstrang, and believe me, I’ve been looking under every rock and chasing down every whisper of a lead.” Tom frowned unhappily. Then he looked at Viktor again. “How much do you know yet of the second task?”

Viktor seemed surprised to be included back into the conversation so suddenly. “I know that it will involve the lake and a hostage. Once I figured out how to decipher the message it was more than obvious.”

“Hostage?” Harry whispered, feeling a bit ill, having forgotten that earlier assumption.

“Yes. At this point I should ask if you wish to back out of being my date. I suspect they will use you as my hostage because of it.”

He shook his head. “No. I want to go with you. And I have enchantments for waterbreathing in case whatever they do fails. I expect I and whoever else will be submerged.” He narrowed his eyes and shifted his gaze to Tom for a split second. “That’s a hint if you want it to be, by the way. I can supply you with another little something so you can breathe underwater, but you’d have to figure out how to fake that you aren’t actually using it, if that makes sense.”

“Perhaps. Let me think on it.”

“All right,” Tom said. “So you know that much. Third task?”

“Based on the book I read I expect it to be some kind of maze,” Viktor replied.

“Good enough. Harry, your device is powerful enough for two. I suggest you take Viktor with you for at least one repeat so you can explain things to him. I expect you will not disappoint me and use the ability for . . . other activities.”

He adopted an offended look. “Of course not.”

“Good. Now, in case your mother has not yet had the chance to tell you, you can return home for the twenty-fifth, for the first part of the day, and you can bring Viktor with you. I would say do it on repeat, but the device isn’t strong enough for three people. Viktor can share your portkey. You’ll just have to get outside the main wards and then sneak back in from here after you return. Your mother and aunt would like to have you home for at least the morning. I’ll let you know as soon as I hear anything about Serana.”

He blinked, taking all that in, and nodded. “Understood.”

“Good,” Tom repeated. He looked at Viktor and said coolly, “Don’t disappoint me,” then stood up and apparated out.

Viktor immediately arched a brow at him; Harry was forced to shake his head. “Not yet. At six every morning I—well, just be there shortly before six, okay? It’ll all make sense then.”

“You have a time turner, obviously, a powerful one.”

He nodded. “Let’s go see my aunt, then, while we’re here,” he said to change the subject, and stood. Petunia was in the little library as promised and Mary brought them tea and nibbles.
His mother joined them a short while later and sat down with a sigh. “Well, that was uncomfortable and awkward. Severus is very curious about you, Harry, but I think that’s to be expected. He’s very intelligent, after all, and I can tell his mind keeps trying to work around the Secret. Stubborn, too. I finally shooed him away by reminding him he’s in Hogsmeade to keep an eye on his students, not to sit with me having tea and a chat.”

“I was tempted to read his mind,” Harry said.

Lily shrugged. “He’s a master of Occlumency, Harry, and Legilimency. I could tell he was going a bit nuts because I’m protected and he couldn’t even tell if I was being truthful.”

“Good to know,” he commented, then said, “We’ve been discussing some alterations to my and Viktor’s robes for the ball,” showing her the things they had picked up.

His mother looked thoughtful for a moment before saying, “Well, we can’t very well put lions on them because for both Norway and Bulgaria they’re golden. Perhaps some vines or . . .” She trailed off, still thoughtful. “If you like, send them to me with Pelk. Petunia and I will take care of it.”

Viktor said, “Thank you,” so Harry nodded.
At quarter to six the next morning Viktor slipped into the room and perched on the edge of Harry’s bed. Dudley was still fast asleep, snoring lightly behind a charm to keep it from disturbing Harry. Harry got up and yawned his way to his trunk and opened it, gesturing Viktor inside. After closing it behind him he walked over to the mirror and opened that, again gesturing Viktor ahead of him.

Pelk showed up to hand over the time turner, so Harry took Viktor’s hand and led him into the bathroom and looped the chain over their heads before spinning it back a day. The time turner went to its usual spot and Harry said, “Okay, we have to stay here until Pelk gives the all clear. I’m going to shower.”

Viktor nodded and busied himself with investigating the room, moving out of the way when Harry stumbled over to the sink to take care of his teeth and hair. Pelk popped in and retrieved the time turner and nodded, so Harry led Viktor back out into the main room and then into the kitchen. Already waiting was a hearty Durmstrang-style breakfast, which he gratefully tucked into.

Eventually, finally, they sat together on a sofa against the wall in the main room and Harry began his story.

“That must have been very strange for you,” Viktor interrupted some time later, “sitting there with those dragons nearby.”

“Yeah. I was worried they’d somehow sense me, but it was fine.”

“And this whole set up?” Viktor asked, waving his hand around at the room.

“For me to practice, both aetherial magicka and wizarding magic. With my core strength I have to work well in advance of everyone else just to be able to do the spells when they come up on the syllabus. Tom got the lists from Karkaroff so I’d know what to focus on.”

Viktor nodded. “That makes sense. And Pelk is here to keep an eye on you. But what happens if something goes wrong and you’re hurt?”

Harry huffed. “Believe me, that occurred to me early on. I wanted to tell you then, actually, but it wasn’t my decision. My mother and Tom had to agree, too.”

“I can’t believe your family friend is a dark lord,” Viktor said, shaking his head. “He seems so normal. Intimidating, but still normal. And you—this explains why you’re so mature for your age. Makes me feel less weird about being so attached to you.”

Harry grinned and ducked his head for a second.

“Will you show me some of this magicka? I know you cannot do the Shouts here.”

He nodded and jumped up, turning to face Viktor. First he demonstrated Candlelight, then Magelight, aiming for the wall off to the side. “It’ll stay there for a minute,” he explained. Then he dropped a knut on the floor and used Telekinesis to make it hover and move around. “Like levitation, basically.” And then he went over to a chest and rummaged around for any left over iron. Finding
some he showed it to his boyfriend.

“It’s iron,” Viktor said, a mite confusedly.

“Right.” Harry prepared and cast Transmute and smiled when Viktor blinked over seeing the iron clearly become silver. “Iron to silver, silver to gold. So much for the fabled Philosopher’s Stone.” The metal went back into the chest. “Those were all Alteration spells. A lot of them provide temporary armor, but I don’t learn anything casting them if I’m not in danger. Now, Conjuration. I haven’t mastered nearly as much here because, again, I don’t learn all that much if I’m not in danger.”

He conjured a Bound Bow, feeling a quiver of bound arrows settling into place. Harry quickly nocked an arrow and spun around, releasing at a target. He shot several more before letting the bow vanish. The quiver returned to aether as he said, “I can also conjure other weapons and, er, entities to fight for me. For Destruction I again don’t have much mastery due to circumstances.”

Even so, he faced the target and nailed it with Ice Spike. “Fire, Ice, Lightning variants, offensively, defensively, traps.” He prepared and released a Flame Cloak, causing Viktor to half rise out of his seat in alarm. “Illusion spells tend to focus on either pacifying an enemy, scaring them, or giving them the illusion of courage. But, it can also provide analogues to the wizarding disillusionment. Restoration is mostly healing and damage absorption, but there are spells there to use against the undead.” He resumed his seat on the sofa.

“So, I can’t do a whole lot in terms of power with wizarding magic, but once I can manage more in terms of mastery I can use something like Chain Lightning on enemies or walls of flames. The closer to mastery I get the more I can handle and the longer I can cast them. Right now I go through a lot of potions.”

“I am amazed and impressed,” Viktor said, sounding vaguely awestruck. “Can anyone learn this?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. All of the spell book copies were given to me. Mum had a full wizarding education and Tom obviously went way beyond that. I don’t think it occurred to either of them to try. After all, well, okay, take the armor spells. They reduce the amount of damage you take, but they don’t reflect it or negate it. Some of the healing spells absorb it, but all of them are only temporary. A witch or wizard would use a normal shield spell if they can’t dodge, or maybe levitate something to block with. But things like that are also why everything I have is heavily enchanted.”

Viktor eyed Harry’s clothing dubiously.

“As Valdis pointed out to me, light armor can easily be mistaken for normal clothing. I have multiple enchantments for resistance to general magic, elements, and physical damage. Against mind control, to muffle the sounds I make moving around, to breathe underwater, and so forth. Enchantments to boost my effectiveness with a bow, my health, how fast I heal. I also have a ton of portkeys because Tom thinks I won’t be able to learn to apparate.”

Viktor eyed him up and down. “Where?”

He smiled and extended a leg, angling his foot back and forth. “All the metal on my boots? Permanent portkeys.” He lifted his wrist and fingered the bracelet he wore. “More portkeys, plus protean charmed strips so I can message several people because Tom thinks it’s unlikely I can manage the patronus charm, either. I also carry around another bracelet, that one enchanted with a magicka spell called Chameleon. With all five pieces in place I’m completely invisible; there’s no ripple like disillusionment.”
Viktor glanced at his own bracelet and nodded. “So you have extra rings to make substitutions to this to make the protections stronger?”

“Right. I’m hoping that, now you know, you can spend part of the summer with me? I’d like to take you to meet Valdis.”

“I would like that.” Viktor paused, then said, “What language does she speak?”

“Oh, right. I’ll have to get Tom to give you Old Norse. I expect Serana, if it is the same person, already knows more modern languages.”

“And Serana is?”

“Ah, she’s a vampire, obviously. Back in the previous kalpa, when the world was Nirn, Valdis got involved with a group called the Dawnguard. They were dedicated to wiping out vampires, but they had no idea of a longstanding goal of one group in particular. There was a weapon, a bow, allegedly fashioned by one of the Aedra. The Snow Elves called him Auri-El. The dragons call him Bormahu—it means “our father”. Anyway, the bow was enchanted and it had some very special qualities. Arrows could be blessed, I guess you could say, to cause specific damage to the undead—vampires, draugr, risen skeletons—that kind of thing. But they could also be cursed with the blood of a Daughter of Coldharbour.”

“Meaning?”

Harry sat back and let his head rest against the cushion. “The Daedric Prince Molag Bal is the creator of vampires, and his Plane of Oblivion is called Coldharbour. He created the first by raping a virgin. There are two kinds of vampires in that lexicon. The ones he creates directly in ceremony and the ones created by transmission of a virus from an existing vampire. A Daughter of Coldharbour is one created so directly.”

Viktor grimaced, but did not speak the obvious.

“Anyway, the blood of one, such as Serana, could curse arrows which, used with Auri-El’s bow, could blot out the sun for a day, making it possible for the vampires to be out and about all the time. Valdis was sent off on a mission and happened to stumble over Serana entombed deep underground. She agreed to escort her back to her home and did so, was offered the chance by Serana’s father to become a vampire lord, refused, and was booted out. Valdis thought that was the end of things, but Serana showed up at Fort Dawnguard some time later looking for her.

“Serana didn’t agree with her father’s plans—a prophecy was involved, you see—and wanted help against him. Along the way Valdis became very fond of Serana; they were companions for a long time in the chain of events which eventually saw Serana’s father, Lord Harkon, defeated. If it’s the same person, well, I think she’d be pleased to see Valdis again, and may choose to join us based on Valdis’s word and me being dovahkiin. Besides,” he said with a laugh, “I’d like to meet a vampire who won’t see me as lunch.”

Viktor rolled his eyes. “Will you show me what you mean by mastery of wizarding spells?”

Harry tipped his head forward again and shook out his wand, thought for a moment, then cast at the opposite wall.

“I have absolutely no idea what you cast. Huh. And the results, aside from it being a barely visible ripple in the air, is a stronger spell for less magic? Did I get that right?”

“Mm-hm. That’s how Tom explained it to me.”
Pelk skittered in and said, “Master Harry, lunch is ready. And Master Tom has sent an elf to me with a package for you. It is by your plate.”

“Okay, thank you. We’ll be right in,” he replied, pushing forward so he could stand. At the table was the promised package and he opened it curiously, taking from it first a note. ‘Oh,’ he thought a minute later. ‘I’m glad he remembered my portkey is blood-bonded and Viktor would need his own.’ The other item in the package was a dual portkey for Viktor, which he handed over. “I’d do what I do and attach this to your boots or something until after Yule, but first you need to bond it, just in case some idiot somehow manages to activate it.”

Viktor nodded and hooked the portkey into his bracelet for the time being. As he picked up his knife and fork he asked, “How would I thank Tom for this?”

“Hm? Oh, send something in care of my mother, or leave a note with Pelk. Either should work.”

They were halfway through their meal when Viktor joked, “My boyfriend is a lot more exciting than I had anticipated.”

Harry blinked, then dropped his fork and reached out to smack Viktor’s arm.

The morning of the twenty-fifth they had breakfast and decided to take a walk. Harry, Viktor, and Dudley strolled off, all bundled up, and casually made their way along the perimeter of the lake, shortly thereafter disappearing into the forest and beyond the edge of the wards. There they employed their portkeys and were dropped in the backyard of the house in Norway. Tom was there but only stayed long enough to impart some languages to Viktor and provide a one-use portkey for him to Hrothgar.

They spent an hour opening presents and consuming hot chocolate, then Harry excused himself and Viktor for a visit to Hrothgar. They reappeared in the room housing Valdis’s tomb and she appeared moments later, looking at Viktor with curiosity.

“Hi, Valdis!” Harry greeted cheerfully. “This is my boyfriend, Viktor Krum. Viktor, Valdis of too many names, the Last Dragonborn of Nirn.”

She aimed a fondly exasperated look at Harry, then turned her attention to Viktor. “Drem yol lok,” she said, then, “I am pleased to meet you.”

Viktor looked a bit nonplussed, despite being used to seeing spirits roam around. “Ah, it is a pleasure.” Perhaps it was just that one normally did not also see the physical body of said spirit right there as well.

“Are you ready for the next soul?” she asked Harry.

“Yes, please,” he replied. From things she had told him much earlier on he had to assume that absorbing a soul straight from a dragon would not feel much different from being given one the way she managed it—well, except for the heart-pounding, adrenaline rush levels of excitement that went along with the killing of said dragon.

She nodded and bowed her head, hands coming up in front of her in an almost cupped posture. Within seconds the transfer began, lines of fiery light streaming from her to him, making him glow. Fifteen seconds later she was done and standing normally again. As always, Harry felt like he was flying in a blissful fog and swayed in place, arms automatically stretching out to the sides to help him...
maintain his balance.

He did not see the anxious look Viktor cast at Valdis, or her reassuring smile. When the feeling finally faded he felt a bit depressed, as always, but managed to smile anyway. “Thank you, Valdis.”

“You are welcome.”

“I tried to get Tom to move you to my trunk, but he said no. Said he’d have to re-work the entire ward schema, for one thing. Well, and there really isn’t enough room.” He rolled his eyes and sighed.

“I am happy to hear you tried. Is there anything we need to go over while you are here?”

“I just don’t like leaving you here with those silly old men.” He looked off toward the warded entrance. “Um, no, I suppose not. I’m doing my best with the aetherial spells, but you already know I can’t do much with some of them right now.”

A patronus snake slithered into the room at that point and said, “Stay there,” before vanishing.

“Um, okay?” Harry said. “Tom has news, I guess?” He shrugged and continued, “I’m getting really close to mastery for Alteration and Illusion, and not so good with Restoration, but still a lot better than Destruction and Conjuration. Tom also said I can’t keep a caged beast handy, so those have to wait.”

“I know you have the requisite patience,” she said soothingly. “Tom can take you on hunting trips over the summer.”

“Well, there was that time he let me incinerate a termite mound,” Harry said musingly.

Viktor snorted in amusement and stepped back a little, then turned as Tom appeared.

“Ah, good. Valdis, a pleasure as always. I come with news.” Tom glanced at Harry, then back to Valdis. “Tell me, please, answer this: When the Psijic froze time in Winterhold, what did you do?”

Valdis looked supremely shocked for some few seconds, then thoughtful, her brow furrowing and eyes narrowing. She eventually focused on Tom and said, “Before I spoke with him I went around the then Arch-Mage’s quarters and stole everything not nailed down.”

Tom actually grinned. “I have found Serana.”

Valdis stumbled forward, her legs appearing entirely unsteady, and hovered her hand over Tom’s arm. “Serana? She was saved?”

“It seems so. When I was meeting with various vampire clans the name came up. I remembered what you said, so I investigated. They would not give me much information, but did agree to pass on a message I devised. What I got back was a test, which you just showed was valid. If you don’t mind, will you explain what happened more fully? I wish my response to be as detailed as possible.”

“Very well,” she said, seeming to regain her composure. After stepping back she said, “Ah, this happened after Serana and I became companions, but before we defeated her father, so she was with me during all this. I went with some of the other students of the College to Saarthal as part of our education, under the tutelage of Tolfdir. There I stumbled upon some anomalies and eventually to what was termed the Eye of Magnus. It was during that time in Saarthal I was first visited by a member of the Psijic Order, but that one did not actually freeze time, though he did make it so that Tolfdir could neither see nor hear him.
“Ah . . . yes. I was then asked to do some research on the artifact, but to do so I had to recover books taken by a former member of the College; one of the books was germane to the issue. After that I was to speak with Tolfdir again, and did, but the Thalmor representative at the college, Ancano, interrupted. He said that there was a visitor to see me, and seemed awfully upset about it. He was Thalmor, so naturally he was a spy and trying to influence the mages of the College, so he insisted on escorting me and being there when I met with this visitor.

“The representative froze time in order to speak with me without Ancano or the Arch-Mage overhearing. Of course, being a thief, I first stripped the place bare. I assumed, and was right in the assumption, that once time unfroze it would appear to the others that everything had blinked out of existence and they would likely blame the mysterious visitor rather than me. Serana thought it was hilarious, especially later on when I became Arch-Mage and it all would have been mine anyway.”

Tom’s mouth twitched. “An interesting tale, indeed.”

“There are other things which happened during that time, such as the fight before the Eye of Magnus under Saarthal, but who doesn’t expect to have some howling undead attack while in ancient ruins?”

Tom’s mouth twitched again. “Ah, I wouldn’t know, actually. But, with this information, I can compose a suitable reply. With luck I will be able to meet Serana face to face and eventually bring her here. If nothing else you will at least have seen your friend again and have a chance to catch up.”

“I would be extremely grateful.”

“You deserve it,” Tom replied with all sincerity. “Now, much as I hate to break up this gathering, you two”—he looked at Harry and Viktor—“should be getting back. The longer you are gone from the school . . .”

“Right. I will see you in a few weeks,” he said to Valdis, then lifted his wrist and prepared to portkey back to the house. As soon as he saw Viktor was also ready he activated it. There the three of them said their good-byes to Lily and Petunia and portkeyed to the house in Hogsmeade. Harry and Dudley used their Chameleon bracelets and Viktor a disillusionment charm to get back within the school wards and over by the lake, then allowed themselves to become visible again.

They meandered back to the school and joined the crowd streaming into the Great Hall for lunch. After having been outside that morning, even if most of it was actually indoors, they stayed in the castle after lunch, strolling the halls with Draco, Luna, and Ilsa and simply talking. Ilsa and Luna wandered off at six to begin getting ready and then Draco left at seven.

Once they were dressed in their finery they emerged back into the hallway outside the tower for Durmstrang, Dudley playing temporary escort for Ilsa as they headed to Ravenclaw. There Ilsa joined Draco and Luna emerged to join Dudley. From there they strolled on down to the ground floor. In the entrance hall he noticed Delacour arrive, dressed in silver-grey satin robes; admittedly, she did look stunning. Edward came down the main stair and strutted over, his form draped in scarlet silk robes and a red-haired girl on his arm wearing gold-stitched ivory robes. He vaguely remembered seeing her at the Gryffindor table at least once, so he assumed she was one.

Before he could even look away he heard the Hogwarts Deputy, Professor McGonagall, call out, “Champions over here, please!”

Viktor led him away toward the woman; she was decked out in red tartan and had a rather ugly wreath of thistles around the brim of her hat. ‘Why is she even wearing a hat?’ he wondered. They were directed to stand off to the side so as not to impede the flow of students into the Great Hall.
Once everyone else was settled in the Hall, Professor McGonagall told the champions and their partners to get in line in pairs and to follow her. Thankfully, Cedric and his date came after them and before Edward, so there was at least some distance. They did so, and everyone in the Great Hall applauded as they entered and started walking up toward a large round table at the top of the Hall, where the judges were sitting.

The walls of the Hall had all been covered in sparkling silver frost, with hundreds of garlands of mistletoe and ivy crossing the starry black ceiling. The long tables had vanished; instead, there were a multitude smaller, lantern-lit ones, each seating about a dozen people.

「We sit at the top table,」 Viktor whispered to him.

He nodded back, his eyes seeking out his cousin and Draco, and smiling at them. 「Well, you champions are so terribly important,」 he whispered back, smiling slyly.

Viktor reached over with his right hand to squeeze Harry's lightly. 「I think it’s a shame. I would prefer to sit with friends, not staff members and officials.」

「Oh, I agree. We have to actually behave ourselves up there.」

Dumbledore smiled happily as the champions approached the top table, but Karkaroff wore a rather sullen expression. Ludo Bagman, in robes of bright purple with large yellow stars, was clapping as enthusiastically as any of the students; and Madame Maxime, who had changed her usual uniform of black satin for a flowing gown of lavender silk, was applauding them politely.

They were, unfortunately, slotted in between Crouch and Maxime—or perhaps it was fortunate after all. Karkaroff would have oozed over Viktor again, and Bagman might have talked their ears off. Maxime would have little reason to speak with them, and Crouch seemed taciturn enough to ignore them. Each of the glittering gold plates had small menus lying in front of them, but Harry was not sure what to do until he heard Dumbledore say very clearly, “Pork chops!” As he looked over he saw that choice appear on the man’s plate.

‘Well, then, okay,’ he thought, and scanned the choices, eventually saying, “Chicken Kiev.” It appeared on his plate along with garlic-roasted asparagus and corn so he set the menu aside and picked up his utensils.

Off to the side Delacour was making disparaging remarks about Hogwarts, comparing it unfavorably to the “Palace of Beauxbatons”. She even alleged that choirs of wood nymphs serenaded them during meals.

「Save me,」 he muttered. 「That girl is...」

Viktor nodded and swallowed. 「She does not seem to be taking this opportunity in the right spirit. True, Hogwarts is much different from our castle, but I do not think anyone actually expected them to be the same. Coming here means we experience something new, and see the English culture in counterpoint to our own.」

Surprisingly, Crouch grunted in agreement, though he did not actually speak.

Edward could be heard boasting farther on, while Diggory and his date were speaking quietly. He thought it was somewhat of a shame that none of the champions seemed to want to actually speak to each other, though he could understand anyone avoiding Delacour and Potter. He scanned the Great Hall as he ate and saw very little evidence of mixing between schools, with only Dudley and Luna, and Draco and Ilsa standing out. He did give Delacour points for having a non-Beauxbatons escort.
This is weird, he said, sharing his thoughts with Viktor. Isn’t half the point to mix? I know, sure, this is also about the competition itself, but all these people here and most of them don’t cross the borders. Our bunch has, but.

I’m not sure what to say, Viktor admitted. It was Draco who made the first real effort, and he and Luna have integrated nicely. We’re apart for all our lessons and have different housing areas. Nothing really has been done to encourage getting to know students outside our schools. Though, it is also true that ours takes students from many countries, so we already do mix, if you want to look at it that way.

True. Diggory seems nice enough, but I have to wonder if trying to talk to him would come across as shady since he’s another champion.

I suspect it would come across as suspicious, Viktor replied.

When all the food had been consumed, Dumbledore stood up and asked the students to do the same. Then, with a wave of his wand, all the tables zoomed back along the walls leaving the floor clear, and then he conjured a raised platform into existence along the right wall. A set of drums, several guitars, a lute, a cello, and some bagpipes were set upon it.

Harry eyed them a bit skeptically.

The Weird Sisters now trooped up onto the stage to wildly enthusiastic applause; they were all extremely hairy and dressed in black robes that had been artfully ripped and torn; they picked up their instruments. The lanterns on all the other tables went out, and then the other champions and their partners were standing up. Viktor rose and offered his arm, so Harry got up and rested his hand on Viktor’s elbow, allowing himself to be led around and down to the floor.

The Weird Sisters struck up a slow, mournful tune; Harry turned when Viktor stopped and took position, then began to move at his boyfriend’s lead. The least they could have done was open with a waltz, he muttered.

Viktor smiled at him. We could always do a slow-motion waltz.

Harry rolled his eyes. Right, because that wouldn’t be weird or anything. Then he spotted Dudley and Luna doing exactly that; he laughed. And we can’t possibly copy my cousin and his date.

Viktor spotted them half a turn later and laughed as well. Definitely not. We will simply have to wait for a more sprightly offering in three-quarter time.

Thankfully, the Weird Sisters gracefully segued into a new tune a minute later, and it was indeed waltz material. Harry smiled and nodded, pleased he could do something more than a modified box step.

And that is it for this evening, Viktor said. Dancing and more dancing, though I understand that an area has been set aside out the front doors as a garden. Warming charms, of course. Roses and statues and fairy lights.

Aside from the mingling that’s supposed to be going on, Harry pointed out. But, assuming the band cooperates with danceable music, let’s have a few more before we take a break?

Of course. I am enjoying myself. Would you like to take a walk in the garden when we stop?

He nodded. With drinks, please. With so many people in here it’s getting a bit hot and stuffy.
About ten minutes later they drifted away from the dance floor and by one of the refreshment tables, pausing long enough to grab bottles of butterbeer. With those in hand they made their way around the perimeter and out into the entrance hall, and then outside. Fluttering fairy lights in the rose garden winked and twinkled as they went down the front steps, where they found themselves surrounded by bushes, winding, ornamental paths, and large stone statues. Harry could hear splashing water, which sounded like a fountain. Here and there, people were sitting on carved benches. He and Viktor set off along one of the winding paths through the rosebushes, taking sips from their bottles, and Harry was pleased to cool off a bit.

Along the way they saw Professor Snape, who gave them a nod even as he was using his wand to rattle rosebushes. Every so often squeals issued from them and dark shapes emerged to run off. They continued on, Harry snickering, and eventually came upon a large stone reindeer, over which they could see sparkling jets of a tall fountain. The shadowy outlines of two enormous people were visible on a stone bench, watching the water in the moonlight. And then Harry heard Hagrid speak.

“Momen’ I saw yeh, I knew,” he was saying, in an oddly husky voice.

“What did you know, 'Agrid?” said Madame Maxime, a purr in her low voice.

Harry looked at Viktor in alarm; his boyfriend immediately steered them left and away from the scene, passing by Delacour and her date partially concealed in yet another rosebush. They were . . . quite busy.

「I’m starting to think we’re doing this wrong,」 he said. 「We’re not parked in the foliage madly kissing.」

Viktor chuckled and replied, 「We could, if you liked.」

「Er, no. I’d prefer to show my affection in private if you don’t mind. Still, it’s strange seeing so many people being indiscreet. Does this happen at Durmstrang and I’ve just been too oblivious to notice?」

「It does, just not in the corridors.」

In the distance he could hear Madame Maxime shrieking something. They ignored it and kept walking, eventually ending up back inside to join the dancers. Dudley waltzed by with Luna at one point, this time properly, and Draco was spotted speaking animatedly with Ilsa. When the Weird Sisters finished playing at midnight, everyone gave them a last, loud round of applause and started to wend their way into the entrance hall.

Many people were expressing the wish that the ball could have gone on longer, but Harry was perfectly happy to be leaving. Much as he had enjoyed himself he was tired and really wanted to get some sleep; he had to be up for six. They might be having a holiday from classes, but that didn’t mean he could afford to slack off.

In his room, even though Dudley wasn’t there, he pulled Viktor into his dressing room, just in case. He looked up at his boyfriend and smiled. 「I had a good time. Thank you for asking me.」

Viktor nodded and leaned in, and Harry was eager enough to lift his face in order to share a kiss. This time, though, Viktor kissed him a second time and Harry parted his lips in invitation, feeling a frisson of arousal slide down his spine when his boyfriend made good on that offer. His fingers clutched at Viktor’s robes as their tongues danced and he pressed closer, feeling more than a little disappointment when Viktor did finally draw back.
「Good night, Harry.」

He nodded, smiling, and watched as Viktor saw himself out.
Viktor was waiting when he awoke, which was surprising. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and yawned, smiling in bemusement when his boyfriend helped him out of bed by drawing the covers back so he would not become entangled. On his way through to the trunk’s secret rooms he grabbed a change of clothing, Viktor following, and included his boyfriend in the time turner’s field of influence before spinning back a day.

After his shower and once he was seated at the table in the kitchen for breakfast he was finally awake enough to say, “I absolutely do not mind that you’re with me on this repeat. But what prompted it?”

“Can’t I just want to spend time with you?”

Harry favored him with a semi-sarcastic patient look and forked eggs into his mouth.

“All right. I wanted to get in some extra practice and perhaps talk about the next task.”

He nodded. When they did make it out to the practice room he said, “I didn’t get a chance to do my Occlumency last night, so can we start with that? Then talk?"

Viktor was agreeable, so for the next hour there was silence. Once they were both back in the here and now his boyfriend said, “All I know or can guess is what I said before, that you will probably be a hostage to me and placed somewhere in the lake. You have already said you have that enchantment, so I don’t need to fear you drowning, at least. I expect, based on what I’ve been able to turn up about the lake, that the merpeople will be keeping an eye on you as part of some agreement, so I shouldn’t need to fear the creatures down there getting to you. I know there are at least grindylows present. The giant squid isn’t hostile.

“I’ve thought about what you offered. My original thought was to do a partial transfiguration to give myself the capability to breathe underwater. I could easily do a bubble-head charm or use gillyweed, but those aren’t all that complicated and probably won’t do much for my score. The problem with the transfiguration is that what came to mind was a shark and having given it more thought, and knowing it would be you down there, I realize that my vision will be messed up.”

“So what were you thinking instead?” he asked curiously.

“I could use illusion instead, in combination with an enchanted item for waterbreathing. Make it still appear I’m doing the transfiguration, but my sight would be unaffected. Well, that depends in part how clear the lake is, but you get my meaning. Either way I will have to start going into the lake to check the conditions and see how to believably maneuver around the illusion so there’s no suspicion. I know Dumbledore speaks Mermish, so I don’t doubt he’s got some kind of deal with them and that they’ll probably report what happened after everyone is back so they can decide on the scores.”

Harry pursed his lips as he envisioned what Viktor was saying, and nodded. His wrist came up so he could send a message to his mother, but he paused. “What would you like the item to be? Or, wait. I could just have a link done and we swap it in for a blank on your bracelet?”
“That sounds fine. I’ve been wearing the bracelet for a month now and aside from some comments during the first couple of days nobody has paid it any further attention. Changing a link shouldn’t make it any more obvious.”

“Okay.” He started tracing a message onto one of the silver strips and then sent it. “We should have that soon enough. Certainly in time for you to get in the practice you need. Maybe I should ask Tom to intimidate the living hell out of Karkaroff to make sure none of my gear is removed before I get dunked. I assume Karkaroff will be the one coming to get me, or Kozlov. On the other hand, that might make Karkaroff think he could use me against Tom.” He wrinkled his nose in uncertainty.

“That might depend on when they come for you.”

He bit his lip. “What time does the task start again?”

“Half nine,” Viktor said promptly, “so they would either have to come for you the night before, or in the morning, perhaps right after breakfast. That would be cutting it close, though, and for all I know having food in your stomach might react badly with whatever it is they plan to do. And, they would have no guarantee of getting the hostages situated unseen if they waited until morning. I’m betting on the night before.”

Harry shivered at the thought of being in the depths of the lake overnight. Viktor noticed and started to say something, but Harry cut him off. “It’s fine. Maybe instead . . . at one of the team practices—I’ll go to an extra—I can portkey home and whip up a couple of things. While I sincerely doubt they’ll strip us down and re-clothe us, I could do something like. . . .” He trailed off, thinking. “On the other hand all this speculation and planning on my part may be for nothing and you end up rescuing your broom or something.”

Viktor snorted in amusement. “All right. I will trust that you will adequately prepare yourself, just in case it’s necessary. A large part of me says it won’t be necessary, but it’s always possible something could go wrong.”

Pelk wandered in and handed Harry a package. He thanked the elf and opened it, pulling a greenish link from it which he showed to his boyfriend. The wrappings were set aside on the end table. Viktor slid his bracelet off and examined it carefully. “Do you have any tools to pry a link open with?”

He squinted in thought, then set the link on the table and got up to rummage in the kitchen. He returned with a knife and a pair of scissors. On sitting down he placed the knife beside him, picked up the link, and inserted the scissors, carefully spreading them. With his now free right hand he grabbed the knife, still spreading the scissors, and when a slight gap had appeared in the ring he slid the knife in and twisted, opening it more. “This would be easier with pliers,” he muttered. The knife went back onto the sofa cushion and the scissors were placed next to it; the link went back onto the table. “I think you can get one of the edge ones easily enough.”

Viktor picked up the scissors and started working on one, so Harry grabbed the new link again and examined it, then began manipulating it so the gap was back to front, not side to side, so it would be easier to force it closed again once it was in place. A minute later Viktor held out a hand and exchanged links with Harry, and shortly thereafter the bracelet was back on his wrist. Harry put the blank link in a safe place and returned the knife and scissors to the kitchen.

“You wanted to practice?” he asked, brow furrowed.

“Yes. I wanted to try doing what you do, this mastery of wizarding spells. What process have you been following?”
“Oh, okay.” He explained it as Tom had explained it to him and Viktor took over half the room. Harry started with his Alteration-Restoration combination, preferring to get that out of the way first. He was so used to doing it that he was able to sit there and observe his boyfriend, who was a bit distracted at first given the flashy spells Harry kept casting, but quickly enough got into a rhythm of his own.

Pelk alerted them when it was time for lunch. Afterward they started in again, straight through until dinner. “Please say we’re done for the day,” Viktor said a bit plaintively.

Harry grinned at him and nodded. “You get used to it, but even then it’s tedious and sometimes a struggle to keep your mind on track. I spend the evenings reading for pleasure. Well, unless there’s some homework I haven’t managed to get finished on normal days. I don’t know if you noticed, but there’s a bookcase in the bedroom with a fairly wide selection in it.”

“I’ll check after we finish eating,” Viktor replied, looking relieved. Looking over the titles later on Viktor was moved to ask, “Any suggestions? None of this is familiar to me.”

“Er... Fantasy might be best. A lot of the other stuff may go right over your head. Let’s see.” He ran his fingers over the spines until he found a likely one, and tipped it out. “Try this one.” For himself he grabbed the book he was part way through from his bedside table and brought it out into the main room. Normally he read in bed; this had not come up the previous time because they managed to talk steadily all the way through until it was time to sleep.

He did, after they were dressed for bed, think that they both deserved a little treat after working so hard all day. “You can share the bed with me,” he told Viktor. “I can’t imagine the sofa was all that comfortable last time.”

Viktor shot him an uneasy look, so Harry rolled his eyes. “Sleep, Viktor. Your virtue is safe with me,” he said dryly. “I’m too young for anything really interesting and I’m not about to push the issue—much. It would be nice to kiss you before we settle in to sleep, though.”

The uneasy look cleared and Viktor nodded. “Acceptable.”

“If you end up doing more repeats, though, we can always add a second bed, or have something that can be easily transfigured into one as a temporary measure,” he suggested. “Though, I expect we ought to seek permission beyond the occasional instance. I think my mother would blow her stack otherwise, and Tom would be disappointed in me.”

“Agreed. And I do not plan to in any case. I will, however, continue with the practice in and around other things.”

“All right,” he said, then went back into the bedroom and slipped under the covers. As Viktor was joining him he added, “Pelk will wake us in plenty of time to hide in the kitchen so we don’t run into the other me. May I have my good night kiss now?” he asked teasingly, blushing a little despite himself.

Viktor chuckled and pulled Harry close. Harry drifted off to sleep a short time later feeling happy.

During January Viktor was often in the lake when not otherwise occupied, and he was careful to never make it obvious that he was capable of breathing underwater without any visible means to do so. He was also very careful, as he told Harry, to never do anything there if he was aware of another champion in the vicinity. “It is a little harder to cast underwater,” he commented one day, “but not by much. That surprised me.”
Harry had replied, 「Well, at least you won’t drown while testing your strategy.」

January flowed into February and Luna was making noises about convincing her father to transfer her to Durmstrang, in part to escape the bullying by her fellow Ravenclaws. For whatever reason it seemed her head of house, Flitwick, was either uninformed or negligent. And, considering that Luna herself had tried to broach the subject, one had to wonder just what was going on. Had Flitwick consulted his prefects and been assured of their action, thus leaving it in their “capable” hands? Or did he know and believed that Luna ought to stick up for herself? He was part-goblin, and while Harry was loathe to assume the man shared every single attribute with his non-human kin. . . .

Draco continued to press the issue with his parents of a transfer, with Dudley’s support. Draco made it a point in his letters, after ensuring his own understanding of how wand classes worked at Durmstrang, of stressing that information in comparison to the rather simplistic teaching methods of Hogwarts. 「And really,」 he said to Harry, his German having gotten even more fluid under Dudley’s tutelage, 「mother can mention all she likes about her being worried at me being so far away if I go there, but I’d still be home for every holiday. It’s not like I’d be without friends there.」

A letter from his mother informed him that Snape had taken to writing her on a weekly basis. She was partly exasperated by this, she said, but also a bit intrigued. One of the very first things he had done during that initial meeting was to apologize most profusely for having once called her a “mudblood”. In his letters he was being almost chatty, filling her in on the years since, though avoiding any mention whatsoever about the Dark Lord, something she said she found inordinately amusing. In some ways it was weird for him that his mother was being so candid, but at the same time it made him feel a bit proud that she felt she could with him.

Tom had sent word that he had finally met Serana and escorted her to Valdis, though he did not stick around through their visit. He had, however, given her a set of portkeys and explained their use, plus how to bond them. Harry was thrilled; he really wanted to meet her.

The day before the task finally arrived and Harry went about his day feeling more than a little anxious. He had a backup enchantment for waterbreathing and one for regulating temperature and was wearing both, though he did not expect to be whisked away until the evening. Viktor gave him covert looks of understanding, but did not actually speak of the upcoming event. The only other preparation he made was to exchange his usual boots for a spare pair—if they became ruined, so be it—and parts of his usual clothing for non-leather versions.

They were on their way back from dinner when Karkaroff called out to him from behind. Harry stopped and turned. 「Yes, headmaster?」

「Come with me,」 Karkaroff ordered. 「There is an issue.」

Harry adopted a worried look and nodded, pausing long enough to turn back and arch a brow at Viktor and slip him his wand and bracelet, then headed over to the headmaster, who then led him away. Once in the man’s office—and truthfully, Harry felt more than a little creeped out being there alone with him—Karkaroff said, 「You’ve been chosen to help with the second task.」 The man’s wand came up—and the next thing he knew he was coughing out a mouthful of water and experiencing the disorientation of having no idea where he was or where all that noise was coming from.

「Harry, you’re all right,」 Viktor assured him softly. 「We need to get you up on the dock.」

He blinked and tried to focus, reaching up to push the hair away from his face and the water from his eyes. 「Right,」 he said slowly.
Viktor nodded to someone and grabbed Harry around the waist and gave him a boost. Kozlov was there to take Harry’s hand and pull him up, then sling a blanket around his shoulders. Viktor was beside him in the next minute, also with a blanket, and they were hustled off to a nearby tent. Healer Ahlberg was there, wand already casting charms to dry them off and warm them up. The blankets were swapped out for new ones and a bag was thrust at Viktor.

Ahlberg cast a few more spells, nodded, and disappeared for a moment only to return with mugs of hot chocolate. Viktor took a minute to get dressed with clothing from the bag, then took up one of the mugs and sipped. 「Hey, drink,」 he urged.

Harry blinked, still feeling strangely disoriented. Even so, he reached out and carefully picked up the mug with both hands and took a sip. 「I feel really weird. I hope this passes soon.」

「Ahlberg did not seem concerned,」 Viktor replied, 「but I will call him back if you prefer.」

He took a deep breath and released it before saying, 「Let me finish this first and then we’ll see.」

Viktor nodded and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. Harry slowly drank down his hot chocolate, gradually feeling better. 「I think I’m all right. I’ll go see Ahlberg later if that changes. It’s really, really weird to blank out and come back like that, to such different conditions and to so much noise. Were you first?」

「So far as I know, yes,」 Viktor said with a grin. 「You ready to go back out? I have cloaks for the both of us.」

「All right, yes.」 He set the mug down and stood, allowing Viktor to ease the cloak onto him. Viktor put on his own and took his hand. They arrived outside just in time to see Diggory emerging from the water with his hostage. Delacour was also out of the water, but no hostage was in evidence; she was crying. Diggory and the girl he brought back were hustled off as soon as they were back on land, so rather than stare at the water Harry chose to scan the stands.

His gaze alighted on Dudley, who noticed and sent him a thumbs-up, then shifted to the side to see his mother looking relieved. Petunia was also there, looking rather uncomfortable. A look around the judges’ area revealed that James Potter was present and looking vaguely annoyed. He quickly looked away and back toward the water. 「What time is it?」 he asked quietly.

Viktor cast a quick tempus. 「Ten-thirty. I estimate I took forty-five minutes based on that.」

He considered and nodded. 「Sounds about right. I hope this is done soon. Even with those charms my socks are squishy. I think I’ll take a hot shower once we get back.」

「Well, remind me to give you your things,」 Viktor said. 「Or rather, from Dudley. He stored them in his trunk.」

He smiled and squeezed Viktor’s hand. 「Thank you for taking care of them for me.」

It was another fifteen minutes before Edward surfaced, dragging his red-haired hostage with him. She flailed around a bit in the water before realizing she was fine and in no danger of drowning. Behind them surfaced several merpeople and Dumbledore crouched at the edge of the water to begin a conversation with what seemed to be the chief merperson, a particularly wild and ferocious-looking female.

More merpeople surfaced, this time with a female child between them. Delacour let out a cry of surprise and relief and waded in to help remove her from the water. The girl was obviously Delacour’s hostage and, by the looks of it, probably her sister.
Finally Dumbledore straightened up, turned to his fellow judges, and said, “A conference before we give the marks, I think.” The judges went into a huddle.

Harry leaned against Viktor as he covertly watched Edward and their father. James continued to look annoyed and appeared to be arguing with his brother, who looked to be arguing right back. Harry wondered if James had not provided as much help as his brother might have wished and was subsequently disappointed when Edward didn’t perform as well as hoped.

Ludo Bagman’s magically magnified voice boomed out, startling him, and causing the crowd in the stands to go very quiet. “Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached our decision. Merchiefanness Murcus has told us exactly what happened at the bottom of the lake, and we have therefore decided to award marks out of fifty for each of the champions, as follows. . . .

“Fleur Delacour, though she demonstrated excellent use of the Bubble-Head Charm, was attacked by grindylows as she approached her goal, and failed to retrieve her hostage. We award her twenty-five points.”

There was a polite round of applause from the stands.

“I deserved zero,” said Delacour throatily, shaking her head.

“Edward Potter used gillyweed to great effect,” Bagman continued. “He returned last, and well outside the time limit of an hour, but he did retrieve his hostage. That being so, we award him thirty-five points.”

There was another polite round of applause. James Potter’s somehow managed to sound sarcastic.

“Cedric Diggory, who also used the Bubble-Head Charm, was second to return with his hostage, returning at fifty-five minutes.” Enormous cheers sounded from the Hufflepuffs in the crowd; Harry saw Cedric’s hostage give him a glowing look. “We therefore award him forty-three points.

“And finally, Viktor Krum used an incomplete form of Transfiguration, which was nevertheless effective, and was first to return with his hostage. We award him forty-seven points.”

Karkaroff clapped particularly hard, looking very superior.

“The third and final task will take place at dusk on the twenty-fourth of June,” continued Bagman. “The champions will be notified of what is coming precisely one month beforehand. Thank you all for your support of the champions.”

Harry smiled and looked up at Viktor as Diggory, Delacour, Edward, and their hostages were herded away by the Hogwarts matron. Ahlberg appeared again and gestured for Viktor and Harry to precede him to the castle. «Good. So that’s it until the end of June. And you’re in first place so far.»

Viktor smiled back, his arm around Harry’s shoulders as they walked. «I am definitely not disappointed in myself thus far.»

Back at the castle and up in Durmstrang’s tower, Harry gratefully entered his room and shrugged off his cloak, and stripped off his sodden boots and socks. He wiggled his toes, looking up when Dudley burst into the room.

«You seemed okay! Are you?» Dudley asked.

«I’m fine. I’m going to take a shower, though, which is funny since I’ve been submerged all
Dudley smirked and crossed over to his trunk, pulling open one of the compartments and fetching something out. A few seconds later he walked over and handed Harry his wand and bracelet.

「Thanks, Dudley.」

「Hey,」 Viktor said to Dudley, 「Will you stick around for a bit until Harry is back out? I have to at least put in an appearance at the party already forming.」

「Of course,」 Dudley assured him. 「We’ll be down in a bit.」

Viktor nodded, smiled, and quit the room, so Harry slid his bracelet on temporarily, tucked his wand behind his ear, and grabbed his socks and spare boots. Pelk would take care of those for him. 「Okay, I’ll be out in a couple.」 And he was, ten minutes later, with once again cozily warm toes, and properly dressed and geared up.

They headed down to the ground floor of their tower, where the seventh years had again expanded the room to handle so many people, and hunted down Viktor. Harry slid in beside his boyfriend and stole the butterbeer out of his hand. Viktor scowled playfully at him as Harry took a long swallow. Bergfalk laughed and grabbed another butterbeer to hand to Viktor, who accepted it with a nod of thanks. 「So, proud of our Viktor?」 Bergfalk asked.

「Of course!」 he replied. 「He’s doing himself and our school proud. I just wonder how they’ll set up the final task.」

「Well, we think it’s a maze,」 Bergfalk said.

Harry nodded. 「Based on past tournaments. So do they all go in at the same time or...?」

「Maybe Viktor will get a head start because he’s in first place?」 Dudley suggested. 「And I figure, since they axed quidditch for the Hogwarts teams, they might be using the pitch for it.」

「Not a bad thought,」 Viktor allowed. 「I lean toward getting a head start, myself. Otherwise they would have to design something that allowed each champion to enter from equidistant locations and yet not have anyone with any particular advantage getting to the goal.」

「Mm. Delacour has sixty-five points right now. Let’s say she got wherever first and got the full fifty. That’s one hundred fifteen. You have ninety-three, so you’d only have to get twenty-three points to still beat her overall score. Assuming they don’t do something silly like say whoever gets there first is the winner, other points aside.」

「Well, I plan to do my best to be the one,」 Viktor said firmly.

「I wonder how much we’ll be able to figure out ahead of time,」 Bergfalk said thoughtfully. 「If they make a maze it could, in theory, be flown over.」

「That’d help with what route to take,」 Dudley said, 「but to manage it without being seen? And that doesn’t say anything about what obstacles might be included.」 He paused, then added, 「Draco has mentioned some beasts their Creatures professor has showed them in class. Word is Hagrid created them by cross-breeding manticores and fire crabs.」

Viktor shuddered. 「Can you find out more, please?」
Sure, Dudley said with a nod. And without hinting, Draco is, technically, rooting for Diggory, even if he’s badly wanting to transfer to Durmstrang. And really, Diggory isn’t making a bad show of it so far, and he’s only a sixth year.

He’s really not, said Poliakoff, inserting himself into the conversation. Delacour is a bit of a disappointment, though. Even that Potter kid is doing better, and he’s treating the whole thing like an excuse to showboat.

Did you see him fighting with his father afterward? Bergfalk asked. I was a bit shocked.

It looked to me as if Potter was annoyed his son wasn’t doing better, Harry said. Maybe he’s embarrassed that he went to the trouble to cheat his son’s way into this and his performance is disappointing.

Not living up to the hype of the Boy-Who-Lived, you mean? Poliakoff said.

Harry shrugged and drank more of his butterbeer.

A lot of his identity seems to consist of that status, Viktor said. If he doesn’t live up to it, then who is he really? Does anyone really even know?

There seemed to be no answer to that, or not one that any of them was willing to say. Harry drained his butterbeer and motioned for another one, which Bergfalk was happy enough to get for him. A bit later they all trooped down to lunch. And, as they sat at the end of the table nearest Slytherin, Draco made sure to get a spot at his end, so they could at least converse without outright switching tables.

As he was turning to answer something Draco said his gaze passed over the Hogwarts head table and he noticed that Snape was eyeing him. That could get creepy after a while, he thought, then said, You can always see if your parents would let you visit. I don’t think my mother would mind.

It would, he thought, make it a little difficult for me to practice, though, but I guess I could just keep to my repeats in the trunk if he’s visiting.

Ask her, please? I’d rather not say anything unless I know it’s all right.

He nodded. I’ll send her an owl and let you know. Any progress on convincing your parents?

Oh, I don’t think father would mind, but mother is harder to talk around if I can’t give her the right look, Draco said with a faint smirk. She’s kind of a sucker for that look.

He noticed that Snape kept eyeing him and said, Your head of house keeps looking this way. Do you think he’s not okay with you being so friendly with Durmstrang students? While Draco was distracted he took a few bites of his roast pork, chased it with some vegetables, and had some tea.

Huh. That’s a little weird. I wouldn’t have thought he’d care.

And maybe now the man will realize he’s not being discreet enough.

You can share my room if it happens, Dudley said, having to speak a little louder given that he was sitting on the other side of the table.

What would you like to do this afternoon? Viktor asked quietly.

He had more of his meal, thinking, and said, I don’t really know. It’s not like we can pop off to a cinema to watch a film or visit a zoo or amusement park. We could always rejoin the party that’s sure to start back up, but . . .
「How about a quiet afternoon, just talking, or reading?」 Viktor suggested.

They repaired to his trunk (since he would already not be able to do a repeat of the day due to using the shower earlier) and chose books, settling in on the sofa, but after a while Harry asked, “So, how far are you willing to go?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“As a couple.” He looked over with a sly smirk.

“Harry, you tempt me too much,” Viktor said ruefully.

He let his book flop down onto his lap and shifted so his back was against the arm. “I wonder sometimes how old I actually am after all these repeat days. Maybe I should do the math. By my quick reckoning I’m already fifteen.”

“That may be true, but you are still a minor and I am not,” Viktor reminded him. “I will be eighteen in just over two months. Besides, I made a promise to your mother.”

He rolled his eyes and groaned. “Oh, all right. So how far?”

Viktor let out a groan of his own and replied, “The clothes stay on.”

“I can think of some interesting loopholes to that,” he said, smiling innocently.

“Harry,” Viktor said, trying for stern.

He leaned over and set his book on the floor and scooted forward, bringing his face near Viktor’s. “Yes?”

Viktor stared at him, still trying to be stern, then swiftly dropped his book and grasped Harry by the shoulders and pushed. Harry ended up on his back with Viktor hovering above him. “I’ve changed my mind again,” Viktor said. “I’m back to thinking Slytherin for you.” Then he leaned in and kissed him breathless.
Chapter 13

Harry received a letter from his mother which expressed a certain amount of exasperation with Snape. “He’s started to ‘subtly’ ask questions about you,” she wrote. He glanced up at the Hogwarts head table and saw that Snape was eying him again. He flashed the man a rather insincere smile, saw him blink, then looked back down to the letter. She also wrote that having Viktor to stay for part or all of the summer was fine with her, though she doubted he would be able to stay the entire time, and that Draco was also welcome to visit. The remainder was just the usual sorts of things and nothing in particular of importance, so he passed the parchment over to Viktor.

“Dudley, mum says it’s okay for Draco to visit if he can get permission,” he said, then focused on his breakfast, knowing his cousin would take care of letting Draco know.

A minute later Viktor handed the letter back and said, “That poor man must be going a bit crazy.”

“Yes, well, unless he manages to convince my mother of his sterling character and trustworthiness it’s unlikely he’ll ever get that untwisted. Kind of like Escher’s staircase, around and around and none of it makes real sense. And then there’s our friend to consider.”

“Wait, I think I missed something here.”

Harry looked over to see a confused look on Viktor’s face. “He was, er, one of our friend’s people? But then started batting for the other team when it became clear my mother was in danger?”

Viktor’s expression cleared. “Ah. Interesting. I assume the old man had something to do with him not ending up in prison?”

He nodded. “I expect our friend could steal him right back, should he choose, especially since, well, he’s our friend. I expect it’ll get taken care of, but perhaps not until after the school year. I just wish he’d stop eyeing me up like some pederast considering which dark corridor he’s going to bugger me in.”

Viktor choked and about spit his tea out, then scowled at him playfully.

Over the course of the next few days Draco received permission to visit that summer, but had not yet heard a decision about a transfer. Dudley had asked to invite Luna in a letter to Petunia and received permission to ask her.

The weekend following they rode down to Hogsmeade again and spent quite a while browsing through the shops before repairing to the cottage, Ilsa heading off with some of her friends rather than intrude. Inside Harry was somewhat resigned on seeing Snape present. Apparently he had been invited to take lunch with them. Petunia directed them all to go wash up first, and shortly, after some jockeying for space at the sink, they were seated at the dining table. As “luck” would have it, because his mother was at one end of the table (Petunia was at the other), he and Snape were sitting across from each other. Viktor gave his thigh a sympathetic pat under the table.

Mary trotted in long enough ensure everyone was ready, then vanished back into the kitchen. Moments later they each had a fair-sized bowl on their plates filled with what looked to be beef stew.
Several baskets were placed down the center of the table filled with fresh, sliced, crusty bread.

“This smells amazing,” he commented, reaching out to grab a few pieces of bread to put on the side of his plate.

His mother smiled. “Petunia and I have been experimenting,” she said, getting bread as well, then picking up her spoon. A moment later a glass of some variety of red wine appeared for each setting.

‘Awkward,’ he thought, trying not to actually look at Snape.

“So,” his mother said, “how are things going for the final task? Or are we all pretending that none of you have a clue yet as to what it will be?”

Viktor snickered quietly and set his spoon down so he could spread some butter on a piece of bread. “It will be a maze.”

“Oh? How did you come to that conclusion?”

Viktor shot her an amused look. “After I checked a history book. Back in September. I wanted some idea of what to expect should I choose to enter my name.”

“Imagine that,” Petunia said tartly, “someone paying attention to history.”

Dudley laughed and Viktor smiled.

Luna looked up and said, “This stew is really very yummy. May I have a copy of the recipe?”

“Oh, thank you, dear,” Lily said warmly. “I’ll make sure you get one.”

Harry had a spoonful and hummed in pleasure. After swallowing he said, “Oh yes. Mum, Aunt Petunia, this is wonderful.”

His mother reached out briefly to squeeze his wrist. “So you knew approximately from the start what sort of things you’d have to face?” she asked.

“Yes. Harry and I spent an afternoon out on the grounds reading through that book and discussing it.”

“I hope,” Draco said, “that it won’t be quite so boring to watch as the second task was, but I rather expect it will be.”

Dudley nodded. “They don’t seem to be designed with an audience in mind.”

They were part way through the meal when Snape suddenly seized up and grabbed at his arm. Harry looked up quickly. Snape had gone deathly pale and his eyes were closed. They slowly opened, his gaze shifting to Lily, his expression tragic.

His mother slowly arched a brow, then calmly reached out for her glass and had a sip of wine. As Snape prepared to push his chair back the door swung open and Tom walked in. Harry felt a lot like drinking some of his own wine, but suspected he might well spit it back up depending on whatever it was Tom was about to do.

“So, Severus. How delightful to see you again,” Tom said dryly, then sat in the empty seat next to Viktor. A bowl of stew appeared for him and he picked up his spoon, then began to eat.

Another look at Snape showed that the man was just lost.
‘And just how do you follow that?’ he thought.

“Did something happen?” his mother asked curiously. “I expected you sooner.”

Tom looked up and said, “I lost track of time talking with Valdis and Serana. You know, I could just build a warded structure at your house, cover it in ivy—you’d forget it was there easily enough—or maybe whip up a cellar.”

Lily sighed and glanced at the ceiling, then looked at Harry. “Did you put him up to this?”

He did a slight double-take and frowned. “Actually, I asked about moving her to my—” He paused, his eyes cutting slightly toward Snape. “To my work room.”

“Oh, Harry, she’d take up too much space.”

“I know, but she wouldn’t be with those silly old men, either. Doesn’t matter. Tom already told me no.”

“Oh, honey,” she said a bit sadly. “Look, I’ll think about it, okay? No promises.”

He nodded and tore a piece off his bread to dip in his stew and eat.

“I assume those two are still the best of friends?” Viktor inquired.

Tom snorted softly. “Oh, yes. But, still, listening to them is fascinating. Considering how long Serana has existed. . . .”

“My lord?” Snape said tentatively.

Tom switched focus, aiming a faintly amused look at the man. “Yes, Severus? Should I assume that you have, indeed, taken note of the fact that I did spare a certain life after you begged me so prettily?”

Lily huffed. “Tom, really.”

“Eat, Severus,” Tom ordered. “We’ll talk soon enough.”

“I think you would look very pretty with a hairstyle like Serana’s,” Luna said to Petunia, who looked startled at the comment and absently reached up to pat her hair.

“But I have no idea. . . .”

“You will,” Luna replied with a nod.

The meal continued on and eventually everyone was sitting back in satisfaction (though Snape looked closer to terrified). After Mary cleared the table Petunia rose and gestured to Dudley, Luna, and Draco to follow her. Harry noticed that Draco badly wanted to stay, but an arched brow in his direction from Tom sent him almost scurrying away.

“I understand you’ve been trying to get back into Lily’s good graces,” Tom said. “I wonder why I should allow these attempts to continue.”

“I am so confused,” Snape whispered.

“I don’t see the problem here, Severus,” Lily said. “Tom is an old friend of the family. How long has it been now?” Her brow crinkled.
“Almost seven years, mum,” Harry said helpfully, “since I was eight.”

Tom nodded. “Whom are you loyal to, Severus?”

Snape looked up. “I’ve only ever really been loyal to one person.”

“Why is it I fail to be surprised by the evasion?” Tom asked no one in particular.

Lily leaned over and whispered to Harry, “He’s being awfully brave, wouldn’t you say?”

He nodded, then smiled when Viktor’s arm slipped around his shoulders.

“I shall rephrase the question,” Tom said, “and if you fail to answer this time I might forget I’m here as Tom and not Voldemort. Severus, are you loyal to Dumbledore?”

“No,” was the immediate answer.

“Then you get to live,” Tom said simply. “I expect your primary loyalty remains to Lily, but you still belong to me. Don’t forget that. Now, I need to go make sure young Malfoy knows how to hold his tongue. I already know Lovegood will.” He got up and passed out into the hall.

“So, mum,” Harry said, smiling, “what exactly did Viktor promise you, because he’s being stubborn about the details.”

Viktor’s free hand came up to cover his face.

His mother giggled. “No intercourse until you’re at the age of consent. So, sixteen.” She saw Viktor’s reaction and giggled harder. “You poor dear. Harry is being pushy, isn’t he.”

Viktor peeked out from between his fingers and nodded.

“Well, I trust you to hold him off from that particular activity. I can’t have people saying my son’s boyfriend is a pedophile.”

Viktor’s arm slipped free and he thunked his head on the table. “And I like you so much, why?” he muttered.

Harry patted Viktor’s back and grinned at his mother, who grinned back.

“Okay, you two. Off you go. See me before you leave, though,” she said, then eyed Snape.

Harry pushed his chair back and got up, waited for Viktor to stand, then guided his shell-shocked boyfriend out of the room. He backed him against the wall and gave him a kiss, then said, “Maybe I like to tease you, too.”

Viktor took a deep breath and released it. “Fair enough.”

Tom appeared from the sitting room and stopped. “On a side note,” he said, “Serana is looking forward to meeting you. Valdis has expressed how fond she is of you, you see.”

He smiled happily, then edged closer to say quietly, “Is mum going to let him in on the Secret?”

“I don’t know yet. I expect she would make sure you’re okay with it first. It is your identity, after all.”

“Do you even know what you plan to do about him?”
Tom, surprisingly enough, shrugged. “I don’t have a clue yet. But I do hold his life in my hands, so he had better behave himself. I’m letting your mother handle it for now."

He nodded thoughtfully. “Okay. I assume Draco is still amongst the living.”

Tom favored him with a sarcastic smile and swept off. Harry turned back to Viktor and stole another kiss, then went to find the others. When they did return to the castle Harry led Viktor up to his room and then into his trunk’s dressing room for some additional privacy. “Okay, I’ll be serious, though I do like teasing you. I’m fifteen and I’m sure you remember what that’s like, assuming you ever had your eye on anyone at the time. I know what you promised my mother, and that’s fine. As much as I want to, I hadn’t planned to until I was old enough. What I really want you to tell me is what you don’t want to do, what your limit is.”

Viktor gave him a smile and drew him over to the bench. “First, I did not expect your mother to join in on the teasing. That rather blindsided me. Second? I’m not sure, really. I want all of it, but where I stop? Right now I think clothes stay on, like I said earlier.”

He nodded. “I can accept that.” He paused, smiled, then said, “It could get messy.”

Viktor smiled back and said, “Come on. We should head down to dinner.”

A few days later Draco squeaked after opening a letter delivered during the morning post. Dudley looked over curiously and Draco rattled the parchment. 「I can transfer!」

「Really? They finally agreed? And you never got a chance to use that look on your mother.」

Harry looked up and smiled, but he wondered. A part of him wondered very much if Tom had gotten involved. 「I wonder how that’ll work, him transferring in as a fifth year,」 he said quietly to Viktor.

「You mean in terms of a mentor? I expect a fellow fifth year will take that on, at least in terms of making sure Draco can navigate the castle and such. Beyond that, though, your year group’s mentors won’t be there, so. . . . I know that you and Dudley will take care of him.」

「Of course. I expect it’ll be weird for him transferring to a new school for OWL year.」

Luna piped up from her seat at the end of the Ravenclaw table. 「Daddy has given me permission as well. I won’t have to suffer for much longer.」

Harry blinked at her. 「This is going to sound really rude, but, can he afford it? Even I don’t know what Durmstrang costs per year.」

「Daddy makes a surprisingly good living with the Quibbler,」 she replied, unruffled. 「Even if not, I have a trust from mummy I could use. I’ve never bothered with it because daddy can well afford the books and supplies for here.」

Viktor leaned back a little so he could see Luna clearly. 「Will you be telling anyone here that you’re leaving?」

She shook her head. 「If I said something they might get worse, knowing they have so little time left.」

Viktor nodded. 「A wise decision, I think.」

Dudley, of course, was ecstatic when that was passed on, having been busy enough talking with
Draco that he had not overheard the exchange. Either way, Luna would already have friends waiting for her, friends willing to back her up and defend her. Harry resolved to make copies of his course notes for the first four years to give to her so she could study them in advance.

Letters continued to arrive from his mother, filling him in up to a point on how things were going with Snape. He got the distinct impression that not only was the man behaving, but also that his mother was becoming fond of him again, this time in a different way. Luna was probably correct in her assertion that he may well gain a stepfather.

For himself, he kept trying to think of ways to go on “dates” with Viktor, but it was difficult being stuck in a castle in a remote part of Scotland, not that it would be any better at Durmstrang. The best they could manage were walks together and games. They could duck out of the occasional meal to an unused classroom and have Pelk provide, but with the weather becoming so much nicer he instead asked for, and received, the occasional picnic basket so they could have a meal with a view, and in peace, without hundreds of voices layering in.

By the time May rolled around he was well into the fifth year material in terms of wand classes. He was relieved to learn that he could handle it, but the strain was becoming a bit more pronounced. The best he could do was work himself like a dog in terms of mastery. Being as far ahead as he was also meant he could move onto sixth year material early; that right there would tell him if he needed to drop any or all of the wand classes at NEWT level.

Viktor was held back after one of his classes during the last week of May and told to be at the pitch that night for nine o’clock. 「I expect this is where we’re shown the fledgling form of the maze,」 he said.

Poliakov made a rude noise from a few seats down. 「I’m sure they waited so long so that the champions can concentrate on their studies or something, never mind that Potter is a fourth year and is exempted, and Diggory is a sixth year and likewise exempted. You, however, and Delacour, get to do NEWT exams the week before the task and the week during.」

Viktor shrugged. 「I knew that could happen when I put my name in. Perhaps they wished to keep all the candidates here through to the end, though I don’t really understand why. Maybe they wanted the exams out of the way in case one of us was injured badly in the final task and stuck in an infirmary or hospital.」

「Well,」 said Bergfalk, 「if they’re going to be showing you tonight that means there’s finally something to bother looking at.」

Harry wondered about the degree of cheating to map the burgeoning maze while in full Chameleon. Neither he nor Dudley could do it while flying because neither of them knew how to do a disillusionment charm on a broom, assuming it could even be done. Viktor may not want that much assistance, either, though it had already come up previously and he had not given any sign he thought the idea was distasteful.

Viktor wandered back into the tower and up to Harry’s room at around ten. It could not possibly have taken very long down at the pitch, so he assumed his boyfriend had stopped to talk with his friends in seventh year. 「Surprise, it’s a maze,」 Viktor said dryly.

「Do you want a map of it?」 he asked bluntly.

「I’m not sure if we can,」 Viktor replied, sitting on the bed and scooting back. 「As we were leaving I noticed a bunch of people approaching from another direction. I have to wonder if there’ve been some kind of wards up to keep students away and they were there to reactivate them. The
hedges are already partly grown, though still low enough to climb over. Bagman said they’ll be twenty feet high by the time of the task. A month is plenty of time for anyone with that in mind to act.

Harry frowned. Viktor made sense. 「And there’s just two weeks left before exams begin.」

The door opened and Dudley came in, followed by Draco and Luna. His cousin paused on seeing the two of them. 「Oh. This okay?」

「Of course,」 he replied with a smile. 「It’s your room too, silly.」

「You guys are so lucky,」 Draco said a bit wistfully. 「Just two of you per room. We have to share with a bunch of people.」

「But not for much longer,」 Harry pointed out. 「Though—」 He looked at Dudley. 「We’re an even number in this year, so I expect we’ll have a trio.」

Viktor nodded. 「No one gets to room alone. You can request to have Draco with the two of you. Luna cannot room with Ilsa, but there is an odd number already for third year girls, so with the transfer it will be back to two per.」 He looked at Luna directly and added, 「You might want to get with Ilsa to see what she thinks of the current trio. Perhaps one in particular would be a better roommate for you.」

「They won’t allow a shuffle?」 Dudley asked, rummaging around in one of the compartments of his trunk.

「Nn. Not that I’m aware of,」 Viktor replied.

Dudley made a happy noise and pulled something from his trunk, then closed it back up. 「Knew they were here somewhere.」 He turned back and said, 「I’m going to teach them to play Uno. You two want to play?」

Viktor had no idea what that was and said so, but Harry assured him it would be fun, so off they went to the fourth year common room to commandeering a table and drag Ilsa in, as well. No one said a word about it being so late and after two rounds Draco and Luna scurried off to their houses. Viktor gave him a lingering kiss before leaving, saying they’d talk more about the task on Saturday.

「After talking with my friends and doing some watching of my own, I can say that people are being diverted from the maze,」 Viktor told him during a walk around the grounds after breakfast Saturday morning. 「I think mapping it would be extremely difficult.」

「So, twenty-foot hedges, probably resistant to being cut or burned. And we in the stands will have a grand view of foliage.」

Viktor snickered softly and nodded. 「I am hoping to be able to introduce you to my parents soon.」

「Oh? I’d like that. I assume they’re okay with us?」

「I think they knew I liked you before I did,」 Viktor replied, pulling him closer for a moment. 「I am hoping you will sit with them in the stands.」

He nodded. 「I’m sure my mother would love to meet them, too, so we can all sit together.」

「Well, on the morning of the task they will be here. Champions get to spend the day with their families. I don’t know if you’ll have an exam that day, but if you have the time free I’d be happy if
I’d love to, he replied happily. ‘What about your sister?’

‘Ah, no, Bisera will be with my grandparents. And lucky you, not having any chance of being saddled with her as a mentee.’

Harry poked Viktor in the side. ‘Be nice. I’m sure she’ll get a good fourth year. More worry for you, being there for your mastery.’

Viktor shrugged. ‘I cannot decide if she will avoid me or pester me. Anyway, we should know the exam schedule on Monday. Kozlov mentioned something in passing. As for the task itself... I’ll already be brushing up on everything for the NEWTs, so that counts as preparation.’

‘Well—Dudley got back to you about those creatures?’

‘Yes. Assuming those show up in the maze their only weak point is the underbelly as the rest is armored. Otherwise I expect something like trying to freeze them might work since they blast fire.’

He tried to think what else might be in there, but there were just too many possibilities. Instead he asked, ‘Do I need to learn Bulgarian, or...?’

There was a pause, then, ‘Oh, my family. No. They know German. But if you wanted to I’m sure they would appreciate it, even if they never realize you acquired the language with essentially no effort. Your friend knows an inordinate number of languages.’

He chuckled. ‘Yes. He traveled extensively before he rose up as a—well, it’s very helpful that he can so easily gift them to others. Can you think of any other gear you might need?’

‘It might not hurt for me to have a few things, perhaps on a pair of boots or as additional links. Muffle, for one. Something to conceal scent. I can do disillusionment with a spell—after all, depending on how they’re scoring it would be as well for me to obviously do magic. I was thinking of bringing in a selection of pebbles or something similar.’

‘So you can use them as projectiles, or things to transfigure?’ he asked.

‘Yes. Projectiles, distractions, whatever. Granted, I doubt they’ll be messing with the turf, so I could rip up grass and transfigure that.’

‘I remember this one thing, in a video game Dudley used to play, called a hookshot,’ he said musingly.

‘Which is?’

‘A device that shoots out a hook, trailing a rope or cable. It, you know, hooks around something and then you can reel it in with the effect of moving you to where it’s lodged. I just had this image in my head of you reeling around the maze like that. Spiderman without the webs. Amusing and all, but not very likely.’

Viktor laughed. ‘No, but the concept itself might be useful. Depends on how sturdy the hedges end up being.’

Monday at breakfast the schedule was distributed to their tables. Officials would be coming to Hogwarts to administer OWLs and NEWTs for Durmstrang students, separate from those of Hogwarts. Checking his copy showed that he would have his last exam on the morning of the third
He made a copy and sent it down the table to Viktor, who was sitting with his friends. Because Dudley had different electives he would not be free until dinner. Still, should he want to, Dudley would be able to meet Viktor’s family at lunch; otherwise he would at dinner or as they were heading to the stands.

A minute later he was nudged in the side; he looked over to see his seat mate pointing down the table. Viktor tapped the schedule and nodded, so Harry expected he would let his parents know.

When that day did finally arrive he ate his breakfast while reading his notes for his upcoming exam, then headed out. Additional rooms had been set aside on the fifth floor for the OWL and NEWT students, but all other years would be using the usual classrooms. Thankfully it was only Arithmancy, so he needn’t worry about having to go through a wand portion. He could simply take his time, then join Viktor and his family at lunch.

The exam went by easily enough and he was soon on his way to the Great Hall. Viktor was in the entrance hall, and smiled as soon as he saw Harry coming down the main staircase. With him were his parents, both dark-haired like Viktor. Amusingly enough, it seemed Viktor had inherited his father’s hooked nose. Once he got near enough Viktor stepped forward and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, then said, 「Harry, my mother Iskra and my father Pavel. Mother, father, this is Harry Evans.」

They both looked at him curiously, then Iskra stepped forward with a smile. 「You’re too old for me to say this, but you’re adorable, Harry.」

He blushed and ducked his head briefly. 「Thank you, I think,」 he muttered. 「I am very pleased to meet you both.」 he said with a smile for Mrs Krum and a respectful incline of his head for Viktor’s father. 「I hope that you’ll sit with me and my mother for the task.」

「She’ll be present?」 Mrs Krum asked.

「Oh yes. She’s very fond of Viktor and came to the first two, as well. I can’t say she was exactly thrilled with me being a hostage, but she had every confidence in Viktor.」

「Shall we go in to lunch?」 Viktor invited, letting go of Harry.

Viktor’s father proved to be a bit on the taciturn side, but Harry could not tell if that was simply because they did not know each other or if he was always that way. Mrs Krum, however, was on the chatty side and he thought she would probably get on with his mother well. 「Where have you seen so far?」 he asked.

「Oh, Viktor has been showing us the school. It’s quite different from Durmstrang and a lot more open in some ways, isn’t it, but I suppose the climate has a lot to do with that.」

Harry grinned. 「I recall seeing more than one person gawking when they saw Viktor swimming in the lake in January. I expect they thought he was mad. I guess those of us at Durmstrang are a bit hardier.」

「Well,」 she said, her eyes bright with what he assumed was amusement, 「I have to say I’ve never seen Viktor smile so much as he has today.」

He glanced at his boyfriend before saying, 「I’m going to go on the assumption that, aside from being a bit reserved to begin with, having screaming quidditch groupies stalk around after you is an excellent reason to scowl most of the time or otherwise appear surly.」

In his peripheral vision he could see Viktor rolling his eyes. 「That is a good way to put it,」 Viktor
said.

「And you are not reserved?」

He blinked at her. 「Sort of? Ah, as my cousin puts it, I’m not a social butterfly, but I suppose I’m comfortable enough in social situations.」

She nodded in response, seeming somehow satisfied.

After the meal Viktor steered them out onto the grounds; the weather was beautiful, sunny with puffy white clouds decorating the sky. The Beauxbatons carriage was the only thing not “native” to the grounds and was a point of interest, but aside from that they walked a slow, circuitous route, speaking of general things like school work, exams, and Viktor’s plans for the following year. And then it was time for dinner.

There were more courses than usual, but Harry didn’t notice so much as he was still busy getting to know Viktor’s mother. As the enchanted ceiling overhead began to fade from blue to a dusky purple, Dumbledore rose to his feet at the staff table, and silence fell. “Ladies and gentlemen, in five minutes’ time, I will be asking you to make your way down to the quidditch field for the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament. Will the champions please follow Mr Bagman down to the stadium now.”

Viktor nodded and turned to Harry. 「You’ll take care of my parents?」

Harry rolled his eyes. 「Of course. Be safe. Do me proud.」

Viktor gave a faint nod and leaned in for a relatively chaste kiss, then rose, moving around the end of the table to kiss his mother’s cheek and grip his father’s shoulder for a moment. Then he left along with the other champions.

「Where will your mother be joining us?」 Mrs Krum asked.

「Hopefully outside the main doors, or a just a little bit on. That’s where she was the last two times.」 They waited until Dumbledore gave the okay to leave and carefully made their way outside, Dudley catching up with them just moments before Harry spotted his mother; Dudley raced on ahead to give her a hug.

「This way,」 he said, walking briskly. He kissed his mother on the cheek once close enough and said, 「Mum, I’d like you to meet Viktor’s parents, Pavel and Iskra Krum. Mr and Mrs Krum, my mother, Lily Evans. And, of course, my cousin, Dudley.」

His mother smiled widely. 「I’m so pleased to meet you! I understand you’ve been here all day. Has it been enjoyable?」 Lily turned slightly and gestured toward the stands.

Mrs Krum smiled back after a moment, took her husband’s arm, and moved forward.
His mother and Mrs Krum chatted away on the walk to the pitch, and seemed to be getting along just fine. They eventually made it to the stands and climbed up into a section more or less reserved for Durmstrang and took seats down near the end of a row. Spread out before them was the maze; it was a dead loss in terms of viewing and, indeed, they would have an exciting time staring at foliage. Harry sighed and rolled his eyes, then looked at where the entrance was.

Viktor was waiting there along with the other champions, watched over by Bagman. Edward, twit that he was, was grinning and waving at the crowd. He couldn’t help but roll his eyes again. He leaned in close to his mother, waited for a lull, and whispered, 「Look at Edward.」

She glanced at him, then down at Edward, and sighed. She shrugged helplessly and went back to speaking with Iskra, who asked, 「Your husband is not joining us?」

His mother laughed lightly, not seeming the least bit bothered by the question. 「Oh, no. We’re divorced. He and I had... irreconcilable differences.」

After a startled silence Mrs Krum said, 「Oh, I am sorry for having brought it up.」 「Don’t worry about it,」 Lily assured her. 「It’s been almost seven years now.」

Bagman was saying something to the champions, waving one hand around gaily, but stopped when four adults wearing large, red, luminous stars on their hats (except for the half-giant, Hagrid, who had his on his vest) approached. The woman, Deputy Headmistress McGonagall, started talking, but as he was no good at lip reading, and certainly not at that distance, he had no idea what she was saying. Then the four of them separated and began walking the perimeter of the maze. How interesting that all of them appeared to be connected to Hogwarts, not sharing the duty with any staff from Durmstrang or Beauxbatons.

Bagman brought his wand to his throat, cast, and then boomed out, “Ladies and gentlemen, the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! The first champion to reach the cup gets the full fifty points! Let me remind you how the points currently stand! In first place, with ninety-three points—Mr Viktor Krum, of Durmstrang Institute!” The cheers and applause sent birds from the forest fluttering into the darkening sky. “In second place, with eighty-one points—Mr Cedric Diggory, of Hogwarts School!” There was more applause, just as enthusiastic. “In third place, with seventy points—Mr Edward Potter, of Hogwarts School!” There was more applause, just as enthusiastic.

“In third place, with seventy points—Mr Edward Potter, of Hogwarts School!” The applause was decidedly lukewarm, but there was enough of it to pay lip service to politeness. “And in fourth place, with sixty-five points—Miss Fleur Delacour, of Beauxbatons Academy!” More applause, better than for Edward, but still not especially enthusiastic. “So... on my whistle, Mr Krum! Three—two—one—” He gave a short blast on his whistle, and Viktor ran into the maze.

Harry sighed and grabbed his mother’s hand; she gave his hand a squeeze. A mere thirty seconds later Bagman blew his whistle again and Diggory dashed inside, followed by Edward and Delacour at thirty second intervals. 「I thought there’d be more time between,」 he muttered.

「Yeah, not much of a head start,」 Dudley said quietly. 「And the only thing we get to see is the
light given off by spells, if that much."

«So, um, hm. How do you think your exams today went?» Harry asked, just to have something to do besides staring blankly at greenery.

Dudley shrugged. «They went fine, though Creatures was more than a little strange taking it inside. I hope Viktor did all right on his NEWTs.»

«He seemed pretty confident,» Harry replied. «I didn’t detect even a hint of anxiety or nervousness in him.»

«What do you think happens when whoever it is gets to the cup?»

Harry looked at his cousin with a faint frown. «You know, that’s an excellent question. Do they get portkeyed out? Does some sort of light show go off? And for that matter—those people patrolling the exterior. I assume they’re there either to catch one of the champions forcing their way out of the maze and back in as a shortcut, or to help if someone needs assistance. But how do they get in if they have to help? Can they leap tall hedges like Superman? Are they hiding brooms somewhere?»

Dudley laughed. «I’m sure they have some super secret spell that lets them walk right through any of the hedges.»

«What, à la Kitty Pryde?»

«Uh, yeah, let’s go with that.» Dudley yawned and stared at the hedges apathetically. «I hope whoever thought this up gets fined for boring the audience to tears. We don’t even get commentary because it might give too much away to the champions.»

«Was it this boring for the second task?»

Dudley nodded. «Unfortunately. Well, it was more exciting because you were down there. I didn’t even have the thrill of seeing Delacour in a swimsuit because she wore her robes into the water for some reason.»

«Because she was cold? We’re not all strapping specimens of humanity who are honorary members of the Polar Bear Club.»

There was a short pause before Dudley said, «If I should happen to fall asleep, please say you’ll save me from falling out of the stands and cracking into little pieces when I hit the ground?»

Harry gave that some thought, then said, «I could attach a bungee cord to you.»

His mother turned away from her conversation with Mrs Krum and shot them a look. «No, Harry, no bungee jumping off the stands.» Then she turned back with a shake of her head to answer Mrs Krum’s question about what bungee jumping was.

«Mum says no bungee jumping. Sorry, Dudley,» he said with mock sadness. «How about a Stay Puft suit with a bouncy charm on it?»

His mother snorted in amusement, but stuck to her own conversation.

After a while they were reduced to thumb wrestling, having exhausted most of their conversational options for the time being. Dudley was tired out from exams and dinner had been more elaborate than usual, leading to sleepy people trying to digest a big meal. But finally, after an interminable wait, a light blossomed from the center of the maze and, off to the side, where the judges were
stationed, a figure appeared.

Dudley was on his feet a second later cheering madly, but it took a moment for Harry’s loggy brain to catch up to the realization that Viktor was the winner. He was on his feet as soon as it registered cheering as loudly as his cousin. Even his mother was into the spirit of things.

Bagman’s voice boomed out again after another span of seconds. “Ladies and gentlemen, we have our winner, Mr Viktor Krum of Durmstrang Institute!” Red sparks flew up from three places in the maze; the other champions asking for an escort out, he assumed.

It took them some time to manage to get down from the stands because of the amount of people, and more before they managed to get to Viktor. He held back, knowing that Viktor’s parents had every right to be the first to congratulate him, and looked around quickly instead. Delacour was not far away with her family; she may have been crying. Diggory was also nearby with his family; the father looked horribly disappointed. Edward was—’Oh, hell,’ he thought, jostling his mother’s arm.

「What?」 she asked in confusion.

「Two o’clock!」 he practically hissed.

His mother looked toward the right and cursed under her breath. 「And I’m not wearing a glamour.」

James Potter was headed their way, something of a sneer on his face. When he got close enough he said, “Fancy seeing you here. Why are you here, anyway? What possible reason could you have?”

Lily arched a brow at her ex-husband, expression smooth and calm.

“Well?”

“I don’t answer to you anymore, remember?” she replied evenly. “And why would I bother to? It’s not like you ever listened to me anyway. Please leave.” The only sign of her agitation and anger was the blooming stain of colour high on her cheeks.

James scowled and took another step forward. Viktor swept by at that point, parents preceding him, and grabbed Harry by the arm. Harry caught on quickly and grabbed his mother, and Dudley slid in behind them. As a group they hastened away, but not so quickly as to be thought fleeing in terror.

Once they were far enough away and Dudley had let them know it should be all right again, his mother stopped and exhaled heavily. “Christ almighty. What the hell?” She massaged her forehead with one hand and sighed, then straightened up and found a believable smile for Mr and Mrs Krum.

「I’m sorry you had to see that.」 Her gaze switched to Viktor. 「Thank you, Viktor, for your quick thinking. I admit, I was actually scared there for a moment that—」 She paused, an expression of disbelief on her face.

「I guess he was really upset that Edward didn’t win?」

Mrs Krum reached out and touched his mother gently on the arm. 「You’re not responsible for that man.」

Lily stared at her for a moment, then smiled. 「That’s absolutely true.」

Harry gave his mother a hug from behind, frowning off into the distance where they had left his father. Her hand came up to cover his and squeeze comfortingly.

Mr Krum stepped forward to give Viktor a manly sort of hug, then inclined his head to Lily, Harry, and Dudley. Mrs Krum also gave Viktor a hug, and said, 「Well, it is late. We should be going. I
had a lovely time talking with you, Lily, and, Harry, you keep an eye on Viktor for us. Dudley, a 
pleasure."

Once they had departed his mother eyed the direction James was last known to be at a bit warily.

"Damn. Seriously, what the hell was that? He didn’t give me any trouble at all over the divorce, but 
today he’s acting like I owe him something? The sooner we all get back to Norway the better."

"It’s just as well Aunt Petunia wasn’t here," he said. "And I hate to say it, mum, but you should 
probably head back. We’ll be okay once we’re up in the tower. The only other time you would have 
to be back would be at the station, and we can just portkey home from there."

"You have a little over a week left. Let me think about it," she said. "Now, if you don’t mind, 
escort me to the gates?"

Once his mother was safely away—she apparated the moment she was beyond the wards—they 
returned to the school, thankfully not seeing either Potter, and up to the tower for Durmstrang. Only 
once they were inside Harry and Dudley’s room did Harry relax properly.

"I’m kind of hoping she just lets us portkey back. I’d skip the train if I could, but that wouldn’t be very nice to Draco and 
Luna."

Dudley shrugged. "We’ll find out soon enough. But I agree with you. There’s no need for our 
mothers to come to the station when we can just portkey out. It’d be different if those two were going 
with us straight away, but they’re not. Anyway, I’m gonna get ready for bed."

He turned away and 
go for his trunk.

Harry arched a questioning brow at Viktor and tilted his head toward his trunk; when Viktor nodded 
he went to open it at the dressing room. Shortly thereafter they were in his practice room on the sofa.

"I’m really happy for you, and proud. Was it bad in there?"

Viktor just leaned in and kissed him, threading his fingers through Harry’s hair, and deepening 
the kiss almost immediately. He was so intense that Harry began to have trouble regulating his breathing, 
and he was soon enough pressed back against the cushions. He lost track for a bit after that, lost in 
the sensation of kissing Viktor, his hands roaming freely over his boyfriend’s back and up into his 
hair, and almost yelped in surprise when Viktor’s hips started to grind against his, sliding their cocks 
against each other through the fabric of their trousers, causing a delicious friction.

He moaned into Viktor’s mouth and slid his hands down to clutch at his boyfriend’s hips. Viktor 
shoved a hand between the cushion and Harry’s back and dragged it down to just above his tailbone, 
helping to guide Harry’s movements. In no time at all, when he was pushed into delirium, aching and 
anxious and dying for it, Viktor moved more roughly and sent him over the edge. Harry’s head 
snapped back as he cried out harshly, calling his boyfriend’s name. Viktor followed him over the 
edge, burying his face in Harry’s neck and biting, breath hot and moist.

A few minutes later, after Harry had regained his senses, Viktor loosened his grip and pushed 
himself up a bit only to dip his head briefly to give Harry a sweet kiss. The look on his face, 
though. . . .

"Viktor," he said tentatively, "what happened in that maze?"

Viktor swallowed audibly before replying. "There was a boggart in there."

Harry’s eyes went wide at the implication. "Oh," he said inadequately, feeling a bit ill and more 
than a little horrified—and deeply touched.
Viktor kissed him again. 「I’d like to stay tonight, in here. Is that all right?」

He nodded and slid his hands back up. 「Of course. Oh, Viktor,」 he breathed. 「Come on, let’s go clean up. Then we’ll go to sleep. Okay?」

Viktor nodded and extricated himself from their embrace, grimacing slightly as he did so. Harry could only assume it had a little something to do with the issue of their enthusiastic bout of frottage. A hand came down to help him up and he gladly took it, allowing Viktor to assist him to his feet. He smiled faintly, kissed his boyfriend again, and pulled him into the bedroom and beyond into the bathroom.

「You know where everything is. Pelk will clean your things. I’m going to go get a fresh set for myself and take my shower when you’re done.」

Viktor shook his head. 「No. Shower with me. It’s fine.」

His brows went up in surprise, but he nevertheless nodded. 「All right.」 That boggart must have scared the hell out of Viktor and stomped on his heart. He didn’t even want to imagine exactly what his boyfriend must have seen. He nodded again and started stripping down, setting everything off to the side, then stepped into the shower and started the water, thankful that it was always just the right temperature. A glance down had him blushing and he quickly rinsed away the evidence. He had completely drenched himself and moved back when Viktor stepped in.

He smiled; Viktor really was quite skinny. He found the shampoo and lathered up his hair, then lifted his net sponge off its hook and squirted some bath gel onto it. By then Viktor was soaked, so Harry quickly scrubbed himself down and switched places, handing off the sponge, so he could rinse off. If he happened to covertly eye his boyfriend in all his naked glory, well, who could honestly blame him?

A short time later they were dried off and wearing sleep trousers and under the covers. Viktor pulled him close and sighed. 「I almost feel as though I took advantage of you.」

Harry shook his head. 「No. Don’t go there. I know I’m about to sound too old for my age again, but there’s nothing wrong with what we just did. We’ve both wanted it, our clothes stayed on so you didn’t break your rule, and I’m pretty sure I understand what prompted it. You did surprise me. You did not take advantage of me. If you need to hear it I’ll say it. I forgive you. I just don’t think there’s anything to forgive. And, Viktor—wow! Just wow.」 He shifted and twisted so he could see Viktor’s face and was surprised and pleased that his boyfriend was blushing, visible even in the low light. 「Let’s just sleep.」

Viktor nodded, grabbed his wand long enough to extinguish the lights, and pulled him close. Harry wanted to say something about how it was over and he was fine, but depending on what Viktor had seen a statement like that would probably come across as being unfeeling or insensitive. Just because he was fine now was no guarantee that he always would be. He was subject to a prophecy and Viktor knew it, and just because they were the “good” guys did not mean that things would always go their way.

The next morning Viktor seemed less shaken up and they went through the day with relative ease, Harry of necessity skipping the repeat. Classes were a bit of a joke for the following span of days for him and Dudley, mainly consisting of their professors giving them work for the holiday and reminding them of what to expect the following year. Their remaining time passed easily enough, and the majority of anxious feelings came from Draco and Luna, both of them counting down the days until they would never have to return to Hogwarts.
Two days before the train would return them to London Harry got a message on his bracelet from his mother; they were good to use their portkeys from the station. That was a relief; he had been unable to not imagine his father showing up at the station and honing in on his mother, and heaven only knew what might happen under those circumstances, even with two schools worth of students and parents and guardians milling about.

「That is good news,」 Viktor commented with a nod. 「I will be joining you in two weeks.」

He smiled. 「After you visit with your parents, naturally.」

「Naturally.」 Viktor paused, had a casual look around, then leaned in to whisper, 「And I do not plan to tell that what happened in there.」

Harry shook his head; they absolutely did not need to know that, despite it giving quite a bit of insight into the depth of Viktor’s feelings.

「I will wait until you and Dudley have departed to leave, just in case. While I would normally say you should just portkey from our compartment, it would be politic to meet Draco’s parents, and Luna’s father first, and that means disembarking. I already have the means of my own departure so I’ll be leaving a mere second after you.」

He nodded, somewhat in relief. He did not really think that James Potter would go after Viktor, assuming the man had even properly registered who had initiated the retreat, but the thought of Viktor being there alone made him uneasy. 「Poliakov and Bergfalk could be nearby?」

「Yes. I will ask them. A layered defense that hopefully none of us will need.」

The next evening was the Leaving Feast, a cause for relief for Harry, and no doubt many others of Durmstrang. This sojourn in another’s territory was almost over. They would pack up, sleep, consume breakfast, and finally get back on that train. Dudley and Draco and Luna were almost beside themselves in excitement (though it was difficult to tell with Luna). Draco would be leaving behind his two hulking shadows, not to mention the uncertainty of residence as a member of Slytherin, that base lack of anything resembling friendship and trust. Luna would be leaving behind the sneers and contempt and bullying, and a head of house who apparently could not be bothered to defend his charges, nor punish or educate the transgressors.

They repaired to his secret rooms again that night after a walk around the grounds, as it would be their last night together for some time. They got ready for bed, even though Harry had every expectation of having to shower and change again shortly—well, assuming he could coax Viktor into some fun. Once under the covers he snuggled up to his boyfriend and began idly tracing his fingers around on Viktor’s chest, teasingly dipping lower on occasion.

Viktor eventually got tired of it and reached up to capture Harry’s wrist firmly, then flipped him onto his back. He was quickly having the life snogged out of him, and once he was breathless, Viktor slid his mouth off to the side and went for his neck. Harry arched, lifting his hips, seeking that friction. His boyfriend responded by shifting his left hand into position to press Harry’s hip down, preventing him from trying to direct things. Only when he was good and ready did Viktor seek out Harry’s mouth again and begin to grind and thrust against him.

Harry was easily reduced to moaning into Viktor’s mouth. His boyfriend was amazingly strong, commanding, and sure for all that he suspected Viktor was no more experienced than he was. Viktor seemed to know just exactly how to move against him, with that suggestion of roughness that undid him, that dominating yet not overpowering violation of his mouth—his head jerked back as he came, Viktor’s name on his lips again.
Several minutes later Viktor said quietly, 「You are a tease.」

He snickered softly. 「I would only be a tease if I didn’t follow through. And it is one way to see if you’re in the mood without being obnoxious about my interest.」

Viktor responded by nipping gently at his lower lip, then began to move away. 「We should clean up.」

Harry wholeheartedly agreed and almost cast Candlelight; instead he simply readied the spell in one hand. The resulting glow emanating from the cradle of his fingers was more than enough light to see by for the moment without the potentially painful brightness actually casting it would provide after being in the dark for as long as they’d been. A quick shower and a change of sleepwear saw them back in bed, this time to actually sleep.

He dreamed that night of Viktor taking him for real and was subsequently surprised when he woke that it was not to a sticky mess. Breakfast was seasoned with excitement and shortly thereafter they were all situating themselves in compartments on the train. Viktor did not immediately join then, choosing instead to sit with Bergfalk and Poliakoff in the next compartment down for a while.

When the train did begin to slow in preparation of stopping at Platform 9¾ Viktor excused himself again to check in with his friends. Harry and Dudley exchanged a look and got their trunks ready, kicking them to release the wheels and then extending the handles. A slow shuffle ensued down the corridor to the nearest exit and once on the platform they waited for Draco or Luna to find family.

Draco was first, spotting his father, and raised a hand in restrained greeting. Mr Malfoy made his way over to the group, his expression just shy of cold. “Draco,” he greeted his son, reaching out to briefly clasp Draco’s shoulder. “And these are your friends?”

Draco nodded. “Yes, father. Allow me to introduce. . . .”

If Mr Malfoy recognized the name Evans he showed no sign of it, though he did seem faintly pleased that his son could name Viktor Krum a friend. Luna’s father arrived part way through the introductions, causing Draco to restate the names the man had not been in time to hear. After it had been established that portkeys would be delivered in due time for Draco and Luna to visit, the two fathers led their children away to clear spots before transporting them away.

Edward had been seen hovering off at some distance, eyeing the group, but he had made no move to approach. That changed when Mr Malfoy departed, so Viktor nodded to Harry and Dudley. They nodded back and with firm grips on their trunks, activated their portkeys.

Harry portkeyed to Hrothgar to spend time with Valdis, his brief ‘lesson’ with her being almost incidental in his mind. Absorbing yet another soul and flying in that blissful sensation caused him to miss that someone else had portkeyed in. When he came down from his high and slid into the customary slight depression he caught movement in his peripheral vision, causing him to pivot warily toward it. He absolutely did not expect there to be a strange female there with dark hair, pale skin, and glowing eyes, decked out in clothing very much like what Valdis had favored.

“Serana, I presume,” he said carefully. It probably did not escape her notice that his hands had twitched much like he was about to ready spells.

She tilted her head and gave him a slow smile. “Yes. You’re obviously Harry. I’m very pleased to meet you. Valdis has said quite a bit.”
He let his hands relax as unobtrusively as possible and nodded. “I have very much looked forward to meeting you. Shall we be seated?”

She nodded and took a spot at one end of the bench, angling so she could see him and Valdis with equal ease. “You look surprisingly like Tom,” she commented.

He shrugged. “Perhaps having absorbed so many of his memories has altered the way I express myself to the outside world. Mannerisms alone can create a resemblance that would not otherwise appear physically.”

Serana smiled again. “So, you are this curious amalgamation of magicka and wizarding magic and the blood of a dragon. How does this affect your life?”

Well, she certainly didn’t waste time when it came to asking about what was on her mind. “Oddly,” he said honestly. “I am, like Valdis, very much annoyed by the Greybeards and their bizarre outlook on life and their power. As such, aside from the odd practice session, I have been unable to do much with it. Magicka is amazing, though limited in comparison to wizarding magic. But for that... I came very close to breaking down when I learned I was so disadvantaged. I will never be the equal of even an average wizard, but I do have certain advantages, obviously, so I suppose it evens out.” He huffed a laugh after a moment and added, “Offensively I suppose I can be quite deadly.”

Serana grinned, showing off her deadly canines. “A little Chain Lightning to get people’s attention?”

He laughed. “Maybe. But I have a lot of work to do with Destruction and Conjuration. I’ve been unable to practice them properly except during the summer months. Tom takes me on hunting trips. My mother doesn’t really want to see me laying waste to the local wildlife so she stays out of it. It would be easier if I had the opportunities you and Valdis had,” he said, casting an amused look at Valdis, “to go tomb raiding and have any number of draugr to test my skills against. Or have innumerable Thalmor to sneak up on and shiv in the kidneys.”

Valdis laughed. “I admit, it was often fun. There is something wickedly satisfying about creeping around in the shadows and dealing death with such swift precision, or even in just robbing someone blind.”

“I know I never minded dealing with those who thought the only good vampire was a dead one,” Serana said, “or the innumerable bandits who thought they would intimidate us out of our wealth.”

Harry laughed along with them, then sobered. “I remember what you said all those years ago, Valdis. I know that the first time I have to take someone’s life I will probably be violently ill, maybe even for more than that. It was hard enough as it was to take down my first deer. But I know that there is some confrontation out there waiting for me.”

“I will help you,” Serana said quietly. “When the time comes I’ll be there, guarding your back.”

Harry felt his eyes inexplicably go wet; he swallowed against the sensation and blinked a few times.

Serana just nodded slightly and promptly said something to Valdis, allowing Harry time to compose himself. The three of them spent the next several hours talking, though Harry spent a lot of that listening. Valdis was even more loquacious with Serana there to add her own thoughts or perspective on any given event. He thought, during the short ride back home, that it would be very easy to like Serana.

The next few weeks were a blur of practice, and he was still repeating days, determined to get as much done as he could. Viktor showed up on a sunny Saturday just after breakfast, a smile
brightening his face when he saw Harry.

“I can stay for a month,” Viktor informed him. “But the mastery program starts up mid-August. I’m afraid I’ll have to get settled back at Durmstrang then.”

Harry nodded, happy and disappointed at the same time, then angled his face up in the hopes of a kiss, which Viktor promptly gave him. In deference to the rest of the family sitting there finishing off their morning tea a quick kiss was all it was. Viktor greeted everyone and took a seat, accepting a cup of tea for himself.

“You’re sure you don’t mind me staying for so long?” Viktor asked Lily.

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t mind and neither does my sister. You’ve been a friend of the family for years now, even if it’s only been recently that we’ve become closer. You are very welcome here. Now stop asking such silly questions.” She and the others left shortly thereafter, Mary trotting by to take care of the dishes piled into the sink.

“I finally met Serana,” he said. “She’s really nice and just as amazing as Valdis. She told me that, when the time comes, she’ll be there. I kind of lost it for some reason.” He shrugged lightly. “She took it in stride, though. Didn’t make a big deal out of it.”

“. . .I look forward to meeting her. I missed you.”

He smiled widely. “I missed you a ton. Letters are never the same. And hey, now that you’re here, we can do things like see films and visit places! All the stuff we could never do at school. Speaking of which, do you have your scores back yet?”

“Yes. Straight Outstandings,” Viktor replied with restrained pride.

Harry beamed. “I never doubted you’d do well. I suppose your parents already made a big fuss?”

Viktor rolled his eyes a little. “Yes. All my favorite foods. Bisera was a little put out by it all, but I suppose she was just doing what little sisters do: be a pest.”

Harry smirked at the idea. “Oh! The latest gossip. . . . Well, actually, let’s get you settled first, then we could take a walk and I’ll fill you in.”
“So what is this gossip?” Viktor asked as they walked.

Harry had decided to take his boyfriend on a stroll around the area, down various paths outside of town and through the woods. “Well, it seems that my mother told Snape she had no intention of setting foot back in the UK unless she had to so the only relationship they could have is one of friendship. Apparently Snape didn’t much care for that and promptly resigned Hogwarts. He’s moved into town, actually. Decided to start his own apothecary. It also seems that he screwed up his courage and got a message to Tom, asking for some languages.”

“Oh, wow. What exactly was his relationship with your mother before?”

“They met when they were kids. Snape witnessed her doing some accidental magic and used that as a way to talk to her. He spent a lot of time away from home because his father was an abusive drunk and his mother disowned from her family for marrying a muggle. Not that I told you that, of course.”

“Of course,” Viktor said smoothly.

Harry smiled. “They became best friends, went to Hogwarts together, but she was sorted into Gryffindor and he to Slytherin, and you’ve seen that rivalry. Despite that they somehow stayed best friends. My father and his friends, all Gryffindors, were absolute beasts to Snape and took great pleasure in bullying him. Mum always defended Snape when she could, of course, but it all eventually blew up. Snape was getting in too deep with the pure-blood bigots and future Voldemort supporters, for one thing. But what tore it was an afternoon shortly after their OWLs. Snape was just minding his own business when my father and his cronies showed up to bully him again, and this time they humiliated him so badly that my mother witnessing it saw Snape losing it. He called her a mudblood.”

Viktor frowned. “I can see where that might make your mother strongly reconsider the friendship. If it had just been a heat of the moment reaction that’d be one thing, but the build up to it is something else.”

“Exactly,” he said with a nod. “And let’s face it. Most people at fifteen or sixteen aren’t the epitome of mature or worldly and experienced. You play the cards you’re dealt, and not always well. The other factor was that Snape fancied himself in love with mum, and she knew it on some level. Anyway, eventually, my father managed to reform enough to stop causing so much friction between himself and mum, and, well. . . . But later on, when Snape realized just who the prophecy might refer to he tried to save her, begged Voldemort to spare her, and luckily for all of us Tom actually listened. So now Snape sees a second chance, especially since mum and my father parted ways years ago.”

Viktor let out a vaguely disbelieving huff. “It is not every man—or woman—who would drop everything and move to a new country just for a chance at blossoming an unrequited love.”

“I’m just surprised he got away with it,” Harry said, reaching out to pick a wildflower. “Dumbledore supposedly kept Snape from going to Azkaban as a Death Eater and has kept him close ever since, more or less forcing him to teach Potions. Mum says he’s brilliant at Potions, but most likely a poor
teacher. Even Draco says he has no business teaching, not kids, anyway. So he’s here. And he’s been over to dinner a few times already.”

“Does he know? Your identity, I mean.”

He shook his head. “I guess if it really goes that far I’ll let mum know it’s okay. It’s got to still be twisting him up inside, that conflict. I notice he tends never to actually look at me if he can help it, and that I obviously look like my father’s son can’t help. Not really sure how I feel about all of it. Yes, I want my mother to be happy, and if he’s it, all right. It’s just so strange the idea that he was a Death Eater, and technically still ‘belongs’ to Tom.” He shrugged and tossed the flower aside.

“Has Tom said anything about hunting trips yet?”

“Ah, we did a few in the woods, but they only hold so much game. We’re going to have to go farther away from civilization. I have this weird feeling, though, that he’s been waiting for you to get here, which makes me wonder just what he has in mind.”

Viktor reached over to take his hand before saying, “Well, whatever it is I expect it will be interesting. Tom doesn’t strike me as the type to—” He shrugged. “I expect he’s going to step things up, and an extra person on hand would be a wise thing.”

That had not occurred to him, though why not also escaped him. They walked in silence for a while, simply enjoying each other’s company and the day, then Viktor asked, “Is that offer still open for me to do repeats with you?”

He blinked and looked over, a little surprised. “Of course. Do you want to add in another bed, then?”

Viktor hesitated, then shook his head. “I think we can behave ourselves. But we will check with your mother. The more work I can get done ahead of time. . . . And besides, I would like to try to see if I can use the aetherial spells.”

Harry smiled at him. “Okay. I’ll grab one of the spell books and you can give it a try. Maybe you could learn enchanting, too, though that requires a whole lot of soul gems. Still, if we’re going hunting it means it’s easy enough to get them.”

Back at the house he rummaged through the shelves in his room and found the book for Candlelight, a novice-level Alteration spell. He held it out, but before letting Viktor take it he said, “To explain how this works. These books are magical themselves, so when you read it you’ll be getting more than just words on the page. You’re going to sense things, like how it feels to actually ready and prepare and cast the spell. You can kind of think of it like someone giving you their memory of how to cast a new spell, except not really. It’s hard to explain. So. . . .”

Viktor nodded and accepted the book, taking a seat in the nearby reading chair. Harry grabbed the book he had already been reading for pleasure and sprawled on his bed, and when he glanced up a while later Viktor seemed engrossed. His mother poked her head in a chapter later and smiled when he looked up, then took a closer look at what Viktor was reading; her brows went up.

Harry quietly got up and went over to her, drawing her back out of the room and down the hall. “He wanted to try an aetherial spell and I saw no reason not to give it a shot, so I gave him a copy of Candlelight. He’s been at it steadily, but I can’t honestly tell if it’s working.”

“Huh.” Lily looked a bit nonplussed. “You know, if he can do it, I might just start learning them myself. For all I know Petunia could learn them. Whatever it is that awaits you out there—well, it might not hurt the least bit to have options not available to anyone else. At the very least for Petunia,
because then she’d have a way to defend herself that wasn’t, you know, a firearm.”

He nodded. Having Petunia try hadn’t occurred to him, either. “Oh, mum. Viktor would like to do repeats with me so he can have more time working at spell mastery. He wants your permission first, because it’d mean him sleeping in there, well, repeatedly.” He snickered.

His mother shot a “why me?” look at the ceiling and smiled at him. “Well. . . . I want your word. No intercourse until you’re sixteen.”

“You have it,” he said seriously. “And we already made an agreement with each other not to until then. I asked him straight out what his limit was and he told me. My only question would be when, technically, do I turn sixteen, but I’m thinking it’d be safer all around to wait for the official day.”

She nodded. “The official day, preferably. You know the ministries are fussy about this whole illegally meddling with time thing. It’s not like you can get pregnant or anything, honey, but still.”

“You’re a really cool mother, you know?” he said and hugged her. “Something tells me most kids can’t talk to their parents like this, that they don’t feel they can be honest.”

Lily gave him a misty-eyed look at that. “You’re probably right. Okay, lunch will be soon, but if Viktor is still absorbing that book I’ll set something aside for him. We’ll see. One of us will wander by when it’s time.”

He nodded and went back in to resume his reading, but didn’t get three paragraphs when Viktor sat up straight and caught his attention. He eyed his boyfriend curiously, setting his book back on his bedside table.

“That was incredibly weird,” Viktor finally said. “I see what you meant, though.”

“So. . . .” He watched as Viktor looked down at his hand like he’d never before seen it, and stared. Nothing happened, even after a minute.

Harry sighed in disappointment. Maybe part of why he could was as compensation for his weak core? A core which might be weak because of Tom’s attack on him? Or because it was deliberately limited due to the other gifts he was given? “That sucks. Well, lunch is just about ready. And mum said it was fine, you doing repeats with me.”

Viktor nodded, then frowned. “Lunch?”

“Yes. You’ve been, er, assimilating that for a while now. Learning them takes time.” He shrugged and slid off the bed to reclaim the book and add it back to the case. “Now come on. Let’s wash up and see if they need any help.”

Viktor nodded again, a bit absently, and stood. Several minutes later they were in the kitchen and Harry offered their help. His aunt smiled and shook her head. “No, it’s fine. We’re almost done. But if you want you can set out the table.”

Harry nodded and started grabbing plates, which Viktor took from him, then cutlery, then napkins. By the time Dudley wandered in to check they were ready to eat. Naturally, at that moment Snape was ushered in. Harry heaved a tiny sigh; it was just too weird, the idea of his mother falling for someone who wasn’t his father. He was not about to stand in her way out of some selfish desire to keep her to himself, but it was all still very weird.

He ended up sitting across from the man again and realized part way through his chicken parmigiana that Snape was again doing everything to avoid directly looking at him. He finally got fed up and set
his cutlery down with a clink. Harry took a deep breath, looked at his mother, and said, “Just tell him. Because if he doesn’t stop doing that I’m going to chuck a wobbly a two year old would be jealous of.”

His mother tried very hard not to smile, and almost succeeded. “Okay.” She scooted her chair over toward Snape and crooked her finger at him, then whispered in his ear once he leaned in. She returned to her proper spot and began eating again.

Snape looked up at him squarely; he gave off a bare hint of bemusement.

Harry tilted his head and arched a brow questioningly. “So, can I hope that you will stop acting like I’m the elephant in the room? Please? I’m starting to develop a complex here.”

“It’s not good for his delicate psyche,” Viktor said seriously.

Harry reached over without looking and smacked his boyfriend. “Can we get past that I look unfortunately like that—sperm donor?”

A gleam of amusement lit Snape’s eyes for a moment. “You could always dye your hair red,” the man suggested.

He considered that, eyed his mother’s hair, then looked at Viktor, who shook his head. To Snape he said, “Nn, no. But I, at least, have been taught what a comb is.”

The tendons in Snape’s neck flexed, telling Harry he had provoked the man into forcing back laughter.

Harry favored the man with a small smile, then looked down and reclaimed his utensils, and began eating again.

“Viktor?” his mother said. “Did it work?”

“No, though apparently I was . . . reading . . . far longer than it seemed to me.”

The corners of his mother’s mouth drooped down and Harry knew she had to be thinking of her sister. “Well, it was worth a try,” she said.

Unfortunately, Harry would have to keep checking in with his mother before practicing out back, to see if Snape would be dropping by. That would not be an issue if he knew, of course, but it would still be nice to be able to practice at home rather than in his trunk or wandering in the wilderness. “I wonder if it would work against transfigured animals,” he muttered and had another forkful of chicken.

“Experience?” Viktor asked.

“Hm? Yes. Not trapping, but. . . .”

His mother tapped his wrist and arched a brow at him.

“Destruction,” he replied to the unasked question, his eyes flickering toward Snape.

His mother’s brow furrowed and she looked down, but Harry could see her gaze cutting slightly toward Snape for a moment. “It’s all right if he knows,” she said.

“. . .We can try after lunch,” Viktor offered. “Just because an animal is created doesn’t mean it won’t attack.”
“You okay with that, mum?’”

“Ah... Let me think here. What sort of animal are we talking about? Because rabbits aren’t likely to attack. This isn’t a Monty Python skit, after all. And I don’t think I want a bear in my back yard.”

Harry’s head swung back around to Viktor.

“How about a boar?” Dudley suggested. “So long as you were high enough above it that it couldn’t reach you, that is.”

“It’s only cheating if the other guy does it,” Harry said, grinning at his cousin.

“I think I could manage that,” Viktor said slowly. “We would either need a pit or an enclosure with scaffolding to stand on.”

“Well, all right,” his mother said after a moment. “You can try after lunch. Severus, will you help keep an eye on things?”

“. . .Yes.”

“Thank you.”

More than half the room was incited to eat faster at that point and lunch was over quickly. Harry retrieved some potions for himself, just in case, then joined the others out back in time to hear Snape saying, “A pit would be safer. An enclosure could be rammed into, causing people to lose their balance and fall.”

Viktor nodded and the two of them began to dig up part of the yard with their wands. Half an hour later they had one six feet deep and ten feet square. Viktor picked up a rock and tossed it in, then transfigured it.

Harry readied Ice Spike and nailed the boar with it. It squealed in pain and anger and began searching for a way to get to them, so Harry began lobbing spikes at it every few seconds, keeping count as he did so to get an idea of how tough it really was. At the same time he was “listening” to that odd little internal sense that surfaced whenever he was using aetherial spells.

The boar finally went down and reverted to its base, and Harry lowered his hand. “Okay. Can I have another one, Viktor?”

His boyfriend transfigured the rock again, but this time Harry readied Firebolt and used that, again keeping count. “It took one less, so—” he muttered. “Okay.”

“Is it helping?” Dudley asked.

“I think it is, actually.” He fished a potion from his pocket and knocked it back, putting the empty vial in his opposite pocket. “Are you okay for another one, Viktor?” Thirty seconds later he was sending Lightning Bolt at it, focusing even harder on that hard to grasp sense. Once the boar was dead he smiled. “Yes, I’m pretty sure it’s working. I’m actually getting somewhere.” He grinned and pulled Viktor’s head down for a kiss. “Thanks for the suggestion, Dudley, because I was drawing a blank. And thank you, sir, for helping with this,” he said to Snape.

“May I ask what exactly did this accomplish?” Snape asked.

“Well, to be blunt, I’m defective when it comes to wizarding magic. But there’s—”
“Wait,” Snape interrupted, shaking his head. “What do you mean by ‘defective’?”

Harry sighed. “I started having trouble my third year, so when I got home I brought it up with Tom and my mother. Tom ran some tests. My mean core strength is below average. It’s extremely doubtful I’ll ever be able to do the higher level spells. If I’m lucky and I keep grinding away at it I might be able to manage NEWTs in wand classes, but I’m not going to bet on it. I should know soon enough if I’ll have to drop those after the OWLs and stick with my other classes.”

Snape looked faintly shocked, then his brow furrowed just a bit and Harry assumed his brain had just kicked into overdrive trying to figure a few things out. “And what you were doing?”

He nodded. “There’s another kind of magic I’m capable of without the same limits. The problem is that some of it can’t be mastered unless it’s used in real circumstances, hence the potentially deadly animal,” he said with a nod toward the pit. “Just like with wizarding spells, mastery grants you a stronger result for less effort, though some of the other benefits differ. In this case, however, it means I can do it for longer, more times, if I’ve mastered the particular discipline the spell comes from. And, until today, none of us knew if it would work for anyone here but—” He paused, hit by a thought, and shot a look at Dudley. “I wonder. . . .”

Dudley looked at him quizzically, then gasped. “Oh. I see where you’re going with that.”

“You think your aunt might be able to,” Viktor said, “because she’s classed as a squib.”

Harry nodded. “Maybe? I don’t want to dash her hopes by suggesting it, but if it works she’ll be able to defend herself. I’d rather my aunt be packing Chain Lightning and not a gun.”

Dudley snickered. “Let me talk to her about it, okay? If she agrees to try I’ll get a book from you.”

He smiled. “Right.” He paused again, then sat down on the grass and started worrying the hem of his shirt. “Now, the real question here is whether or not there’s an animal small enough that would work and that I could transfigure.”

Viktor nodded and sat next to him. “Right, because I can’t be there during all your practices to keep providing the animals.” He scratched the back of his neck absently and let his hand drop into his lap.

Dudley wandered off at that point, though Snape stayed, choosing to take a seat with them. They were still thinking about it, Harry plucking blades of grass and peeling them into thin strips, when Tom showed up and asked just how many people they planned to bury.

Harry’s head snapped up. “Tom! Query, O Wise One! Please bless us with your wisdom!”

Tom scowled at him so murderously that Snape flinched back. “Wise ass. What is it?”

So he explained.

Within a minute Tom replied, “Wolverine, honey badger, Tasmanian devil.”

“Did you absorb a complete copy of the Encyclopædia Britannica when I wasn’t paying attention?” he asked.

Tom favored him with a sarcastic smile. “Now, see, I was planning to take you tomb raiding in Egypt, but now that you’ve solved the essential problem. . . .”

Harry perked up. “Tomb raiding? Really?”
“...No. Your mother would kill me.”

He flopped back and growled, then asked hopefully, “When I’m an adult?”

Tom nodded. “You might already have mastered everything by then, but it would be one way to get you experience with something human.”

He sat back up with a grin. “Will you help me to learn to transfigure one of those? I wouldn’t even know where to find one to study.”

Tom nodded again. “Of course, Harry. It will be a few days, but yes. Now, your mother has finally hashed things out with Petunia and given permission regarding Valdis. We need to pick a place for a sepulcher.”

“Above or below?”

“Either, but appropriately warded or within the existing wards here. The latter is preferable, because then I don’t have to do as much work.”

Everyone got up, and they delayed that decision long enough to fill in the pit and put the turf back in place. While they were doing that Harry was thinking about what was included within the wards, then led them off to one of the back corners of the ward lines. “It’s not in line of sight to any of the windows in the house,” he explained, “which means it won’t be an obvious reminder of us keeping a corpse. Because really, I’m not sure Aunt Petunia will ever quite get a handle on that part of things.”

Tom nodded. “Sensible enough. This will do. It’ll be more trouble for me to transport Valdis and all her ‘relics’ than it will be to build the structure.”

“I won’t even ask,” he said with a shake of his head. “You’ll be giving Serana a different set of portkeys, too?”

“Yes. Now, go away. I have work to do,” Tom said, including all three of them in that.

Harry reached out and squeezed Tom’s forearm in thanks, then sprinted off to the house. Viktor was right behind him, and once inside the house Dudley popped up with a nod, so Harry headed upstairs to get the book. “Just get it back to me whenever,” he said. “I realize she may dither a bit over actually reading it.”

“Sure,” Dudley said, then disappeared.

Viktor grabbed him and pulled him into a hug. “I’m happy for you,” he said quietly. “Once you learn how to do that transfiguration it will be so much easier. Perhaps Tom can come up with some kind of cage with a magical barrier that prevents physical passage, but still allows magic through. Then you could just keep a stone inside like I used earlier and keep reusing it.”

“I wish it could have worked for you,” he whispered.

“It’s fine,” Viktor said, holding him tighter for a moment. “I already have all the magic I need. It was still an interesting experience and I’m not sorry I tried. I hope that it works for your aunt, though. She’s likely gone her whole life always thinking she’s second best and a part of her must be bitter what with her sister and son and nephew capable of it.” He pulled back and gave Harry a kiss. “I’m also happy that Valdis will soon be away from a place she dislikes so.”

“Yeah. And for Valdis, too. You’ve not met them—gods willing you never do—but the Greybeards are so infuriatingly pacifistic about their power, and more than a little pushy about how the dovahkiin
should be using theirs. I’ve wanted to get her away from there almost since I met her. But, this kind of talk is a bit depressing. What say we go check the newspaper to see if there’s anything playing in town we could go see while you’re here?”

Viktor nodded and stepped back. It was only as they were walking down the hallway that Harry noticed Snape had probably been there for some time, out of direct sight leaning against a wall, listening.

Four days later Tom wandered into the house just prior to lunch and joined them at the table. He made mention that Valdis had been rehoused and needed to show them how to access the place. Harry forced himself to eat at a decorous pace and not just shovel his meal in at light speed, and participate in the conversation. Snape was there again and a part of him was wondering just when his mother would be announcing a wedding date.

After the meal Tom led the group (Petunia opted out, unsurprisingly, and Dudley really wasn’t interested and didn’t need to know) to the sepulcher and explained how to access it. Inside the room looked very similar to where she’d been housed at Hrothgar, except there were “windows” to provide relief from the monotony of grey stone.

“Hello, Valdis,” Harry said cheerfully. “You’re finally free of the old men!”

“That I am,” she said with a nod. “I see there is someone new to meet.”

His mother smiled and said, “This is Severus Snape, an associate of sorts of Tom’s and a friend of the family. Severus, this is Valdis, one of Harry’s teachers.”

“And,” Harry said, spying a familiar reddish glow, “lurking over there in the corner is Serana.”

She chuckled and came forward, stopping next to Tom. “Hello, Harry.”

“I hope it’s dim enough in here even with the windows,” he said.

She nodded. “It’s fine.”

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you,” his mother said. “I’m Lily, Harry’s mother.”

Serana smiled. “Likewise. Tom has told us that this area is protected, so we may go for walks outside the structure.”

His mother nodded. “I’ll make sure my sister and nephew know.”

“Harry, it’s time I show you how to do that transfiguration,” Tom said. “Let’s go to your work room.”

“All right. I’ll be back later to visit,” he promised, then followed Tom out and walked with him up to his room. He brought them both through to the work room and Tom worked him like a dog that afternoon. When they were finally done for the day Harry brought up Viktor’s suggestion.

Tom nodded and said he would think about it, and then informed him they would be doing this during the afternoons until he had it down. Harry took from that not to plan anything for some time, unless it was for the mornings or evenings, and then said, “One thing. If we’re doing this in here I can’t do repeats. Can we practice in the sepulcher so I can still get in my usual practices?”

“Yes, that’s fine. I’ll just section off an area inside there temporarily. I’ll be back tomorrow, either for or after lunch.”
With that they exited into the house and Tom disappeared. Harry went back downstairs to see that Viktor was helping his mother and aunt with dinner and joined in by getting the table set. As he worked he let them know what Tom had said, then casually asked if Snape was still around.

“Hm? As far as I know,” his mother replied. “He was quite busy chatting away with Valdis and Serana. I suppose having access to two such ancient beings was too much for him to resist. One of us may have to go bodily pull him away.” She shook her head in fond exasperation.

“I have to admit,” Petunia said, “I find it all a bit creepy, even having known of things like this for years.”

Harry smiled at her. “It was a little bizarre being at Hogwarts and having ghosts floating by randomly. And Serana is the first vampire I’ve ever met. But still, ghosts aren’t quite the same thing. Those are like, er, echos of the person they were, I guess? Valdis is something else entirely. Just think of Valdis as being physically challenged.”

Petunia shook her head lightly at the idea, a tiny smile on her lips. “I’ll try,” she promised.

He wanted to ask if she had read that book yet, but decided it was the better part of discretion to refrain. If she had done so and succeeded he expected he would already know. If she had failed she was in a surprisingly good mood. Otherwise, she had to still be screwing up her courage.

“When are Draco and Luna coming exactly?” Petunia asked.

“Oh, er, the last week before school. It gives them some time in a mostly muggle area—maybe Dudley and I can take them to see a film, for instance—and then they’ll portkey with us to school. We can help them get their supplies, too. We already made sure they had our notes from the past years so they have a much better idea what to expect in terms of the difference in teaching styles and general thought processes.”

“I never would have thought Durmstrang would be so superior,” his mother commented, “not after all those years of hearing the nasty things about the place. Just another lesson in not taking things at face value, I guess.”

Petunia decided to go all philosophical on them when she quoted, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”
“So, I arrived early,” Serana said, “thinking to scope the place out before the meeting. Well, he also arrived early and went to the bar, ordered a few things, then took a small table in the corner. Sat down, back to the wall, pulled out a book to read. One of the girls delivered a glass of wine and a cheese plate—you know, crackers, grapes, a variety of cheeses.”

Harry nodded, leaning into Viktor.

“I saw his wand come out briefly, so I assume he was checking for tampering, but after that he flipped open his book and started reading, working his way through his order. He didn’t even seem to be concerned about possible attacks, or checking to see if I’d arrived yet. This was a shady dive in a bad part of town, so you’d expect differently.”

“So you just watched him for a while?”

She nodded. “I figured I’d wait until he was just about done. It was odd, though. It was almost sexual, the way he ate.”

Harry blushed; somehow Tom and sex just did not click in his mind.

“He was just about finished when I walked up to him. He looked up, nodded, and gestured to the other chair. I sat down and looked at him—I admit I was very curious—and he looked back, slowly putting a piece of cheese in his mouth.” She shook her head. “It wasn’t until he drained the last of his wine that he spoke. Within a minute after that we were portkeying to Hrothgar. He didn’t stay long.”

‘I may never look at the man the same way,’ he thought, his gaze shifting to the side.

Viktor shook his head, smiling, then said, “It’s about lunch. We should be going.”

Lunch was sandwiches. Afterward Harry went off with Tom back to the sepulcher to work on that transfiguration. The evening was devoted to card games. Unfortunately the paper hadn’t turned up anything of interest when it came to films except for Batman Forever—they got them later than the Americans—and even then it was not all that great. It was rather a dry year for entertainment in his opinion.

His repeat was spent doing the usual while Viktor worked hard on mastering wizarding spells, but he was extremely frustrated. Transfiguration up to this point involving inanimate to animate life forms dealt with simpler, more passive creatures. The additional load of a proper carnivore over a herbivore was pushing him to his limits, and it was becoming obvious to him, especially after looking over the syllabus for Transfiguration again that he would have to drop that as a class after the OWLs. Charms was a bit easier, but it still looked bad. Same with Offense and Defense. He was in a seriously foul mood that evening, not a state he usually succumbed to.

Viktor noticed—he would have to be blind not to—but did not patronize him with “comforting” words. Instead he led Harry into the kitchen, reversed one of the chairs, and sat Harry down. “Uncover your torso,” he said blandly.
Harry frowned as his lip curled up. He was already cranky and this mysteriousness was irritating.

“Uncover your torso,” Viktor repeated patiently, his head tilting slightly to the side.

He could feel his nostrils flaring in frustration, but after several long moments he shrugged and did as Viktor asked, setting his clothing on the table.

“Now, please sit backward.”

Despite himself he was becoming rather curious, so he didn’t hesitate, and promptly stood up and resumed sitting, facing the back of the chair. A very short time later Viktor placed a hand on his shoulder and pulled to get him to lean back a little, shoved an elongated cushion in between his chest and the chair, then released him. He saw Viktor grabbing the other chair and moving it behind him, then heard him sitting.

A moment later strong hands came to rest on his shoulders and Viktor said, “A massage. And done this way there is much less temptation. Okay?”

A smile crept onto his face; he nodded, relaxing against the cushion. He quickly found, as Viktor’s hands slid over the flesh of his back, that motion plus heat plus moisture meant a delicious kind of friction that had him rolling his eyes in pleasure. He surrendered against the cushion fully, letting his arms dangle, and just let Viktor have his wicked way. Squeaks and groans and moans escaped his throat when his boyfriend’s thumbs would dig slightly, either pushing up the expanse of his back or in circles, or when he used his nails to scratch on the way back down, or when all his fingers would go after his shoulders and neck. Some timeless span later Viktor gently swept his hands down Harry’s back and pulled away, causing Harry to sigh in disappointment.

“A massage doesn’t erase the cause of your frustration or ease things long term,” Viktor said quietly, “it just gives you a bit of a respite. But my hands are tired now, so . . . .”

He slowly sat up, stood, and sat back down properly, then leaned toward Viktor, who obligingly gave him a kiss. “Thank you,” he said, smiling fondly.

“You’re skinny,” Viktor replied, smiling as well.

“Hey! You’re one to talk,” he said, reaching out to poke his boyfriend in the chest. “Maybe we should be doing weapons work together.”

“Well,” Viktor said thoughtfully, “that would give you an outlet for the problems, and both of us know healing spells. Do you think Serana would help get us started? I noticed she carries a dagger.”

“I think so. I’ve only done a little bit with a dagger myself. I’ve concentrated more on the bow because it’s a distance weapon.”

Viktor eyed him and nodded. “Well, it shows in your arms. Put your stuff back on so you don’t lose more heat.”

While Harry did that he thought about his boyfriend’s suggestion. Given how much he had wanted to kick and destroy things earlier, perhaps learning how to fight with a dagger was a good idea. He would never have it in mind to maliciously hurt Viktor, but the purely physical exertion would have a calming effect on him overall. It would also help with stamina, and Restoration for injuries along the way. Having Serana ease them into it was better than flailing around until they figured it out. He nodded, looking at Viktor again. “If you’re up for trying, so am I.”

“Agreed, then,” Viktor replied. “We can ask in the morning—Valdis if Serana isn’t there, so she can
pass on the question if necessary.”

He was content enough later on, when they went to bed, that he refrained from teasing his boyfriend—much. Actually, he thought the hair on Viktor’s chest was simply fun to play with. It was soft and silky and felt nice between his fingers. Viktor took it as the offer it partly was and some time later he had been subjected to a cleaning spell and pulled close. Apparently his boyfriend was feeling too comfortable or sleepy to get out of bed for a shower. Harry supposed it made no difference and the shower could wait until morning; he felt awfully sleepy, as well.

Serana agreed, during her next visit, to teach them the basics. She also pointed out that everyone should learn their own, personal style. Some were more agile, some more forceful. Her words made sense.

When his birthday rolled around he and Viktor had been through three lessons and his days—both types—were incredibly busy. At least three mornings a week on dagger work, afternoons for lessons from Tom, and his repeat days were filled with spell mastery. Only his evenings were free, though all of it would change to some degree in a fortnight. Viktor would have to return to Durmstrang and a week after that Draco and Luna would be arriving.

Like other birthdays it was a quiet day, with nothing in particular to mark it as different aside from some of his favorite foods appearing at lunch. James’s treatment of Edward had produced a curious effect; honest, sincere praise was fine, making a fuss wasn’t; and marking the date of a solar revolution was nothing to get especially fussed over. ‘It will be,’ he thought, ‘next year, but for entirely naughty reasons. And the year after because I’ll be an adult. And the year after because I’ll be done with school unless I try for a mastery in something.’

Viktor’s gift to him was a simple enough fountain pen, except that he had gotten help from Tom to enchant the ink cartridge to never run out. It was certainly easier to use than a quill and produced a cleaner line. It made him feel slightly guilty about not having given Viktor anything on his birthday in May, but his boyfriend had made it quite clear that he wanted nothing after the presents he had already been given in connection with the tournament.

That evening, as something of a treat, Lily and Petunia brought home the rental of a VCR and a copy of Star Wars. Viktor was fascinated, even though it wasn’t being displayed on one of the huge screens found in a cinema. Snape had showed up just before they all got comfortable and handed a package to Harry, then joined them in drinking purely muggle soft drinks and eating buttered, salted popcorn during the film.

Afterward Harry opened the package he had set aside to find a set of annotated Potions books. A faint smile crept over his face as he examined some of the writing; these were the words of a master. “Thank you, sir,” he said quietly. “These will be very useful.”

“Severus,” the man replied.

His eyes widened as he looked up. “Thank you,” he repeated, nodding gently. “Maybe I can become a Potions Master, or come up with new ways to runically enchant things.”

“And how have your Potions classes been going?”

“Well, I think. Byquist isn’t exactly in love with them, but Viktor says Dahl is, and I’ll have Dahl from now on.”

Viktor nodded. “Dahl is a much more enthusiastic teacher. For Byquist it’s just a job. And I think better than you admit,” he said, giving Harry a look. “You always get Outstandings on your Potions
Harry ducked his head for a moment. “Yes, well. Just as well that we get a better teacher for OWL and NEWT years. Byquist is good at teaching the basics—safety, reactions, preparation—and the lower level potions.” His bracelet twitched so he looked down. Tom had sent a message telling him about a gift in his work room. He hoped it was the cage, but it would have to wait until the repeat. After clearing the message he added, “I don’t take Creatures, but Dudley does, so between the two of us. . . .”

Snape nodded, hesitated, then said, “I would like to speak with you privately. Viktor is welcome to join us.”

He eyed the man—was this where a discussion of his mother came up? “All right. Let’s go take a walk.”

Ten minutes along one of the walking trails Snape opened with, “You already know that your mother and I were friends.”

“. . .Yes, she has recounted more than one fond memory to me,” Harry replied.

“Moving here might be seen as idiotic.”

Harry deliberately misunderstood the underlying meaning and replied teasingly, “Are you saying there is something wrong with Norway and her peoples?”

Snape looked over sharply, but relaxed on seeing Harry’s expression.

Harry cleared the emotion from his face and continued, “What is so strange about a person choosing to depart lands of such lingering pain and sorrow? To be near the one person they counted as friend for years?”

“You know what I aspire to,” Snape replied, being rather blunt.

“Yes. My mother is candid with me,” he admitted. “Not one hundred percent, because that would be weird, but candid enough. Now that you’ve stopped giving me those looks—how did I put it again?”

Viktor looked him in the eyes, seeing his mood, then went thoughtful, obviously searching his memories. “Ah, yes. I believe you likened it to a pederast considering which dark corridor to bugger you in.”

Snape choked on his saliva and went into a coughing fit.

“No, well,” he said, trying not to laugh. “If you are what makes my mother happy, then okay. The other side of that coin should be obvious. My mother has always been my defender and protector, even when that meant having to send me away from those four. I will do the same in return.”

“I believe we understand each other, then,” Snape said, recovering from his little fit. No doubt he had never, ever meant to give that sort of impression during meals in the Great Hall.

Harry nodded and began asking questions about Potions, and the resulting discussion filled their time until the way brought them back to the his home. Two days later Snape ushered Harry’s mother out for a “date”. He also noticed, that evening, that the book he had loaned his aunt was back on his bedroom shelf. Either Petunia had decided against trying, or had tried and failed. He acknowledged to himself it was back and let the issue drop in his mind.
Viktor left on another sunny day, having waited until after breakfast. Harry was sad to see him go and got a lingering kiss to tide him over, but knew it would only be a few weeks. So much of his time was caught up in work that the time he had with Viktor was precious to him.

Then Draco and Luna arrived. Their portkeys dropped them in the yard out back, away from the sepulcher. Luna was led up to the recently vacated guest room and Draco to Dudley’s room. Thankfully Harry had mastered the transfiguration he needed by then so he would not have to explain why he kept disappearing during the afternoons.

Once those two were settled in Harry and Dudley brought them back downstairs and into the dining area for lunch. Luna immediately started making plans with Petunia for a hair-styling session. Dudley looked a bit bemused by that and quickly began a conversation about quidditch with Draco. ‘Boring week incoming?’ he wondered.

Luna and Petunia disappeared once the meal was over, giggling. Harry stared after them uncertainly, not wanting to know what it was that made a female giggle like that. Dudley and Draco had continued their passionate discussion of quidditch, including whether or not Dudley thought they could get Draco onto his team, but that was broken up—briefly at least—when Snape showed up to go over Potions with Harry.

Draco seemed terribly surprised that his erstwhile Potions teacher was there in Norway, but had apparently learned more of discretion (perhaps due to Tom) and said nothing even after his expression cleared. Harry and Snape spent a companionable afternoon going through what Harry had already learned, and he began to get a better sense of what the man was really like based on what he was seeing now and his mother had described.

Snape was a man driven almost from the start by “Light” bullies down the road to being “Dark”, or at least more so than he had started as given his mother’s family and the abuse he suffered. He had learned to fight back, but that only gave them more reason to call him Dark and step up the bullying. The only thing that brought him back from the precipice was the threat to Lily’s life, and at that he was part of the cause having been the one to overhear the beginning of the prophecy which had since helped to shape Harry’s life.

That had taken a minute for Harry to digest. He absolutely did not know how to react to the knowledge, but the uncharacteristically blunt delivery was indicative of Snape wanting things to be straight between them rather than have it come out later and be seen as a betrayal of any relationship that developed. That he could understand. A tiny part of him did wonder if Tom had given the man some “advice”.

Luna had done up Petunia’s hair, as seen at dinner, and indeed, she looked very pretty and even younger. The style was nice with blonde hair, though Serana was in a class of her own. They settled in to watch Star Wars again after the meal, so that their friends could experience the wonder of muggle technology. The two were enchanted, though Luna had a disconcerting habit of pointing out errors in logic and other flaws in a quiet voice.

All too soon it was time to return to school. All four of them had done their shopping and happily enough took up their portkeys to the school and activated them. Draco looked around wonderingly. “It’s so different here,” he said. “It’s a castle, sure, but it’s so cold looking. So forbidding. There is none of the warmth I’m used to.”

Harry nodded. “We’re a hardy lot here. Come on. We have just enough time to—oh, wait.” He scanned the arrivals area and located Ilsa, and called her over with a yell. “We have just enough time to get our things to our rooms. Ilsa, will you help with Luna?”
That being confirmed he and Dudley led the way to their room, having been assured it was the same one as always. Whatever had happened to close the school for so long had not impacted the living areas. Their room now had three beds, each against a different wall, though it made the arrangement awkward for desks. The other awkwardness might have been Harry doing his repeats, but he knew that Draco was unlikely to be up early enough as to wonder what was going on during those times Viktor might join him. And speaking of Viktor—his face broke out into a smile as he wheeled his trunk over to his bed and parked it.

Draco put his at the foot of his bed for the time being and Dudley did much the same as Harry did. Then they took off for the dining hall. Just outside the doors was Viktor, who smiled on seeing Harry and approached. An arm was slung around his shoulders two seconds later and he was pulled close.

“Do you actually do anything work-wise today or is this afternoon for settling in?” Harry asked.

“We get a break today because of the returning students. After that it’s back to the grind,” Viktor replied, guiding him to a seat.

“Did you at least get this morning off?” he asked, smiling when Viktor sat next to him. Ilsa, Dudley, and Luna sat across from them and Draco to Harry’s other side. Vasilka, Luna’s room mate, sat next to Luna.

“Yes. Any day I don’t have practice I can be here, in theory working myself silly on my mastery. Though, being here to get a mastery means I can come and go anyway, so if you people are nice to me I might consider topping off sweets supplies.”

Harry bumped Viktor’s arm and then when Karkaroff smacked his goblet with a knife for attention turned his focus that way. They got the usual speech, but at least Karkaroff seemed to be a bit more focused than he had been at Hogwarts, and less disinterested. Kozlov looked relieved. Maybe they had just been really discomfited by being out of their usual surroundings? Their comfort zone? Or maybe they disliked Dumbledore that much.

“At least they seem back to normal,” Dudley commented quietly, unknowingly echoing Harry’s thoughts. “And we’re finally back home.”

“So to speak,” Draco said.

“Right.” Dudley nodded, then smiled when the food made its appearance.

When the weekend hit Harry sat down with Luna to see how things were going. She happily enough informed him that things were fine. The mentor system at Durmstrang made it very difficult for bullies to get a toe-hold; no one wanted to bring down the wrath of the upper years for making them get involved in idiotic disputes and younger years trying to assert dominance.

But for Harry, he was having a difficult time. Not his classes, even the wand ones, because he had already taught himself those spells and knew he could perform them well enough to pass. He had been feeling exceptionally moody of late and prone to snapping at people. Viktor noticed and hauled him off into the trunk’s dressing room one evening.

Once the outer door was secured Harry burst out with, “What is wrong with me!? You never acted like this.”

Viktor drew him over to the bench and sat him down, joining him a second later. “Yes, I did. I was just better at hiding it. Your physical self is still maturing, Harry, things keep changing. Your mind as well, for all that you have rigorously trained it. A part of you is chafing so hard against the rules and
restrictions, against your very personal problems, and that you cannot simply go out and do whatever it is you feel like doing.

“Believe me, I felt it, too. It seems to hit the more powerful more strongly—and before you say it, your cousin is a good wizard, but he is not particularly special in terms of power. You may not be a strong wizard, but you are strong in the arcane arts. I wonder at times if I found my beginning studies with you on Occlumency to be easier simply because I had so much practice keeping myself calm.

“You need to be aware of it, and you need to use what you’ve already learned to make it dissipate when you don’t have the option to go shatter something or get in some practice with me. Okay? I absolutely don’t want to hear that you’ve been resorting to something like calming potions, because those don’t solve anything, just give you a temporary reprieve from learning to control yourself.”

Harry lowered his gaze to the floor, considering Viktor’s words. He did feel restless, a bit trapped, and certainly frustrated by things beyond his control. He was frustrated right that moment for not having thought to use Occlumency to even out his mood. Maybe because sometimes feeling angry and breaking things was satisfying? It really wasn’t right to let his bad mood affect others, people who had done nothing wrong. Perhaps he should move his Occlumency practice to the mornings so as to help it carry through the day rather than doing so before he slept.

He nodded and said, “You’ll pull me aside again if you see—” He waved his hand around vaguely.

“Of course,” Viktor assured him. “I would be a poor friend if I did not haul you up short on occasions like this—if I did not take the time to listen or try to help—if I did not try to offer you alternatives to losing it.”

He nodded again, exhaling a bit noisily. “I’m dropping the wand classes after OWLs.”

Viktor nodded. “Do you still plan to go as far as you can with them, privately?”

“Mm. I’m already into the sixth year spells, but it’s so hard,” he said tiredly. “I’ll master what I can of them, but I’ll be concentrating more on mastery of the aetherial spells and completing the fifth year spells. I don’t like it, hitting this wall, but it’s there and I have to admit it and not bash my head against it.”

“That sounds reasonable. Do what you need first, then give some time to the rest. When you do want to fit in our dagger training?”

“Um. . . .” Viktor was probably going to be horribly tired a lot of the time. “We have two choices, I guess? Evenings before your mornings off or the opposite. Or, well, it depends a lot on your schedule, right?”

“Tuesdays and Thursdays. Perhaps Saturdays since I have the weekends off,” Viktor replied. “Well, unless there’s a game.”

“That’s a given. Do you think it’d be possible to charm a target for my work room to move erratically within a certain scope?”

Viktor looked a bit puzzled by the request, but nodded. “I don’t see why not. Maybe even something runic.”

“I can’t get any better with a bow if my aim is for shit,” Harry explained. “Draw strength? Sure. I have every intention of being able to use Valdis’s bow, but if I can’t practice against something that moves. . . .”
Viktor nodded again, then smiled a bit oddly. He eyed Harry for a moment, then said, “I can always get you the equivalent of a wind-up muggle mouse toy to set loose inside.”

He snickered, his mood lifting.

Over the course of the year Draco and Luna relaxed even more. Luna had a steady support system in place and people who genuinely wanted to spend time with her, and not just Dudley with his romantic notions. Draco was learning what being friends with someone actually meant, as opposed to the wary system of suspicious bartering any Slytherin was taught. Someone you could depend on to have your back—and not be readying a knife to stick in it? What a concept!

Draco had found out fairly quickly that money meant very little. It had to cost a fair amount to attend Durmstrang, so having money was a given. Flaunting it was just a way of saying you had horrible insecurity issues. In some respects it had been easier for him at Hogwarts, being friends with them, because they did not fit into the established hierarchy there and he could act as he wished. At Durmstrang he had to learn a whole new set of rules. “I think my father is a bit surprised,” he said one day.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“I’m starting to see that kids are taught some really weird lessons at Hogwarts,” Draco replied, “and it skews things. I can see now that my parents are actually rather lucky. Sure, they had the usual pure-blood marriage deal, but they do care for each other. It’s not just an agreement. I think he’s surprised because I have friends now, not hangers-on.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “I don’t think my father has any friends.”

“One of the things I found most difficult about Hogwarts was the house system,” he said. “The idea that at eleven years old you get pigeonholed into a group. How after that people stopped paying attention to who you were and simply saw a symbol, and made a whole lot of assumptions about you based on that. If you were a Gryffindor you were stupidly brave and reckless. I look at my mother and shake my head. If you’re a Hufflepuff you’re too stupid, too cowardly, and too naïve, and only good for drudge work. I don’t think anyone can say that about Diggory.”

Draco nodded. “Or my ‘friends’ Crabbe and Goyle. They’re honestly too thick-headed to be Slytherin, but I think they went there because of tradition. They probably would have been better off in Hufflepuff with people who cared about bringing them along. It’s not all wine and roses here, though.”

Harry smiled in amusement. “We do have wine, though,” he joked.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Yes, which is a nice thing. It’s very easy to get tired of having pumpkin juice poured down your throat at every opportunity. No, what I meant was that it’s rather stiff here.”

“Oh yes. I agree. I noticed that almost straight away. But the school seems very concerned with propriety. I was shocked to see some of the things that happen in the hallways at Hogwarts. Viktor tells me it still happens here, but it’s all private. They want us to be mannerly. I also think that explains the mentor system to some degree.”

Draco looked thoughtful, then actually blushed, pink staining his cheeks. “Yes, well, you guys must have been rather discomfited by that scene on the train, then.”

He nodded, a bit apologetically. “The word barbarian might have come up.”

Draco dropped his head and made a faint sound of distress.
“In all fairness, you were really excited. And from what I’ve seen of Potter he’s not easy to ignore.”

Draco sighed and nodded. “I don’t do so well when I’m excited. And Potter’s father is infuriating. Even when he starts it—if it wasn’t for Professor Snape—” He looked up, his brow crinkled. “And what is the story there? I’m glad he’s left because he was never, ever, happy teaching. I just thought it was terribly strange to see him at your house.”

Harry shrugged, unsure how much he should be saying. “I think,” he said slowly, “he saw an opportunity to get away from Dumbledore and took it without hesitation. He and my mother were friends back when they were in school—even before that—so why not Norway? Dumbledore seems to play favorites a lot, from what I’ve seen and heard. If he gets involved it’s always the Slytherin who comes off worst, despite all this noise about people deserving a second chance.”

Draco scoffed. “Yeah, sure. Second chances galore and a slap on the wrist for his favorites.”

“Did Snape do the same?”

“Well, maybe a little,” Draco admitted. “The professors were all too ready to take points from a Slytherin, unless they were one in school themselves. He didn’t seem to have any problems taking them from everyone else in retaliation.”

“Maybe he recognized that the points system was utter crap?” Harry guessed.

Draco looked shocked for a moment, then thoughtful.

“Okay, look at it this way. You have prefects who don’t really have much power and frequently look the other way. Half of them don’t take their positions seriously. On top of that you have a points system that applies against the house, not the individual. Someone losing a bunch of points may be vilified by their house mates and someone who gets a lot cheered. The individual means nothing unless they piss someone off, essentially. At the end of the year the house with the most points gets a useless trophy, and most of the people in that house probably didn’t even contribute much. It’s divisive and makes it hard for students to cross house boundaries. At least with the Quidditch Cup you have people actively working toward a recognizable goal in a sporting event.”

Draco looked even more thoughtful. “But here we have mentors who look out for their charges, and stop the problems before they get a foothold. I expect if they slacked off they’d lose the spot to someone else, and it doesn’t seem to be used here as a form of currency.” His head came up. “You’re right about the one thing, the House Cup doesn’t mean anything, though it does kind of teach something.”

Harry tilted his head. “Oh?”

“That winning it doesn’t mean you keep it and you have to keep trying and striving. Winning isn’t the end of the game.”

Harry smiled.
When they went home for the Yule break Harry was unsurprised to see that Snape was practically a fixture at the house. His mother had been saying a little less than usual, but he was more than aware that she and Severus had been dating steadily since the summer. He sidled up to his mother at one point and asked quietly, “Should I be preparing for a wedding?”

She blushed. “I don’t think we’re that far along yet, honey. Though if it does, we may have a fantastic fight about names.”

He arched a brow at her. “What, the name Snape?”

“Oh yes, I remember what his father was like and I can’t stand the idea of even potentially bearing that name. I’m just not sure if he’d kick up a fuss over it,” she said thoughtfully.

He shrugged. “The only reason I can think of for him to be attached to that name is simply because he’s known by it for Potions. But really, he’d probably be better off without it. We’re certainly better off without the name Potter.”

His mother grimaced, which made him curious. “I got a letter from your father,” she said, which explained it. “Why he waited so long I’ve no idea.” Before he could ask she continued, “He made some vaguely apologetic noises about that encounter after the third task, then turned around and started asking questions about this boy I’ve adopted and altered.”

‘Ah, Edward’s accusations coming to the fore,’ he thought.

“I set it aside. I don’t think I’ll bother responding to it. It’s not like I can explain—well, I could, but why would I?—and I don’t owe him one anyway. I suppose it just irks him that there’s some mystery and he doesn’t have a solution for it.”

He shook his head somewhat disbelievingly. “He really just takes whatever Edward says as the truth? I mean—okay, I get that you do with me because I’ve never had any reason to lie to you.”

“Well,” she said, casting an amused look at him, “you did rather demur that day when Tom popped up.”

“But I didn’t lie,” he reminded her. “I just think it’s weird. I wonder if his parents were like that.”

“Ah, well, they had him so late in life that they doted on him. It wouldn’t surprise me if they did take a lot of what he said at face value, but I have no way of knowing. But enough about him. When is Viktor coming?”

“The twenty-ninth. He’s spending the first week with his parents, sister, and grandparents.”

“Okay,” she said with a nod. “I’ll just send the gifts on ahead, then. Petunia and I made up a big basket of baked goods. Food is usually a safe choice.”

By the time Viktor had arrived Harry was done making his present. Taking Tom’s original idea, he

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had created a new bracelet for his boyfriend, but this one was double “woven” so that with one side
down it was much like the one he already wore, with waterbreathing and protection against magic
and elements. When flipped, however, it had all the same enchantments plus a full Chameleon effect,
Muffle, and various other helpful effects. He had also planned the “weave” carefully to take
advantage of the muted colours of the enchanted links and create a pattern of sorts, rather like
chevrons, and each side was different.

Even so, he was unhappy with the idea. The bracelet was still stylish and did what he required of it,
and would even usually be covered by Viktor’s clothing, so people would be unlikely to try to
summon it away from him thinking it was an artifact. However, his crazed fans might try, simply to
to say they possessed something owned by Krum. He went to Tom with his complaint—and an idea.

“You want to do what?” Tom asked, brows raised.

“Create enchantments that reside in the body,” he replied, then explained his thoughts about the
bracelet and his memory of a conversation they’d had ages ago about runic tattoos.

“Well, true, someone might do a thing like that. His earring, as well. As for you,” Tom said, eyeing
him, “it would mean not having to rely so much on heavily-enchanted gear.” There was a pause
where Tom had that look on his face that told Harry he was swiftly paging through his memory and
thinking furiously. “How well do those Restoration spells heal?”

Harry furrowed his brow, not understanding. “As well or better than magic, plus acting like a Blood
Replenishing potion.”

Tom shook his head. “Scarring, Harry.”

“Oh! Er, well? I haven’t exactly done a lot of damage to myself to see that.”

Tom made an impatient noise and pulled a knife out of his clothing, then slashed his arm. “Heal it.”

He stared at the bright red blood welling up, then snapped into action, prepping a Restoration spell.
Moments later he released it. If there was a scar it was so faint he couldn’t tell from that distance.

Tom brought his arm up to inspect it more closely after wiping the blood away with a cloth and
setting the cloth on fire. “Not bad,” he said. The knife went away. “Come on.”

Tom led him to the enchanter, where the man found a strip of silver, which they had found carried
enchantments quite well. He cut it to the size he wanted and buffed all the edges, then enchanted it
with what looked to be waterbreathing. Tom led him away again, this time to the sepulcher. Serana
happened to be there, so Tom said, with some amusement, “If spilling blood might tempt you, I
suggest you wander off.”

She smiled and shook her head. “No. What are you going to do?”

“An experiment, prompted by my young friend here.” Tom turned back to Harry and said, “Be ready
to heal me when I say.”

He nodded with a touch of uncertainty as Tom brought out his wand and numbed his entire forearm,
then used a spell to split his arm open to the bone, exposing the white in a sea of blood and glistening
muscle. Harry turned to the side and vomited, unable to help himself, but yet managed to see that
Tom was placing that piece of metal against bone and adhering it with a sticking charm.

“Harry,” Tom prompted.
He brought his hands up, aiming despite the heaving of his stomach and the dizziness staggering him, and released. It took several rounds to seal the wound from the inside outward, but it worked. All that remained was a thin white scar that dittany would probably remove. Then he turned and threw up again.

Serana came to tuck back his hair and keep a comforting arm around his shoulders. “It happens to all of us,” she murmured.

He could believe that, especially considering some of the things she had endured. When his stomach finally stopped rebelling he sat back against the wall.

Tom kindly banished the mess and took care of the blood, then flexed his arm thoughtfully. “I can’t feel it, but that was rather the point. Now to test it out.”

“And if this works?” he said a bit weakly.

“Then you’ve thought of something extremely useful,” Tom replied. “I didn’t feel a thing and it’s only a little sore at the moment.” His gaze slid over to Serana, who shook her head.

“I don’t know healing spells,” she replied to the unspoken question. “They would only harm me.”

Tom nodded and eyed Harry up again, making him feel a bit like a prize cow. “All right. I’m going to go test this. Thank you, Harry.”

When Tom did return it was with an anatomical model. Viktor had arrived shortly before and inspected the thing with bemusement. Tom ignored that and nodded to Harry. “It worked just fine,” he informed him, satisfaction evident in his voice.

He summoned up a smile. Despite his less than stellar reaction to seeing something of a person’s insides he was pleased. The smile tried to slide off his face when he realized what more he would have to go through in order to protect himself properly, and Viktor. Tom might be amenable to having it done, but he rather doubted his mother would. Just thinking about that sight made him a bit queasy.

“I’m going to do some enchanting,” Tom continued, his eyes bright. “Why don’t you explain to Viktor what we’ve been up to?”

He nodded and watched as Tom exited with the model in tow, then turned to his boyfriend with a smile. “It’s awfully cold out, but would you like to take a walk anyway?” Shortly thereafter they were bundled up and out on one of the walking trails. “So, I had this idea earlier when I was finishing up your present.” He reached into a pocket and pulled out the bracelet, offering it. When Viktor took it he said, “It’s much like the one Tom made, but this one is double-sided. If you look you’ll see the design is different. If you wear it with the random pattern facing up it’s like the one you’re already wearing. The other way gives you full Chameleon.”

Viktor tucked it away for the moment and nodded. “Thank you, Harry. But what does this have to do with a fake, skinless human?”

He laughed—almost giggled—and shook his head. “My mind was wandering while I was making it and something occurred to me that got me upset. You’ve got all these fans, right? And fans are weird. I started getting worried that one of them might do something awfully cheeky like try to summon away your earring or bracelet, so—”

“Right. They’d probably steal your underthings if they could get away with it,” he said dryly. “So I had this thought, based in part on a conversation Tom and I had ages ago, and I went to him to discuss it. I wanted to know if it was possible to put the enchantments inside.” He looked over to see a look of dawning realization on his boyfriend’s face. “Yeah. He dragged me off to the enchanter, did one up with waterbreathing, then dragged me off to the sepulcher. He—actually, wait.” He took a careful look around, making sure there would be no witnesses, then shook his wand out and extracted a copy of the event.

Viktor looked confused for a few moments, then produced his wand and looped the silvery strand around his own and touched it to his temple. Thankfully, Viktor didn’t say a word about Harry’s moments of weakness and instead focused on the import of the test. “Oh my,” he breathed. “That is a novel solution. And—and you want to do this to yourself. And me.”

“That was the general idea, yes. It scared me when Karkaroff came for me that night. When I was unconscious all those hours. He could have done anything he wanted to me, taken anything he wanted. And then as I said, your fans could steal your protections. The portkeys wouldn’t work for them, but still.”

Viktor exhaled heavily, his breath forming a misty cloud in front of them. “I assume then that Tom went to test it, based on what he said. He’s capable of breathing underwater with no problems from that addition.”

“Mm-hm. Though, I think if I go ahead with this, I’ll need some potions to stop me from getting sick again.”

Viktor snorted, sending out another cloud of mist. “And he just went off with that model so he can better decide how to shape the pieces against the bones. And possibly how to cut so as to avoid doing more damage than necessary to the muscles.”

He nodded; that was what he assumed as well. “If we go ahead with this I can just give you a simpler bracelet with only Chameleon on it. Or to go someplace people won’t normally see so they wouldn’t think to steal it.”

Viktor shook his head. “They never would see it, silly, not unless you did it as a double weave like the one you just gave me.”

Harry rolled his eyes; of course they wouldn’t. Viktor would never wear it unless it was required. “Okay. An unenchanted bracelet like the one you already have, because I like how it looks on you. And then one for Chameleon to save you having to use a spell for it. Everything else is pretty much a given—the standard stuff, anyway. I could see putting enchantments into the Chameleon bracelet for things to hide your heat signature and scent, because you wouldn’t normally care about them being concealed.”

As they reached the halfway point on the trail he changed the subject to Snape and his mother, and that carried them back the remainder of the way. “I’m thinking by summer, maybe.”

“He has been treating you well,” Viktor remarked.

“Yes. He’s surprisingly good one-on-one when it comes to Potions. Doing his damnedest to make sure I am the absolute best I can be at them.”

“That and he doesn’t automatically assume you’re an idiot,” Viktor pointed out.

“True.” He was pleased a bit later to be back in the warmth of the house. His enchantments helped
quite a bit, but there was nothing like the real thing. Viktor kissed his reddened nose before helping
him out of his heavy cloak and the two of them went to wash up before lunch.

His mother gave him a hard look once they were seated, but it was nothing compared to the look she
aimed at Tom. Lunch was the stew his mother and aunt had worked so hard on perfecting with more
of that wonderful crusty bread. The butter was nicely soft and easy to spread and the traces of it in
his stew from dipping the bread added a little something special.

It wasn’t until after the meal was cleared away and Mary was handling the dishes that Lily pinned to
two of them with a look. Viktor was included only incidentally. “So what’s this I hear about an
experiment?”

Harry turned to Tom and stage whispered, “How do they always know?”

“Harry,” she said sharply, sparing him a glance. “Now, Tom, what’s this all about?”

Tom pretended to be cowed, but Harry could see the gleam of amusement in the man’s eyes. He
explained Harry’s idea and what they had done to test it. After a very long silence his mother spoke
again. “I see. Harry is still underage, though.”

He went to protest but she cut him off.

“I won’t even allow his boyfriend to ‘insert’ himself into Harry so why do you think I’d allow this
just yet?”

Harry went bright red and Viktor wasn’t much better. Tom just laughed and laughed some more.
“Fair enough,” Tom said. “So we wait until Harry is a bit older.”

He fled the room as soon as he could, Viktor in tow. Once they were alone Viktor said, “She got us
both this time.”

Harry palmed his face.

By the time exams were over Harry was exhausted and thrilled to realize they would be going home
soon. He had given his all to get through his OWLs, especially the portions of wand classes where
he actually had to demonstrate his knowledge and ability. The examiners had been a bit taken aback
at his inability to use the customary and expected wand movements, but seemed fine once he showed
that he did, in fact, know them. One of them had actually nodded a few times and commented, “It
just gives you a leg up for the future, young man, much like already not needing to say the
incantations. Point-casting is something not many manage.”

Harry had taken that as a good sign and felt a tiny bit better about the whole thing. Either way he felt
confident he had at least obtained Exceeds Expectations for those OWLs, and probably Outstandings
for everything else. He and Dudley had agreed between them to take the Muggle Studies OWL,
despite never having bothered to sign up for the class or even crack a book regarding the subject until
just days before it came up on the schedule. It was an extremely unpopular class under Karkaroff’s
reign, but they had managed to track down a few people who took it to get some idea of what to
study.

The fifth years had even more free time than usual on their hands once they were over, as there was
nothing in the way of work meant to be done over the break. He wished they could just leave early;
what harm was there in letting OWL and NEWT students take off once their last exam had been
taken? Dudley was feeling pretty confident about his results, as was Draco. Luna had only the normal exams, but she was also pleased with her efforts, and had, over the course of the year, made friends with more than just Vasilka, often sitting in on mentoring sessions.

Sitting there at dinner, Viktor at his side, he couldn’t help but think ahead. Not necessarily to sex, though he did look forward to that, but more to the increased intimacy. And, of course, to the big experiment. He looked up at a question from Draco and nodded. “I don’t see why not. You could come for the last week again.” He already knew Viktor would be spending time with his family until mid-July before coming to stay with him until mid-August.

His time with Valdis from hereon out would just be time to be friends. She had taught him every Shout she knew, every word of power, and transferred the dragon souls to back them up and make them more powerful. His practice with bows had brought him to the point where he expected he could begin using hers. Maybe it was a bit crazy for someone living in the wizarding world to be so pleased by that, but she had always made sense, and he was no Gryffindor to go charging into the thick of things like some cheerfully laughing Nord warrior.

Or Barak. Or Mandorallen. He was a bit more like Silk or Velvet. For Viktor’s birthday he had gotten him a boxed set of books: The Belgariad. If he liked them well enough Harry planned to get him the second set for Yule. Well, assuming Viktor didn’t go out and track them down himself.

Thankfully, a few days later they were given the go-ahead and Harry was able to portkey home. Tom latched onto him before he was even able to unpack and dragged him off to the sepulcher, revealing a small table there with a bunch of enchanted metal pieces on it. “Huh? But I’m not even officially sixteen yet!”

Tom shrugged. “I eventually talked your mother into doing it a little early. Now, I also have a calming potion for you, and. . . .” He paused to sketch something in the air and make a jabbing motion at it. “So, we can . . . install . . . pieces in your legs and arms, spread them out a bit. One limb at a time.”

“What about the non-resistance ones?” he asked. He could see putting the ones against damage into each of the four places. While he could never achieve full protection—something about magicka and resistance enchanting refused to be used that way—he could get that percentage quite high. But the others? Did it matter?

Tom shrugged again. “Doesn’t matter. The waterbreathing enchantment worked just fine being in my arm. So did all the others.”

“Others? You mean you did the full deal? But—”

Severus arrived at that point, just in time for Tom to say, “Yes, all of them. Severus was there to heal me. And he’s here now as backup.”

“Oh. . . . Okay.” In truth, the idea of cutting himself open, or being cut open, was making his stomach rebel again. Perhaps it showed on his face because Tom gave him something of a sympathetic look.

“All right. Let’s go to your work room,” Tom said, and gathered everything up. A short time later they were inside his trunk, with Severus looking around in interest. Tom fetched a potion out of a pocket and said, “If’ll knock you out.”

He exhaled in relief and accepted it, then drank it down without really thinking. Before he lost consciousness he saw Tom rolling his eyes and heard him say, “Catch him, will you?” When he
woke up he was on his bed in the trunk and groggy as hell. He was also almost naked, he realized, tucked under the covers. ‘Oh hell,’ he thought, covering his eyes with one hand. ‘That must have been fun for them, me passing out on them and making them have to undress me.’

He rolled over and fell back to sleep, waking up again at around four in the morning. He took a shower and dressed, then settled into the chair in his proper bedroom with a book, and when six o’clock rolled around he kept reading. At least now when he bought new clothes he wouldn’t have to enchant them as he did every other time he grew enough. Well, fire resistance, perhaps, but of the sort to protect cloth and leather from burning. The last thing he needed was some crazed enemy trying to make him into a wicker man.

After breakfast he was hauled off by Tom and dropped into a lake without warning. It took him a minute of shocked sputtering to realize he was not, in fact, drowning, though his clothes. . . . ‘I swear.’ He was returned to the house dripping wet, much to his mother’s amusement, though Petunia was making upset noises about water all over the floor and up the stairs. It was not until he was in the shower that he thought to check for scarring; there was none. Severus must be really good at healing because he couldn’t even tell where they’d cut him open.

That made him feel a lot better, especially when Viktor arrived. He showed up after breakfast again and was stolen away for a walk after he had greeted everyone. Harry told him all about his rather embarrassing actions on that day, laughing at himself.

“But it works just fine.”

“Yeah. Tom dumped me in the middle of a lake the next morning, the bastard. But, now all I have to do with any clothing really is fireproof them. There aren’t any scars, either, so unless I end up going through some kind of muggle scanner I don’t imagine anyone will ever realize.’ He paused. “Well, I don’t really know what medical scans show, now that I think about it. If they only show injuries or also abnormalities.”

Viktor shook his head. “I don’t know, either, actually.”

Harry looked over and smiled. “Yeah, you who never seems to get hurt.”

“I fly well,” Viktor replied.

“And dodge well. Guess we can ask Severus.”

“And speaking of him,” Viktor said, “you haven’t said anything in your letters about potential recent developments.”

“Oh, well, no one has said anything yet, and it’s not like I’ve caught them up to anything.” He shrugged. “Do you want to go through with it?”

“Sure,” Viktor said easily. “I’ve had plenty of time to think about it and you have some valid concerns. Even now there are times when fans manage to get into the stadium during practices. I swear they get more clever as time goes by. It must take a lot of dedication to be stalker.”

Harry shuddered. “Idiots probably think that whole brooding thing you have going on is dead sexy or something and all you need is the right woman to make you smile.”

Viktor simply shrugged. “I’m sure they’ll figure it out at some point. Do you want to go to the World Cup final this year?”

Harry looked at him funny. “Bulgaria isn’t even in it this year. Why would I bother? I wouldn’t get
to see you play. I think Dudley may be trying, though, with Draco. It’s in Spain this year, right?”

“Yes. Spain and Germany. Well, come on. Let’s go do this.”

The insertion went well, and Harry even managed to stay conscious through it and not lose his stomach. His sixteenth birthday rolled around with little fanfare, though many of his favorites ended up on the table again during meals. He felt a little bad for Dudley given that his cousin’s birthday fell during the school year, but a care package always winged its way to the blond with favored sweets.

Viktor gave him some scented candles. “Now, I could say these are brilliant for meditation and your Occlumency and were chosen very carefully for that, but the truth would be that Bisera has taken up a hobby.”

“Your sister made these?” he asked, greatly surprised.

Viktor nodded, smiling. “I sort of wonder, assuming she keeps on with it, if she actually could make ones to help with things like that, or have effects like a calming potion—things of that nature. Anyway, I liked them very much so I bought some from her for you. I did request specific colours, of course.”

They were quite handsome, dipped in layers and carved and twisted. He wouldn’t be surprised if she had used magic for that part, to keep everything so smooth and flowing. “Well if she keeps making them I may start buying them myself. Seems to me each layer could have a slightly different effect. Or a mingling of scents.”

“I will let her know,” Viktor promised. “Perhaps she will show a little more interest in Herbology and Potions, then.”

Harry snickered. Bisera was one of those girls who thought dirt and ingredients were “icky” and tried to push the work off on a partner. “Well, perhaps I’ll ask Severus what effect it would have to burn a potion, or even certain herbs. I know sage is all right. It’s not really the kind of thing that gets covered in class.”

Viktor nodded, and, on seeing Severus as he entered the house, hailed the man and asked.

Snape seemed a bit surprised by the question, but quickly turned thoughtful. “Yes, it might work,” he finally said. “I’ll get you a list. And do some experimentation.”

“Well,” Harry said, mostly to Viktor, “even if your sister isn’t interested in the long run, I might be.” He thanked Severus and started gathering up his gift. “I think I’ll keep them in my work room,” he muttered. Viktor immediately gave him a hand as he offered his own thanks to Snape, and the two of them wandered upstairs and into his room, Harry setting aside his burden long enough to open the trunk.

As soon as they were inside the dressing room he set his burden back down and turned to face his boyfriend. Viktor quickly divested himself of his supply of candles and stepped closer, snaking one of his hands into the hair at the nape of Harry’s neck, leaning in for a kiss. Harry was thorough in his response, not to mention ardent, eventually breaking away to say a bit breathlessly, “Thank you—for the candles. I like them, and I like the colours you picked. You realize, of course, that I’m getting a lot more out of you on repeat.”

Viktor nodded, a slow smile forming. “As much as I let you,” he countered.

Harry narrowed his eyes.
The next evening, on repeat, they showered before bed, then slipped under the covers. Viktor was chuckling to himself for some reason and it was annoying the hell out of Harry. That being so, he said and did nothing once the normal lights were extinguished except snuggle up to his boyfriend and prepare to sleep. Yes, he would like to start plucking the hairs from Viktor’s chest one by one to express his irritation, but that would be childish.

Ten minutes later, as he was just in that twilight stage between waking and sleeping, Viktor flipped him over onto his back and loomed over him. “Hm?” he said sleepily.

“Okay. I deserve you ignoring me,” Viktor said.

“You deserve me plucking out your chest hairs one by one,” Harry replied, giving voice to his earlier inclination, “but I refrained. So why were you so amused?”

“Because I was finding it to be somewhat absurd, the idea of us making love in your mother’s house.”

He stared up, trying to see better in the almost complete darkness. “Why? We’re in the trunk. It’s not like anyone is going to hear anything. Besides, if you don’t actually mind, I’d rather wait until after we return to Durmstrang.”

“Oh?” Viktor laid back down, pulling Harry to him in their usual position.

“Yes. Because—well, as fun as it can be to tease and to have her be part of it, I’d actually prefer not to here so that if it comes up I can say with all honesty we haven’t yet,” he replied, idly playing with Viktor’s chest, tracing meaningless patterns.

“That . . . makes a certain kind of sense.” There was a pause, then, “So how far is your limit at this point?”

He grinned in the darkness and slid his hand down, teasing his fingers under the waistband of Viktor’s sleepwear. “These can come off.”

Viktor chuckled again and changed position, carefully rolling Harry to the side, then pushed the covers back and skinned the sleep trousers down his legs. He then shifted onto his side and reached out to assist Harry with his own.

Once they were both naked Harry slid his hand down Viktor’s chest again and, for the first time, skimmed his hand over his boyfriend’s cock. Viktor twitched and let out an odd noise that interested him greatly. It also interested him greatly that the skin beneath his hand was velvety soft, a contrast to the somewhat wiry texture of the nest of hair. “Close your eyes for a minute,” he whispered. “I’m going to light a candle.”

“Okay.”

Harry sat up and readied Candlelight, then slipped off the bed and fetched one of the candles using its glow to guide him, then returned and set it up and lit it. He shook the spell away and got back into bed, putting his hand back on Viktor, gliding his fingers over the skin. Viktor twitched again and Harry made the logical conclusion that the things he liked to do to himself were probably going to be things that his boyfriend also appreciated. However . . .

He scooted down the bed a bit and leaned over, purposely exhaling, and smiled when Viktor made that odd noise again. A quick look offside showed that his boyfriend’s visible hand was trying to clutch the sheet. It was so strange, watching his boyfriend’s cock slowly thicken and lengthen, the foreskin “disappearing” as it happened. He suddenly bent lower and ran his tongue along its length.
Viktor made a strangled sound.

The next thing he knew Harry was on his back. “You’re killing me,” Viktor whispered.
Harry struggled for a moment against his boyfriend’s hold, then said softly, “Lie back down.”

Viktor groaned and released him, then flopped onto his back. Harry grinned and sat back up, then leaned over his boyfriend and ran his tongue along Viktor’s cock again. One hand went out to grasp the shaft so he could suck the head into his mouth. Viktor thrashed beneath him and arched his hips, forcing his cock deeper into Harry’s mouth, accidentally choking him. He backed off quickly, coughing.

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” Viktor whispered.

He shook his head. “It’s okay. I didn’t expect any of this to go perfectly.” He leaned back in, then paused. For such a skinny man Viktor seemed awfully big. His tongue came out again, lazily gliding, then his hand, to grasp. He took his boyfriend’s cock in his mouth again and tried to do the things he thought he himself would enjoy. It really did not take long. Viktor was gasping and twitching under him like he was being continuously shocked and his hands were claws against the sheets. And then he came and Harry was afraid he would choke again. He pulled back a bit, still moving his hand, capturing his boyfriend’s semen in his mouth. The taste was . . . interesting.

Eventually he curled up against Viktor, careful to stay away from his cock. He knew from experience just how sensitive that part of a man’s anatomy could be after orgasm, after all. He just idly stroked his boyfriend’s chest, considering what he’d just done. One of the things he did not get from Tom was memories of sex. Either the man had never bothered in his pursuit of power, or those had been censored somehow from the mind of a one year old. Harry listened as Viktor’s rapid heartbeat slowed, as his breathing evened out, just letting his mind wander, and was subsequently surprised when Viktor moved.

He found himself on his back again with his boyfriend looming over him. “I think it’s my turn to explore,” Viktor whispered, and Harry could only nod dumbly. Viktor did not go straight for the end game, however, and instead started by kissing Harry until he was breathless, then went for his neck and ear, nipping and sucking carefully.

He squirmed, but Viktor was much stronger than he was and easily held him in place. That mouth sought downward, to his chest, and Harry truly began to understand what Viktor had meant by saying Harry was killing him. It seemed an age before Viktor had shifted far enough down to address Harry’s very real problem, and then he felt all over again that he might die soon if his boyfriend didn’t—“Oh,” he gasped and drew in a long, shuddering breath.

It was the last decent one he had for a while. His breathing quickly went haywire at the feel of Viktor’s warm tongue and mouth on him, his head was swimming, he was dizzy, and—“Viktor,” he cried, hands flying into position in his boyfriend’s hair. “Vik—tor. Oh god.”

Viktor moved away a minute later, flopping onto his back and pulling Harry to him. “Doing that felt almost as good as experiencing it,” Viktor whispered.

He hummed in agreement. “It was wonderful,” he replied softly. “You know, I think I’m in love
with you.” He could hear Viktor’s heart skip a beat and then thump once extra forcefully before settling back into a normal rhythm.

“I’ve been in love with you for a long time now,” Viktor replied. “I was in serious like with you for a long time, which always confused me because of your age. It kind of made me think something was wrong with me. And then there was the mystery that cropped up at the beginning of seventh year, making it even more complicated for me. Still, I decided I wanted to try, and you were a bit older by then and seemed interested, even if you didn’t really understand.”

“Then I guess it must have helped,” he said, “when the mystery was revealed, and later when the really huge secrets got shared.”

“Oh yes. That made it much easier to reconcile things in my head. And even your struggle. There is much to admire there.”

Harry began playing with Viktor’s chest hair. “Are you worried? I’m supposed to go up against some dark lord at some point and we still don’t have a clue who it might be.”

“Yes, I’m worried. But there you are, still coming up with ways to better protect yourself, to further your studies. And you aren’t alone anyway. You have your mother, and Tom, and Serana. Probably Severus and Dudley. Makes me glad I decided on trying for a mastery as my fall back option.”

He smiled and decided to lighten the mood. “I’m a little jealous that I’ve spent so much time strengthening myself to use that bow and you still flip me around and hold me in place like I’ve got wet noodles for muscles.”

Viktor laughed softly. “I’ll tell you a secret.”

“Yes?” he replied, curious, his fingers stilling their movements.

“I like being able to flip you around and hold you in place,” Viktor said, holding him closer for a moment.

“You big brute,” Harry teased. “Sorry, you big skinny brute.”

Viktor growled playfully and flipped him onto his back again, then leaned in for a kiss. “Ha, I am wiry, not skinny.”

Harry giggled. “I notice you didn’t dispute the brute part.”

Viktor kissed him again. “I was getting to that,” he protested. “And I can hardly be a brute when you so obviously enjoy my strength.”

“Oh, damn,” Harry replied with mock chagrin. “What gave me away?”

“Hm, let me think,” Viktor replied slowly. “Maybe how you get twice as excited when I get ‘brutish’?”

He blushed, not realizing it had been quite that obvious. “Well, maybe a little.”

“Mm,” Viktor hummed, somehow sarcastically, one brow rising up.

“Okay, a lot,” he admitted.

Viktor rewarded his truthfulness with another kiss. Harry reached up to keep him in place and parted his lips, inviting more. Viktor responded and was soon kissing him breathless again, shifting to cover
Harry’s body with his own. He could feel and welcomed that sweep of heat that rushed up his body as his boyfriend violated his mouth, and his other hand slid down Viktor’s back to his ass. He squeezed, that analytical part of him cataloguing how Viktor reacted, while the rest of him eagerly participated in the rousing kiss he was sharing with his boyfriend.

When Viktor went for his neck he whispered, “I can’t wait until I can feel you inside me,” then groaned when he was bitten, rolling his head to the side and arching his hips, badly wanting to feel that friction again. “Yes,” he managed to continue, “how it feels, with that bit of roughness I like so much—oh!” Viktor had begun to grind and thrust, shocking the air from his lungs. “It—already feels so good—but you inside—oh!—so strong—”

Viktor sought out his mouth again as his hips began moving faster and Harry started losing his mind again, the heat of blood rushing under his skin making itself felt even more strongly. He felt so dizzy and his heart was hammering away madly. And then Viktor did that move, introduced that roughness, and Harry was lost, his head snapping back, crying out his boyfriend’s name raggedly.

Several minutes later Viktor pulled away enough to reach for his wand and cast a cleaning spell on each of them. Harry could hear the quiet sound of the wood clicking against the side table, then his boyfriend rolled, pulling Harry with him. Viktor used a foot to hook the coverings and draw them up high enough to grab so they could get properly situated again, then said quietly, with more than a hint of amusement, “I had no idea you liked to talk dirty.”

“Neither did I, actually,” he said, snuggling closer. Before he even realized it he was asleep and waking back up at Pelk’s insistence. The candle had long since gone out—or Viktor had stayed awake long enough to use his wand to extinguish it. “Oh,” he said bemusedly.

The two of them threw on some clothes quickly and hustled into the kitchen. As soon as Pelk showed back up and gave the okay they headed out of the trunk to get ready for the day. Viktor was almost out the door to head for the guest room when he stopped, a slight frown on his face.

“What is it?”

Viktor smiled and reached up to rub his thumb against Harry’s neck. “I seem to have left some evidence.”

His hand flew up to cover Viktor’s, then grabbed him and hauled him back into the trunk so he could use the mirror as an actual mirror. There on his neck were “love” marks; one in particular was right where Viktor had bitten him after he had brought up penetration. “I’m surprised the enchantments haven’t healed it already,” he commented, then shook his wand out and cast a simple illusion to cover the damage. He turned a little and inspected the other side. “Okay,” he said. “We start checking from now on.”

Viktor nodded and pulled him away from the mirror and into a kiss. “Okay.”

With no obvious evidence no one said anything at breakfast, though he did catch his mother eyeing him with a vague sort of curiosity. He and Viktor went to visit in the sepulcher afterward and have a little practice fight with Serana, and things continued on more or less as usual until Severus arrived the next regular day for lunch. He and Harry went off for another Potions lesson and while the potion they were working on was quietly bubbling away Harry took a deep breath and said, “There’s something I’ve been wondering about and you seem to be the perfect person to ask.”

A brow went up questioningly before Severus eyed the progress of the potion, one that brewed at that stage for a variable amount of time based on the condition of the ingredients rather than a set time.
“I’m older now, and certain things are on my mind,” he said, embarrassed to realize he could feel heat pooling in his cheeks. “I expect that sometime in the near future my boyfriend and I are going to make love, and I’m a bit concerned about—” He broke off in surprise when he saw that Severus was also blushing, though it was just the merest stain of colour. “Er, pain,” he continued, feeling a bit better. “The aftereffects mainly, because anything during might make things both more and less enjoyable.”

Severus coughed quietly, his gaze firmly on the potion. “I see.” After a moment the man cleared his throat softly and straightened, rather like he was girding himself. “Yes, well, things would be different between two men.”

“Right,” he agreed. “I didn’t really see the point in asking Tom because I expect he’d have sent me to you anyway. He’s my mentor and protector, but you’re, er, becoming something closer to a . . . father, I guess.” He didn’t know that the man was angling for that in any way, actually, but he was already more of one to Harry than James ever had been.

Severus ducked his head for a moment, his fingers on the edge of the counter twitching. He had to wonder if, in addition to being touched in some way by that statement, if the man was debating the pros and cons of facilitating Harry’s sex life. The potion began to change colour and Severus straightened back up, gesturing toward it, so Harry proceeded with the next step, adding the diced frog livers he had prepared earlier and stirring it widdershins seven times. It bubbled briefly and started the slow change in colour from bright yellow to cream.

“I can think of a couple of things offhand,” Severus said slowly as Harry cleaned off the stirrer and set it on its rest. “You should have no trouble brewing them yourself. One for pain and one for any . . . potential complications.”

He frowned. Complications? He wished Tom’s memories covered this, but they didn’t, so he arched an inquiring brow at Severus, who blinked slowly and said, “Potential tearing, internally.”

“Oh,” he said softly. And given that Viktor liked to be a bit rough and Harry liked him to be—“Oh,” he repeated. “Okay, right. Yes, I’d like to know both so I also know what to stock up on and how far in advance to plan.”

Severus nodded. “They are seventh year potions, but I fully believe you’ll be capable of handling them. You’re already through most of what I’d consider sixth year, though I admit I’m not entirely certain of what you’re scheduled to learn this coming year.”

Well, he had that information already and could probably get his hands on the syllabus for seventh year as well. Even so, their text should, in theory, cover things. He called for Mary and, when she arrived, asked, “Do you know where Dudley is?”

“In his room,” she informed him.

“Will you please go ask him if I could borrow his copy of our Potions text? Mine is in my trunk so you can’t get to it. If he says yes will you bring it here, please?”

“Yes, master,” she said and popped away.

While she was gone he saw that the potion had completed its next stage, so he grabbed the next step’s ingredients, a mixture of ground porcupine quills and nettles, and added those in a slow trickle, constantly stirring clockwise. He thanked Mary quietly when she returned and set the book down, and continued the step, finally sitting back to clean the stirrer again and set it aside.
“Our text is done up by year and indexed,” he said, “so that should tell you well enough what I’m coming up on.”

Severus took the book and opened it at the front, running a finger down the page as he read. “All right, seventh year here as well. I’ll make sure you’re stocked here for lessons on those for next time,” he said, closing the book and setting it aside.

“And you’ll let me know what it’ll cost so I have supplies for the year?” he asked, already chopping lemon grass.

“Harry. . . .”

He paused and looked up, knife stilling. “What? You started an apothecary so I expect you’d know prices.”

“You don’t have to pay for them,” Severus said softly.

“Why the hell not?” he asked, frowning. “This is your livelihood we’re talking about. It took you a lot of effort to start your own business and find reliable suppliers with quality stock.”

“. . .I plan to ask your mother to marry me.”

He blinked slowly and said, “Okay, but that’s irrelevant to the issue. You run a business and I’m a customer. And on a side note, expect a discussion about surnames.”

Severus gave him a half-lidded look. “All right. I’ll write up a list of ingredients and their prices and bring that along with the practice supplies.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “I trust that the prices will be the same as you charge everyone else?”

Severus shuddered for a moment. “There are times when you’re too much like him. Yes, the regular prices.”

He almost smiled at the comparison to Tom, but instead frowned when he realized the potion was almost ready for the next step. He immediately began chopping again. “I’d appreciate that,” he said. “Look, you already give me a lot of your time and expertise. I’m not then also going to take stuff I want for free—not even stuff I need, rather stuff for my sex life. The very idea of it is just plain weird and this conversation is already pretty weird. I mean, okay, James wasn’t good for much other than helping to give me life, but he did have the decency to set up a basic trust for me so I do have discretionary funds.”

“All right. I won’t argue the point.”

When Severus did return the next time it was with the promised list and a new set of supplies. They spent that session making the pain potion multiple times to ensure that he was solid on its creation. Everything Severus deemed good enough was transferred to vials and labeled. The next session involved the potion for damage, and he again ended up with a fair amount to store. That did not stop him from actually visiting Severus’s apothecary, list in hand, to secure the ingredients he would need for the upcoming year. Once they were outside Viktor asked what it was all for.

He waited until they were a ways away before saying, “I had a talk with Severus about later on, asked him what potions I should be making. You know, for pain and whatnot.”

“. . .I’m sorry,” Viktor said, “that hadn’t even crossed my mind. He’s been teaching you, so we’re prepared?”
He nodded. “I have to look at this from a slightly different perspective, so it did come to mind for me, and I asked. I’m confident I can make what’s necessary and now I have the ingredients, too.”

Viktor slung an arm around his shoulders and asked, “And are you going to let me help pay for that?”

He grinned up at his boyfriend. “Well, yes. It’s not all fun and mind-blowing hormonal experiences.”

Viktor chuckled. “How about I pay you back for that since you’ll be doing the work of making them.”

“I can live with that,” he said with a nod. “Hey, I just remembered something, from first year.”

“Oh?” Viktor took the bag from him, saying, “Let me carry that. I wouldn’t want you to strain your noodley muscles.”

Harry laughed and smacked him. “Beast. Anyway, you said we could start taking a class on fighting come sixth year.”

“Yes. I don’t know how much it would help you, though. Bergfalk took the class, I recall. I can write him and ask.”

“Please. If it’s real tactics and stuff I think I might as well give it a shot. But if it’s just some silly bit about formal dueling I won’t bother.”

“I’ll write him as soon as we get back.”

Two things happened when they did arrive back at the house. The first was him and Dudley finally getting their OWL scores. It was supremely irritating to have to wait so long, and he had expected them to arrive much sooner, but they were at least finally in their hands. He had to assume the NEWT student scores took priority and OWL students just had to wait. Dudley ripped his open with enthusiasm and scanned the parchment, then crowed and shoved it at his mother.

“I’m going to guess he did well,” Harry muttered, then opened his own, Viktor looking on over his shoulder. His results were good. While Charms and Transfiguration were only Exceeds Expectations he had somehow managed to pull an Outstanding in Defense and Offense. His non-wand classes were all Outstandings, much to his pleasure.

“Impressive,” Viktor said warmly. “You worked really hard and it shows.”

“Harry?”

He looked up to see his mother standing there expectantly, so he handed the parchment over. A smile grew on her face before she stepped close enough to kiss his cheek. “Really well done, honey. I’m so proud of you.”

Petunia looked thoughtful. “One meal each,” she said. “Choose up, lunch or dinner.”

Harry and his cousin exchanged a look. “I’ll take lunch,” he said, knowing perfectly well that Dudley ate more and dinner would make more sense for him.

Petunia nodded when it became clear Dudley was in agreement. “All right. Let us know what you’d like. We’ll do it tomorrow or the next day.”

Harry nodded and turned to leave, mainly so he could get those supplies to his Potions compartment.
and to write to Draco about his scores. He and Viktor were all of two steps from the door into the hall when Tom appeared with a muted crack.

“Something very strange has happened,” Tom opened with, causing everyone to cluster around in front of him. “Four separate nuclear power plants in Japan have all gone into meltdown.”

“What?” Lily breathed in horror. “Four? Lord knows they have a ton of power plants over there, most of them non-nuclear, but . . . .”

Tom nodded. “I’m hearing that the wizard population over there has been playing a desperate game of damage control without the general populace getting wind of their help. They’ve been trying to create coincidences to help cover their attempts to contain the fallout, to keep it from spreading into the atmosphere.”

Petunia sat down with a thump, one hand covering her mouth, eyes wide and wet.

Viktor, alone amongst them as a pure-blood wizard, seemed at a bit of a loss as to their reactions. Tom noticed and addressed him specifically. “Nuclear power—there’s a kind of radiation associated with it, an invisible force, like some of the types of light from our sun. It can cause birth defects, horrible sores, cancer, and death. Radiation sickness is nothing to treat lightly. Two nuclear bombs were dropped on Japan during World War II and they’re still recovering from that in some ways. Muggles figured out how to turn bombs into power sources and those plants are all over the world, though mostly in America, Europe, and Japan. There was a partial meltdown at a plant in America the year before Harry and Dudley were born.”

“. . . The wizards over there, they know what to do, then?” Viktor asked softly.

“They’ve dealt with it before,” Tom replied.

His mother shook herself and said, “Okay. This is horrifying, but normally I wouldn’t expect to be hearing something like this from you. You’re suspicious?”

“A bit,” Tom said. “It does seem terribly improbable that four plants all started to melt down at the same time. Part of me is wondering if this is some kind of test.”

“A test of what, though?” Harry asked. “Against whom?”

Tom shrugged. “I have no idea. But I’m suspicious. Maybe I’m just paranoid over anything odd or maybe it’s intuition, I don’t know. I’ll be keeping an eye on various papers from around the world now.”

“And I’m going to be finding out exactly what the muggles are using here in Norway,” Lily replied. “Radiation sickness. I wonder if there are any books about magic against that,” she said softly.

Harry’s brow went up and he looked at Tom, stroking his arm where it had been, presumably, cut open. Tom nodded. “I’ll check.” Then he was gone.

A letter came back several days later from Bergfalk. “He says it’s real fighting, but—” Viktor looked up, his expression a bit rueful. “You need to be in NEWT level Defense to take it.”

“Ah, hell,” he whined, dropping his head. After a brief indulgence in self pity he lifted his head and ran a hand through his hair, finger combing it back out of the way. “Well, that settles that,” he said briskly.

Viktor gave him a sad look, but refrained from platitudes, thankfully. “We’ll keep on with our
practices. Unfortunately, I’m a bit leery of adding in actual magic aside from healing spells. Well, unless we stick to something like stinging hexes.”

He furrowed his brow and nodded. “We could do that. Those can be fairly painful and raise welts, but they’re unlikely to cause any true damage. And it would get me better used to casting under those conditions and working on my aim. Preferably chest down. Heaven only knows how permanent one of those to the face could be if an eye was hit.”

Viktor grimaced and nodded. “Yes, I would prefer to keep my sight, thanks. But maybe we could get some goggles just in case.”

“We can look in town.” He checked the time and saw it was still early enough, so off they went. There was a sporting goods shop in town; Harry mainly knew of it from checking out the usual archery accoutrements. Sure, he had built up the requisite calluses, but those had taken a lot of time to develop, so guards had been a necessity so as not to end up with bleeding fingers or ruined sleeves. They found what they were looking for and returned to the house after also stocking up on sweets.

Tom was there, rattling some pieces of metal in his hand, expression slightly bored. “Ah, Harry.”

“Are those what I think they are?” he asked, gaze riveted to the metal.

“I expect so. We can go to your work room for this or the sepulcher. Think you can handle it or should I call Severus here?”

Harry rolled his eyes at the reminder. “Work room,” he replied, knowing he would have to skip the repeat.

Upstairs and through into his work room he grabbed a chair from the kitchen and set it in the main area, then took a seat. He held out his left arm, palm up. Tom cast a numbing charm at his forearm, then swapped wand for knife and cut him open. Harry swallowed audibly at the sight of his arm split open like one of those hot dogs Dudley used to eat, except a whole lot gorier. He could see the metal Tom and Severus had already installed and watched as Tom added two of them to the collection. As soon as he got the nod he started casting healing spells, waited for Tom to reverse the numbing charm, then held out his right arm for a repeat procedure.

Once they were done he tested both arms, saying, “Quarter each?”

“Correct,” Tom replied, then jerked his head to the side.

He got up and looked at Viktor, who nodded and took his place. At least this time his stomach was behaving. They got through Viktor’s insertions quickly enough, and then Tom took the seat. It was while he was working on himself that Viktor finally asked, “What exactly are we adding here?”

Harry burst out laughing. When he got a hold of himself he said, “Unless I’m very much mistaken, I’m going to vote for protection against radiation sickness.”

“Shouldn’t you have asked that before letting me cut you open?” Tom asked dryly, looking up briefly from sticking one of the pieces to bone.

“Everyone has their stupid moments,” Viktor protested. “Better now than in the middle of a fight. I trust you two, is that so terrible?”

Harry laughed again and started healing Tom’s left arm.
“I’ll take care of the others with Severus,” Tom said, cutting open his right arm. “If we never need these, great. If we do, well, we’re ahead of the game.” Soon enough Tom was done and healed up; dittany was used to erase the scarring.

Harry returned the chair to the kitchen and came back out, and the three of them exited back to the house. The post had arrived while they were busy and Harry (and Dudley) received forms from Durmstrang regarding class choices for their NEWT years. ‘Well, this will be easy enough,’ he thought, fetching out his fountain pen so he could start marking off his choices. He would have to get the extra sheet that came with his OWL scores to go with it so that the school would know he was cleared for what he’d chosen. He rather wondered how many people tried to alter that page only to find out the school got copies as well to be able to do a cross-check.

‘So,’ he thought, ‘Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, Astronomy, Herbology, History, and Potions. I suppose I can always slide into the Muggle Studies NEWT exam like I did for the OWL. I sincerely doubt it’ll be any more difficult.’ That done he retreated to his room long enough to get the extra sheet and put it with his form, then bundled them into an envelope. It could be sent out as soon as his cousin was also done.

Viktor left not long after and a week after that Draco and Luna arrived for their week-long stay before school. They were lucky enough to be able to see Independence Day at the local cinema—in English, even. They simply ignored the subtitles. But the week passed quickly enough and they were shortly back at Durmstrang, ready for a new school year.
Harry’s sixth year was much more relaxed overall. True, he still had plenty of classes and practice, of magic and magicka and weapons, but the lack of sheer strain in trying to keep up with the wand classes was a huge weight off his shoulders. On the other hand, that first evening after class, Draco was quick to bring the subject up, though he was obviously trying to inject some delicacy into things.

Harry gave the blond a steady look, not having foreseen this for some reason, and wondering if he should decline to answer, lie (not his favorite option), or be honest. He finally decided to give some of the truth. “I’m not a very strong wizard,” he said matter-of-factly, “so continuing with wand classes would be a waste of my time. I practice what I can outside of class, but there’s no real point in trying to do so for a grade or in preparation for a NEWT.”

Draco frowned. “I—but you always seem so confident and in control of your magic. I never saw anything weird in classes last year,” he protested.

He shrugged. “I work very hard,” he said flatly, seeing that Draco was getting very curious and might start asking questions he definitely did not want to answer. He arched a brow in a way he knew should remind Draco of Tom and was pleased to see the burgeoning questions stick and wither in the blond’s throat. “Suffice to say, core strength is not necessarily a determining factor in how effective or dangerous someone can be. Hard work, knowledge, and creativity count for a lot.”

Draco nodded absently, his eyes going a bit distant. “You always make me think about such weird things.”

“Oh?” he prompted, his expression softening.

“Yeah. You’re making me think about the Hogwarts houses again. I don’t know about the stupidly brave part, but . . . .”

‘Ah,’ he thought. ‘The hard work of Hufflepuff, smarts of Ravenclaw, and cunning of Slytherin.’

“Well, I’m just happy to no longer be there,” Draco finally said. “I’d have preferred to be here the whole time, especially knowing what I do now, but maybe if I had I wouldn’t be coming to certain conclusions, so I guess it works out in the end.”

‘Funny how that kind of echoes my thoughts on my situation with Edward and the trio,’ he mused.

“Okay, I won’t bug you about it, but if you ever want any help or someone to practice with, just ask,” Draco offered.

He smiled and nodded. “Thank you,” he said, and was saved from further awkwardness when Dudley and Viktor came in. Draco and his cousin immediately fell into quidditch talk, making Harry wonder if Draco actually wanted a career in it, or just found it an easy option for any conversation. He had taken over Viktor’s seeker spot for Falk the previous year and did a good job, though he was not of Viktor’s caliber. He shook his head slightly and smiled a welcome at his boyfriend.

Viktor tilted his head toward the door, so he grabbed his cloak and the two of them went for a walk.
Being so far from civilization meant the night sky was sharp and brilliant with stars and their surroundings held that peculiar kind of quiet he always associated with being out in the cold, especially when snow lay thick on the ground.

When they were a fair distance from the building he said, “I forgot to mention this before, but Severus confirmed that he plans to ask my mother to marry him.”

“He told you . . . to tell you, or to get your okay?”

He blinked at that and thought back. “He was trying to convince me to take the ingredients for free, for the potions. Seemed to think that his intentions made it okay for me to not pay him.”

Viktor snorted.

“Yeah, that was my reaction, too. I told him the one didn’t make the other irrelevant. So, my estimate was off, but he’s confirmed that he intends to ask. Your thought might have bearing, though. I just brushed it aside at the time, so it wasn’t like I warned him off or anything.”

“Perhaps by Yule, then. It would be a bit cliché, I suppose,” Viktor mused.

“I did warn him that mum will probably start a discussion of names, though. She hated his father and wouldn’t want to bear his name. Can’t say I blame her. Though whether that’d mean Severus would take ours or not. . . .”

“It might be a bit strange to possibly end up with siblings at this point.”

Harry huffed a laugh, the fog from his breath obscuring his sight momentarily. “Yes. Yes it would. Oh, wow. I’d be a generation separate from any, though it’d be kind of neat if some of them got his eyes. Maybe one of each?”

Viktor chuckled. “Oh, so you like black eyes, then?”

He squeezed his boyfriend’s hand. “You have black eyes. Of course I like them.”

“And the nose?”

He giggled quietly. “It’s distinguished. And why are you fishing for compliments?”

Viktor ignored the question and said, “Maybe, since you’ve already got black and green, two red-haired children, one with black and one with green.”

He laughed again. “I’ll write home to mum and put in a request. I’m sure she’ll be thrilled to know I have certain expectations about her sex life and fertility.”

Viktor laughed with him and then pushed him against a tree they were passing, pressing Harry’s back against the cold trunk and standing right in front of him. “You are my prisoner now.”

Harry smiled in amusement and nodded. He was also feeling turned on, but he wasn’t about to admit that. “I am. Why have you taken me prisoner?”

Viktor just stared at him, reaching up to brush the hair away from his eyes and run his fingers down the side of his face. Harry’s breath caught at the gesture. “Do you want to get married someday?” he blurted out, then blushed hard, wondering what in the hell had possessed him to ask that in such an ambiguous way.

“Someday,” Viktor replied, nodding slightly, his thumb wandering over to brush Harry’s lower lip.
“Someone isn’t old enough to be asked yet.” Then he leaned in for a brief kiss. He pulled back and stepped away, holding out his hand. “We should keep moving. Even with the enchantments it’s too cold out to stay still.”

The remainder of their walk went by in something of a daze to Harry. He was pretty sure that his boyfriend had meant exactly what it sounded like, and that he could expect a proposal down the line. They had been a couple for nearly two years and Viktor was nineteen. He was too young yet, but he wouldn’t be once he had finished his NEWTs. Viktor wanted to marry him? He squeezed his boyfriend’s hand and smiled up at him, then asked about how things were going with the mastery program.

Harry wasn’t the least bit surprised to find Viktor waiting when he woke up the next morning, drawing the covers back for him. As they passed into the trunk and through to the suite he wondered if he should key Viktor into the system, though the benefit to doing so at that point was dubious. Pelk met them in the bathroom and handed over the time turner, so they spun back and eventually made it to the kitchen for a hearty breakfast.

The first hour was spent on Occlumency, as usual. But with Viktor there. . . . “Want to spend the morning sparring instead of the usual?” he asked hopefully. Viktor was agreeable, thus they spent the time until lunch, after getting daggers and goggles, working on that, taking short breaks every so often to knock back water and catch their breaths. He was pleased, actually, because going at it for so long meant he was getting better at aiming, not to mention wand casting with his left hand, and he was having to keep fighting even while getting increasingly tired and dealing with blunted reactions.

They stopped shortly before lunch to get cleaned up and he seriously wished he had a tub in there so he could soak. When he grumbled about it Viktor got a funny smile on his face and agreed. “What are you grinning about?” he asked as they sat down to eat.

Viktor snapped out of whatever fantasy he’d been enjoying and said, “I just think it would be interesting to bathe with another person—and slippery.”

Harry picked up some bread and began to butter it, pondering the image that came to mind. It would be an interesting angle on intimacy, and the slipperiness? His thoughts slid right on over to imagining the amusements one could get up to with soap suds as he set the knife down and took up his spoon instead. He shook his head and actually paid attention to what was in his bowl; it seemed Pelk had wrangled the stew recipe from his mother. He managed two bowls of it before he was satisfied, and several slices of the gorgeously crusty bread.

The afternoon was given over to conventional applications of effort and dinner was a fantastic slow-cooked beef roast with carrots, potatoes, Yorkshire puddings, and brown gravy. He actually moaned in pleasure over the combination of spices and flavors all piled onto a wedge of the pudding and dripping in gravy, not to mention that the beef was so tender it practically fell apart when nudged with his fork. “I’ll just have to crawl into the bedroom to get my book,” he muttered as he loaded up his fork again, using his knife to steady it. “It’ll be okay.”

Viktor snickered at him. “Pelk did a fantastic job, I agree.”

He nodded. Pelk was fabulous and he was seriously considering buying the little creature from Tom. He wouldn’t be living with his mother forever, after all, and he had little in the way of knowledge when it came to cooking. The elves had always done it when he still lived in his father’s home, then Aunt Petunia, who prided herself on her cooking, and then his mother joined in. The most he had ever done was “help” when it came to baking biscuits or cakes. Would Pelk be okay with it? ‘I’ll get around to asking,’ he thought, ‘though I wouldn’t be surprised if Tom just told me Pelk is essentially mine anyway and not to worry about it. This way Pelk obeys both of us, not just me.’
He did manage to walk in order to fetch his book, but he was stuffed enough to think longingly of just stretching out and dozing off early. Thankfully he felt mostly normal when bed time rolled around, and thought nothing further of it as he marked his page and set the book down. He was out of the bathroom a few minutes later and sliding under the covers, shortly thereafter joined by Viktor, the candle he had lit casting flickering shadows all around the room.

His hand went almost automatically to his boyfriend’s chest, playing with the hair and “accidentally” brushing Viktor’s nipples and feeling them harden. His hand roamed for a while, getting more and more daring, paying careful attention to his boyfriend’s reactions, until finally he shifted position so he could run his tongue straight up the center of Viktor’s chest. Viktor twitched, hands going out to dig into the mattress beneath them, obviously holding himself back from pouncing.

His boyfriend was ridiculously quiet in comparison to himself, he thought, moving so he could straddle him and attack Viktor’s neck. Hands settled on his back, fingers digging in, then slid down to cup his ass. Harry moaned softly at the feeling and bit down, feeling the muscles under the flesh shift and flex in response and the hands on his ass tighten. He relaxed his jaw and licked instead, slowly making a trail up to Viktor’s jaw, then under his chin. Viktor’s facial hair felt very odd against his tongue, prickly and yet soft as he continued his journey to the other side and went for the neck again.

He could feel the grip of one hand on his ass shift closer to center and a part of him yearned deeply for Viktor to just go for it, but his boyfriend always waited, aside from that initial outburst on the night of the third task, for Harry to give the okay in one way or another. It was then that a thought occurred to him and caused him some consternation. He ran his tongue up to Viktor’s ear, nibbled on the lobe, and whispered, “Do you know of any spells to, er. . . .” He rolled his eyes at his inability to finish that question and kissed just in front of Viktor’s ear, also feeling a sweep of heat at the twitch of Viktor’s cock against his skin. “Because,” he finally continued, pausing to nibble the lobe again, “if you’re up to it. . . .”

Viktor’s hands skimmed up his body and came to cradle his head, and gently guided him to look at his boyfriend directly. “I did some checking,” Viktor said huskily, his gaze steady. “I know of a little something to start things off. I expect it will feel quite strange for you, though.”

He sincerely hoped that meant what he thought it did, because otherwise things could get a bit messy, and not in a fun way. “So no mess?” he managed to ask.

“None of the kind you mean, right,” Viktor replied with a slight shake of his head. He blinked slowly and asked, “What would you like me to do, Harry?”

He hesitated, staring into those fathomless black eyes, and smiled. “I’d really like you to make love to me, Viktor.”

Viktor exerted pressure to bring Harry’s head down and kissed him, softly at first, then with more strength and urgency. He was shortly flipped onto his back and being kissed breathless, with his boyfriend covering his body. The very idea of Viktor being inside him soon made him groan and bring one foot around so he could rub it down Viktor’s leg. When he came the first time it was with Viktor’s fingers sliding around down behind his scrotum, teasingly applying pressure near his anus. It was driving him mad with anticipation, above and beyond the bliss of release.

His boyfriend shifted back up and began kissing him again, cock hard against Harry’s skin and making him ache. “You’re going to drive me to the edge of sanity first, aren’t you?” he asked breathlessly when Viktor pulled back a little.

“Oh yes. That way if I make any mistakes you’ll be too out of your mind to notice,” Viktor teased.
Harry giggled and pulled Viktor’s head back down. He was half out of his mind when Viktor reached to the side and grabbed his wand. The spell cast was non-verbal and caused him to feel the weirdest sensations inside. The wand went back onto the side table even as Viktor continued to feast on his chest and he heard the drawer open next. He kept lubricant in there for his own use (he used to apply a glamour at home to look older before going out to purchase it in town, but now he just made his own), though it had been joined by those potions he’d made under Severus’s supervision.

Viktor moved back up and captured his gaze. “I understand it will be easier on you if—”

“No,” he interrupted. “I want to be able to see you.”

Viktor nodded and kissed him, then looked off to the side and grabbed the bottle of lubricant. A quick push flipped the cap open. Viktor kissed him again, then pulled back so he could squeeze some of the gel onto his fingers before putting the still open bottle on the table. Those dark eyes gazed at him for a moment, then he grabbed the pillow Harry wasn’t using and said, “For under you.”

He suffered a moment of confusion before the resulting image in his head made sense. He took the pillow from Viktor and stuffed it under his ass. Viktor nodded and moved closer again, spreading his legs and shoving his knees under Harry’s thighs. Despite the somewhat awkward disruption Harry was still rock hard and aching. His eyes rolled back when he felt Viktor’s fingers push against him, cool and slippery, and when one nudged inside he couldn’t help but arch up and moan. “I want all of you,” he breathed.

“Patience,” Viktor said softly and nudged a second finger in, his other hand coming to rest on Harry’s leg and squeezing, his thumb stroking back and forth against the softer skin of his inner thigh.

He felt, not pain, but discomfort at the intrusion, and at the same time it excited him beyond measure. He was being opened, slicked up, made to adjust. It greatly appealed to his not-so-secret desire for Viktor to dominate him sexually and made the blood rush under his skin and bring with it another wave of heat. A third finger joined the others and they spread apart, pressing out and shifting. The other hand slid upward to ghost over his cock, causing him to arch again and drive those fingers deeper. “Oh god,” he whispered. “If your fingers make me feel this way I can only imagine—” Viktor brushed over something inside him that made his head snap back and his hands claw the bed. “Oh please.”

Viktor pulled his fingers free and leaned diagonally forward to grab the bottle. More gel ended up on his fingers, which was used to coat his cock. Then he leaned forward and grabbed Harry under the ribs, pulling him up even as Viktor fell back. He was guided to straddle his boyfriend. “This way you can control how fast you take me in. Okay?”

He nodded, breathing heavily, and knelt up a bit. Viktor dropped a hand and he quickly felt the head of Viktor’s cock nudging him. Ever so slowly he pressed down, grinning and tensing up in pain as the head slipped past the tight ring of muscle. Viktor grabbed his sides and stilled his progress, holding him in place without any apparent strain, giving Harry’s thighs a break.

“Tell me when,” Viktor said.

After a minute the pain eased and he nodded. Viktor’s grip loosened, his hands then just resting against his skin. Harry continued the descent, gazing into his boyfriend’s eyes. The expression on Viktor’s face was more than just one of pleasure. It was something he couldn’t quite place, but it reminded him of when Viktor had him trapped against that tree. He bottomed out seconds later and sighed.
“There are some weird side effects to Occlumency,” he said a few seconds later, relaxing completely and giving an experimental wriggle.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s this analytical part of my brain storing all this up rather methodically to review later,” he replied, flexing his thighs and settling back down.

A brow quirked up and a faint smile touched Viktor’s lips. “Well now, we can’t be having that.” Viktor tightened his grip and rolled them, shoving his knees back under Harry’s thighs as they stabilized and pulling his hands free. He leaned forward, eyes intent, hands grabbing at Harry’s hips and pulling him into a better position with a jerk.

Harry groaned at the feeling and tried to figure out what to do with his hands.

“Yes?”

“Oh yes. Please,” he breathed, wishing he could reach far enough to make Viktor move, but then he did, drawing back slowly, pausing, and thrusting forward. And again. “Don’t tease me.” A brow quirked up again, and then Viktor began to thrust for real, the hands at Harry’s hips gripping tightly. “Oh god,” he groaned and latched onto Viktor’s arms, his eyes rolling back when that spot inside was brushed again. Even the soft slap of Viktor's balls against his ass was spiking his arousal.

“Your heat is driving me crazy,” Viktor said huskily, “the feeling of you around me, accepting me, letting me make love to you.”

“Oh god,” he repeated, wrapping his legs around Viktor as best he could for leverage to make it easier to meet Viktor’s thrusts and trying to ensure that spot kept getting hit. “Harder. That angle.”

Viktor complied, putting even more strength behind his thrusts, gripping his hips with hands like steel, then let go and pushed Harry’s legs farther apart and bent over almost double so he could pull Harry up toward him and capture his mouth in a bruising kiss. Somehow the change made the steady, forceful thrusts even more effective in terms of making his head spin and his hips jerk. His hands roamed his boyfriend’s skin, one going to the back of Viktor’s neck and into his hair. Viktor jerked him again, releasing his mouth, and running his tongue down over Harry’s chin to tongue his Adam’s apple.

He could feel his body starting to wind up; Viktor’s body shifting rhythmically against his cock while driving into him was slowly but surely pushing him to the edge. “So close,” he breathed, and Viktor went for his neck and then his mouth. A hand slid down between them and started stroking his cock, with just that touch of roughness.

“Viktor,” he moaned, head going back, cock pulsing and shooting semen between their bodies.

His boyfriend groaned low and long and latched onto his neck again, hips jerking erratically. All movement ceased a span of seconds later, Viktor’s teeth loosening their grip. Harry felt the abused spot be licked, and then his mouth was being sought again for a fairly gentle series of kisses. “I love you, Harry,” Viktor whispered against his lips.

His heart seized for a moment. “I love you, Viktor,” he breathed, kissing him again. They continued to kiss lazily, heartbeats slowing down to normal, Viktor softening inside him. Viktor pulled him more upright, sitting back, then carefully lifted Harry up so he could slip free. It felt very strange indeed. Moments later Viktor had maneuvered them so that he was draped over his boyfriend, almost straddling him. They fell asleep that way.
Pelk had an awful time waking the two and was visibly distressed by the time Harry was coherent enough to really look at the little creature. He inhaled sharply and shook Viktor. “We need to get up!”

Viktor made a grumpy noise and slowly sat up, then grimaced slightly. Harry himself was realizing that they hadn’t even bothered to clean up before they drifted off and wrinkled his nose. Hell, they weren’t even positioned right; their heads were at the foot of the bed.

“Master needs to get up,” Pelk insisted, waving a hand.

Harry felt the stickiness and dried sweat vanish and nodded his thanks, then rolled off the side of the bed. On landing he groaned in pain. “Oh hell.” He yanked the side table open and pulled out a potion as Viktor grabbed clothing and wands. He had time to knock it back before he was being hauled off to the kitchen. By the time Viktor was offering him his sleepwear the pain had subsided, though the stiffness had not.

Dressed, he pulled Viktor into a hug and angled his face up for a kiss, which was granted. “You were wonderful,” he whispered, mindful of the possibility of being overheard by his other self.

“I don’t know,” Viktor whispered back a bit skeptically. “You still seem to have your sanity, so perhaps I did not try hard enough.”

His shoulders shook as he contained his laughter. “Oh, you were hard enough all right.”

Lines formed at the corners of Viktor’s eyes, betraying his amusement, then disappeared. Concern touched his features instead. “Are you all right?”

He nodded. “Some pain, yes, but it’s fine. The potion took care of it. A little stiff. Nothing that won’t work itself out.”

“Okay. You’ll tell me if that changes?” Viktor said seriously.

“Mm-hm.”

Pelk popped in and gave the okay, so they headed on out to begin another day.

Yule brought the expected news. He had been home barely long enough to drop his trunk off when his mother bundled him into a heavy cloak and dragged him off for a walk. “I’m going to guess he proposed?” he asked dryly.

“Yes, he did. Then we had a fight about names.”

He snickered. “So what was decided?”

She held his arm tighter as they passed by an icy patch. “He’s taking our name, but he’s dropping his middle one in favor of Prince.”

He nodded. “Makes sense. He leaves behind both reminders of his father that way. Does it bother you that he’s still technically Tom’s minion?”

“Eh, not really. In some ways it provides him protection from Dumbledore.”

He furrowed his brow, trying to figure that one out. He finally conceded and said, “I don’t get it.”

“Severus was cleared of any charges, honey, though it’s true that was mostly on the strength of Dumbledore’s word. But still, he’s clear. He didn’t have to stay and let himself be talked into
teaching Potions, but he really had no idea what to do with himself at that point. He knows now that Tom isn’t a raving psycho, though I expect he more than once suffered a phantom heart attack seeing how you and I interact with Tom.”

Harry laughed. “I think the word you want is irreverent.”

His mother giggled at him. “Sure. Tom isn’t going to let Severus twist in the wind. They’re not friends or anything silly like that, but he would stand up for him against Dumbledore. He might be mine, Harry, but he still belongs to Tom.”

He thought about that as they rounded a curve and entered the woods proper, eyes taking in the layer of snow sparkling in the sun and making the trees glitter. It was a muffled sort of quiet broken only by the crunch of snow under their boots. “Sounds kind of like his duties these days include being part of the home defense,” he commented.

“Sort of, I suppose. But that’s secondary and he’d do it anyway. You don’t really think Severus wouldn’t defend us all? He’s become rather fond of you, actually,” she confided, “even if you do look unfortunately like your fa—sperm donor.”

Harry snorted. “This isn’t going to be a massive affair, is it? Because that would be weird.”

“No, no. Neither of us wants that. Viktor will be invited, of course. His parents if you think they’d come.”

“Oh, well I’ll ask him what he thinks. Mrs Krum seemed to get on with you just fine, even if Mr Krum is awfully quiet. He spoke a lot more when it was just me with the three of them that day, but even then he was pretty reserved.”

She shrugged. “And some people find it hard to open their mouths without sarcasm spilling out. Anyway, this summer, okay? Before Viktor has to return to Durmstrang. And speaking of Viktor . . .” She looked at him inquisitively.

“He’s fine, mum, thank you for asking.”

“Harry!”

“Oh, right. He’ll be here in a week,” he added, trying not to laugh.

His mother growled at him.

“I asked him something a while back, when we were talking about the possibility of you and Severus getting married,” he said. “It came out so ambiguously and I was really embarrassed once I realized how I’d said it.” He steered them down the right-hand fork of the path.

“Yes?” she said impatiently.

“I asked him if he wanted to be married someday. He had me backed up against a tree at the time and was touching my face.”

Lily giggled delightedly. “I’m thinking the red on your face right now isn’t just the cold, Harry.”

He was very tempted to snatch some snow off nearby foliage and use it against her. “Yes, well, he agreed on the someday part and then followed up by saying that someone wasn’t old enough yet to be asked.”
“I am glad to see he’s not rushing,” his mother said soberly. “Not that it would normally be rushing after two years, but, you know.”

He nodded and eyed her sidelong for a moment. “I swear, sometimes it’s like talking with my older sister and not my mother.”

She laughed and squeezed his arm. “Oh, Harry, you’ll always be my son. I think Petunia and I did a fine job. But you’ve always been ridiculously mature and reliable, and relationships do evolve.”

Harry considered that and nodded. “Okay.”

“Now, about Viktor,” she said, and Harry just laughed.
When Viktor did arrive his mother eyed him again like she had after Harry’s birthday, but refrained from asking what was on her mind, possibly diverted by Viktor saying to Harry, after the greetings, “My parents have expressed their curiosity as to why I have not invited you to visit them with me.”

He blinked, his mouth dropping open a bit in surprise. His situation was so bizarre that it had honestly never once crossed his mind to go to Bulgaria and let Viktor and his family return the hospitality. It made him feel more than a little insensitive. He could still bring his trunk and do repeats if he wanted, though, so was there really any particular issue barring a visit? Well, aside from Tom’s promise to take him tomb raiding after he turned seventeen, and he could go visit prior to that.

He bit his lip, sort of but not really glancing toward his mother, and said, “Maybe at the start of the summer? Before you come here? I could go with you at the conclusion of school. . . ?”

“I’m okay with that,” his mother said, nodding in his peripheral vision. “And since the subject has come up—sort of—Viktor, Severus and I are getting married this summer and you will of course be invited. You’ll be here anyway, I expect. But what I was curious about is whether or not you thought your parents might like to come. I’d say your sister, too, but I’ve never actually met her and there won’t be anyone here around her age at the time.”

“Congratulations,” Viktor said, smiling. “And I would love to attend. As to my parents—hm. They both seem to like you, so there is no problem there I can think of. My concern, however, would be other guests.”

Harry quirked a brow at his boyfriend. Nobody really knew who Tom Riddle was, so he couldn’t mean him—and that was assuming Tom even bothered to attend. So who?

“I imagine that Dudley would invite Luna, but would Draco not also be invited? And through him, possibly his parents? The only reason I bring it up is that even I knew of the Malfoy family and—” Viktor looked away for a moment, exhaling in almost a snort. “My paternal grandfather was killed by Grindelwald himself, you see, before Dumbledore defeated him, and we’ve been a little touchy about certain things.”

His jaw dropped and he wondered just exactly how it was that Viktor took learning about Tom so calmly.

“Er. . . .” His mother seemed to be at a loss for words. “Well, unless Severus wanted the Malfoys here. . . .”

“I guess Draco might be a bit put out if he wasn’t invited given his visits here and his closeness to Severus,” Harry mused. “Though, now that I think about it, I’m not actually sure how close that is.”

“I, well, I don’t know,” his mother said. “I’ll check. I’ll still issue an invitation, Viktor. We don’t really have room for everyone to stay here overnight so at best it’d be an afternoon and evening.”

Viktor nodded. “I can always warn them after the invitation arrives that there may be some questionable guests. Even so, the Malfoy family was not connected to Grindelwald that I am aware
of.”

“All right. I’ll get back to you with more information later,” she said, wandering off with a thoughtful expression.

Harry stood there for a second, still a little surprised, then looked up when Viktor pulled him close for a kiss. He smiled happily when Viktor drew back, then frowned. “I had no idea.”

“The Grindelwald thing?”

“Yeah,” he replied as Viktor bent to pick up his trunk, then walked with him upstairs to the guest room to drop it off. When Viktor did not remove his cloak he fetched his from his room and the two of them went for a walk. It was not until after they were into the woods that he asked, “How the hell did you not flip out when you realized who Tom was?”

Viktor sighed and let go of his hand, slinging his arm around Harry’s shoulders instead. “I’ve known you since you were eleven. I may not have known about Tom specifically, but you and Dudley have always struck me as being fine. And then when you were finally able to tell me your story—no, I can’t say that I was happy finding out, knowing the things he must have done, the lives he must have been responsible for ending. I rather doubt that the people directly affected would forgive him.

“But he woke up one day, I guess. Realized that he was fighting the wrong fight. Made sure you and your family were safe. As intimidating as he can be, which is a lot, he’s—he obviously cares about you, takes his perceived role seriously, and treats you and your mother well. And bizarrely, you have so many of his memories and some of his mannerisms; and you’re ridiculously well-adjusted. Maybe part of what he went through was in preparation for what will come. I don’t know. It was a lot of information to take in at the time and I ended up focusing on you and dragons and magicka first.”

“Oh,” he replied, not pressing that any further. “I remember hearing some rumors at Durmstrang about a symbol, but the places it supposedly was were all damaged.”

“Yes. I defaced them. Some of the students thought it looked cool, the symbol, and were putting it on their things. They didn’t know it was the symbol Grindelwald used. I convinced them to stop and tried to remove any I found in the school.”

He nodded. “Somehow I find that easy to believe.” He reached up to briefly clasp Viktor’s hand.

“What’s it like where your parents live?”

He gave his cousin a hug and stepped back. “We’ll see you soon,” he said.

“Yeah. Bring me back a souvenir,” Dudley said with a grin.

He nodded. “If I see something perfect for you, sure.”

Dudley departed as Viktor took out their portkey, so Harry pulled his trunk up close and waited for Viktor to make sure his own was secure before reaching out to touch the silver tag. A second later Viktor activated it.

Harry looked around curiously on landing and let go of the trunk’s immobile handle. He kicked the base to release the wheels and extended the transport handle. Viktor hefted his own up onto one shoulder and placed his free hand at the small of Harry’s back, urging him toward what appeared to be a back door. Much like with his permanent home portkey they had landed out back, it seemed, in a very spacious yard surrounded by a high fence. The house itself was a large, three storey affair,
Grander than Harry’s home, but not overtly ostentatious and screaming of wealth like the Potter home or, he suspected, the Malfoy home.

Viktor opened the door and gestured him inside, so he entered to see a long, wide hallway paneled halfway up with dark-stained wood and painted a cream colour above. ‘Fancy,’ he thought, eyeing the paintings on the walls. Down at the far end was what he presumed was the front door, a double, with stained glass panels. Was his boyfriend’s family rich?

The door behind him closed with a quiet sound and Viktor set his trunk down against the wall. “You can just leave yours here for the moment. We’ll get it in a couple of minutes.”

He looked back and nodded, nudging his trunk over by Viktor’s. He honestly felt a little uncertain and out of place, and he had only seen a hallway so far. Viktor must have noticed because the next thing he knew his face was being cradled and a kiss pressed to his lips. “You think I wasn’t a bit anxious coming to your house the first time?”

He tried to smile, but wasn’t sure he managed it very well, and nodded.

Viktor let go and took his hand. “Come on.”

He was led down the hall and off to the right, through a set of French doors, into a parlor or sitting room. Viktor’s parents were ensconced in a set of chairs near the fireplace that dominated the far wall and set down their books on seeing them.

“Viktor,” Iskra said happily, rising from her chair gracefully and coming over to hug her son. “Harry, welcome to our home. I hope you enjoy your stay with us.”

He felt unaccountably like blushing. “Thank you for having me,” he said softly, still feeling a bit intimidated by his surroundings. “It’s nice to see you both again. You have a lovely home.”

She smiled warmly at him. “Well, I’ll let Viktor get you settled. We’ll catch up in a little while.”

He nodded, and then at Viktor’s father, and let Viktor lead him away. They reclaimed their trunks and went upstairs to the second floor.

“My parents have rooms on the first floor,” Viktor said, pausing briefly at the first door on the left at the top of the stairs to set his trunk down. He pointed at the door across the hall and said, “My sister’s room.” They continued on to the next door down on the left and Viktor opened it for him.

Harry went inside and relaxed a little at the soothing blue of the walls. An open door to the right revealed a bathroom and a large bed dominated the center of the far wall, flanked by matching side tables. He rolled his trunk over to it and parked it, then reached up to rub the back of his neck. There were pastoral paintings on the walls, but no portraits. ‘Just as well,’ he thought, ‘because that would be kind of creepy.’

Viktor came up behind him and pulled him back into a hug. “Do you want to settle in first or come down now?”

He took a deep breath and released it a bit jerkily. “We can go down now.”

Viktor held him like that for another minute, then turned him and planted another kiss on his lips. “Okay.”

Downstairs Viktor’s parents had moved to one of the sofas. Facing it was a matching loveseat with a coffee table between them. They took a seat and Harry slowly relaxed as Iskra skillfully drew him
into conversation, managing to forget about his surroundings.

That evening after dinner he and Viktor were in his room relaxing in the angled reading chairs to either side of a bookcase straddling the corner. “You seem to be all right now,” Viktor observed.

He nodded. “I’m not sure what came over me.”

Viktor arched a brow at him and said, “Perhaps associations to the house of your father and your . . . life there?”

Harry frowned and looked down. Perhaps that was it. Aside from his mother’s efforts he had always felt like he lived in that house on sufferance and he knew his father had tried to get rid of him on more than one occasion. “Probably,” he said, fiddling with the hem of his shirt. “I guess some wounds run deeper than I realized.”

For the next two weeks Viktor took him around to see various sights, and not just those in Sofia. Churches, caves, interesting rock formations, and even a zoo were visited, Bisera sometimes coming with them. Travel to magical areas was done a bit more circumspectly due to Viktor’s fame.

Evenings were usually spent talking with Iskra and Pavel (who had become much more talkative as time went by), and Viktor’s living grandparents had stopped by twice for dinner, so he got to meet all three of them. They seemed to like him well enough and he was amused to note that Pavel’s mother had a tendency to fuss over the man somewhat, even at his age. Eventually, however, it was time to head to Norway.

“We’ll see you soon enough,” Pavel said, a faint smile showing.

Viktor nodded and Harry said, “Thank you again for having me. It’s been a lot of fun for me.”

“Us, too,” Iskra said. “Now, off you go.”

Harry pulled his trunk to him and poised his hand over his bracelet. After Viktor nodded he activated it, landing in his own back yard. His boyfriend appeared a few seconds later and together they headed inside.

His mother popped up before they had taken two steps and said, “You’ve already eaten?” When he nodded she gave him a hug and kissed his cheek, then did the same to Viktor. “Okay. You have fun?”

He smiled. “Naaah, it was awful. Viktor kept dragging me all over Bulgaria and forcing me to see amazing sights and learn stuff. I’ve never been so traumatized.”

Lily rolled her eyes. “Okay, wise ass. Once you two are settled I want to check your clothes for the wedding, see what adjustments need to be made. I left them on the beds.”

Upstairs he parked his trunk and expanded it, then glanced over at the bed. Laying there was an outfit that wouldn’t look all that out of place on a muggle. A set of robes lay next to it, obviously intended to be worn open, of a very dark green colour with a slightly lighter lining. His mother had already pulled out one of his pairs of dress shoes—he normally left them at home because he wore his boots almost exclusively.

A few minutes later he was changed and downstairs. His mother eyed him intently. “Well, maybe a little more length on the sleeves and legs, but aside from that it looks fine.” She muttered to herself for a minute and jotted down some notes, then nodded, and by then Viktor had shown up and his mother started eyeing him instead. “Okay,” she said finally. “Petunia and I will get these fixed.”
Tom showed up a short time later with the latest News of the Weird. “Another four plants in Japan melted down and eight hydroelectric plants were blown. It’s a mad house over there, with riots amongst the muggles in powerless areas.”

“It almost sounds like whoever is doing this,” Viktor said, “is increasing the severity of the test. But I can’t see if it’s a test against wizards or muggles.”

“Have any terrorist groups taken credit?” his mother asked, head tilted in confusion.

Tom shook his head. “No, which is strange.”

“Wizards, then?” Viktor mused. “Seeing how the muggles would react to the loss of their technology? Because no power means a lot of other things fall by the wayside.”

“But why Japan?” Harry asked. “Is it because it’s an island nation?”

“To limit the scope of the experiment?” Tom said. “Perhaps. That would make a certain kind of sense. Limit the scope, make a move, sit back and watch the reaction, then do it again after things have settled, only worse. And this time the reaction is much worse. It’s showing that the muggles will fall apart—civilians, certainly.”

“Is this our dark lord coming out to play?” Harry asked. “And if so, what do we do?”

The answer to that turned out to be nothing, at least for most of them. Heaven only knew what Tom was doing out there in the wider world, but he did have a much wider pool of assets to tap for information. Harry rather wondered if Lucius was one of those being tapped. Unfortunately, between the wedding and the craziness going on, tomb raiding was not on the menu for that summer. His mother was getting married the week after his birthday and shortly after that Viktor would be returning to Durmstrang for his mastery work, for his final year. That it happened to coincide with Harry finishing normal schooling was a bonus.

They were on a walk after breakfast on the day he turned seventeen, idly strolling beneath the canopy of greenery, when Viktor backed him into a tree. “Am I your prisoner again?”

Viktor reached up to brush the hair away from Harry’s eyes, then push some of the longer locks back over his shoulder. “I have a gift for you, and a question.”

Was his heart suddenly hammering away for a reason? Over that look again in Viktor’s eyes? He nodded, because the words just weren’t coming.

Viktor reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box. “I’m mixing traditions here,” he said softly, bringing the box up and pushing the lid open. Inside was a ring of some whitish metal, inset around the center circumference with black and green stones. “I love you, Harry. Will you bond with me, after we’re done with school? Will you be mine?”

He looked up from the ring to Viktor’s eyes; his gaze was so intense. He nodded slowly, a smile creeping onto his lips. “Yes.”

“Will you wear this ring?”

“Yes,” he repeated, fighting the urge to giggle nervously or otherwise make a fool of himself.

Viktor nodded, a slow smile finally appearing. He reached into the box and removed the ring, the box going back to his pocket. Harry offered his left hand and watched as Viktor slid the ring into place. How his boyfriend had figured out the right size he was unsure; perhaps while he’d been
sleeping? “It’s enchanted with anti-summoning,” Viktor said, the smile morphing into a brief grin, then he leaned in to capture Harry’s mouth and kiss him breathless, pulling him close.

When Viktor finally drew back Harry asked, “Were you nervous?”

His boyfr—no, fiancé—laughed. “Yes. Of course I was.”

“Did your parents know you were going to do this?” he asked, almost teasingly.

“They did,” Viktor replied, taking his hand and pulling him back into a walk. “My mother helped me to pick the ring.”

He nodded, tempted to inspect it more closely, then his brow furrowed. “What? When? We were barely apart the whole time.”

“Well,” Viktor said slowly, squeezing his hand, “I may have asked Tom for the loan of a time turner.”

Harry stopped walking for a moment, but let himself be pulled into motion again. “Did everyone but me know ahead of time?”

Viktor looked over with a brow arched skeptically. “I would like to think you had some idea, but no. I didn’t tell Tom why I wanted it, just that I wanted it for a few weeks and would promptly return it. And that I would not do repeats during that time. I would make plans with my mother and turn back to do some browsing before returning to you.”

‘Probably during bathroom breaks,’ he thought, ‘or something like that.’ “So I guess this means I don’t need to worry about the in-laws hating me,” he said, half teasingly and half anxiously.

Viktor stopped and pulled him into another kiss, then resumed their walk. “My mother adores you, Harry, and my father thinks you’re a good match for me.”

His mind quickly enough twigged to the next issue to raise questions. Sometimes it was a royal pain to notice certain kinds of things and not just be happy and accepting. “Did you enchant it yourself?”

Viktor chuckled and shook his head. “No, I asked Tom, and he’s more than smart enough to figure it out. I haven’t progressed far enough for the enchantment to be as strong as I’d like. He didn’t comment, just gave me a knowing look.”

“Well, I love the ring, but not as much as I love you,” he said, feeling entirely too sappy. The stupid grin on his face was also annoying, but he was too happy to try to wipe it away. He also had the strange urge to go dancing.

His mother’s eagle eye spotted the ring within seconds and she had his hand up near her face, examining it. “Onyx and emeralds—for your eyes?” she asked Viktor.

He nodded.

“Where’s yours?” she all but demanded, allowing Harry to reclaim his hand.

Viktor smiled that slow smile again and pulled a matching ring from one of his pockets and handed it to Harry. Harry laughed quietly and waited for Viktor to offer his hand, then slid the ring into place.

“Much better,” Lily proclaimed, then pulled Harry into a tight hug, followed by one for Viktor. “Congratulations,” she said a bit throatily. “I’m so happy for you two. Be angels and try not to
upstage my wedding, though, okay?”

Harry snickered and nodded. Neither of them went out of their way to bring attention to the rings, but they were noticed quickly enough anyway. They simply accepted the congratulations and kept the fuss to a minimum. Even so he felt ridiculously emotional for someone who practiced daily to keep his emotions and memories under control, that same stupid smile gracing his face randomly.

When dinner rolled around Viktor led him away to Harry’s bedroom instead of the dining room and came to a stop at the trunk. Harry eyed him curiously for a moment, then decided they were obviously going to dine privately; he made a mental note to skip the repeat. He also came to another decision, one which saw him keying Viktor into the trunk’s exterior protections, and then to the mirror inside the dressing room.

The table was already set in the kitchen, meaning Viktor had managed to get with Pelk for a little strategy. Once they were seated the plates filled with a Shopska salad.

As Viktor picked up his fork he said, “Tom released me from that vow.”

He paused in the act of picking up his own, then forked up some of the salad. “I guess he’s finally decided you’re trustworthy? To be honest I’d forgotten about the vow. It didn’t actually cover all that much, anyway.”

“True. And I was never much in a position to violate it,” Viktor said after swallowing. “It’s really too early for me to be asking this, but will you consider having our bonding at my parents’ house?”

He blinked and chewed a bit mechanically, following that with a sip of water. “Yes. The world doesn’t revolve around this tiny spot in Norway, after all.”

Viktor huffed a laugh. “It may, for all we know.”

“I wondered once, back when we first found out, if I’m supposed to deal with Alduin at some point. But we’ve not seen any dragon activity in all this time.”

“Perhaps it only counted for the last kalpa?”

He shrugged. “Maybe he’s still sleeping off the change?”

Dinner itself was chicken yahniya, something he had come to be quite fond of during their time at Durmstrang, so he happily enough dug in. Baklava rounded things off, with tiny glasses of rakia.

He eyed Viktor as he sipped. It was just enough rakia to enjoy the taste without being close to the possibility of drunkenness. After setting the glass down he got up and disappeared into the bedroom long enough to retrieve his wireless and set it on a table in the work room. Viktor wandered out to see why he had left so abruptly and stopped on seeing the radio.

Harry turned it on and stepped up to his fiancé. “I’ve been wanting to dance with you ever since you proposed and I don’t really want to wait until my mother’s wedding,” he said hopefully.

Viktor immediately took hold of him, pausing only long enough for a kiss before guiding them into a dance. The wireless was playing a waltz, coincidentally the same one the Weird Sisters had played at the Yule Ball for their second dance. Viktor obviously made the same connection because he laughed. Fifteen minutes and several dances later Harry wrinkled his nose when the music segued into a show on gardening. He turned the wireless off and said, “Well, at least I got my dance.”

“I can think of another dance we can do,” Viktor said straight-faced.
He groaned softly. “That was corny.”

“But?”

“But I love the idea,” he said, allowing himself to be ‘captured’ by his fiancé and literally picked up. Viktor carried him into the bedroom and tossed him on the bed, then began stripping down. Shortly thereafter he started undressing Harry, boots first, and paused frequently to kiss random patches of exposed skin. When Viktor did join him on the bed he welcomed him with an anticipatory smile. “I would love for the man I love to make love to me, love,” he purred, trying not to laugh.

Viktor paused and gave him a pained look. “This is payback for my earlier line?”

“Absolutely,” he said with a nod.

Viktor rolled his eyes and kissed Harry to occupy his mouth for better things. Better things turned out to be gasping for air, trying to suck more air into his lungs with inadequate equipment. Viktor was taking great pleasure in driving him straight up the wall and down the other side. His fiancé must be really, really happy about Harry agreeing to marry him to judge by the two orgasms he had already been coaxed into.

He had only just started feeling a little less dazed when he heard the snap of the bottle he kept lubricant in, and then felt the usual spell doing odd things to his insides. He opened his eyes only to close them again as Viktor started to prepare him, adoring the feeling and wanting something else a whole lot more. His desire was answered quickly enough when Viktor flipped him over and pulled him up onto all fours, then pushed into him with a long, shuddering sigh. He moaned when Viktor jerked him into a better position, hands like steel at his hips. “I love it when you do that,” he said raggedly, then threw his head back when Viktor started pistoning inside him, one hand going up to grip the top edge of the bed’s headboard.

His fiancé managed to find the right angle quickly and Harry used his grip on the headboard to help him push back into the steady thrusts, which allowed Viktor the opportunity to loosen his grip and slide his hands up Harry’s body, stroking his chest and the back of his neck. That, too, drove him crazy. In no time at all his cock was being palmed and then stroked and he was coming so hard he saw stars.

A few minutes later, after a quick spell to clean up, Harry was snuggled against Viktor and lazily kissing his collarbone. “You know,” he said sleepily, “I don’t actually have a clue about how people get married or bonded in the wizarding world.”

“As I understand it it’s not that much different from the muggle world,” Viktor replied. “The wording might be a bit different, I suppose. It’s not like some mystical bond between souls.”

“Well, I’d assume not. After all, my parents got a divorce. But I guess I could imagine two people convinced of the everlasting immortality of their love doing something like making unbreakable vows to each other.”

“I guess,” Viktor said doubtfully. “A lot of pure-blood bonds are hedged in with contracts, though, making it a lot more complicated in terms of separating.”

“Maybe I’ve read too much Shakespeare for that to have even come to mind,” he remarked. “And ours?”

Viktor carefully maneuvered so that they were both lying on their sides, facing each other. Those wonderful liquid black eyes were soft as they gazed at him. “I’d rather not use a contract of that style,
because in the very unhappy event that something changed I would not want you to be forced to stay and be miserable.”

Harry smiled. “I like that you said that. I’d much rather be tied to you in mutual desire and friendship and love.”

Viktor smiled back, nodding faintly. “I was sort of hoping that your family could stay with mine for a week or two at that time. They certainly have room for it.”

“Mm.” He blinked then, furrowing his brow.

“What is it?”

“Just wondering where we’ll live.”

“Here,” Viktor said easily, “unless you can think of a problem with that.”

A sense of relief swept over him. “I just suddenly thought of—”

“I understand,” Viktor interrupted. “We don’t know what will happen and it would be better for you to be here with your power base, with these protections. I know Tom went to a lot of trouble with them. And I like this house. It’s very homey. At some point we can buy a house of our own, but for now? Here.”

Harry shifted forward a bit, sliding his knee between Viktor’s legs, and kissed him. “Okay. Though I think our room is going to need some extra wards.”

Viktor snickered. “You think so, huh? Well, I agree. I love the way you sound when I’m having my wicked way with you and would hate for you to be quiet. The same can be done for what will be our room at my parents’ house.”

He snorted at the idea of Bisera overhearing them. “I’m thinking, other considerations aside, of seeing if Severus will apprentice me.”

Viktor nodded again. “I was wondering if you were going to lean that way. I was also wondering just how much it could be combined with your alchemy.”

“Hn. That’s an interesting idea.” He kissed Viktor, a bit lingeringly. “I’ll have to give it some serious thought.”

Viktor blinked sleepily at him and nodded. When Harry smiled in response Viktor maneuvered them again to their usual position. He fell asleep, far earlier than usual, feeling imminently satisfied, for more reasons than one.
Chapter 21

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21

As planned they had a late breakfast so that food would be out of the way and most of them could sleep in. Once the meal was over Lily and Petunia disappeared upstairs; for that matter, so did everyone else, at least long enough to change into their finery for the day. Severus had been relegated to the guest room temporarily for his preparations.

Back downstairs Harry and Viktor were pleased to welcome Luna first, who was immediately claimed by Dudley, then Viktor’s parents. Iskra’s gaze went straight to their hands and she smiled before giving the usual warm greetings and hugging the both of them. Pavel also smiled, and this time Harry was given a manly sort of hug. It made him feel so warm inside at this evidence of acceptance. He and Viktor escorted the two of them to the sitting room for the time being, knowing that Dudley would take care of welcoming Draco and his parents.

“The ring looks as lovely as I thought it would,” Iskra said.

“My mother spotted it almost before we got in the door,” Harry said with a short laugh, then turned on seeing movement in his peripheral vision; Serana was just then lowering her hood. “Ah. I would like to introduce a family friend. This is Serana,” he said with a fond smile, not bothering to point out the obvious. “Serana, Iskra and Pavel Krum, Viktor’s parents.”

Serana smiled, and nodded to each of them. “I am very pleased to meet you. Harry has been very complimentary.”

He watched slightly warily given that Iskra seemed to be at a bit of a loss. But then she smiled and nodded. “It is lovely to meet you. Viktor has mentioned you, but apparently left out a few details.”

Serana grinned at that, flashing her fangs. “He’s a good boy—ah, sorry, Viktor—young man. When you get to be my age, well. . . .”

“Do I dare ask?” Iskra said, looking a touch mischievous.

“Oh, a few millennia or so,” Serana replied casually. “You lose track after a while.”

It was then that Harry realized Iskra had a passion for history; she got a hungry look on her face and asked about the countries that Serana was familiar with.

Severus wandered in at that point, looking very smart in an outfit similar to Harry’s, and came to stand next to him; he could see that the man was the barest bit nervous. In a lull he caught Iskra’s attention and handled the introductions, then turned as Dudley and Luna arrived with the Malfoys in tow.

The only person who seemed to be missing was the officiant, unless Tom decided to show. Dudley handled those introductions. The Krums seemed fine being faced with Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy, but he already knew Iskra was forewarned and a classy lady able to handle herself in social situations. Mary made sure that some light refreshments were available and they happily enough mingled while they waited.
Harry was finally able to meet Draco’s mother; she was stunningly beautiful, but had that same air of coldness that Lucius did. Still, her eyes softened considerably when she saw the ring he was wearing, so he segued into an introduction for her to Viktor as his fiancé.

Draco’s eyes went wide, not having been forewarned, then smiled happily. “It’s about time! When are you planning for?”

“Next summer,” Viktor said. “We plan to hold the bonding at my parents’ home in Sofia.”

“Oh, wow. I’ve never been to—” Draco snapped his mouth shut, looking a bit worried about his presumption.

Harry snickered and said, “Yes, Draco, you’ll be getting an invitation. You don’t really think we’d leave you out, do you?”

“And to live?” Narcissa asked.

“Here,” he said. “For the time being, anyway. It’s not like it’s any trouble for Viktor to get to work and the time difference is only an hour.”

Lucius arched a brow. “And yourself?”

Harry gave the man a look very much like Tom might use and was pleased to get the reaction he desired. “I’ve asked Severus to apprentice me. He’s agreed.”

“Yes, I have,” Severus said, joining their little grouping. “Harry is very talented and well worth the effort.”

“Such praise,” Lucius said.

“He’s at least as good as I am,” Severus replied.

“Don’t sprain something with all that flattery, Severus.”

Harry turned to see Tom standing there, smirking. “You came,” he said happily.

“Of course I did,” Tom said patiently. “I escorted the official. And I’ll be making sure the man can’t remember where he’s been after the fact.”

Harry grinned. “Good to know.”

Tom’s gaze flickered down, he said, “And I suppose congratulations are in order,” then eyed Viktor a bit narrowly.

Viktor returned the look steadily and nodded slightly.

Harry half-rolled his eyes at the not so subtle manly posturing and said, “You knew it was coming.”

Tom favored him with a sarcastic smile. “I want to see how you two have come along with daggers later, so expect that sometime this—” He broke off when Luna popped up at his side and touched his arm for a moment. “Yes?”

“It’s time,” she said.

“Ah. In that case. . . .”
A general exodus began to the yard, where a very small venue had been set up. The official was already waiting, a vague sort of smile on his round face, and Severus walked down the aisle between the chairs to stand nearby, facing back toward the house. The chairs for the event had been placed on a curve, three on each side, with three more each in a second row, slightly offset so as to not block the view.

Harry had to wonder if Tom had already been fiddling with the official’s brains given the man’s air of not quite being all there. He, Viktor, and Petunia took the right front seats, with Dudley, Luna, and Draco behind them. The left front was filled by Viktor’s parents and Serana, who had her hood back up and took the end seat, the one most in the shade. Behind them sat Narcissa, Lucius, and Tom.

Behind the official was a table with some parchment on it; Harry assumed it was either a contract or simply the legal evidence of the joining—a certificate of sorts. A faint chime drew everyone’s attention back toward the house and Harry watched as his mother stepped through the back door. Her dress was a stunning green that made her hair look as though it was on fire and her smile was a bit on the quirky side.

She strolled down the aisle as if it was no more important than a walk in the woods and came to a stop by Severus; then she smiled at him for real. Only being on the side he was afforded Harry the opportunity to see the sheer adoration Severus felt for his mother and he couldn’t help but smile in response and squeeze Viktor’s hand.

The official straightened up and checked behind him, then faced forward and said, “We are gathered here today to celebrate the union of two faithful souls. . . .”

Petunia had already turned on the waterworks, but at least this time she was happy. He had previously heard the stories about his mother’s wedding to James, so this had to be a vast improvement. Of course, that made him wonder if his aunt would ever get married again or if she was content as she was.

“Do you, Severus Prince, take Lily Marie. . . ?”

‘If Severus gets any more emotional he’s going to be embarrassed,’ Harry thought, though he was reassured by the man’s expression. Severus had obviously already ditched his middle name, which he supposed made sense. He wouldn’t want that name being spoken, either, not during a ceremony like this.

“. . .Then I declared you bonded for life.” The official waved his wand high and released a shower of silver and green motes of light which floated down in spirals around the couple. His mother and Severus shared a relatively chaste kiss and turned to face all of them as the official said, “Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to present Mr and Mrs Evans!”

Severus actually smiled, and a glance to the side revealed that Lucius and Narcissa were unable to hide their surprise, though whether that was due to the name change or that Severus was actually capable of smiling was in doubt; it could be either, or both. He smiled himself as he stood, applauding his mother’s happiness.

As everyone rose from their places Tom ghosted over to the table. Lily and Severus turned back to take care of the parchment with the official, which replicated itself several times once they were done, two of the copies disappearing with a snap. Tom grabbed the extras and tucked them away in a pocket, then spelled the official unobtrusively. The little man got a dazed look on his face, then produced a small tag of metal and activated it. Tom smirked in satisfaction.
Mary showed up long enough to rearrange the chairs to circle several small round tables that appeared, and set out the buffet. An area appeared off to the side, the grass covered with polished wood, obviously intended as a dance floor, and a strange mist-filled sphere on a pedestal. He ignored that for the moment in favor of giving his mother and new stepfather hugs, and then realized—“Mum? You never did say if you two were taking a honeymoon trip.”

She laughed at him, not unkindly. “Yes, honey. We’ll be back before you leave and Tom knows where we’ll be.”

He nodded and almost asked where, but decided against it; he would find out soon enough. Once all the congratulations were out of the way Lily and Severus moved over to the dance floor. Mary was obviously waiting because the next thing Harry knew the contents of that odd sphere began swirling and music started playing.

He was led out onto the floor himself a short time later and happily began to dance with Viktor. “So what was the deal with the parchment?” he asked quietly.

“Ah, copies go to the ICW and ministry for filing,” Viktor replied. “As it was only the two I assume Severus changed citizenship.”

“That would make a certain kind of sense,’ he thought, nodding. ‘Not being a British citizen puts him one step further from Dumbledore, just in case.’ “So for us it would be three, then.”

Viktor nodded. “ICW, Norway, and Bulgaria. Though, once bonded, we can claim citizenship in both countries.”

“Okay.” He had no idea if that would attain any value, but it was good to know nevertheless. He smiled a bit slyly and pressed a bit closer, whispering, “Draco’s parents seemed awfully surprised by something.”

“That Severus knows how to smile?” Viktor said in amusement.

“Or that he changed his name,” he replied, sharing his other thought on that matter. “It’s kind of a shame in a way. I actually liked his middle name, but the associations were enough to get rid of it.”

“What was it?”

“Tobias.”

Viktor tilted his head slightly, consideringly, and nodded. “I rather like it, too, but oh well.” Then he smiled. “Should I assume you would like there to be dancing at our bonding?”

Harry bit his lower lip against a smile and nodded. “Yes, dancing. Different sorts.”

Viktor snickered after a moment, remembering. “And a trip together?”

“. . .I have no idea where,” he admitted, “but preferably somewhere we could have acquired the language for.”

“Now where’s your sense of adventure?” Viktor asked. “Don’t you want to go to a country where we’ll be at the mercy of a translator’s integrity?”

“Right at the top of my list,” he said sarcastically, then glided to a stop when the music ended and gave his fiancé a quick kiss. “Back shortly. I’m going to at least steal my mother for a dance.”
Viktor nodded so Harry tracked his mother down and pulled her into a dance as a new tune began. It was more than a little strange to be the one leading. After that he snagged Severus for a dance, noticing that Viktor was dancing with Iskra. “So, you closed up the shop for now?” he asked as Severus swept him around.

“Yes. I warned my customers I would be away for a few weeks.”

Harry nodded. “Welcome to the family.”

Severus smiled again, though more faintly. “Thank you, Harry.”

He returned the smile and said, “Something tells me that Tom will be around a lot while you two are away.”

“I’ve no doubt of that. And, while it is a bit early, I have left you some material. You will be able to get a better idea of what to expect.”

“Okay. Where?”

“The guest room. I did not feel inclined to invade your room. You will have the year to prepare in and around the other demands on your time. Part of that will be helping me at the shop.”

When the song did end Severus released him and Harry wandered off to the buffet for a breather. He grabbed a butterbeer and took a long pull, smiling as Viktor and Iskra arrived to join him. And, apparently mothers loved to tease their young, as Iskra cast a sly look at Viktor and asked Harry, “So, was his proposal romantic?”

He saw Viktor make a pained face. “I certainly thought so.”

“Details, Harry, details,” she urged.

He shook his head, laughing silently. “No, no, you don’t get all of them. He asked while we were on one of our walks in the woods. That’s all I’m saying. Thank you for helping to choose the rings.”

“Oh, you’re very welcome,” she said warmly, then smiled as her husband drifted up.

“So, a Potions apprenticeship?” Pavel asked, reaching over to grab something to nibble on.

“Yes. I’m looking forward to it. Severus has been a fantastic teacher so far. Ah, which reminds me—Viktor, Severus said he left some material for me in the guest room when he was getting ready, so I’ll get that later. I’ll find out what sort of horrifying plans he has in store for me next year.”

Viktor snickered. “Sure. And—” He gave Iskra a look. “To avoid my beloved mother asking any more embarrassing questions, I am going to steal you away for more dancing.”

Harry grinned at Viktor’s mother and set his bottle on the table, and let himself be led away back to the dance floor. By the time he found himself dancing with Narcissa (which was a little strange given she was taller than him, though many people were) he realized his mother and Severus had disappeared. “Oh, I guess they sneaked away.”

Narcissa nodded. “About a half hour ago. Tell me, how is Draco doing at Durmstrang? He tells me how much he enjoys it there, but I must wonder.”

He quirked a brow. “He’s doing very well. It took some adjustment, of course. Things are very different at Durmstrang, after all. Things are . . . kind of stiff, there. They are much concerned with
propriety and learning, not power struggles between the students, and we’re all on something of an even footing considering we pay tuition for our education. But yes, he’s fit in well, gets along with all our year mates, and he participates as much as anyone in classes. He never really got the basic ‘right’ to a mentor as my cousin and I did, but we serve that purpose well enough, and Dudley is a mentor in his own right.”

“I hear there are no muggle-born students,” she commented, a shade too casually.

His eyes narrowed. “Not with Karkaroff in charge, no. I know in the past there have been, mainly students with older siblings who went to one of the other schools and decided to give us a try instead. I did some checking because, you know, my mother is muggle-born, and found out that Karkaroff suspended the classes for them after that which would bring them more fully into our culture and help them to adjust rather than tearing down our own traditions to cater to muggle customs. There were never that many attending to begin with.”

She nodded and said nothing more for a full revolution, her gaze not on him but on their surroundings, then said quietly, “That is something of a shame. Although I was against sending Draco there I am nevertheless pleased now, especially as it means he’s meeting a much wider selection of other people his age.”

His brow quirked again, wondering if what she was really saying was she hoped that her son chose a spouse from outside Britain, to bring in fresh blood. Draco and Ilsa had drifted apart romantically while still staying friends, and the blond was currently mooning over a Swedish girl named Petra, in the year below them. “He is, from any number of countries. He’ll have contacts everywhere. And, no offense to your alma mater, a much better handle on magic in general and its use.”

She thawed a little, her grey eyes becoming softer. “That does present an issue. I think about what Hogwarts teaches, and not just in the classroom, in comparison to Durmstrang and . . . Well.”

Harry nodded and felt somewhat relieved as the current piece of music came to a close. He thanked her for the dance and escorted her to the side, then looked for Viktor, but was promptly stolen by Luna, hauled into another dance (she was leading), and asked, “So, how long before you think Dudley works up the courage?”

He started laughing and it took him a minute to get himself under control. “Um, maybe next summer? Or whenever you turn seventeen. Something like that.”

Luna nodded, guiding him around with admirable skill. “I can’t see things like that, of course, so I thought maybe you might have some insight. Viktor waited that long and Dudley does look up to him.”

“Well, it’s what I’d advise should he come to me to discuss it. My mother said it wouldn’t exactly have been rushing for Viktor last year, but she felt better that he waited. I wouldn’t doubt Aunt Petunia feels similarly.”

“All right. I’ll be patient, then. I’d just propose myself, but Dudley has some funny ideas about things like that.”

He started laughing again and was shortly delivered straight to Viktor, who was eyeing them with amusement. “Thank you for the dance, Luna,” he said, taking hold of Viktor’s arm.

After she smiled and wandered away Viktor asked quietly, “What was so funny?”

Harry scanned the immediate area to make sure Dudley wasn’t lurking and explained, a grin on his
Viktor laughed and guided him over to one of the tables and held a seat for him. “Now, don’t go anywhere. And if anyone else steals you I shall become cross.” His fiancé headed over to the buffet and prepared two plates, balancing those while also managing to grab bottles of butterbeer, then returned.

“Thank you,” he said, helping to get everything settled. “And at that, I’ve yet to dance with my aunt or your mother or Serana, though I don’t know if she dances.”

“She does,” Viktor replied, opening the bottles. “I saw her dancing with Tom, actually.”

He blinked. “Seriously? Tom danced?”

“Yes.” Viktor set one of the bottles at his plate. “I was a bit shocked, I admit.”

“Huh.” He spent the next few minutes eating, looking up when Tom joined them.

“I’m sure you’ve already figured it out, but I’ll be here while they’re gone. Serana will also be keeping an eye out.”

“Yes. But, where will you sleep?”

Tom turned his gaze on Viktor. “I hardly think there’d be a problem if you moved into Harry’s room. I’ve even been kind and warded it already, knowing that you two have most likely come to the conclusion that living here after your bonding is wisest.”

Viktor nodded with admirable solemnity and said, “I’ll move things after the guests have gone home.”

“What about Serana?”

“The usual,” Tom said with a shrug. “Those two will continue taking their walks at night.”

That had not exactly been what he meant, but it sufficed. “Well I don’t expect to be invaded while they’re gone, but it’s good to know you’ll be here. Any other . . . news?”

“Since you mention it, yes. Plants in Korea and China have been affected.”

Harry frowned and drank down a good third of his butterbeer.

“There have also been some odd reports about undead, and I’m not referring to Serana’s kin.”

“Inferi?” Viktor asked.

“I haven’t gotten a straight answer yet.”

“Okay, two more places not to visit during a honeymoon,” Harry half-joked.

“But languages which might become useful to have,” Tom said, “and something I’ll be looking into given this latest information.” He looked up, behind Harry, and nodded.

Harry blinked and looked back over his shoulder to see Lucius standing there. The man borrowed a chair from one of the other tables and joined them. “We will be leaving shortly,” the blond said, “but before we did so I wished to express my appreciation for you having taken Draco under your wing.”
Not a direct thank you, but Harry did not really expect one. “It’s been a pleasure.” What part exactly Lucius thought Harry played in Tom’s life was still up for debate, but it was possible the man believed that being close to Harry meant something insofar as Draco’s future went in terms of power. Or something.

Lucius inclined his head and stood, saying, “Please pass on our well wishes to your mother and Severus.”

Harry nodded and watched for a moment as Malfoy walked away, then took a sip of his drink, feeling a bit bemused. Any interesting questions could wait, assuming he even remembered to ask them later on. Things wound down at that point, with Luna portkeying out next, and then Viktor’s parents came to give their farewells.

Mary took care of cleaning up the yard as those remaining wandered back into the house to get changed. Viktor, of course, simply moved everything to Harry’s room first, handing off the material Severus had left for him before stripping down and fetching out clothes for the evening. Their good things were set aside for cleaning and Harry’s dress shoes went back with the others.

Harry grabbed a book, then hesitated. “Actually, would you like to go get in a little practice out back?”

Viktor looked over and nodded, and started collecting what they would need. A short time later they were downstairs and his fiancé let Tom know the room was free. Tom eyed their supplies and followed them outside, conjuring up a chair for himself and settling in.

Harry and Viktor faced each other, weapons ready, and began fighting, more or less tuning Tom out. They had progressed to the point where they no longer wore goggles and could go for much longer before taking a break for water, and subsequently went at it for a little over an hour, healing themselves each time they were unlucky enough to actually suffer a hit. Harry’s attacks were more like darting razor slashes; Viktor had a bit of difficulty holding back his strength. Still, neither of them ended up bleeding profusely or dead on the grass or blind.

Tom said, once they both pulled back, “Well done. You two have been practicing hard and it shows. Excellent stamina, as well. I’m impressed.”

Harry smiled widely at the praise and sheathed his dagger, then grabbed one of the water bottles. And as much as he would like to gulp it down he knew better than that and sipped instead, walking around in slow circles to cool down.

“What do you think,” Tom asked, “of digging another temporary pit and going against a beast or beasts properly?”

He nodded, swigging more water. “I’m okay with that. It’s going to happen at some point anyway, and while I’ve learned a lot sparring with Viktor, it’s not the same thing. Neither of us is trying for killing blows, after all.”

Tom nodded and looked at Viktor, who also nodded. “All right. Make sure you have plenty of potions. I expect it would be nice to see you get in some practice with some of the higher level spells. I also want you to start carrying all your gear. Always be stocked up. Those enchanted pockets will carry a ridiculous amount and there’s no excuse not to utilize them.”

“Okay,” he said, thinking that Valdis’s bow would be one of those items, and arrows of necessity. True, the action was all off in Asia at the moment, but who knew when that might change. A ton of soul gems was also a given, empty and filled. He was also pretty sure he was done growing, so the
worst he might need in terms of adjustment was for changes to musculature, and everything he had was slightly loose anyway. “I’ll work out a system so I can find what I need without thinking. Can you make regular deliveries this year of the things I’ll need for alchemy, please?”

“Of course.”

“Um...” He eyed Tom a bit hesitantly. “About Pelk.”

“Yes?” Tom quirked a brow. “What about him?”

“Will he stay with me, even after I’m done school?”

Tom sighed faintly. “Harry, I bought him for you, even though technically I’m his primary master. Yes, he’ll stay with you. I will ask him to listen to Viktor.”

“Okay, thank you,” he said, smiling. “I’ve grown fond of the little guy.”

“He is equally fond of you,” Tom informed him. “You’re a good master to him.”

He furrowed his brow, his mind wandering back to supplies again. “Hm. I’m tempted to convert part of the work room into a forge so I can crank out a ton of arrows.”

Tom narrowed his eyes. “How close are you to mastery that you can afford to give up enough space?”

“I’m just about done, actually. Just a bit more for Destruction and Conjuration.”

“In that case, no more repeats until I’ve had a chance to set that up,” Tom said.

A glow off to the side caused Harry to look that way, to see Valdis approaching. “Excuse me,” she said, “but something finally occurred to me and I wished to test it.” She came to a stop nearby and continued, “One of the ‘relics’ I have worked for non-magicka users, granting the ability to use two spells, Ignite and Freeze.”

No one spoke for a moment, then Viktor said, “I will test it, if you wish. That way, if it does not work, Petunia won’t need to feel that failure. And if it does...”

Valdis nodded. “Please come. I will show you where it is.”

Shortly thereafter Viktor was wearing the ring—Ahzidal’s Ring of Arcana, as it was grandiosely named—and was staring at it trying to figure out how to ready a spell he had not experienced in any way.

“Freeze is a lot like Ice Spike,” Valdis said helpfully.

Viktor looked up for a few moments, then nodded. A moment later his hand lit up with a familiar blue-white light. He had a look of recall on his face for another few moments, then his hand twitched, the light growing brighter. Seconds later he released the spell into the grass, a grin on his face. “What can you tell me about Ignite?”

“Mm, something between Flames and Firebolt, I suppose,” she replied. “It damages over time as Flames does, but is a single discharge like Firebolt.”

Viktor went into recall mode again, then asked Harry, “Can you please do Flames for me, just so I know? I’ve already seen Firebolt.”
He nodded and picked a spot on the grass, prepped the spell, and released, letting the flames char the spot until Viktor nodded, then let go and shook the spell away.

Viktor was quickly enough able to cast Ignite and another grin graced his face. “Something feels different, though,” he said, the grin fading.

Harry looked at him sharply. “Is it anything like an extra sense? Really subtle?”

“I’m . . . not sure.”

“Oh okay,” Tom said. “Viktor, keep the ring on for now. Tomorrow you can get in some practice and try to chase down that feeling while Harry is in the pit. We’re done for the evening, though. Valdis, excellent idea,” he added admiringly.

“I am just happy it worked. Hopefully it will be as much as I imagined, but we’ll see,” she replied.

Harry and Viktor headed inside to clean up, sharing a shower, and came back downstairs to indulge in Uno with Dudley and Petunia. Not a word was mentioned about the ring to his aunt, not yet. But if Viktor developed that sense he needed, that connection to the aetherial, then he could pass the ring to Petunia. She could get started as well and both of them could finally get some use out of all Harry’s spell books.
Chapter 22

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Harry felt a little weird sliding into the bed naked, as he had never done so in his mother’s house, but really preferred it when Viktor was sharing with him. On top of that it was weird having Viktor in his bed. The one in the trunk was like a world away in some respects. And remembering what Tom had said he leaned over to adjust his alarm to not wake them so early. The various activities of the day had tired him out and he snuggled up to Viktor, not even thinking about teasing him into anything.

The next thing he knew his alarm was going off and he was sleepily reaching over to silence it. Viktor pressed a kiss to the back of his neck before getting up. They shuffled through morning ablutions, got dressed, and wandered downstairs. It was while he was eating that Harry realized he needed to go back to his room afterward and load up as Tom had asked him to start doing. For that matter, Viktor should do the same, especially if the ring ended up working the way he hoped it would.

As the meal was being cleared away he got up and tugged on Viktor’s sleeve. “Forgot to do something,” he said. “Then we can come down and start digging.”

Tom spared him a glance and nodded, then returned to finishing his tea.

Shortly thereafter they were out back removing turf and setting it aside before digging. The resulting pit was six feet deep and twenty feet square. Tom called for one of his elves and soon enough there was quite a stack of caged animals off to the side. Harry eyed them a bit dubiously, but allowed that there could certainly be a difference in behavior between transfigured and real animals.

Tom released four of them into the enclosure and said, “One round of this first to see how it goes, then, Viktor, we’ll see about that ring.”

They nodded and Harry got out his dragon dagger and readied a healing spell, then jumped in. As soon as he landed and the boars oriented on him he Shouted, “Fiik Lo Sah!” A ghostly copy of himself appeared at the opposite side of the pit, grabbing the attention of the creatures, and allowing him to come up on one from behind and slit its throat before it even knew the danger. Its soul was pulled free to fill one of the many soul gems he carried.

One of the remaining three turned to face him and charged. Harry jumped to the side and turned so his back was to none of them, then flung out his left hand and reanimated the dead boar, which staggered up and charged the two harassing the decoy. The single boar charged again, but Harry was ready for it and slammed the dagger into its chest in an underhand thrust and ripped up, then kicked it away and nailed it with Incinerate.

By then his decoy had faded and the reanimated boar had dissolved into a pile of glimmering ash, so he pivoted and unleashed a Lightning Cloak. The newly dead boar’s soul streamed to him; the corpse was reanimated, staggered up, and charged. While it kept one busy Harry went for the other, trying to keep away from those tusks, but was unfortunately gored in the side as the boar tossed its head. “Gaan Lah Haas!” he Shouted, dancing back a little, then threw a spear of ice at it.
It went down and he turned to the final one, readying and using a healing spell, as the Shout had not drained enough from his target to fully heal him. His reanimated boar dissolved, so he went for the final one with his dagger. A minute later it was dead and he was up another soul. The act of going against multiple, real creatures at once had him breathing a bit heavily from the adrenaline rush, but he was otherwise all right.

A slow clapping had him turning his head to see Valdis and Serana applauding; he blushed. Serana reached down and pulled him from the pit, then clapped him on the back. “Well done.”

“Oh, er, thanks,” he said.

Viktor came up and enfolded him in a hug from behind. “I agree. Well done. And I finally got to see some Shouts.”

He looked to Tom and smiled when he saw approval in the man’s expression. Tom then said, “All right. Harry, rest a minute. Viktor, I’m going to transfigure some beasts for this next test. I want you to kill them with either or both of those two spells.”

Viktor kissed Harry’s head and pulled away. “Okay.”

Tom got rid of the remains in the pit and threw in a handful of rocks, then transfigured them into more boars. Viktor stepped up to the edge and readied Freeze, then started casting. He managed to “kill” one of them before he had to stop and get a potion from his pocket. Harry kept a close watch on his fiancé’s face, noting that Viktor developed an odd expression as he kept on casting.

After the second one reverted he asked, “Can you sense it?”

“Yes, I think I do,” Viktor replied slowly, then knocked back another potion and used Ignite on the next one, pausing much longer between casts to let the spell do the full damage it could.

Once the final one had reverted Harry persisted in advancing his theory. “Try casting Candlelight again.”

Viktor eyed him curiously and nodded. And it worked, to Harry’s great pleasure. Valdis was also smiling in satisfaction.

“The question is,” Tom said, “will that still work if you remove the ring?”

Viktor shrugged and slipped the ring from his finger and tried Candlelight again; it worked.

“So the ring allowed Viktor to gain enough experience with aethereal magicka to open, er, pathways or conduits to that source,” Harry said, “allowing him to be able to utilize the spell books.”

“That’s what I was hoping for,” Valdis said. “Which means your aunt stands a good chance of being able to learn the same way.”

“I guess I know what my evening reading will be for some time,” Viktor joked.

Tom nodded. “Ring back on for now. How long do those books take each?”

“It depends on the level,” Harry replied. “The apprentice level ones are about an hour, not more than two? Longer for higher.”

Tom nodded again. “Very well. Viktor, are you comfortable with the idea of trying in the pit as Harry has done, or would you prefer the way you just did?”
Viktor pursed his lips in thought. “I will go in, but preferably with Harry on standby healing, just in case. It will take me a long time, obviously, to be able to cast magicka with such ease and frequency.”

“Two real ones, then,” Tom said and removed the rocks from the pit, replacing them with two true boars. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Harry moved to the edge and readied healing spells. Viktor took a deep breath, pulled out his dagger, and jumped in even as Freeze illuminated his left hand. He was able to get through both boars with a combination of dagger strikes and magicka without too much trouble; he never signaled for healing. Serana gave him a hand out of the pit.

They spent the rest of the morning alternating turns in the pit, getting used to combat against multiple creatures. For Harry, getting comfortable using magicka and Shouts in combat, and Viktor to use magicka and managing potions under those conditions. Tom eventually called a halt and sent them off to clean up.

During lunch he asked for the ring and turned his attention to Petunia. “We’ve discovered something very interesting, thanks to a suggestion from Valdis.” He went on to explain and Harry watched as his aunt went a bit pale and wide-eyed.

“I couldn’t bring myself to try the book,” she admitted. “But this worked for Viktor? Truly?”

Tom answered her with admirable patience and asked if she would like to try. He handed over the ring a few moments later. “We will start after lunch. Viktor, you’re reading spell books this afternoon. Harry can sort them for you first, then come help out back.”

A half hour later Harry was upstairs sorting through the books, tapping sticky notes on each cover with spell name, school, and level showing, then putting them into piles. “I kind of think if this works for Petunia that he might just duplicate all of them so you can take a set with you for this year. Then again, Petunia can get through a lot in a day and Pelk or another elf can shuttle them back and forth.”

“Whatever works,” Viktor replied.

“Okay, well, I guess go through the first book in each set to at least have a spell for every school. Anything you’ve gotten through set aside for my aunt?”

Viktor nodded and leaned in for a kiss, then said, “You should go before Tom comes looking for you.”

Petunia was a bit dithery about the whole process, but watched carefully as Harry demonstrated both spells, having taken the ring temporarily. She had to sit down after she managed to ready Freeze and they both politely ignored the tears of relief and happiness that fell after she successfully cast the spell.

Once she had her composure back he said, “I want you to, well, listen, I guess. Viktor said he sensed some kind of change in himself. What I’ve always sensed when I’m using this kind of spell is subtle, but once you figure it out keep it in mind. It will tell you both when you’re out of juice and how well you’re progressing in mastery for a school.”

She nodded, brow furrowed, and glanced over at a little table Tom had set up with a number of vials on it. Tom went ahead and tossed a rock into the pit and transfigured it for her to practice against and at least gain enough experience to be able to use the books. It was going to be a long, hard road for her to gain mastery in Destruction and Conjuration, but he assumed his mother would help with the
necessary transfiguration.

Tom pushed her for an hour before reclaiming the ring. “Harry, I want you to get your aunt the book for Candlelight to start with.”

“Okay. Do you think the books will need to be copied or. . . ?”

Tom looked away for a moment, then back. “I’ll copy them. Viktor can take a set with him.”

He nodded and went to fetch the book. He saw his aunt in the sitting room when he came back down and gave it to her with a smile, then went to find his cousin. The remainder of the week went much the same and Viktor had managed a number of books by then, as had his aunt. That last evening, as they were lying in bed, a thought occurred to Harry.

“Do you even share a room at school now?”

“. . . No.”

A smile curved his lips.

“I know what you’re thinking and I’m all right with it,” Viktor said, “but you’d be the one explaining it to Dudley and Draco. People will also notice that you aren’t in the usual places at night.”

“True,” he admitted. “Do you think anyone on staff will bother to get involved?”

“So long as we don’t make a huge deal of it, no. But if someone should complain I expect you’ll be ordered back to your dorm room, at the least.”

“But you’re okay with the idea?”

“Very much so.” Viktor moved and rolled Harry onto his back, and kissed him. “I would love to have you with me all year.”

“Mm. I’d love for you to have me right now,” he said hopefully.

“I think that can be arranged,” Viktor said, and kissed him again.

When Draco and Luna arrived for the last week he pulled the two males aside after Luna went off with Petunia. He rolled his eyes up, trying to think how to broach the subject, then said, “So, er, I found out that Viktor has a room to himself at Durmstrang.”

Dudley grinned knowingly. “Lucky.”

“Yeah. About that. . . .” he said, scratching his neck.

“Yes, Harry,” Draco said, “you can skip out on us and bunk with Viktor. We won’t be offended.”

He exhaled in relief and laughed a little. “Well, thanks. Viktor did point out, though, that if someone complained I’d probably be tossed back into our dorm room.”

“Oh,” Dudley said mock sadly, “I guess that means we can’t make your bed disappear. We’ll just have to manage.”

Tom wandered in with Lily and Severus, and Harry did a double-take before rushing over to give his mother a hug, then Severus. “You had a good time, I trust?”
Severus nodded and his mother said, “We had a wonderful time.”

As it turned out they had spent equal time in France and Spain. For some reason that made Harry think that Germany should be on his list. It was a bit strange to read and speak the language fluently and never have visited the country. Of course, he had never been to any number of places.

His mother and stepfather headed upstairs to unpack and weren’t seen again until lunch, after which Petunia pulled her sister away, presumably to jump up and down and squeal and generally make a fuss over her newfound ability without Draco being clued in. Luna probably already knew, but she kept her mouth shut if she did. If nothing else, the addition to her life had wrought an interesting change in his aunt; she carried herself far more confidently, for one.

Movie night turned out to be *Ghostbusters*, which had Draco in stitches and Luna not far behind. Soon enough, though, they were back at Durmstrang for another year. Viktor was waiting in the entrance hall, which helped, because Harry had no idea where his fiancé’s room was. Dudley and Draco just smirked at them before heading off, and Viktor led him to a section of the castle he was unfamiliar with, then into a suite of rooms.

“Fancy,” he commented, looking around before passing through to the bedroom and parking his trunk.

“No, that you have joined me I would prefer to store the books in your trunk.”

He nodded. “It’d be safer that way, yes,” he said, and expanded the trunk. “Shall we?”

“Mm,” Viktor hummed agreeably, but rather than head down to lunch he pulled Harry close for a lingering kiss. “Okay. Now we go.”

That night, after reacquainting themselves with each other, Viktor said, “What do you think of spending the first week of Yule break in Sofia? A departure from the usual, I know.”

It would mean missing the usual opening of the presents ritual, but that wasn’t really the important part of the holiday. Much like how it had always been Viktor coming to him, this was another opportunity for him to spend time with his in-laws. The fact that they weren’t bonded yet was rather beside the point. He kissed Viktor’s chest lazily and said, “I think it’s fine. I’ll let my mother know of the change. Suppose I should ask Tom to make me a permanent portkey to your parents’ house, too. Can you think of anything your parents would wear daily, possibly, that I could make as gifts?”

Viktor reached up to cover his hand, idly stroking. “Enchanted items, huh?”

“Yes, like the earring I originally gave you, at the least.”

“I don’t know,” Viktor said dubiously. “My mother changes her jewelry constantly to go with what she’s wearing and my father wears nothing in particular of that nature.”

He frowned and nodded, his cheek rubbing against Viktor’s chest.

“We can get some of the particulars out of the way at Yule, for the bonding.”

That made sense, since they would be having it there. “Preferably something small.”

“Agreed. Though we may need to release a photograph. I am more than a little hesitant on that point, because you might come in for harassment once it becomes known we have bonded.”

He wrinkled his nose. He had been surprisingly sheltered from Viktor’s celebrity so far, despite any
number of school-aged people having some knowledge of their relationship. “I think I’d want the opinions of my mother and Tom on that one.”

“Understandable,” Viktor said easily. “I can already guess your side of the guest list. I would have my family, of course, and I think perhaps Bergfalk and Poliafof.”

“No one from your team?”

“Ha. My coach is dying to meet you, but no, not really. I can’t say I’m all that close to any of them except in terms of team play. Maybe Levski.”

Harry snickered. “If your coach is lucky I’ll attend a team practice to see what kind of hell you get put through in comparison to school practices. I guess they all noticed the ring.”

“Oh yes. The very first practice back. You’d think they were all girls with the reaction I got.”

He laughed quietly and snuggled closer.

He did actually attend a practice the next chance he got, when schedules lined up properly. He also brought a book with him, just in case. In deference to him and because of Viktor’s relative strength when it came to apparating great distances, they first portkeyed to the Krum’s backyard and then Viktor side-along apparated him to the stadium.

It was appropriately huge, much like the one used for the World Cup he’d attended. Professional players flew so much faster that a larger stadium was a wise idea. The coach went into raptures once he realized that Viktor had his fiancé with him and eyed Harry up in a way that almost, but not quite, made him feel uncomfortable. A quick look at the man’s mind told him the coach was just blown away that someone had actually managed to snag Krum so early on and really had been dying to meet that person.

Harry was able to greet the man equitably enough, and Viktor’s team mates, and was shortly installed in a seat halfway up at center where the coach was based during practices. When the man spotted Harry’s book he looked surprised and asked about it while the team was still warming up.

“Oh, well, I’m not much of a quidditch fan, really,” he said.

The coach clutched at his heart and stared at him wide-eyed. “Not a quidditch fan?”

“Not really,” he said with a shrug. “But I used to attend half the practices to show support for Viktor and my cousin—they were on the same team. I was curious to see how a practice differed at professional level. I’ve already seen him play at the ’94 World Cup. He was amazing. It’s just a shame Bulgaria lost.” He slumped a little at the memory.

The coach glanced around and then leaned in to whisper, “Between you and me, Viktor is the best player on the team.”

Harry smiled. “I won’t tell.”

The man laughed a bit nervously. “Good. I’d probably be lynched if that got out.”

The practice got underway a few minutes later and Harry could see it wasn’t all that much different from school ones, just a lot more cutthroat in nature. The reserve players were doing their damnedest to outplay the first string and, much like when he watched the World Cup game, it was difficult to actually make sense of the action at times. Even so, things were frequently halted so the coach could fly out and, well, coach.
By the time Viktor fetched him he realized he had not once resorted to his book. Levski was with him and asked, “Well, what do you think?”

“Impressive,” he said. “I kind of get the feeling I’d get motion sickness if I flew around that fast, though.”

Levski laughed, not unkindly. “It’s not for everyone, true. But if you did, you’d probably go for seeker. You’re such a little thing.”

Harry rolled his eyes and sighed.

Viktor snorted. “You should see him fight. He’s not so little then. More like, ‘Oh hell, I’m glad I’m not the target.’ ”

Levski arched a brow and gave Harry another look. “You going for a mastery, too, then?”

“Oh, not in that, no. Potions, actually. Though now I’m wondering….” He looked off to the side, considering. “It might be interesting to brew up certain potions and throw them in a fight. I’ll have to ask my master.”

Levski laughed a bit nervously, no doubt imagining all sorts of horrors.

“We should get going,” Viktor said. “Lunch starts in a few minutes.”

He nodded and said to Levski, “It was nice meeting you.” Shortly thereafter they were back at Durmstrang.

In no time at all it was Yule and they were back at Viktor’s parents’ home. Iskra practically pounced on them after they entered the parlor and ushered them over to one of the sofas. “So, let’s talk about the bonding,” she said.

Viktor blinked and said, “Hello, mother. Yes, we’re fine. How are you and father?”

She waved her hand around. “Welcome home, darlings.”

Harry closed his eyes briefly, then smiled. “Small, not fussy. I don’t want people there who’re only there to see and be seen, so there’s no point in being elaborate.”

She pursed her lips and nodded. “Colours?”

“Blue, green, and silver,” Viktor said.

“So, something vaguely like your mother’s wedding?” she asked Harry.

“Yes. More people, obviously, but essentially.”

“Indoors? Outdoors?”

Viktor shrugged, then said, “Vines in preference to flowers.”

“Clothes?”

Harry grinned at how quickly she was going through various issues. “Not much different than what we were wearing before.”

“Hm. All right. Afternoon? Evening?”
“If you go for evening outside,” said Bisera from the doors, “I could make up some candles for it.”

“Oh, darling, what a lovely idea,” Iskra said.

Harry smiled at Viktor’s sister as she sat next to her mother. “I think I like the idea. If we went for around sunset. . . .”

Viktor was nodding slowly. “It would mean starting late, but I like it, too. Thank you, Bisera.”

She smiled. “It’s not every day my big brother gets bonded. Just let me know about scents and whatnot.”

The rest of the week they were randomly attacked with questions and Viktor promised to get his mother a list of guests as soon as possible, and then they were off to Norway to spend the other week of the break. Tom presented Harry with another portkey for his collection and mentioned that when the time came he would do the warding on their bedroom at the Krum home. He also passed along another handful of languages.

Worrying, however, was the statement that, “It seems those undead I heard about are starting to sound an awful lot like Valdis and Serana’s descriptions of draugr.”

“We have animated, partially-fleshed corpses wandering around possibly using Thu’um?” he asked a bit skeptically.

Tom shook his head. “No mention of Deathlords or Overlords, but that could easily change. They’ve been appearing in areas where the power plants were destroyed.”

“To muggles?” Viktor asked. “Because that would probably send them all off in a screaming panic.”

“Not yet, from what I’m hearing, but something tells me they will eventually.”

“Damn,” he said. “I have to wonder just how much longer before the lid on this goes and blows the Statute of Secrecy all to hell.”

“I think if it gets to that point we’ll have a lot more to worry about than the statute,” Tom said wryly.

A whole lot of communication went by house-elf during the following months, between Harry and Viktor, Iskra, and Lily. Decisions were made, lists of guests were shared, and arrangements were made for the Evans household to visit the Krum household for several weeks. NEWT exams finally came and Harry plowed through them along with Dudley and Draco, and finally they could leave, done with normal schooling. Viktor had finished his mastery work and should be getting confirmation soon.

Draco left first, heading back to England for the time being, but already holding a portkey for the wedding. Harry and Viktor went next, followed by Dudley. Inside Dudley was suitably impressed by the house and easily suffered to be ushered up to the second floor and shown to a bedroom—the one Harry had used previously, actually.

“Just come back a room when you’re ready,” Viktor said. “We’ll leave the door open.”

“All right.” Dudley stepped into the room, pulling his trunk behind him, so they left him to it.

Back at Viktor’s room, now theirs, Harry wheeled his trunk in and parked it off his side of the bed, up against the wall, and expanded it. Dudley showed up a minute later so they headed back down and into the parlor. His family was already there and broke ranks to welcome the three of them in.
Bisera was nowhere to be seen, as of yet, but then she usually wasn’t straight off.

Harry had just stepped up with a mind to hug his mother when one of the windows flew open and what looked like a miniature dragon flew in and landed on the back of the nearest sofa. He blinked a few times, thinking he was hallucinating. And then it spoke.

“It is time, my son, my chosen,” the creature said, its gaze steady on Harry. “You have done well these years, worked hard, always with an eye toward the future you were only partially warned of. But it is now time for you to be tested, and to take care of an issue from the previous kalpa.”

Off to the side something was forming and it took everything he had to look away from the dragon. ‘Oh god,’ he thought, and then he was frozen in place, fascinated, enthralled, by what he was seeing. It was like some eldritch horror from a Lovecraft novel with a million eyes that bubbled up, popped wetly, and reformed, with a million tentacles to go with it, undulating in a fashion that made his stomach lurch threateningly. In the air around it was a dirty aura of black and grey and brown and yellow—even some green—like a bastardized soup of frog spawn or the stain of tar from countless exhalations of muggle cigarettes.

The only person who seemed to be able to move was Severus, and he stepped back quickly a few times and turned slightly. Harry just knew he was going to use his Dark Mark to send a call to Tom. Indeed, even as the thing grew in size and seemed to take over an entire side of the room, Tom showed up and stopped dead.

Then it spoke, and it was as though someone had recorded speech and slowed it down imperfectly. Sometimes slower, sometimes a bit faster, higher or lower, but all syrupy and thick and very much inhuman. “Akatosh has granted me this favor, dovahkiin,” it spoke, “and your testing shall be to defeat the first, he who has become corrupted and vile.”

Some of the many eyes focused on Lily; she cried out in pain and stumbled. Severus caught her and pulled her close. “It’s broken,” she gasped, “the Secret.”

“The dovahkiin should no longer shelter behind its protection,” the thing stated.

Harry almost desperately wished he could back away from that thing, but he was still frozen in place. He felt like he was fading, a little more with each word from it.

“Should you emerge from this victorious it will not be without reward,” he was told. “I am Hermaeus Mora, Daedric Lord of Knowledge and Fate. And now, it is time for you to visit my Plane of Oblivion, Apocrypha. But beware, seek not to delve too deeply into the knowledge lest it drive you insane, as it has so many already.”

A large black book appeared in front of him, already open, glowing with a sickly green light, and tentacles reached out from it to grab at him and lift him off the ground. He knew, somehow, even as the room faded and he was slowly becoming aware he was in a different place entirely, that his body was still back in Sofia, in the parlor.

The floor beneath his feet was a combination of sheets of paper or parchment and a lacework of some material that may have been wrought iron—or might be plant matter for all he knew—fashioned into an unyielding almost lace of curves. He was irresistibly reminded of the leaves of a plant or tree, of the delicate tracery of veins. Below that and all around was a foggy body of water. Tentacles rose from it at random and waved or snapped around. The air had that same kind of dirty aura and there were more eyes and tentacles randomly appearing, making his stomach lurch again.

Harry finally got it together, realizing he could be in imminent danger, and pulled out the dragon
bow and a quiver loaded with arrows and slung them into place. A sheathed dagger was strapped to his thigh. As he crouched down and was about to ready the bow that apparition appeared again, floating above his head.

“Consider this little corner of Apocrypha an opportunity to understand part of what you will be up against,” the thing said. “At the end is a reward, and then you will face the real test. But before you begin I shall give you the first piece of knowledge necessary on the path to defeat the corrupted one.”

He almost fell over in shock as a word slammed into his consciousness: Gol—Earth.

Hermaeus Mora slowly vanished, leaving him alone.

Harry took a deep breath and swung the bow around, then grabbed an arrow.
The only way to go was a path in front of him; he could see a set of stairs up ahead, beyond an arch formed from books. The path was lit with flower-like lamps. As he started forward, moving carefully, tentacles erupted to either side from the water and lashed out at him, causing him to roll backward to avoid them. He looked up at the dirty yellow-brown-green sky and sighed, then stood up and darted forward. The tentacles lashed out again, but he was already beyond them.

At the stairs he went into a crouch again and nocked an arrow, then headed up, eyes sharp for anything unusual. At he crested the rise a ripple caught his attention, confusing him. It was almost like seeing someone using Disillusionment or an incomplete form of Chameleon. He drew back, aimed, and released. The arrow struck true and he sucked in a breath on seeing a creature flick into view and turn to face him.

Whatever it was it floated; octopus-like tentacles hung down to brush against the landing. Four arms like those of a desiccated corpse or an anthropomorphic tree gently moved around, one holding a blackened book. The head was another eldritch horror and it was “clothed” with a shaggy, layered cloak of sorts. “I am never reading Lovecraft again,” he swore, then nocked another arrow and aimed. It collapsed into just the cloak, so he assumed it was dead. Even so, his approach was cautious and he used an arrow to poke at the remains before daring to actually search them. He found a book and some scrolls and tucked them away, not daring to read them after Hermaeus Mora’s warning.

He continued up the next set of stairs from the landing to a platform, at which was a circular pool surrounded by a low rim and the water within was black and oily. He took a moment to look around and saw numerous pillars in the distance, formed of blackened books. ‘They look almost burned,’ he thought, ‘which seems a bit odd for the realm of a Lord of Knowledge.’ He glanced at the pool again, thinking of the tentacles from the path, and edged around it very carefully. A tentacle whipped up and he did a shoulder roll, being careful not to roll straight off the platform.

Ahead were a series of arches blocked off by more of that wrought iron-like material, showing him glimpses of the spaces beyond. A pedestal held a book, which he quickly tucked away. Another held an odd, flower-like thing that glowed. He prodded it with an arrow to no effect, so he used his fingers instead. It curled and folded and he could hear something shifting.

‘Okay, so those are probably switches of some kind.’ Directly behind it the blocked archway had a center seam, so he approached and gave it a push; it opened like a set of French doors. Off to the left was a dark sideboard or table holding a grand soul gem, tucked into another arch fashioned from singed books, and ahead was a glowing blue light. He grabbed the gem, and a book almost hidden in shadow, and continued on, noticing that where the floor was not covered in pages it more closely resembled the cracked earth of a dry waterway or lake bed.

Books upon books upon books formed walls and arches and pillars, and swirling columns of loose pages erupted from nothing every so often, then faded. He spotted another door, but this one did not open at his push, so he searched around for another one of those flower things. He found one near another grand soul gem and activated it after pocketing the gem. As the sound he expected was heard he chuckled to himself, suddenly remembering some of the stories Valdis had been happy to share,
then stiffened on seeing a shady ripple ahead.

Another arrow went into place and was drawn as he crept sideways and forward. He released it, hitting the mark, and quickly nocked a second one and finished it off. Either they weren’t very hardy or his experience plus enchantments equaled one hell of an attack. He continued on through the bizarre landscape, collecting a few things along the way and opening another door. Ahead, down a short flight of steps, was a much larger pool, and the air there was hazy with a green mist. As he hit the top of the stairs something rose from the pool.

It was far more humanoid in appearance, but still horrifying, with a head like a mutated fish. He started shooting; it quickly oriented on him and began lurching his way. He kept shooting, moving backward, until it dropped down dead. ‘And this is the equivalent of a tutorial area in one of Dudley’s games?’ he thought a bit wearily. He moved forward again and spied another switch off to the side. When he activated it a set of stairs appeared, but the door at the top was still locked. Another look around revealed a lacework ramp, which led up to a switch, some scrolls, a book, and more soul gems.

He backtracked and went back up the stairs and through the open door. Beyond it was a pedestal supporting a large book with a glowing green symbol on the front. ‘Is this the reward?’ he wondered. If it was it made sense to wait for a minute, to let his heart stop racing. True, he had managed so far without getting hurt, but he was still massively keyed up. While waiting for his heart rate to slow to normal he eyed the little “room” and noticed a strange something off to the left of the pedestal. It almost resembled the head of the creature he had most recently killed.

Investigation proved it to be a container; inside was more scrolls, books, gold, and soul gems, which he quickly grabbed and tucked away. He was starting to feel an odd obsession with collecting everything not nailed down and laughed quietly. Though still wary he stood up properly and approached the book. As soon as his fingers touched the cover the circular symbol flashed and the book opened on its own, startling him. The pages subsequently displayed had a text he could not decipher, especially as the symbols moved of their own accord and caused his stomach to lurch again.

Three black circles on the two pages almost seemed like black holes to his eyes, but then they glowed and gaseous green spheres rose from each. He frowned, not sure what to do, then tentatively reached out to touch one of the spheres. His eyes slipped closed as he felt knowledge intrude, letting him know that by choosing that sphere he would gain certain benefits. He checked the other two, as well. ‘Okay, so this is the reward mentioned.’

It really took no thought at all to choose what the book called Companion’s Insight. As soon as he activated it green light from the sphere flowed into him and he could sense a change. From that point on, assuming this was not all some kind of cosmic joke, none of his attacks—physical, Thu’um, or spells—would harm any companion of his. Or, as Dudley would put it, no friendly fire.

He stood there, uncertain of what to do next, but looked up sharply when that apparition formed again. He was almost starting to get used to seeing it after dealing with the scenery.

“You have done well, my champion. For this I will teach you the second word necessary on the path toward the defeat of the corrupted one.”

Harry took a step back as another word slammed into his consciousness: Hah—Mind.

“Use it to bend the wills of mortals to your purpose. But this is not enough. The corrupted one, Miraak, knows the final Word of Power. Without that, you cannot hope to surpass him. Miraak served me well, and he was rewarded. I can grant you the same power as he wields, but all
knowledge has its price. When you wish to proceed simply close the book. You will be transported to the next section of my realm, where you will seek the final word of power.” The Daedric Lord faded away again, leaving him alone but for the waving tentacles in the water and swirling columns of pages.

He sighed and took a seat, fairly certain he was safe for the moment. A part of him could feel a connection to that room in the house in Sofia and he wondered exactly what was happening there. Were the two avatars still present? And, oh lord, he had actually met an Aedra and Daedra, gods of the realms. Was his family still mostly frozen in place? Freaking out? The Krums?

Was his body hanging there, insensate? Held up by those awful tentacles?

Harry shuddered and slung his bow onto his back, and reached into a pocket. He pulled out a bottle of water and drank from it slowly, then capped it and put it back, replacing it with a handful of crackers. If nothing else they should give his stomach something to do besides get upset. He was suddenly very, very glad that Tom had more or less demanded he be fully geared up and ready at a moment’s notice.

‘I kind of wonder what caused the “corruption” of the First Dragonborn,’ he thought. ‘But I guess I’m not in any position to get picky over my motivation right now, not with Akatosh himself loaning me out.’ He dropped his chin to his chest and closed his eyes, feeling very alone, idly fingering his ring. He badly wished Viktor was with him, or Tom. He sniffed, embarrassed to realize his eyes were tearing and one had already escaped, and straightened up. He dashed away the tear angrily and took a deep breath, releasing it jerkily. After a few more deep, calming breaths he felt a bit better. ‘Honestly, you are not a baby. Stop being such a twat,’ he scolded himself, then stood.

He got his bow ready again, recharged the enchantments, and reached out to close the book. The world faded and came back. Aside from some differences in presentation he was absolutely still in Apocrypha. He was on a relatively small platform with a switch in the center. Up ahead was a long, moving passage, rather like it was segmented or accordion folded. He eyed it skeptically for a moment, then activated the switch. A small extension unfolded itself, allowing him to time a jump into that passage.

At the other end of a walk that made him wonder if this was what it felt like to be drunk he waited to see what precisely would appear. Two platforms came into view, but it was the one at the far right which contained another switch, so he jumped off and activated it quickly enough that he could catch the passage again and ride it to the center. There a second extension or bridge had been made known and he used it to get to a pedestal with a black book on it.

Opening it warped him to a new section. Something about it made him nervous so he got into stalking position and readied an arrow, and Shouted, “Laas Yah Nir!” Three bright spots in gaseous red popped up, all vaguely humanoid, two gliding around, one stalking. After a moment he skulked off down the narrow corridor. Part way down the sides unfolded like the petals of a blossoming flower to resolve into a fairly large room containing three creatures, two of the book-holding sorts and one like the one from the pool.

As he took out the first one and gained the attention of the other two he resolved to call them Seekers and Lurkers, having remembered something from Valdis’s stories about the Oghma Infinium. “Fiik Lo Sah!” he Shouted, letting his decoy take the heat, and resumed launching arrows at them. The Seekers used magicka and created clones of themselves while the Lurker had some kind of spitting attack. ‘No way in hell I’d want to go against these things up close,’ he thought, launching yet more arrows.

Once they were gone he checked around carefully and looted the room, then activated the only
visible switch. A set of gates opened across the room. “Laas Yah Nir!” Nothing else was revealed to his sight so he proceeded through the gate. One of those funny containers was just inside the door and to the right, so he looted that, then opened the book on a pedestal straight ahead.

When he warped back he sighed. He waited for his throat to clear from the last Shout, then started in again, recharging his bow as necessary. After a convoluted trip involving numerous opponents he came to yet another book. This one, however, was like the one he gained a reward from, which meant he was at the end of this particular part of the test. After checking again with Aura Whisper for any other enemies he slung the bow back and was about to take a seat. Naturally, Hermaeus Mora appeared once again before he could.

“Young progress since being brought here has been rapid. There is but one word left, and that word comes with a different price.”

There was a long enough pause that Harry realized a response was necessary. “What is this price, my lord?” he asked politely.

“I require knowledge for knowledge, and you hold that knowledge. You will also help to spread my influence in the world.”

He frowned; Hermaeus Mora made it sound like a communicable disease. “You said Miraak has served you well, but he’s become corrupted?”

“Miraak was a Dragon Priest when dragons ruled Nirn, but sought me out and became my champion. I taught him the words of power and he used them to revolt against the dragons and devour many a soul. Others tried to use him to deal with Alduin and he refused. I rescued him from a killing blow and brought him to my realm. He has served me long and well, but he grows restless under my guidance. His desire to return to the world will spread my influence more widely, but it will also set him free from my direct control. It may be time to replace him with a more loyal servant, one who still appreciates the gifts I have to offer.”

“What knowledge do you require?” he asked, squirming inside over being referred to as a loyal servant. How Valdis had become champion for so many Daedric Lords. . . .

“We shall see,” was the response, and then he felt himself freeze in place. Something rifled through his mind, his memories, the sensation ineludibly reminding him of those tentacles, and latched onto the memories of Tom’s diary for some time before moving on to wizarding magic in general. A timeless span later he was released. “Dragonborn, you have delivered me the gift I requested. In return, I keep my promise, as befits a Prince of Oblivion: I give you the Word of Power that you need to challenge Miraak. You will be either a worthy opponent or his successor, as the tides of fate decree.”

Harry braced himself as the final word slammed into his consciousness: Dov—Dragon.

Hermaeus Mora faded away, leaving Harry to feel violated, and not in a good way. “Okay, so I guess Occlumency is a joke when it comes to gods,” he muttered, then sat down and fetched out his water bottle to have that rest, along with another handful of crackers. Ten minutes later he heaved a sigh and got up, unslung the bow, and reached for the book. After choosing which of his Shouts to strengthen he grabbed an arrow and nudged the book closed.

He heaved another sigh on looking around. The way was long and filled with enemies, giving him good reason to use Aura Whisper frequently. Loot tumbled into his pockets, but in each of the sections separated by those transport books there was one book that stood out as being somehow different. At the end of the fourth area was another switch and another gate, through which was a
large, open room with a pillar glowing green at the center.

Harry took care of the lone Seeker and approached after checking to see if anything else was lurking. There were four pedestals surrounding the pillar, each etched with a symbol. Another pedestal sat farther in front of the pillar with what looked to be a transport book. While thinking about that he searched and looted the room, then fetched out those four odd books from the previous sections and double-checked the titles. He placed the copy of *Delving Pincers* on the pincer pedestal, *Prying Orbs* on the eye pedestal, and then the other two.

The transport book glowed. ‘If this were one of Dudley’s games I could at least save my progress,’ he thought ruefully, then activated the book.

The next area featured a book almost straight away that he tucked into a pocket. A check ahead with Aura Whisper showed what looked to be two Seekers, so he nocked an arrow and stalked down the path. Another platform was there, quite large and surrounded by that oily, murky water. Off to the side was something that surprised him. If the images he had envisioned from Valdis’s stories were anything resembling accurate that had to be a Word Wall. It looked much taller than him, was curved and etched with symbols—words in the dragon language—and some of them were glowing blue-white.

He used Aura Whisper again, thankful that his mastery of Illusion spells made his Shouts quiet enough not to alert enemies to his presence, then drew and began killing. As soon as they were down he looted the remains and skittered over to the Word Wall, a low chant resounding in his mind—something or someone chanting the words contained on the Wall itself—and stepped right up to it, just as Valdis had described. In quick succession three words slammed into his mind: *Mul Qah Diiv*—Strength Armor Wyrm.

Harry was reading the Wall to try to understand exactly what the shout would do when a roar attracted his attention and made him pivot in place, using the Word Wall to guard his back. A dragon approached, the first he had seen aside from the avatar of Akatosh in almost four years. “What the hell am I supposed to do?” he whispered to himself, nocking another arrow. He was about to draw when what Hermaeus Mora said came back to him. That Shout was to bend others to his will, including dragons, and he could see no route off the platform. Going back would get him nowhere.

Taking a leap of faith, heart pounding madly, he replaced the arrow and slung the bow across his back, then waited until the dragon got close enough to unleash a torrent of flame at him. He then ran forward. “*Gol Hah Dov!*”

The dragon immediately back-winged to a landing and said, “*Hail, thuri. Your Thu’um has the mastery. Climb aboard and I will carry you to Miraak.*”

“I’m an overlord now?” he wondered, eyeing the dragon, then took it up on the offer and mounted more than a little awkwardly. He was shaking a bit as it launched itself into the air and began to fly toward a tower in the distance. There were other dragons there, circling it, and he fully expected to either have to kill them or control them. Killing was more likely given that he assumed he could only control one at a time.

As they flew the dragon flamed several Seekers to a crisp that were aiming spells at them from a platform part way along, then said, “*Beware. Miraak is strong. He knew there was a threat coming—that you would come here.*”

Harry was still shaking a bit when his mount back-winged to a landing at the tower. He slipped off and was readying his bow when he heard, “Sahrotaar, are you so easily swayed?”
He scanned around as he nocked an arrow, spotting a man wearing elaborate armor and a face-concealing mask much like some of those to be found amongst Valdis’s ‘relics’. A Dragon Priest mask, then. His armor was probably classed heavy.

“No,” Miraak said, glancing up at the two circling dragons. “Not yet. We should greet our guest first. And so Dragonborn meets Dragonborn at the summit of Apocrypha. No doubt just as Hermaeus Mora intended. He is a fickle master, you know. But now I will be free of him. My time in Apocrypha is over. You are here in your full power, and thus subject to my full power. You will die. And with the power of your soul, I will return to the world and be master of my own fate once again.”

While Miraak was speaking Harry was eyeing the man, waiting for just the right moment to crouch down and temporarily vanish, a nifty little perk of being so advanced in stealth. He could use that to disappear long enough to use Sahrotaar as a temporary blind, moving to a different position and attacking from there instead. Whether it worked or not was a different story entirely.

Miraak’s hands lit up and he said, “Kruziikrel! Relonikiv! Now!”

Harry crouched and immediately moved back and under the dragon’s tail, drawing hard as he went, then released as soon as he had a clear shot. Miraak staggered back, but his head immediately oriented to Harry, who came up from his now useless crouch and drew again. The Dragon Priest flung lightning at him from both hands making him extremely glad he was so heavily protected. It still hurt and set his nerves to twitching a bit.

He continued to use Sahrotaar as a blind against Miraak and the other two dragons, not always attacking from the opposite side, taking hits in return, either of lightning or fire, and completely ignoring whatever the man was saying. Tom’s memories and Dudley’s games had made it clear that “bad guys” liked to hear themselves talk and most of what they said was useless or intended to make you lose reason.

“Kruziikrel, ziil los dii du!”

Harry was appalled to see Miraak sacrificing the life of his dragon ally, streaming its soul to him like some super-powered healing spell; it had to be because Miraak straightened up again. Then Harry snorted at his own naïvety and concentrated on bringing the guy down again. There were only two dragons left and he could only hope that he could finish this before Sahrotaar was claimed.

“Relonikiv, ziil los dii du!”

“Hell. I need to learn how to shoot faster.” He kept fighting, but something caught his attention, causing him to listen. Miraak was claiming that the dragon he had sent off before Harry had arrived should be at his body’s location any moment now. He would die there, thus dying here, at the tower. Miraak would claim his soul and return to the world in his place. And he realized, sparing a moment to think back, that there had been three dragons circling the tower, not just two.

“Sahrotaar, ziil los dii du!”

With no cover and the additional threat he was beginning to panic and started to move around the tower platform, alternating arrows with healing potions when necessary, until Miraak finally nearly drained his own magicka pool and closed in with a sword in his hand. ‘Shit, shit, shit!’ He shot two more arrows and slung the bow back, then readied spells instead, still trying to stay far enough away at all times and also out of that pool.

He kept lobbing Thunderbolt as he backed around and dodged that blade, the spell helping—or not,
depending on how he looked at it—to keep Miraak from casting any other spells. But inevitably he tripped over something behind him and staggered, affording Miraak the opportunity to slam that blade into his stomach, off to one side. The pain was excruciating, but he was able to snap off several more casts of Thunderbolt while fumbling for a potion.

To his surprise Miraak backed away and Shouted, “Feim Zii Gron!”

‘You bastard!’ he thought as Miraak became ethereal.

As the man dashed across the platform Hermaeus Mora appeared again and a thick tentacle shot up from the pool to spear Miraak, despite the effects of the Shout, his sword clattering to the ground. Harry stood there in shock, still bleeding heavily, as the Daedric Prince said, “Did you think you could escape me, Miraak? You can hide nothing from me here. No matter. I have found a new Dragonborn to serve me.”

Miraak reverted to normality and coughed up blood, gasping, “May he be rewarded for his service as I am!” His flesh dissolved moments later, leaving only a skeleton that the tentacle dumped onto the floor, and a stream of souls transferred to Harry at Miraak’s death.

Numerous eyes swiveled or floated over to aim at Harry. “Miraak harbored fantasies of rebellion against me. Learn from his example. Serve me faithfully, and you will continue to be richly rewarded.”

Then the room began to fade, his pain with it. During that time between Oblivion and Earth he received a rush of memory from his otherwise insensate self back in the parlor.

Viktor hastened forward and jerked to a stop when Tom barked, “No! We have no idea what touching him will do. It could kill him for all we know.”

Viktor looked to protest, but instead looked to the “visitors”. Both had vanished while their attention was on what was happening to Harry.

“What in Merlin’s name is going on!?” Pavel demanded. “And you,” he said to Severus, “don’t think I didn’t see that!” He strode forward swiftly and ripped the sleeve back, revealing the Dark Mark. “You’re a Death Eater!” Then he glared at Tom. “He called you,” Pavel said softly.

Tom lifted his chin belligerently, as if daring the man to try something. “Yes, he did. I am Lord Voldemort, and Harry, his family, and Viktor are mine to protect.”

Viktor groaned at the implication and palmed his face.

“Viktor?” Iskra whispered in horror.

“What’s all the noise?” came Bisera’s voice; she was standing there in the doorway. She took one look at Harry, held off the floor by tentacles emerging from a glowing book, and fainted dead away.

Iskra rushed over to pull her daughter up and bring her over to a sofa to lay out.

Pavel growled and took a step forward, his wand appearing.

“Father, stop!” Viktor said forcefully. “I am not a damn minion, okay? I didn’t take his mark. That’s not what he meant.”

In the brief silence Severus could be heard murmuring, “Lily, are you all right?”
“Then what?” Pavel demanded, his wand aimed at the floor.

“Harry is special, so special. Yes, I’ve known since before Yule of my seventh year that Tom is a dark lord, but he’s been—sane—ever since that night. Everything he’s done since then is to protect and help Harry against the real threat. Harry is the Boy-Who-Lived, not Edward Potter!”

‘Okay, so much for that secret,’ he thought, feeling more connected to his body. Unfortunately, that also meant the pain was ramping back up.

“What?” Pavel breathed, then shook his head. “He’s still a dark lord! And you’re going to bond with his protégé!?”

“I love Harry,” Viktor shouted. “He’s a good man. And Tom can be trusted. You don’t believe me, but you will.”

“Many, many men have fallen to the charms of a dark lord, son,” Pavel argued. “I would not have you be one of them.”

“Just like gods to cause a massive uproar and then flee the scene,” Tom muttered, looking up at the ceiling.

That set Pavel back. “Gods?”

“Yes, gods, on either side of the spectrum, though apparently being on the so-called evil side doesn’t necessarily mean being evil for some reason,” Tom replied calmly enough. “There’s an entire pantheon. We just met two of them. Akatosh, Aedric Lord, father of all Dragonborn—like Harry. Hermaeus Mora, Daedric Prince, not so much evil as pragmatic and voracious when it comes to knowledge. There are eight other of the Aedra, sixteen other Daedric Lords. And no matter how much you might want to deny it they are real and hold power beyond anything we as mortals can comprehend.”

Pavel just stared, then said, “So you were defeated seventeen years ago and switched philosophies? Just like that?”

“Not quite, but close enough. There was a prophecy involved. Possibly more than one. That boy,” he said, pointing at Harry, “is no more evil than the average fluffy kitten and I will do my damnest to keep it that way, and make sure he survives whatever is coming along with his family and Viktor, his chosen.”

“Please,” Lily said. “I realize you probably won’t believe me, but you can’t lie when speaking Parseltongue. That’s something Harry gained that night and he’s heard it all in that language. That’s the only reason I dared to listen in the first place. Tom is no threat to you.”

He finally finished reconnecting with his body and whimpered at the level of pain from his wound. The tentacles gently set him on the floor, retracted, and the book vanished after closing with a snap. He clutched his stomach, his hands immediately overrun with blood. “Fuck, that hurts,” he said hoarsely. “A little help, please? The only reason I’m not dead from blood loss is my enchantments.”

In the heartbeat that followed a series of items hit the floor in a rough circle around him, then Viktor snapped into action and hastened to him, hands already lobbing healing spells at him. Petunia joined in moments later and Harry began to feel rapidly better. “We don’t have much time,” he said, coughing a little and tasting blood on his lips. “I have it on good authority we’re about to be attacked by a hostile dragon. If the guy I just had to kill was winding me up, fantastic, but otherwise I plan to go kill the thing. You people can argue later.”
He realized he had reintegrated with his weapons still out and reached back for the bow. His other hand went out to grab Viktor’s and dragged him off toward the hallway, muttering, “It’s a good thing this house is on the extreme outskirts of the city.” They were halfway to the back door when he heard a stampede of feet behind them.

Outside he stood out in the open, anxiously scanning the sky, bow recharged and arrow at the ready. Then he heard it, his head snapping around to orient on the sound. “It’s coming,” he warned. “Anyone not protected against the elements or magic in general, stay the hell out of this.”

Viktor stood at his side, hands crackling. A glance toward the house showed his aunt standing by the door, hands glowing with healing spells, Severus beside her. Tom was also there, though he had his wand out, and was standing halfway between Harry and the house. Pavel was near the door, his expression a mixture of anxiousness and bewilderment.

He returned his focus to the dragon and waited, and when it flew overhead he acted. “Gol Hah Dov!” The dragon shook it off like an annoying insect so he changed tactics, shooting at it until he could Shout again. “Joor Zah Frul!” he Shouted, using Dragonrend to force the beast to land. Arrows and spells were hitting it before it finished settling on the lawn, Viktor sticking with Shock spells and Tom with what looked to be some particularly nasty Dark Arts.

The dragon unleashed a torrent of ice at them; Harry and Viktor mostly shook it off due to their enchantments and Tom was far enough away to only get the edges of the attack. When the beast looked to be readying itself to launch again he Shouted again, “Joor Zah Frul!” It roared in response and unleashed more ice, then stomped forward, jaws still open, and tried to snap him in half with its jaws.

He and Viktor backpedaled quickly, and Harry slung his bow because of the lack of distance. His reserves were back so he began lobbing Thunderbolt at the dragon. And then it died under the combined onslaught and he finally saw with his own eyes what Valdis had only been able to describe. She could only speak of her experiences, not share them via memory in a pensieve; and that gave him an idea.

The dragon sagged down, wings drooping, and its flesh began to disintegrate as the beast’s soul streamed to him in a wild display of fiery light. Viktor steadied him from behind as he took in the soul, then gently released him when all that was left was a gleaming skeleton. In the silence that fell Tom produced a patronus and murmured something to it; it left in a streak of silver.

Harry took a deep breath and turned back to the house, the shaking of reaction setting in, and he knew it wouldn’t be long before he crashed hard. He had managed to stow his bow and quiver and was halfway to the door when Serana portkeyed in and followed. When he got close enough he said, “Severus, can I have a clean vial, please?” One was handed to him just before he stepped into the hallway and as he walked he mentally marked off the memory of his trip to Oblivion and pulled a copy, looping it into the vial and sealing it.

“This way you can all see what happened, assuming that works,” he said, handing the vial back to Severus as they entered the parlor. A look at where he’d been standing showed that Miraak’s belongings had followed him to Earth. “I’ll get those,” he said, then staggered when he tried to move forward again.

Viktor produced a blanket out of nowhere and wrapped him in it, pulling Harry into his arms and lifting him up. His fiancé dropped down into a chair and sat Harry on his lap, holding him close. He looked back at that spot, saw the huge stain of his blood, then looked at Iskra, who was still hovering by Bisera. “S-sorry about ruining your carpet,” he said, then lost consciousness, slumping against his fiancé.
Harry woke in bed, snuggled up to Viktor. The second he moved Viktor rolled them and gave him a searching look. “How do you feel?” he asked softly.

He blinked a few times and smiled. “Fine. I’m more worried about the argument that was going on. Did the memory help at all?”

Viktor gave him a sweet kiss before answering. “Yes. My father calmed down considerably once he realized or remembered certain truths. We were all rather shaken up by the memory. I can’t say I was very pleased to realize that you’re counted as the champion of a Daedric Lord, though. We shall have to question Valdis more closely on that, perhaps.”

“Yeah,” he said softly. “So your parents are no longer looking to kick us all out?”

“It’s fine,” Viktor reassured him. “Besides, you don’t really think I’d let you get away?”

“I hope not.”

Viktor kissed him again. “Tom left briefly to fetch a pensieve and we all viewed the memory you gave Severus. I think my father was really impressed with you when he wasn’t being busy being shocked. There was a lot of discussion and more than a few other memories shared.” He hesitated, looking worried, then said, “I shared some, and I must apologize for that, as I was unable to ask your permission. My parents needed to understand that you really are the person they know, even though you’re a lot more than they previously knew.”

He digested that for a bit, knowing that Viktor would never have shared anything intimate, and nodded. “That’s all right. On my way back from Apocrypha I got to see what happened after I was taken. Thank you for defending me so strongly, and Tom.”

Viktor smiled in relief. “Well, you seemed to be fully healed even if you wouldn’t wake, and Pelk eventually gave me a hand getting you cleaned up. You’ve been out only a day. Oh, and you came back with an interesting addition.”

His brow furrowed. “That wound was bad enough to scar?”

“That’s not it,” Viktor replied with a shake of his head, then balanced his weight on one arm and reached out with his left to grab Harry’s right hand and bring it up. Apparently he had gained a tattoo on the back of his hand: a winged hourglass. “That tiny dragon returned briefly during the discussion that followed us watching the memory. It claimed you did well passing its test and had pleased it. That is the symbol of Akatosh—or one of them. It sort of makes me wonder if Valdis ended up with one and she just never mentioned it.”

Harry exhaled gustily.

“That’s not it,” Viktor replied with a shake of his head, then balanced his weight on one arm and reached out with his left to grab Harry’s right hand and bring it up. Apparently he had gained a tattoo on the back of his hand: a winged hourglass. “That tiny dragon returned briefly during the discussion that followed us watching the memory. It claimed you did well passing its test and had pleased it. That is the symbol of Akatosh—or one of them. It sort of makes me wonder if Valdis ended up with one and she just never mentioned it.”

Harry exhaled gustily.

“Your other hand. . . .”

“Oh god,” he whispered and checked that one. It had a half-lidded eye with three jagged “spikes”
above it and one below. “Hermaeus Mora, I assume.”

“We assume, yes. I went ahead and collected those things and brought them up here for you to look through, and Tom and Serana broke down the dragon skeleton. Thankfully we are far enough out that none of the muggles noticed much more than something odd in the sky, and we killed the beast quickly enough that the ministry never got involved, not realizing it came here.”

He nodded and looked down as his stomach grumbled at him. Viktor pulled away and rolled off the side of the bed, then came around to give him a hand up, visibly worried about his stability. A quick shower later and dressed they headed downstairs to the kitchen. The elf there must have sensed them coming for it was setting plates on the table when they entered. Harry gratefully sank into a chair and picked up his fork. Part way through the meal the others came in and took seats as well, the elf serving them promptly.

“Harry?” his mother said.

“I’m fine,” he replied, combing the hair back from his face with his left hand. He caught sight of a tattoo again and sighed. “Not sure I’m too happy about being marked like this, though, or that I’m now the champion and servant of a Daedric Lord.”

“They are rather obvious,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

He forked up and ate some more eggs, then said, “So, er, all the arguing is done? Because my nerves are kind of shot right now.”

“Harry.”

He looked at Pavel a bit warily.

“It’s fine.”

“Okay.” Then he looked away and asked, “Serana went back?”

“Yes,” Tom answered him. “She returned to update Valdis.”

“Bisera?”

Viktor snorted and rubbed his face. “Her memory was modified. She’s, ah, sleeping in this morning.”

“Mum?”

“What is it, Harry?”

“Can I have new armor for my birthday?”

Lily started giggling, which started a general episode of mirth around the table. “Sure, honey. Petunia and I will whip something up for you. We already did some repairs to what you were wearing that will hold up for the time being. We’ll toss that one once we have a replacement.”

He nodded and returned to working his way through the food on his plate, letting the soft conversation of the others wash over him. Viktor finished his meal first and scooted his chair a bit closer, wrapping an arm around Harry’s shoulders. “I think my brain is a bit fried,” Harry said, shaking his head. “That really happened?”

Viktor squeezed him as Tom said dryly, “Yes, Harry, it really happened. And may I say, I am very
impressed by your handling of the situation, especially given you had no warning or really much of an idea what to do.”

“Oh, thanks,” he said, smiling faintly.

The remainder of the week was a little strange and awkward and tense. Tom was keeping a very close eye on news from around the world and Iskra, Lily, and Petunia were caught up in making sure everything was perfect for the bonding. Pavel had retreated some into taciturnity, but always had a reassuring smile for Harry, however faint it might be.

Mid-week at lunch a letter arrived for his mother. She glanced at the writing and frowned, and paused to cast a few spells at it before opening it. The frown grew more pronounced as she read. “Your father is being a bastard again,” she said, then covered her mouth in dismay and scanned the table. She relaxed once she saw Bisera was nowhere to be seen; Viktor’s sister was visiting a friend that day.

“I’m almost afraid to ask,” he replied wearily.

“Seems with the breaking of the Secret he’s suddenly twigged to the realization that the strange Durmstrang boy Edward kept complaining about is actually his son, and he’s all bent out of shape to realize you aren’t actually a squib.”

“Like it matters?” he said bitterly. “It wouldn’t have changed anything.” Then a thought occurred to him that caused him some consternation. “He can’t do anything, right? I’m an adult, and almost one in most of the muggle world, too.”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Tom said. “You’re also no longer a citizen of Britain.”

“Dumbledore.”

Tom nodded, then shrugged.

“So, the only people who have any idea of the truth of that night are right here,” Pavel said, almost questioningly.

“Yes,” Lily answered. “Harry and Tom always knew, but no one else did until Harry was eight, and that was the same time when I divorced James and took sole custody of Harry. Then we moved to Norway. They’re convinced that Edward is the defeater of Voldemort based on circumstantial evidence.”

“Then unless your ex-husband is completely irrational I cannot see why he would make any particular moves against Harry,” Pavel responded.

“He also,” Lily added, rolling her eyes up toward the ceiling, “seems bent out of shape over Harry having snagged the very famous and talented Viktor Krum.”

Viktor banged his head against the table to the side of his plate, then sat back up and rubbed his face.

“Ha,” Harry said with a teasing smile, “more like Viktor snagged me, charming fellow that he is.”

Viktor leaned sideways and gave him a quick kiss. “Perhaps this is Edward’s jealousy. You remember how he acted back at the beginning of the year at Hogwarts. He can’t have been happy that I cut him down, though I admit he never actually bothered me after that.”

He grimaced at the memory of his brother’s actions. “Any other idiocy in that letter?”
“Only that I’m getting the distinct impression he’s becoming fed up with his French society wife’s general lack of substance and might be missing my, er, competence.”

Dudley rolled his eyes at that and said, “Hardly your fault. Actually, I’m a little surprised that we’ve not heard of any kids out of that. They’ve certainly had enough time. But maybe he didn’t want to divert any attention from Edward.”

Harry grimaced again at the thought, then noticed his mother was looking a bit shifty. “What is it, mum? You’re hiding something,” he accused.

She slumped a little and looked at him apologetically. “We weren’t going to say anything yet—you know, because of the bonding.”

He furrowed his brow and gestured impatiently, not quite getting what she—oh. His brows shot up. “Yes,” she said, nodding. “Severus and I are expecting. I’m about two months, so perhaps the end of December.”

He grinned, then turned to Viktor. “Should we start book on hair and eye colour?” he murmured.

Viktor laughed as he faced his mother again and said, “So a little brother or sister, possibly born on the same day as Tom?”

Tom reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

Everyone gave their congratulations and the matter was dropped for the time being, and that of the letter from James. Preparations continued and soon enough it was Saturday. It was a day to sleep in and eat brunch rather than breakfast. And at that they still had over nine hours to fill before the actual bonding started. The ladies, including Bisera and an early arriving Luna, hastened off to see to the details. For a ceremony that they had asked not be fussy the women seemed awfully picky about things.

He just shared a slightly bewildered look with Viktor and shrugged. Guests weren’t due to start arriving until around eight so they had plenty of time to fill. After having been told to keep away from the back yard they instead took over the parlor and started a rousing game of Uno complete with butterbeer and pretzels. Draco showed up early, already dressed in his finery, and joined them when the next game started, but only after removing his outer robes and draping them over the back of a chair.

“So where are you two going?” Draco asked as he played his card.

‘Not Asia,’ he thought, smiling to himself.

“Egypt,” Viktor replied. “Perhaps Germany. Depends on whether or not Egypt turns out to be boring.”

“You’re going for muggle accommodations, right?” Dudley asked. “Heaven only knows how bad it would get in the magical sectors if someone decided to talk.”

“Mm,” Harry hummed in agreement. “No, actually. My elf is handling the accommodations under the name Evans. That way we never have to deal with reception and we’ll be able to apparate in and out. But we arranged for the equivalent of a muggle credit card for Viktor and plan to eat in muggle establishments. We can use glamours to avoid being recognized in magical areas.” He neglected to mention that Tom had been proactive on their behalf and already provided a number of portkeys for their use, mainly to ensure that any they used to get to various attractions were guaranteed safe.
He had considered a two week cruise with various ports of call at one point, but additional thought on the matter nixed the idea simply because if something happened and they were needed it would be much harder to get back from a position on the ocean. Still, it was a nice thought for a holiday some other time.

When Harry reached out to play a card Draco did a double-take and stared openly at his hand, finally noticing one of the tattoos. “That’s new.”

“No up for discussion,” he said flatly. “Sorry.” Experimentation had proven that the marks resisted being covered, even with muggle makeup. Even after a week he still occasionally got upset over bearing them.

“Okay,” Draco said slowly, then looked at Dudley and said, “So when’s your try-out?”

“Mid-August,” Dudley said, grinning. He had been scouted as a possible reserve for one of the Norwegian teams and Harry was amazed his cousin even managed to dress himself properly each day given how excited he was about the upcoming chance.

Some time later Tom wandered in trailed by Severus, Lucius, and Pavel. Pavel aimed slightly wary looks at Lucius every so often, but did not verbalize any of his thoughts. Uno was eventually packed away in favor of Cluedo, and there was a lot of laughter as the suggestions got more colourful. Dudley had them in various degrees of mirth when he said, “I suggest it was Miss Scarlet, having been caught in the midst of a rather *risqué affaire d’amour* with a candlestick in the billiard room and threatened with blackmail.”

Unfortunately, they never did find out the ultimate answer, as they had spent so much time talking while playing both games that it was time to get ready before anyone felt comfortable making an accusation. Draco retrieved his outer robes and remained in the parlor as most of the others left to get ready.

Harry laughed to himself as he and Viktor got ready. It was a bit difficult to pander to any of the usual “customs” when you shared a room. A look out one of the windows revealed that everything appeared to be ready. Tall wrought iron holders supported Bisera’s candles and did a static march down either side of an aisle, as well as to both sides of the seating. Some of the trees were strung with faerie lights, twinkling blue and green.

But aside from the table set back from the head of the aisle intended to hold the certificate the whole setup was fairly understated, just as they wanted. Once the ceremony itself was done and the certificate dealt with things would shift to tables and food and dancing. Nothing fancy, nothing crazy, and allowing people to sit in their own little groupings if they weren’t dancing or mingling.

When they were dressed—complete with fully-stocked enchanted pockets, because you just never knew—but for their over-robos, Viktor backed him up against a wall and placed a hand to either side of his head. Harry smiled and tilted his head back, saying, “Yes, Viktor? Are you angling for a quickie before the ceremony?”

Viktor’s brow furrowed, then he laughed. “No. I want a real kiss from you now, because I won’t be able to kiss you as I’d like then.”

“Oh, by all means,” he replied, then welcomed the feel of his almost-husband’s lips on his. They were still at it when a knock came at the door, breaking them apart. He went for his robes as Viktor went for the door.

Severus stepped in, rolled his eyes on getting a good look at them, and said, “It’s time.”
Viktor nodded and shrugged into his outer robes, then quit the room. Harry smiled at Severus and went to go look out the window again. It wasn’t until he saw Viktor emerge into the yard that he turned and nodded. “Let’s go.”

Severus walked with him down to the ground floor and opened the back door to take a verifying look, then pulled it open fully and walked through. Once he had taken his seat Harry stepped out, biting the inside of his cheek to keep the stupid grin trying to form off his face, and wondered if that was why his mother’s smile coming out the door was so odd back at her wedding. As he walked forward his gaze stayed steady on Viktor, and he drifted to a stop at his side, turning slightly toward him.

Viktor was not smiling, but he had that look in his eyes again, the one Harry had come to associate with an overflow of emotion. He smiled and reached out to take Viktor’s hand, then looked forward.

“Let’s begin the ceremony. It was Mara that first gave birth to all of creation and pledged to watch over us as her children,” began the official, and Harry was shocked at what he was hearing. Had Tom or Serana arranged for this?

“It is from her love of us that we first learned to love one another. It is from this love that we learn that a life lived alone is no life at all. We gather here today, under Mara’s loving gaze, to bear witness to the union of two souls in eternal companionship. May they journey forth together in this life and the next, in prosperity and poverty, and in joy and hardship.”

The official—priest?—turned to Viktor. “Do you, Viktor Pavel, agree to be bound together, in love, now and forever?”

Viktor took a moment to respond, also a bit thrown by the changes, then said, “I do. Now and forever.”

The priest then asked Harry, “Do you, Hadrian Wyn, agree to be bound together, in love, now and forever?”

“I do. Now and forever.”

“Under the authority of Mara, the Divine of Love, I declare this couple to be wed. I present the two of you with these matching rings, blessed by Mara’s divine grace. May they protect each of you in your new life together.”

They each accepted a ring and quickly slipped them on each other; Harry would have to check to see exactly what they did later. They shared a fairly quick kiss and nodded when the priest gestured toward the paperwork. The remaining copies after signing were shoved into a pocket for the moment and he and Viktor turned to accept congratulations from their guests.

The yard transformed at the hands of unseen house-elves to the expected and Viktor was shortly leading him onto the floor to dance. As they swept around Harry whispered, “I have to keep biting the inside of my cheek not to grin like an idiot. It’s like the day you proposed, except I’ve figured out how to stop it happening.”

Viktor chuckled silently. “Well, I am sure if this condition persists over the following days strangers may simply assume that you are really, really excited at seeing the wonders of Egypt. But forgive me if I think I can make your mouth do much more interesting things than grin stupidly.”

He could not help but smirk at the assertion. “Well, it’ll be a while before we leave what with the number of people probably lining up to spin around the floor with each of us. Thank heavens for
“When you’re ready to leave you say the word, assuming I haven’t already stolen you away,” Viktor replied.

He danced with his mother and Iskra, and then he was stolen away by Tom, surprisingly. “Now,” Tom said, “if anything should happen while you two are away, bad enough for me to think we should regroup, I will send a message, either through your bracelet or by patronus. The point being, just because you may notice something in the local papers don’t automatically assume you need to rush back early. All right?”

He nodded. “All right. Would it really annoy you if mum had her baby on your birthday?”

Tom sighed faintly. “I think it would be incredibly coincidental and strange. People should have their own birthdays, and names even, which is why I was pleased your mother changed yours. Not as much the middle one, as that is a common enough practice, but your first.”

He could certainly understand that with the memories he held. Tom must hate like poison to share his father’s first name and it was a wonder he seemed so comfortable letting all of them use it. He could also understand why the man didn’t use his middle name, as members of the Gaunt family were all pretty much batshit insane and that reminder was to be avoided. “Well, I think it would be adorable, though I can understand your reasoning. But I can hope against the twenty-fifth because that’s a lifetime of losing out on the second set of presents.”

Tom rolled his eyes. “I don’t need to say this, but stay on your guard.”

“I will, I promise,” he said seriously. “Same with Viktor. Won’t stop me from hoping the trip will be as carefree as my holiday in Bulgaria last year.”

He danced with Bergfalk, Poliakoff, and Levski before Viktor got annoyed and reclaimed him and found a free table. Instead of leaving him there to prepare plates for them Viktor called Pelk and asked him to take care of it. As they ate he watched the floor, seeing Dudley and Luna enjoying themselves, and Draco and Petra. He also let Viktor know what Tom had said.

“Yes, he said much the same to me,” Viktor replied. “Are you ready?”

He looked up from the last bite of his cheesecake and nodded. “Time to run off.”

Viktor smiled and stood, extended a hand and helped him up, then quietly led him back to the house. Harry noticed a sideboard he hadn’t earlier, heaped with gifts. In their room he called Pelk to gather them up and put them in the work room, and verified that their accommodations were ready.

Minutes later they were standing in the sitting room of a suite and the grin he’d been fighting all evening erupted on his face. Viktor noticed and smiled, then asked Pelk to do a quick round of the suite to ensure nothing was amiss (paranoia was something of a way of life for a celebrity). He approached Harry with that smile still showing and pulled him close. “So, Harry,” Viktor said huskily, “what would like to do with what little remains of our evening?”

Pelk skittered in long enough to give the okay, so Harry said, “Well, we could investigate all those presents.”

A brow went up. “We could. There’s one gift in particular I would like to open.”

He smiled for a second and replied, “Oh? From whom?”
Viktor leaned in to kiss him, taking his time, then said, “Oh yes. From you, actually.”

He furrowed his brow in mild confusion.

“The gift of my husband,” Viktor elaborated.

It took him a moment to register the double meaning. He smiled and glanced down, then entreated another kiss. Viktor took him up on it, gathering Harry in his arms tightly enough to pick him up, then walked them into the bedroom. Wide windows were covered with pale green and white gauze, but Harry was far more interested in the absolutely huge bed waiting for them.

They woke late and enjoyed a meal at a table by one of the windows in the sitting room, sharing a local paper. After verifying that they were ready for the day they set off to explore all the usual touristy spots in Egypt. It was on a Friday, just days before they were due back, that Harry’s bracelet twitched and alerted him to a message even before they sat down to breakfast.

“Check the paper,” was what it said. He frowned at the strip and cleared it.

“What’s wrong?” Viktor asked, hand at his back to make sure he didn’t stumble into anything while distracted.

“Something’s happened. He said to check the paper is all, but nothing about us returning early.”

It was front page news, above the fold. Viktor went pale on seeing the picture taking up half the page and made a choking sound. Harry dropped the paper and reached out to his husband in concern, but Viktor just gestured toward the story, so Harry spread it out between them.

Gellert Grindelwald had somehow managed to not only escape Nurmengard, but also attack a sitting of the International Confederation of Wizards. Albus Dumbledore was allegedly the main target and escaped the confrontation, though the paper did not give details as to his health. According to eyewitness reports Grindelwald had taunted Dumbledore, laughing at him for having believed all this time that it was Voldemort’s forces causing so much mayhem of late.

Harry looked up. “He must be behind the attack on Durmstrang.”

“He was expelled,” Viktor remarked. “A single expression of his lasting grudge?”

“And that means he’s been free for years! How the hell did anyone at the prison not notice?” He lifted his wrist and traced a quick message to Tom acknowledging receipt and sent it.

Viktor shrugged, still a bit pale. “He built that prison himself. He would know its secrets better than anyone. Why he would wait so long, though?” After a moment of thoughtful silence he added, “The attack on Durmstrang happened not long after the World Cup, when actual minions of Voldemort caused trouble. Maybe that prompted him to act? This does say he mentioned Voldemort, and it’s reasonable to assume that was part of the decision.”

Harry nodded. “I can’t decide if Tom will be upset or laughing about that.”

The report also mentioned that Grindelwald had been accompanied by a group of minions, except that none of them were alive. Harry squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and wrinkled his nose, then kept reading. They sounded exactly like Valdis and Serana’s descriptions of draugr; and one wore what sounded like a Dragon Priest mask.

“Where the hell did he dig up draugr?” he whispered.
“Harry,” Viktor said, “I’d like to stick close to the hotel today. Perhaps visit the bazaar and do some shopping.”

“What?” he said. “Oh. All right. I was getting a little burned out on traipsing through various sites anyway. I’ve seen enough of Egypt to last me for a while, it seems.”

That evening a special edition of the paper was delivered to their room with a rehash of the attack plus additional information. Dumbledore had suffered heart damage greatly resistant to healing and the reporter was speculating on whether or not this would cause the man to drop most of his positions in response. Images of the scene had been obtained by taking photographs inside a pensieve, so Harry and Viktor were able to see Grindelwald and his minions.

The dark lord looked surprisingly young for his age. He did a quick mental calculation and estimated that Grindelwald was one hundred fifteen or so, give or take a year. His hair was still blond, though it was shot through with a great deal of silver, and his eyes were a startling blue. There was an impishness to his expression that Harry found mildly disturbing. The minions didn’t look anything like the inferi from memory, but the ones he had were mostly of freshly made ones. No, it was the subtle hint of the minions wearing ancient Nord armor that screamed draugr, that and how the undead-in-charge had glowing blue eyes.

He sat back and paged through his memory files. Viktor was right that Grindelwald created Nurmengard, to serve as his power base. His memories suggested that while there may have been guards at one point—dementors, perhaps—the fortress turned prison had most likely been automated in some way, which would explain how it was the man could disappear from his cell and not have it be noticed. And if he had converted it back to a power base he would have more than enough room to house minions.

Dumbledore had not confronted Grindelwald at Nurmengard, so odds were that the only reason anyone was able to convert it to a prison was simply that Grindelwald was unable to personally prevent it. But with him back in control? A different story entirely.

The paper the next morning was horrifying. Front page, above the fold was a picture of muggles rioting. Around the world power plants had been blown or caused to melt down. Nuclear, hydroelectric, fossil fuels, solar—any and all kinds. Muggles were rioting, dying, and dragons were being sighted, though the dragons were primarily in Europe.

“Er, I know Tom hasn’t said anything yet, but I’d really like to go home early,” Harry said.

Viktor stared at the paper for several long moments before responding. “Pelk,” he called. “We’re leaving a day early,” he told the elf.

Half an hour later they had portkeyed back to the house and headed on inside. Viktor left the trunk in the hallway and they headed to the kitchen, not having eaten after they got caught up in the news. Given that Egypt was two hours ahead of Norway the room was empty, but Mary wandered in immediately to scare up breakfast for them.

They were just finishing up when most of the household straggled in. Tom and Severus looked particularly haggard and both were sporting dark circles under their eyes. Tom eyed them blearily as he sat down, then said, “I suppose I’m not surprised you’re back early.”

“Why do you look like hell?” he asked bluntly.

“We’ve been reworking the ward schema here, to prevent muggles from coming anywhere near the place,” Tom said and nodded a thanks at Mary when she slid a plate in front of him.
And given all the rioting the paper reported that only made sense. Tom must have been warned far in advance of the general public and had likely been at it all night. Viktor had pulled out some parchment and a fountain pen and was writing a letter; he assumed it was for his husband’s family.

He sat there sipping another cup of tea and absentmindedly nibbling on a piece of buttered toast from the rack, feeling a bit numb. In the space of one day the world had gone crazy, all because of one man nobody was watching over; who woke up one day and decided, “I think those plans for world domination are back on again.”

“I hate to ask, but, what about the apothecary?”

Severus merely grunted. His mother said, “That’s next, assuming it doesn’t get burned down today.”

Viktor folded up the parchment and called for Pelk, asking him to deliver it to his parents. The elf popped away a moment later and Viktor fixed himself another cup of tea, then said, “Just a guess, but I suppose Grindelwald could have implanted instructions into any number of people the world round in order to effect this result, getting the muggles to do the actual dirty work of destroying their power sources.”

Tom nodded, pushing a piece of toast through the yolk of his eggs. “And I’m sure some of his old followers have flocked back to him, or will. If he’s been out since 1994 I can only assume he has command of Nurmengard again.” The toast went into his mouth.

“Should we go clean the place out today, just in case?” he asked.

Severus paused in his eating, mulling that over, and glanced at Lily. Her expression did not change, but Severus obviously got some kind of answer for he next glanced at Tom, who nodded. “Please. But return the second danger approaches, should it do so. I shouldn’t need to tell you that your lives are more important than things. Harry, the wards will already accept you even though the shop is closed up. You will have to ‘invite’ Viktor in.”

That was fine, he thought, except for the fact that—‘Never mind. We can always use the Chameleon bracelets if it looks bad out there.’ “Understood.” What, precisely, they were going to pack everything into... ‘Eh, Viktor can probably transfigure boxes and I can pack. Pelk can come shift them to the house—or the sepulcher, maybe. Best case is they get shifted back again a day later. Worst case is we never even make it to the shop and everything there is lost.’

He and Viktor exchanged a look, then got up.
They stood at the front of the house, looking out the narrow windows to either side of the door. It seemed calm enough outside. Viktor looked uneasy, though. “Have your bracelet ready, just in case.”

Harry nodded and found it, then made sure it was easily accessible. They slipped out the door and started walking, keeping a sharp eye out for any trouble headed their way, and managed to make it to the shop without any finding them. There were times when he saw flames in the distance or heard the sounds of voices raised in anger, which caused them to use their bracelets.

He was startled to realize he was shaking as he opened the shop’s back door. He quickly stepped inside, removed and stowed the bracelet, then extended his hand through the door for Viktor to clasp so he could pull him in. An easy enough task, but one that, at that moment, struck him as being too lax. Had he been in full flight a muggle could have grabbed hold of him and been carried inside. Viktor seemed to be thinking much the same given his unhappy frown.

Harry closed the door and breathed out a sigh of relief. At least getting back was easier; they could simply use their portkeys. He led the way into the storeroom and looked around, idly wondering how Draco was handling things, and Luna. Surely Dudley was in some kind of communication with them. Spying a box full of blank parchment he said, “I guess these could be transfigured into boxes if necessary. We can call Pelk to move them. He’s never been in here so it’s not like we could have sent him—or Mary.”

“But there are plenty of crates here, but yes,” Viktor replied. “Depends on how much there is to pack and how many of these are empty.”

With that they got to work, checking the inventory in both shop rooms. One was a front of sorts, with items that muggles might purchase, but could often still be used by wizards. The other was purely magical in nature. Every few boxes filled saw one of them calling for Pelk to transport them to the sepulcher, and they were careful to mark them based on contents and which side they belonged to.

Harry also tracked down all of Severus’s files and had those sent along. Only once they were certain the place was cleaned out did they return home, tired and out of sorts. Severus and Tom were nowhere to be seen; he assumed they were sleeping. When they went upstairs to shower there was a letter waiting on the bed.

Viktor picked it up and immediately opened it. He sat down on the edge of the bed as he read, and finally looked up. “They’re fine. They’re far enough out that they’ve seen very little in terms of discord. Father says he’s already seeing about strengthening the wards. A part of me wonders if I should ask to see if they’d be willing to have the implants done.”

Harry exhaled heavily. “Well, would they get involved in the fighting? I can definitely see the ones for radiation sickness, and the sooner the better. Plants blew all over the place. Hell, we don’t know what’s going to happen to the animal population. We may all have to become vegetarians. Your sister doesn’t even have to know.”
“True. I can only hope the Japanese are spreading the information about how to help with that part of things, assuming there’s anyone not already too busy dealing with their own crises. I expect it would look awfully strange for an anonymous letter to end up at various wizarding papers, and while someone such as Lucius Malfoy might get away with it in Britain I wouldn’t be surprised if, despite the reports, people accused him of being in league with Grindelwald because of his past associations.”

“Speaking of which, I have to wonder if Tom has bothered to offer protection to the Malfoys in any way. But wizards can at least deal with fallout for the most part, unlike the muggles.” He began stripping down, pulling the enchanted “pockets” out of the normal pockets designed to hold them and setting them aside. Everything else was pitched into the hamper.

Viktor joined him and shortly thereafter they were cleaned up and re-geared, and back downstairs. Harry went through what papers they did have while Viktor wrote a follow-up letter to his parents. Dumbledore had announced his retirement from all but the headship of Hogwarts due to the damage he suffered. That might or might not end up being a good thing. Tom’s memories of the man were particularly uncomplimentary and usually scathing in their emotional overtones.

The old man had fingers in many pies, but how much actual work he did was up for debate. It could also be argued that the ICW would not have been attacked if Dumbledore were not an important member of it. Likewise, it could be argued that students at Hogwarts were now in more danger because the man would always be there. Bisera and Luna should be safe enough at Durmstrang during the upcoming school year. Grindelwald’s attack was probably a one-off. That did not mean he wouldn’t push for permanent, bonded portkeys for them.

Grindelwald was everywhere, though, or his influence was. Muggles were dying in droves. Despite having back-up generators there were many dead in hospitals alone. Victims of riots, looting, and break-ins just added to the number. And the magical population? Acting almost normal when not displaying all the characteristics of stunned fish. There were times, he thought, that the difference was subtle.

Where did one even start? Nurmengard? “I’m going to see if Serana is in the sepulcher,” he told Viktor. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

Viktor nodded so he headed out. Valdis was happy to receive him, but Serana was not lurking. For all he knew she was taking advantage of the mayhem to get the supplies for a whole lot of Potions of Blood. If people were dying anyway, all over, then why not harvest their blood to make potions as an alternative to drinking from those people directly? And to have a supply anywhere she went, within seconds, rather than hunting down a victim? It’s what he would be doing, he thought.

“What were you interested in?” Valdis asked, eyes flickering to one of his tattoos for a split second when he reached up to scratch his neck.

“Symbols, actually,” he replied. “You’ve obviously noticed the one Akatosh put on me. Hermaeus Mora did as well. But what I mean is—for instance, we have goblins at the banks, clans of orcs and trolls and giants. Would any of them devote time to worship, and if so, would I be able to recognize that by any symbols present.”

“You’re thinking back to my stories regarding the Orsimer of Nirn?” she said, a bit uncertainly.

“Kind of. I mean, goblins always try to stay out of things after all those damn wars. But if we knew they worshiped a specific Daedric Lord? If I knew what any symbols looked like I might at least have an idea how various groups might react.”
Valdis looked thoughtful at that. “I could see how, possibly, having Hircine’s favor might help with were-creatures. At least, more so here than it would have been on Nirn. We were more of a brotherhood and family as opposed to a hierarchical pack. Here it might have some meaning.”

“You were never marked by any?”

She shook her head. “But then, everyone was aware of them, by various names. Some could even recognize the artifacts I carried. I sincerely doubt the humans of this world would. Those of creature blood, however, may well see those tattoos and understand exactly what they mean. I could see, for instance, these veela being devotees of Dibella—perhaps Mara. Do none of the books you copied from Hrothgar have examples of the symbols?”

He grimaced in chagrin. Unfortunately, he had not gained mastery in Occlumency until after he had plowed through a lot of those books. He would simply have to check them again, first skimming them for images, and going back for a closer look should that tactic fail.

“All these crates and boxes?” she asked.

He explained briefly, then said, “I’ll look over those books again. Thank you.” She smiled as he went to turn away, and he made for the door. Outside he was greatly surprised to see a dragon sitting there calmly and for a moment his hands twitched.

“Drem yol lok.”

“Drem yol lok,” Harry said in kind. “What brings you here?” He had his suspicions, but . . .

“You have grown zol mul,” Paarthurnax said. “The sky is filled with the tinvaak of dov. You yourself have defeated one sulle ago.”

“Geh. Bormahu wished me to be tested and allowed Hermaeus Mora to do so. It was a side effect of being pitted against Miraak in Apocrypha who, before I got close enough to fight him, had sent a dragon against me on Earth to try to win that way. That would be what you heard, I expect.”

“Geh. And you have somehow learned pogaas since first we met.” The dragon’s head shifted to eye the sepulcher.

Valdis was just then emerging, a smile on her ghostly countenance. “Drem yol lok.” She drifted to a stop next to Harry and said, “He has. I taught him everything I know.”

The sound of the back door slamming came to their ears and Harry turned to see Viktor headed their way at a fast clip. He reached out his hand in invitation and took his husband’s, partly to calm him down. “Viktor, this is Paarthurnax,” he said carefully. “You remember me telling you about him?”

“. . .Ah, yes,” Viktor said slowly. “Greetings.”

Harry nodded slightly. “Paarthurnax, ahmuli Viktor. Anyway, geh, Valdis has taught me everything she possibly can over the years, and it came it handy just recently. Reports we’ve read state that dov have been seen attacking all over, though mostly in Europe. I’m going to assume that those are the ones who don’t look to you for wisdom.”

The dragon dipped his head slowly in a nod. “Geh. I will begin again my attempts at reason. Should you wish to speak with me you have but to return to Hrothgar and take the way behind. You have the tinvaak, the Thu’um, you need to brave the journey.” Paarthurnax backed up carefully and launched himself, flying away with an amazing lack of sound. Within moments he was lost to sight.
Viktor exhaled heavily.

“I’m guessing you realized a dragon was here and freaked out,” Harry said to him, a fond smile on his lips.

“Of course. But with the lack of horror-inducing noises I had to hope it was not a hostile visit.”

“He was just checking in,” Harry assured him.

“Now that you have need of it,” Valdis said, “I am reminded of an amulet amongst my things. It will allow you to use *Thu’um* more frequently.”

“Oh?” he said. They followed her back into the sepulcher and he took the item she indicated and pulled the cord over his head, then held it and focused. “Ah, I see. Thank you. Yeah, I can see why you didn’t bother mentioning it before. All right, I guess it’s back to the books for ideas.”

He explained on the way back into the house what he was after and Viktor promised to help. In the ground floor library Harry hunted down the right set of books and started in with the first book of the set, slumping into a chair to read. Pelk eventually wandered by to urge them off to lunch.

“So, how’d it go?” his mother asked once they were all served.

“Fine,” he said. “Viktor and I cleared the place out and had Pelk store everything with Valdis for the moment. Paarthurnax stopped by, too. Seems he was curious about the dragon episode given that I used Shouts I shouldn’t know, but I guess he didn’t feel like flying all the way to Bulgaria to investigate. He didn’t seem all that surprised that Valdis was here.”

“Speaking of which,” Viktor said, “what did he mean about you having the *Thu’um* to meet with him?”

“Oh, I guess much like there was on Nirn there’s a path back behind Hrothgar that leads up to the peak, where Paarthurnax usually stays, but you need a particular Shout in order to get there according to Valdis. I suppose I could use it in a snowstorm, too, or heavy rain, to clear things up briefly.”

“Well, Tom and Severus will see about the shop after it gets dark,” his mother said. “Worst case is customers can’t actually visit and it’s all done by owl post. The papers have been so busy reporting about the muggles that I’m not even sure if it’s safe to go to Trondheim. As soon as we heard about the attack on the ICW I sent Mary to go stock up so we have plenty here.”

“I already got in touch with my parents,” Viktor said before she could ask. “They’re fine right now and working on updating the wards.”

“Good.”

Several days later Tom was recovered and had two things to discuss with the family. The first thing he did was show them a long piece of metal partially cut so it could be snapped along the score lines. “For years now I have been working on something in my spare time, that being a fortress of sorts.”

Harry blinked slowly at the news, but supposed it wasn’t terribly outrageous. And now he had some idea what Tom had been doing when not with them.

“This is a special portkey in the sense that all of you can bond it at the same time, and when it’s separated into individual portkeys they will work for any combination of you. Such as, in the event that one of you has been knocked unconscious and are unable to activate yours, someone else can
drag you along. Viktor, I can send one to your family, but it might be better for you to deliver it and explain.”

Viktor nodded.

“The fortress is massive and includes numerous suites, plus a multilevel greenhouse structure. It probably wouldn’t be a bad idea if we were to start spending time there daily getting those going with whatever we think we’ll need. If we are forced to relocate there for real I’m sure we’ll be glad of having been proactive on that account. There is space for various animals, though I can’t say that any of us has much in the way of animal husbandry in our skill set. I have already furnished the place so, again, if we’re forced to relocate there are only certain things we would need to take from here, and Valdis, naturally.”

Petunia nodded. “Reasonable.”

Dudley half-raised his hand, seemed to remember they were not in class, lowered it, and asked, “What about others? Say, Luna and her father. The Malfoys?”

“Yes, I can provide for them, and I have already ordered Lucius to do certain things just in case. The fortress also has a complement of elves and quarters for them. They can also help with the greenhouse and any animals we choose to import. And before anyone asks, I added warding against radiation back when I checked into magic against it. Up until recently all of this was pure contingency, but with the way things are we may actually need the place. Now, for the second issue. I’ve been doing some experimenting, especially after watching you, Harry.”

“Why me?”

Tom arched a brow at him. “Your knife fight a ways back with Viktor. You were using stinging hexes in addition to the dagger, plus having to use aetherial spells to heal with. It was cumbersome and you risked losing your wand on multiple occasions, though you have obviously had plenty of practice with that situation. So, I took some downtime to consider the problem and came up with a solution.” He reached into a pocket and removed two rings, then slipped them onto his index fingers. He then levitated two books sitting on the coffee table, one with each hand, with no wand present.

“Focus rings. You’ll have to go through a number of materials to find out what will work best, and get used to using the rings instead of a wand. However, it means any of us who were able to learn aetherial spells in addition to wizarding magic will be able to keep a wand as a backup, not a primary, and more easily use both types of magic. It took me a number of attempts before I came up with something that worked, but I am now prepared to make them for the rest of you. And, because they are not technically enchanted, they can be blood-bonded and enchanted against summoning.”

“Wow,” Lily said. “Not that I’m saying the fortress isn’t also amazing, because it is. We always knew you were brilliant.”

Tom inclined his head in recognition of the compliment. “On our first visit to the fortress I can start creating the rings. After we eat we can decide when that visit will be. But first, let’s get this bonded. More or less the same procedure, but be sure that your blood touches every section.” Once they were done he finalized the bonding, then snapped it into the individual pieces and pushed them to everyone.

As they sat around the table a short time later and dug into the meal Mary provided Harry said, “I’m all for going today, but I’d also really like to get a set of portkeys to Viktor’s family.” He paused and looked at his husband with a slight frown. “Er, do your grandparents know?”
Viktor shook his head. “They know you’re special, but they don’t know at this point who Tom is exactly.”

“Either way we’d have to get all of them there first,” he mused. “I guess the fortress, then the delivery, because then we could at least have something to say about the actual destination.”

“All right,” Lily said. “Let’s make a trip after we’re done eating. At least get a feel for the place. After that you two can deliver a set to Viktor’s parents and take care of that end. If necessary you can at least take Iskra and Pavel—well, after the set is done. After that we can get started on the greenhouse and other immediate issues there.”

“I don’t have a problem with that,” Petunia offered.

Dudley and Severus both nodded, so after lunch they each activated their portkeys. Harry found himself in an enormous entrance hall with a wide double set of doors (presumably leading out front) behind him, arches to either side, and a wide set of stairs straight ahead with arches to either side of that.

Tom led them through an arch left of the stairs and back along a hallway. At the very end was a workshop of sorts, with laden shelves and cabinets and plenty of surfaces to work on. “Let’s get this sorted and I’ll make the rings in a bit. Harry, come here.”

He was run through a selection process that relied quite a bit on “feel”, similar to when he was matched up with his wand. Indeed, he ended up with beech and unicorn hair again. Viktor ended up with a different wood, cherry, and the others all choose the same components of their current wands.

Tom set everything aside in neat, labeled bundles, and escorted them out the back of the building and over to the greenhouse. It was four storeys high with each successive floor being narrower due to the peculiarities of construction. The side walls and parts of the sloped “ceilings” were all glass, with only the center length of each floor above ground being stone, and the top floor was entirely glass. Inside were numerous planting beds.

Back in the main castle and up the center staircase, and then up a spiraling staircase to the second floor was where the suites started. “This floor is reserved for family,” Tom said. “They’re all essentially the same, so pick whichever, except for the one at the very end of the hall.” There were four doors on each side, plus the one at the very end.

When no one else moved Harry shrugged and headed down the hall, opening the last door on the left. Inside was a sitting or reception room with an arch to the right nearest the hallway wall. That led to a short hall. Left off that was a door into what proved to be a luxurious bathroom, and the end door led to a bedroom. The suite was furnished entirely in neutrals, which meant they could choose whatever colours they wanted with a few simple spells. Windows graced the exterior wall in each room, providing plenty of sunlight and a lovely view.

He crossed paths with Viktor on his way back to the sitting room and waited there for his husband to come back, then said, “So?”

“It’s more than fine,” Viktor said admiringly.

He nodded, pulled some parchment from a pocket along with his fountain pen, wrote their names on it, and then used a temporary sticking charm to attach it to the door to the hallway. On exiting he saw that Dudley had chosen the suite next to his, then Petunia, then his mother and Severus nearest the stairs. That left the other side for Viktor’s family.
“More suites on higher floors,” Tom said, “but there’s little point in going up there right now. Now, it is possible to apparate here, within the walls bordering the property, but not to cross that border. There are plenty of fireplaces, but none of them are connected to any floo network at this time. Getting here is strictly by portkey or getting to the perimeter by some method and walking in. For all I care we can move here now rather than waiting, but that’s up to all of you. I already do live here.”

Harry looked at Viktor, trying to judge his reaction to that suggestion. Viktor quirked a brow and leaned in to whisper, “If you wish to move here now I have no objection. It would certainly save time on daily portkey trips back and forth, and we would have more room for us personally. I am sure Tom has included communal areas on one or both of the lower two floors.”

“They worked awfully hard updating the wards at the house and shop,” he whispered back, feeling obscurely guilty at leaning toward relocating.

“True. But that would have been done either way, I expect. That’s been your home for ten years and it’s not easy to let something like that go. Protecting it the way they have only makes sense, whether you end up moving elsewhere for some time or not.”

He acknowledged to himself that Viktor’s point was fair and nodded. “Viktor and I would like to move here for now,” he said to Tom quietly.

“All right. I’ll see about moving Valdis here as quickly as possible. You two can pack up your room and transport the contents here. Harry, I’m probably going to want to redo your entire portkey set with the exception of the one I just made. The same for you, Viktor. At the very least I want your sets to work for both of you, not just individually.”

“Okay,” he said. “Can we portkey from anywhere here or just in the entrance hall?”

“Outgoing is fine anywhere.”

He nodded and looked back to Viktor. “Want to get started, then?”

“Yes.” Viktor reached for his Norway home portkey and waited for Harry to use his own.

They spent the afternoon packing their room straight into the trunk. The furniture remained, of course, but pretty much everything else went. “Think we should save Tom some time and pack up Valdis’s things, too?” he asked.

Viktor looked briefly contemplative. “How about we send Pelk with a note asking that?”

“Done.” A few minutes later they got back a positive response and a request to grab the shop crates, so they trundled the trunk to the sepulcher and set it back up again. Valdis seemed more than a little curious.

“We are moving for the time being,” Viktor informed her, “and that means you, too, of course. We’re going to pack up the majority of what’s here. Tom will be along at some point to complete the job.” He started ferrying crates in through to the work room at that point.

“Very well. All of you?”

“We’re not sure, actually,” Harry replied, “but Viktor and I definitely are. If things completely fall apart—and they’re pretty bad already—we really don’t want to leave you here in a relatively muggle area even with the protections Tom has around this property. The fortress is pretty neat, actually, and a lot more welcoming than a place like Hrothgar.”
She nodded and said nothing more, so Harry got to work transporting goods. Even with magic to help them they were fairly tired when the only thing remaining was Valdis herself. When they arrived back at the fortress Viktor did not immediately move.

“What?”

“I am wondering where to put the shop things,” Viktor replied sensibly, then called for Pelk. “Do you have any idea where we should be putting the things from Severus’s shop?”

Pelk nodded and said, “Please follow Pelk.”

Eventually, finally, they were able to head upstairs to their new suite and park the trunk against a wall. Pelk showed back up to inform them of a meal being served and to give them directions; and also to let them know he would be doing some unpacking for them. Harry just nodded wearily and let Viktor lead him away.

The next morning after breakfast Tom led them back to that work room and produced a number of boxes. He handed the first to Harry, who opened it to see two matching rings. He slipped them on, it feeling decidedly odd to have anything on his index fingers, and tried to get himself in the right mindset, such as using a levitation spell over Telekinesis.

He had just managed to get the empty box to rise up when Dudley broke his concentration with a gasp. The box hit the counter with a clatter and Harry looked over his shoulder questioningly.

“Oh, sorry,” Dudley said apologetically. “It’s just that I couldn’t even tell what spell it was until the box lifted and it made me think that—well, having these around muggles would be a good thing, right? If we were careful, I mean, and had the skill.”

Tom pushed a box toward Viktor and nodded. “Yes. That is one advantage. But it means if you wish to enjoy it you will have to put in a prodigious amount of work.”

Harry grabbed his empty box and stepped off to a different surface to experiment, not wanting to get in the way of anyone else.

“Using the rings,” Tom said, “with spell mastery, and being careful, means we can get away with a whole lot around muggles and not draw any suspicion. Considering what’s happening out there right now it’s an excellent goal.”

One by one the others received their rings. Tom interrupted their attempts by leading them out and to another room, this one much larger and set up as something of a practice hall. There were targets, a multitude of objects, and various other interesting features to aid them in getting used to the rings.

They had been messing around for an hour or so when Pelk popped in with a letter for Viktor. He opened it and read through it, a slight frown marring his brow. He turned to Tom and said, “Do you think I could have that portkey set for my family, please?”

Tom nodded and exited. Harry stepped over to his husband and indicated the letter.

“Sofia is a mad house,” Viktor said, folding the parchment up and tucking it away. “They’re getting fairly nervous over there, even on the outskirts, and my grandparents have moved to my parents’ house to consolidate the family.”

Tom returned and handed over two sheets. “Appropriately marked,” he said, nodding at them. “Same process as we did.”
Viktor nodded and put them into a pocket, then took Harry’s hand and led him out of the room. “I don’t think we need to get anything before we go, so, ready?”

“Yes,” he said. Tom had already redone their portkey sets and he had stripped the metal from his boots and slotted them into place. The three most important ones, for the fortress and for the houses in Norway and Bulgaria, were integrated into his bracelet. He held his wrist up and slid a finger onto the right piece, waited for Viktor to be ready, and activated it.

Nothing seemed terribly odd when they landed, but they were not out back this time. As he looked around curiously Viktor said, “The cellar. I guess Tom thought landing out back was a bad idea at this point,” then snapped off a patronus warning before leading Harry to the stairs.

His parents were coming down the hallway as they emerged. Iskra sped up and pulled them each into a hug, then stepped back. “We’re so glad you’re safe.”

“I’m glad you’re okay, also. How bad is bad?” Viktor asked. “Because we do have a safe haven for everyone.”

“The muggles have gone mad,” Pavel said. “The ones not hiding out in their homes have been rioting through the city. It has not gotten this far, but it is getting closer as more of them join the chaos. And what do you mean by a safe haven?”

Viktor glanced around quickly—checking for his grandparents or sister, Harry thought—and said quietly, “Tom has spent the last decade building a fortress, just in case. He’s always been thinking about the prophecy and what it could mean, but I doubt he was expecting this. At any rate, the fortress has far more room than we presently need, a huge greenhouse, room for animals, and so forth. He’s provided me with portkeys for you all, to the entrance hall there, and another set to bring you back here, but inside the house. The cellar, actually.”

Pavel and Iskra exchanged a look, communicating with an ease that long-married couples often had, then nodded. “All right,” Pavel said. “We’ll take care of that now.”
Iskra headed upstairs as Pavel turned back to the parlor. Viktor and Harry followed him and were shortly greeting the grandparents. When Iskra returned with Bisera Pavel nodded at Viktor, who produced the sets. “These are a variant of a normal blood-bonded portkey,” he explained. “Each of you needs to get blood on every section of both.”

Bisera looked confused; she just followed instructions and let her mother heal the minor wound afterward. Once all six of them had finished Viktor finished the process and went ahead with snapping the sheets apart and handing them out. “Bisera, to explain a little, say you were knocked unconscious. With a normal blood-key mother could not use hers to whisk you away to safety. With these she could because you’re both bonded to them.”

His sister nodded after a moment, so Viktor continued, “Wear them however you want. Harry wears all his portkeys on his bracelet or boots, for example.”

Viktor’s parents knew about the bracelet, but not the boots, and the others had never actually seen him use any. Subsequently, they eyed him curiously. “I can’t apparate,” he said with a shrug. “I have a lot of portkeys to lug around and it’s preferable that they don’t actually look like portkeys when possible, so people don’t get any funny ideas.”

“All right,” Pavel said. “So we have a place to go. A safe place.”


Harry laughed quietly and shook his head. “I didn’t think to ask. I was too busy being impressed and then moving everything to our new accommodations. Judging by the views, however...”

“There are four rooms set aside on the second floor, across from ours, for your use,” Viktor informed them. “The family level, if you will.”

“So you’ve already moved,” Iskra said. “All of you?”

“Considering that everyone was there for breakfast I’m going to say yes,” he said. “Tom already lives there—has for quite a while—and Viktor and I decided to move almost straight away. Valdis will be there, too, and I’m sure Serana will be around.” He did not bother to explain further even in the face of the confusion four of them were displaying. He knew Viktor’s parents would understand.

“Wherever it is,” Viktor said, “it’s nowhere near a muggle settlement, so the odds are very much against being confronted with any.”

A siren went off in the distance, causing Bisera to flinch and Iskra and Pavel to exchange another look. “They’re coming more frequently,” she said resignedly.

Pavel sighed heavily. “As much as I dislike the idea of abandoning our home, I think it might be best to relocate for now. The wards should keep the house itself safe.”
“The suites are already furnished,” Harry said helpfully. “If you want to go, bring whatever you think you need or want. Viktor and I will help.”

Viktor grabbed his hand and led him over to the front window. “Let’s let them talk,” he said quietly, easing a curtain to the side and looking out. “Though if they waver I think I might point out that dragons are less likely to attack this house if there aren’t any people here.”

“I heard that,” Iskra said a bit loudly. “And it’s a valid point.”

‘Really,’ he thought, ‘part of the sticking point here is if Pavel’s mother learns of Tom’s identity. But even if the Malfoys were to join us I expect Tom would make it plain to Lucius not to screw things up. Of course, I wouldn’t be surprised if Dudley has gone off after Luna already. I wonder how this will affect Luna’s final year, if at all.’

“We’ve decided,” Pavel said a few minutes later, drawing their attention from the window. “We’ll be moving. We’re simply too close to a major muggle population here.”

“All right,” Viktor said. “How would you like us to help?”

Pavel sighed. “Clear out the library?”

“Okay.” Viktor turned to Harry and said, “I’m going to get the trunk.”

He nodded. As soon as Viktor portkeyed away he headed to the library and looked around. His husband showed up a few minutes later, having had to go a much greater distance, and expanded and opened the trunk and mirror. Crates were transfigured and packed, then floated into the work room.

Pavel wandered by at one point and expressed surprise at the trunk, but allowed that it was a good way to transport large quantities of materials. “After this will you stow what the elves have done in the kitchen?”

“Yes, father,” Viktor replied, levitating another set of crates.

They were, thanks to magic and house-elves, ready to go before lunch. Most of what was being transported was inside the trunk and Harry was thankful for this unexpected but very useful application of Tom’s gift.

“All right,” Viktor said, one hand gripping the trunk’s immobile handle. “Time to go.” Even as he said it another siren went off. After some fumbling everyone had their portkeys ready and one by one they left. “Rooms are this way,” he said, letting Harry take the lead up to the second floor.

“The four rooms on the the right are available,” Harry said as Viktor set the trunk near the first door. “I’d say just pop into any of them for a quick clean up and meet back here so we can go get something to eat. The basics are there. We’ll unpack the trunk afterward so you have access to all your things?”

Pavel and Iskra nodded and headed through the first door. Harry and Viktor went to their own room to have a quick wash, but before he did so Viktor called for Pelk again to have him warn whoever was on kitchen duty about the additional guests. Harry sent a quick message to Tom and his mother, as well. They regrouped in the corridor and led the others down to the dining room, and soon enough everyone was seated and being served.

“This is all very impressive,” Pavel said to Tom.
Tom inclined his head briefly. “I had a lot of spare time on my hands. Building the place was a challenge.”

“You built this?” Bisera asked, looking a little overwhelmed. “By yourself?”

Tom nodded. “Oh, I had some minor help from my elves, but yes. It’s fully warded, in layers. Even the suites have their own individual warding sets. If any of you would like to assist with getting the greenhouse functional, we would appreciate it. We have four levels to plant, plus the decisions of what to plant.”

Bisera shuddered and grabbed another piece of garlic bread before tackling her lasagne again.

Harry shot an amused look at Viktor. “I’m sure Severus and I can decide on most of that,” he offered.

“There’s enough room for both food and ingredients,” Severus replied. “And we’ll need both in order for me to continue teaching you, Harry.”

“Plus alchemy,” he added. “Though we can still harvest some of those in situ because they won’t grow in a greenhouse.”

“Alchemy?” Pavel’s mother asked.

“Yes. It’s not quite the same discipline that someone like Flamel is famous for, though. It’s something of a hybrid between that and Potions. The biggest advantage is you can mix things up anywhere so long as you have a few tools on hand, but there are only a handful of combinations I even bother making.” To try to shift the subject from something he was not willing to expand on just yet he said, “Did you even name this place, Tom?”

Tom looked up and smirked at him. “Skyrim.”

He just stared for several long moments, then erupted into laughter, his mother joining him. “All right, then,” he replied after he got himself under control.

Tom, still smirking, said, “You and Viktor left before we could do the bonding on those rings, so be sure to take care of that. They’re already enchanted against summoning. You’ll have to fit practice in where and when you can.”

It was about then that Iskra noticed just about half the people at the table were all sporting rings on their index fingers and asked about them.

“An alternative to wands I managed to get working not long ago,” Tom said. “None of us have had much in the way of practice with them yet. I’m willing to make more, if any of you would like sets.”

Talk switched at that point into discussion of Grindelwald’s attacks and that carried them through the meal. Severus seemed impatient to get started on the greenhouse so Harry wandered off with his stepfather for a discussion of needs and yields and fertilization. Iskra and Kalina, Pavel’s mother, came with them, as both were interested in Herbology.

“So, less sun-loving plants in the center planters,” Harry said. “They’ll still get plenty of light, but they’ll be shielded at sun’s height.”

“I think,” Iskra said thoughtfully, “the normal vegetables down here, since it’s the largest? Upper floors can be ingredients, with the ones requiring a lot of light at the top. I am assuming there are temperature regulation wards to go with the natural heat through the glass.”
Severus nodded and produced a fountain pen and some parchment. He spread that out on one of the work surfaces and started sketching out the available beds for each floor so they could decide the plantings. Once that was done they returned to the fortress. Viktor was already hard at work unloading the trunk so Harry gave him a hand. By dinner the various Krums were more or less moved in and the trunk was returned to its proper home.

“Have you gotten in contact with Luna?” he asked Dudley after they were all seated around the table.

“Yes. She’s awfully close to muggles, but they haven’t seen much activity. I already brought her and Xeno a portkey set just in case. Her father was all dithery over his press.”

“Any other news?” he asked, a brow going up meaningfully.

Dudley blushed and shook his head. “I haven’t quite gotten around to that yet.”

Petunia clicked her tongue. “She will if you don’t. You know it’s true.”

“She told me that herself, in a manner of speaking,” Harry said, nodding.

Dudley blushed harder. “All right, all right. Don’t rush me.”

Petunia and Lily rolled their eyes in perfect unison and shook their heads.

Off to the side Pavel and Tom were quietly talking about enchantments, amongst other things.

Once dinner had been eaten Pavel collected the grandparents and Bisera and informed them they would have having a meeting in his and Iskra’s suite that evening. Harry exchanged a look with Viktor, then sidled over to Tom as the Krums exited. “So, uh...?” he asked just as an elf Tom was speaking with popped out.

“They’ll be having a discussion about the other factors in this eruption, most of which center around you. I’ve had a pensieve sent up, which means we may have a slight emergency on our hands when Pavel’s mother has a heart attack over my full identity.”

Harry grimaced; he was glad he did not have to be present. “Okay. I’m just going to go, er, practice, then.”

Viktor followed him out to the practice hall. Harry took the time to bond the rings to himself before starting in. It didn’t take much before he was sick of the whole thing, but he made a lot of progress. All those years of other work were standing him in good stead. “I am so tempted to whine,” he said as they walked to their suite.

Viktor chuckled and slung an arm around his shoulders. “Chin up. You will probably get this the fastest of any, except perhaps Tom.”

“Yeah. I can’t complain in any case. I know perfectly well that Tom came up with these because of me. Us, yes, but...”

“You,” Viktor said. “He does most things with you in mind. I guess he changed one obsession for another.”

Harry shuddered and elbowed his husband playfully. “That sounded sick,” he said, wrinkling his nose.
Breakfast the next morning was strange in several ways. For one thing Luna was there. He wondered if she had arrived the night before or just decided on a whim to pop in for breakfast. For another, four members of the Krum family had a bit of a shell-shocked air about them and cast quizzical or odd looks at various people around the table. Kalina kept shaking her head slightly, as though she still could not quite assimilate the details of the revelations.

For yet another, the papers let them know that large parts of London had been blown to bits, but not anywhere near the Ministry or Diagon Alley. The same was true, however, of other countries. Germany, France, Bulgaria, Hungary, and more were reporting multiple explosions in the same cities their ministry buildings were housed, but not in the immediate areas.

Draugr had been seen by the muggles. They reacted either by running the hell away or attempting to make things like Molotov cocktails to set the horrors aflame, which was doing little for the surrounding territory. Those with firearms (such as those licensed for their use for hunting) used those, as well, but were generally warned off by law enforcement and military personnel. The dragons, well, those were being seen with increasing regularity, but since they were going after muggles the magicals in each nation were taking a hands-off policy. The obliviation teams were next to useless in terms of keeping the statute intact.

“So, any plan of action?” Viktor asked after pushing his plate back. “I don’t even know where to begin.”

“His people or his power base,” Luna said. “He’s not exactly being subtle when it comes to the muggles, but magical deaths have been more or less incidental. Smaller communities are faring a lot better, and many of those have their own gardens and some have animals, so they aren’t panicking so much over the local grocery having slow or no resupplies. Maybe I should write Charlie to see if the dragons at the reserve he works at have all taken off.”

“Charlie. . . ?” Lily asked.

“Weasley,” Severus answered. “Second son, works at a reserve in Romania.”

“Oh, right,” she said. “I remember them, now. Edward seems tight with the youngest boy.”

Severus made a mildly disgusted noise as Tom nodded and said to Luna, “It can’t hurt. Maybe if we can get a handle on where they’re all perching when not flaming towns to ash and eating people we could perhaps thin the herd.”

Serana walked in with Valdis and nodded at everyone. “I’m going to make the rounds shortly, find out what I can from my fellows.”

“Oh,” Luna said. “Could I trouble you to start in Romania, then? I have a letter for someone there and it’d take so much less time if you sent it once you were in the country. They’d probably get all twitchy if you showed up in person, though.”

Serana nodded agreeably. “Very well,” she said, and Luna dashed off.

“Well, it would be nice to verify one way or the other if Grindelwald has actually converted Nurmengard back to a stronghold,” Tom said.

“It’s one of the things I can ask about,” Serana said.

“I could ask Lucius to try liaising with the veela.” Tom looked a bit doubtful when he said it. “Not at all sure about the goblins.” He turned to Harry. “Were you able to get anywhere checking symbols?”
“Not done with the Aedra yet, but I saw symbols for all the Daedric Lords.”

Tom got that look on his face again, the one saying he was paging through memory, then shook his head. “I don’t seem to have bothered storing anything much in that sense, so you’d have to visit one of the banks to see.”

“Well,” Viktor said, “we can go a little later. If there’s anything we need to get, such as for the greenhouse, we can do so at the same time.”

“Very well. So—” Tom stopped and leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. “Information gathering, practice, the greenhouse. Maybe some animals.” He tilted his head forward and looked at Pavel. “And those enchantments?”

“Yes. As unorthodox as it is, we will accept them. Seeing Viktor and Harry shake off such a vicious breath attack by that dragon is more than enough reason.”

Tom nodded and sat back up. “All right. Severus, please get a list to Harry and Viktor. After that we can do the implants. Serana, you know what kinds of things to ask about. Dudley, practice with the rings and mastery. Petunia, you keep on with yours. Lily, practice of whichever kind, but don’t overdo it. I’d be happier if you kept Mary with you just in case. Harry, Viktor, after you two get back you can either go for the greenhouse or practice, whichever makes more sense. Severus should be done helping me by then, but I don’t know if Viktor likes to get dirty.”

Harry snorted and dropped his head, bringing a hand up to cover his eyes as his mother huffed and said, “Tom, really.”

“One of these days,” Viktor said, “I will be the one embarrassing one of you.”

“I look forward to it,” Tom declared, his eyes bright with amusement.

Severus got up and said, “I’ll be back shortly with a list,” before wandering off, and Luna returned, handing an envelope to Serana.

“I’ll find a carrier as soon as I get there,” Serana promised.

“Thank you,” Luna said, then resumed her seat next to Dudley.

When they did arrive at the bank Harry had a keen eye out for any sign of affiliation with one of the Daedric Lords; and he realized, as he looked around, that it was everywhere. The weapons on the walls, though some were pikes, or axes, or hammers, or even short swords, were dominated by maces that greatly resembled one known symbol of Malacath.

At the desk for vault visits he purposely brought his left hand up to scratch the right side of his jaw, watching the goblin there closely without appearing to do so. The goblin tensed up before calling for an escort and they were shortly riding the rails on the way to the vault Tom had given him a key for. “Interesting,” he commented, mindful of their escort.

“Agreed.”

“I have to wonder if knowing it will help.”

“I admit I fear another test may be in the offing.”

Harry groaned softly. “If so, I can only hope you can be with me. I really don’t want to do that alone again.”
The cart rolled to a stop and the goblin hopped out. “Vault 1216.”

Viktor stepped out and extended a hand, assisting Harry, who then handed over the key. The goblin tore his eyes away from Harry’s hand and examined the key, then pressed it into an indentation on the vault door. A clicking sound could be heard, at which point the goblin nodded and reached up to run a long nail down the center of the door. After numerous additional clicks the door split and swung open, revealing stacks upon stacks of coins.

Harry checked the list from Severus; his stepfather had included an estimated cost. “All right,” he muttered, tucking the list away again, then stepped inside long enough to secure the money they would need. After exiting he nodded to the goblin and waited until the key was returned to him before getting back in the cart for the ride to the surface.

Outside the bank he sighed. “Let’s go shopping.” An hour later they were back at the fortress and unloading their purchases in the greenhouse. Their arrival must have been noticed for it was only a few minutes later that several people joined them, including Draco to Harry’s surprise.

“We were, er, invited,” Draco said, eyes shifting to the side for a moment, “to visit and obtain some protection.”

Ah. “And you’re in here because you’re just dying to help start setting things up?” he asked, politely ignoring that the blond’s complexion was tinged green.

“Of course,” Draco said grandly. “You know how much I love rooting around in the soil.”

Right. He made a copy of the plan Severus had made and handed it over to Draco, then glanced at the original. A minute later he was hefting a sack of mooncalf dung over to a planting bed and doing some mixing.

Lunch was a little odd with the Malfoys present. Draco was eyeing Bisera as if he had never seen her before, which was also odd. During the course of some rather generic conversation he noticed that Luna had an odd, knowing smile on her face.

“Severus is giving you that teaching look,” Viktor whispered after leaning closer. “I’ll let Tom know what happened at the bank, all right?”

He nodded. When lunch was over he was whisked away to do Potions; Draco decided to accompany them, which prompted him to ask just what Draco was planning to do with his life.

“I don’t really know,” Draco replied. “I love quidditch, but if I’m being honest I’m really not good enough to play professionally. Father wouldn’t mind seeing me have some influence at the Ministry, but that sounds awfully boring to me. Maybe if I hadn’t transferred to Durmstrang and had a lot of nonsense knocked out of my head it might sound more appealing.”

“Potioneer?” he asked, weighing porcupine quills until he got the amount he needed. “Supplier? Metal charmer? Curse breaker? Breeder of rainbow-hued puffskeins?” He found the right knife and began chopping the quills into regular pieces so they would dissolve evenly.

Draco snickered after a pause. “Father would flip if I tried being a curse breaker. It’s too dangerous.”

He looked up, glanced at Severus and back at Draco, and said, “And what’s happening out there right now isn’t?”

“Malfoy Manor is well away from any muggles, Harry,” Draco replied. “They’ve been avoiding the area for so long I doubt any of them even feel a twinge of suspicion over it.”
Harry closed his eyes for a moment. He cleaned his knife and started on the next ingredient he could prepare ahead of time. “Draco,” he said softly, “that may be true. But what happens if someone you care about isn’t so well protected. Do you just sit back and hope? Or do you jump in to help, possibly risking your life?”

Draco frowned. “You’re doing it again.”

“I know.”

He spent the evening with Viktor, working with his rings, and gratefully sank into the tub in their bathroom after they were done. Viktor joined him, slipping in behind him and pulling him back into an embrace. “Mm. So you told Tom?”

“He got that look on his face when I did,” Viktor said in answer. “Then he pulled a few books from the shelves in the library and told me we should read them. There is something of import in there somewhere.”

“Ah, one of those things he indexed and didn’t actually store. Got it.” He grabbed his net sponge and loaded it with soap. Viktor snatched it out of his hand and began lathering him up, so Harry just relaxed and enjoyed. That is, until Viktor’s other hand slid around to palm Harry’s cock and begin stroking it. His immediate response, aside from his head going back to rest on Viktor’s shoulder, was to attempt to spread his legs, not an easy thing to do in a larger than usual yet normally-shaped tub.

Viktor “helped” by lifting each of Harry’s legs in turn and draping them over the sides. Thank heavens the tub was padded to a degree, partly to prevent slipping, but partly because some people presumably had bony asses. Or perhaps Tom just thought it was a proper luxury. All Harry knew was that his tailbone wasn’t complaining and Viktor had gone back to a dual attack of cleaning and slowly stroking him.

He was dying when Viktor set the sponge aside and reached over the side for his wand. A moment later that spell was being used. The wand clattered to the floor and Harry found himself being lifted up and repositioned. His brain cleared a little, enough to realize what he needed to do, so he scooped up a handful of suds and reached back awkwardly and stroked his husband’s penis to coat it with slipperiness, then guided the head to his anus.

Viktor lowered him with agonizing slowness, knowing that a lack of preparation meant some measure of pain for Harry, but soon enough he had bottomed out. Viktor slid down a little, bracing his feet against the end of the tub, and buried his face in Harry’s neck, hands sliding over his torso. They stayed like that for a short time, just reveling in the intimacy.

Then Harry very reluctantly whispered, “You know it won’t work well like this.”

“I know,” Viktor replied against his neck. “It still feels wonderful.”

He wriggled teasingly, laughing softly when a flurry of movement suddenly saw him on his knees, hands gripping the sides of the tub. He knew his husband was quick, but that was a magic all its own. There was a pause, and then he realized that the surface beneath his hands had changed in texture. He smiled, knowing his hands wouldn’t slip, then lost that smile when Viktor drew back and slammed into him.

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me,” he said wearily. “The whole reason the goblins have such sticks up their asses is because we started it?”
“Seems so.”

“Some idiot wizards messed up their royal family, stole their crown, caused mayhem amongst the clans, and made them ripe for a war they had not enough direction in because they lost their heart and, naturally, lost the war; and every subsequent war.”

“Yes.”

“And probably the best way for us to secure their help—or at least their agreement not to hinder us—is to find that crown and return it to them.”

“Yes.”

Harry dropped the book on the table and sighed.

“And the best part,” Viktor said, “is it’s the British who stole it and probably have it hidden in their Department of Mysteries.”

“Hm.”

Harry looked over to see Tom leaning against the wall, arms and ankles crossed. “What?”

“They hold their prophecies there,” Tom said.

“Is that a not so subtle hint that you’d like to go along and do a little browsing?” he asked.

Tom shrugged. “Why not? There’s no reason why we couldn’t take a short stroll through the Hall of Prophecy.”

Viktor frowned. “Is that wise?”

“What do you mean?” Tom said, brows raised in surprise.

Viktor’s eyes narrowed, making his gaze seem all that more piercing. “While it is true that knowing part of a prophecy led to the events of that night, and even to where we are now, would it not be better to just destroy the damn things? Say you find it, successfully smuggle it out, and listen to it. What then? What if it says something you’d rather not hear? What if hearing all of it locks certain paths into place? I’d sooner trust one of those Elder Scrolls Valdis and Serana spoke of. Those at least seem to give something specific, a place, or an action, not possibly mind-twisting babble that can send you off in entirely the wrong direction and get you to effectively slit your own throat.”

Harry was impressed to see that his husband looked defiant as he stared at Tom.

Tom broke off the staring contest, his jaw tightening. “You are worthy of him,” he whispered, something Harry only heard because he was close enough.

Viktor’s eyes widened into confusion. “What?”

“You have a point,” Tom said at a normal volume. “If we end up in that room we can destroy them. The point to going is to seek out that crown.”

Harry exhaled a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding. “You had a man in the department, right?”

Tom glanced his way and nodded. “Rookwood. He told me all sorts of interesting things about the place. Getting in there shouldn’t be much of an issue.”
“Okay,” he said slowly. “Find the crown and get the hell out, possibly destroying the prophecies on the way out? We have the advantage of the bracelets, so it’s not like anyone would actually see us, scent us, or—” He couldn’t actually think of a word for detection of body heat aside from thinking the Homenum Revelio charm would be useless.

“And try to avoid killing anyone,” Viktor said.

Tom rolled his eyes. “No sense of adventure, this one.”

Harry sighed. “Tom, is there a better time to go, or do the researchers there wander around at all hours?”

“According to Rookwood, at approximately 3am everyone present in the department gathers to divine messages from the pattern of smudge marks on the tank in the brain room.” There was a long disbelieving pause, then Tom said, “That was a joke.”
Chapter 27

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“Hang on,” he said, holding up a hand. “If we end up needing to use those bracelets, how the hell do we keep together?”

Tom pulled out his bracelet and slipped it on, disappearing completely. “Use Aura Whisper.”

He blinked. Would that actually work? “Laas Yah Nir!” he Shouted, then said, “I’ll be damned. Point taken.” Both Viktor and Tom were marked by the gaseous gold of a non-hostile. Thinking back, he did vaguely recall that Valdis had told him invisibility could not fool a dragon’s eyes.

Tom reappeared, bracelet in hand. “Right. You keep us together if necessary, if even whispering to each other is not an option. I have no idea what kind of reaction we’ll get from the goblins if we return their crown, but it’s worth trying. They may be able to give us information through various branches about possible followers and perhaps even the fortress itself. If Grindelwald did not create it by himself, as I did here, he probably killed those who did in order to keep the secrets it holds safe. Goblins, however, may be of exceptional use in figuring certain things out.”

At just shy of 1am they appeared in a shadowy corner of the main floor of the British Ministry of Magic. While Tom could get them past the initial wards he could not get them an additional nine floors down directly. Tom nodded at him so he used Aura Whisper to get an idea of how many people were around. No one was on their floor or the one below, but he could see ghostly shapes farther beyond. “The third floor is the DMLE?” he whispered.

“Yes,” Tom whispered back.

“Okay, there’s at least a skeleton crew there, but I can’t see deeper than that.”

“Below that is the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes,” Tom replied. “There might be people there, but we won’t be stopping at that floor. The same with Magical Transportation on the sixth floor.”

“Then let’s go,” he whispered.

Tom set off, slipping from shadow to shadow, and Harry followed with Viktor. They entered one of the lifts and Tom sent it down to the ninth floor. He Shouted again, to see if there would be any guards waiting; there were none. He swept his gaze around and realized that while there was a concentration of “life” on the ninth level, it was more like a grouping of small spheres . . . swimming, some lazily, some with darting motions like fish. It made him think back to Tom’s joke, but the shapes themselves were wrong for such a thing.

“I don’t see anyone down here,” he whispered. “Not anything that looks human-shaped, anyway.”

Tom looked at him sharply, then his expression relaxed. “The brain room is probably what you’re seeing.”

“Brain room?” Viktor asked, looking a bit sickly.
“The Unspeakables study many things,” Tom whispered as the lift doors opened. He cautiously checked visually, then slipped out. “One of those things is the brain and thoughts. They keep a tank full of brains in one of the rooms.”

Not fish, then. Harry grimaced and followed, tugging Viktor along. Tom’s explanation would certainly account for what the Shout showed him. His sight had shown them as blue, which made little sense to him. Ignoring a set of stairs off to one side and down a long, straight hallway tiled in black was an innocuous enough door. Tom led them there and opened it. The three slipped inside to a circular room with a floor he might have thought was still, dark water were not for the fact that they could walk just fine on it.

The door they entered by closed and the room began to spin, the blue-white light from the torches on the walls blurring into an almost textured streak of neon softness. Everything jerked to a halt. “Getting out is easy,” Tom whispered. “It’s getting anywhere else that takes some effort. I have a mental map of this place, but not the credentials to get the doors to work as they should. However, Harry, you can tell me where the brains are. We’ll use that door because I know where to go from there. A random door might take us to the Hall of Prophecy or the Death Room.”

He nodded and Shouted, “Laas Yah Nir!” A moment later he stepped up to a door that was no different from any of the others.

Tom stepped up and laid his hand on the surface; it swung open. Before he went through he whispered, “Do not get near the brains, do you hear me? Stick close and don’t get too curious. Those things will attack if you attract their attention.”

Once inside Harry’s stomach lurched on seeing the tank and what was causing the non-standard glow. Pearly-white brains swam around in a large tank, trailing wisps of darkness. Tom tugged on his sleeve and led them off to one of the several doors on the perimeter, and through it. Down a corridor, through another door, and ever onward. Eventually they arrived at a nondescript door at the end of an L-shaped hallway. Without being asked he Shouted again and saw nothing. He nodded at Tom, who opened the door and passed inside.

Shelves upon shelves upon shelves greeted them, filled with boxes, crates, glass jars, and so much more. Display cases littered the floor, lit by some unseen method to cast a soft glow of more of that steady blue-white light. He sighed at the sheer amount of plunder, aiming a grimace at Viktor.

“Is there any kind of organization to this?” his husband asked.

Tom eyed him incredulously. “These are wizards we’re talking about. We’re lucky they manage a department per floor or room. No, we have to do this the hard way, my friends.”

“Okay, fine,” he whispered. “Let’s start down one side and around back up. I’ll check every so often to see if anyone has popped up while seeing what’s in the center.”

Tom and Viktor nodded, then headed right. Harry stayed nearby as they went through the shelves, running his eyes over the displays. Nothing so far that resembled a crown; and given some of the goblin-wrought weaponry he had seen he thought he would have some idea should he see it. By three they were part of the way down the right-hand side and Harry had already checked everything not along the walls, so he started helping with them, still occasionally pausing to check for warm bodies in the vicinity.

They had finished the right wall when five rolled around and Tom called for a halt. “We’ll simply have to return tomorrow,” he whispered, then led them out.
They were back again the next night, and the next night, taking all the same precautions, and finally found something of interest. Viktor had pulled a box down and was about to put it back when he stopped, taking a closer look. Tom noticed and peered in as well, then let out an odd sigh. “I think that might be it.”

Harry stood up from where he had been checking the lower shelves (it was so much fun being the short one of the bunch) and had a look as well. The headpiece had a distinctly otherworldly quality to it that stood out, and a jaggedness that somehow bespoke the harsh realities of a group of people beholden to the outcast Daedric Lord. “I think so, too,” he whispered. “Is it spelled in any way by the Unspeakables, you think?”

Tom got out his wand rather than use his focus rings; even he had not yet mastered their use, not in such a relatively short amount of time. A battery of spells later and Tom said, “It seems clean of any wizarding influence.” A large silk bag was produced and turned inside out, then Tom carefully captured the crown with it and tucked it away. “Let’s finish checking the rest of these, just in case.”

Nothing else of particular interest showed up, at least that Harry was aware of; but for all he knew Tom had been shoving things into his pockets the entire time over three nights. Considering that much of the inventory was likely stolen to begin with, who was he to object if the man had? The only reason he had not considered just stripping the room bare like any good thief was the fact that it would be noticed at some point, whereas a handful of items would not. He supposed it depended on whether or not the goblins made a fuss over the crown noticeable to the wizarding population and tipped off someone who still remembered the original theft.

Their exit from the building went smoothly, causing Harry to wonder about the utter laxness the British displayed when it came to their seat of power. Not in any of the three nights had they any trouble whatsoever, and never had to use their bracelets. Back at Skyrim they sat down for a quick talk.

“I am extremely leery of having any kind of meeting at Gringotts itself,” Viktor said, starting things off and gaining a look of respect from Tom. “That gives them far too much control over the situation and I for one don’t relish the idea of having to fight my way out if they go all weird on us.”

“Stonehenge at midnight?” Tom mused.

“Well, if Serana were back we could ask about whether or not there are any shrines,” he said.

“We don’t have to do this straight away,” Tom said. “We can afford—or so I hope—to wait until we have some information back from various sources. For now, let’s get some sleep.”

Harry and Viktor nodded and headed to bed, though Harry set the alarm for ten. Better to be dragged out for the remainder of the day than take longer to readjust to the normal sleep-wake cycle.

Luna had a letter to share at lunch. “Charlie says that they don’t have a lot of control over the dragons on his reserve and half the time don’t even know where they nest. Because of that he’s not sure how many of them have actually left to join the mayhem.”

And depending on how many dragons were as skilled and stealthy as Paarthurnax it would be next to impossible for mere humans to keep track of the beasts until they were right there brazenly flaming down humanoids and eating them. Or frosting them, except that made Harry giggle quietly over the idea of some dragon patiently wielding an icing spatula so as to cover a human in buttercream frosting before consumption, just to add that something special to the taste of flesh.

Viktor gave him an odd look, but Harry could not bring himself to explain. Luna also gave him a
look, but she aimed a smile his way, also. “So, more or less a dead end,” she finished. “I doubt we’ll
get better information from any of the other reserves.”

An insistent pinging set up in his mind, causing Harry to look at Viktor in bewilderment, then get up.
He followed the direction of the sensation, Viktor with him, and met up with Tom and Severus in the
entrance hall. The four of them exchanged looks, with Tom shaking his head in confusion, and
headed out, down toward the gates.

Outside the perimeter, in plain view through the bars of the gates, was a man. He appeared to be
insensate, but was wearing, of all things, a bright green bow on his head. Tom put out a cautioning
hand and stepped forward, triggering the gates, then slowly approached the figure. Dangling from a
cord around the man’s neck was an envelope. Tom cast a flurry of detection spells before
summoning the envelope to him and opening it. He spent a minute reading the letter inside and
looked back up, a strange look on his face.

“If this is true, that is Barty Crouch Jnr, delivered to me as a gift,” Tom said.

“One of your Death Eaters?” Viktor asked.

“Yes. I thought he was dead. Azkaban,” Tom replied, then cast a few more spells. “Behind him
should be a house-elf, his caretaker. His identity checks out, though his features have been changed.
The letter writer claims they did so to keep those, and I quote, ‘fools in the British Ministry from
getting any ideas.’” Tom sighed. “Well, I can’t find anything on him to be suspicious of. Let’s bring
him up to one of the unused suites.”

Ten minutes later they were staring at Barty and a house-elf. Tom had sent one for a pensieve and
that was sitting there on a table. After another sigh and a look at each of them Tom woke Barty up.
The man slowly opened his eyes, trying to make sense of his surroundings, then fell to his knees,
staring up at Tom with worshipful eyes. “Master,” he breathed.

Tom reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Barty. Care to explain how it is you live?”

“My father,” Barty said slowly, then launched into a story about his dying mother, his father caving
to her wishes, and the swap effected which saw him free of Azkaban, yet imprisoned anyway by his
father via the imperius curse. He also explained about the elf when prompted.

“And how you were delivered to me?” Tom asked warily.

“Two men, my lord,” Barty replied. “My memory is a little fuzzy at first, and I could not understand
them.”

Harry glanced at the pensieve, then Tom, who nodded and said, “Start thinking about it, Barty. I’m
going to remove a copy of your memory.”

The blond nodded and closed his eyes, then nodded again. Tom produced his wand and touched it to
Barty’s temple, then pulled away a silvery strand which he looped free and deposited in the pensieve.
“All right, let us watch, then.” But before he activated the device Tom called for Pelk and set him to
keeping an eye on their guests. Tom chose the projection option on the pensieve as a further caution.
Harry took a seat next to Viktor on one of the sofas so he could watch in comfort.

Barty’s memory was hazy at first, something Harry attributed to the curse, but he could see with
increasingly clarity. A man, presumably Barty’s father, had just used the imperius on Barty and
spoke instructions—mainly to keep him subdued—when the window behind the older man slid open
and two men slipped in noiselessly. One was of Asian descent while the other was indeterminate
aside from the paleness of his skin.

The Asian man knocked the father out, smirking when the man hit the floor with a thud. The other man started casting spells at Barty, who in memory was still blond, but had rather different features. The Asian man lifted his wand again and pointed it at the father, but not before he crouched down to force the man’s eyelids open with his other hand. Several minutes later of not much happening aside from the two men performing Legilimency on beings in the room the Asian man drew back with a smirk and said, in Japanese, 「Oh, what a prize this one is.」

「And?」 the other asked coolly.

「What a hypocrite. I say we steal the kid and deliver him to his master. Daddy here can flail around in a panic after he’s woken up to realize his biggest secret and shame is missing and might come back to haunt him.」

The other man nodded. 「We can use the Dark Mark to divine the location of his master. We should probably take the elf as well. It is devoted to him.」

Harry glanced at Tom, who looked upset.

The Asian man nodded, his expression saying he more or less expected that response. 「You’ll fix the bond?」

The other flicked his wand into view and did something to the elf, not anything Harry could recognize; there was no visible leakage and no verbal component to give him clues. The man then slid his hand under Barty’s sleeve and again did something, his eyes closing briefly. Tom’s scowl was approaching monumental proportions at the sight. As the man pulled away Harry could see something on the back of his hand, but the length of his sleeve falling back into place quickly hid it.

「It’s in one of the national parks,」 the second man said. 「Go ahead and fix his appearance. No point in setting him free if his looks will only get him in trouble. We can go back to fighting those interesting manifestations after we drop him off.」 Then he aimed his wand at Barty again and the memory abruptly ended.

Harry, not wanting to state the obvious and upset Tom further, said, “Well. They seem to be familiar with the Malfoys.” They had to be considering that Barty looked like a cousin at this point. His hair was that characteristic white-blond rather than the previous straw-blond and his features had become much sharper and more refined, as befitted the supposed lineage. His eyes had gone from brown to a silvery-grey, but his skin stayed that same milky-white. If he looked closely he could see traces of the man from before, but not easily.

Barty just sat there quietly, staring at Tom.

Tom finally relaxed and said, “Barty, welcome back.” He turned to Harry and Viktor and said, “You two are fine to go. We’ll discuss this later. Severus, you stay here with me.”

Harry nodded, trusting that Tom would handle things, and wandered off with his husband to the kitchen to remedy their interrupted meal.

Barty integrated well enough once he was brought up to speed on the current situation, and his devotion to Tom made him agreeable. He was set to working on spell mastery and focus rings, no longer having a wand of his own.

Serana was still out canvassing the clans so there was still no news from that angle, but the wizarding papers were making it clear that the magical population was taking advantage by sweeping into areas
bombed by Grindelwald and warding it against the muggles, increasing their territory.

Tom decided, after a morning of Harry being schooled by Severus, to take Harry and Viktor on a little trip to Trondheim. The magical area was fine, though the muggles were being terrorized by draugr, and Tom thought it would be a fine idea to go get in some experience. They stepped outside the warding of the shopping district and Harry looked around for witnesses before Shouting, “Laas Yah Nir!” He turned in place and stopped on spotting a mass of gaseous red. “That way,” he said, pointing.

The three of them walked cautiously in that direction, eyes out for muggles, and were just about to turn a corner when something shot up into the air that way, a sphere filled with swirling mist. A moment later music began to blare from it, causing a confused look to bounce between the three of them. Harry sidled along the wall and crouched down, Viktor above him, Tom above Viktor, and the three of them peered around the corner like school boys spying on an ill-liked professor.

Those two men were there, wands out, facing down innumerable draugr. Then the Asian one began to dance, almost strut, to the music, a flame whip appearing from his wand, and sing. “When the world is on your shoulder . . . gotta straighten up your act and boogie down. If you can’t hang with the feeling,” the man warbled, whirling the whip around and decapitating two of the draugr with a sharp snap.

He was slightly tone-deaf, Harry noticed.

“When you ain’t no room for you this part of town,” he continued to sing, snapping that whip around with easy lethality. “’Cause we’re the party people night and day. Livin’ crazy, that’s the only way.”

Harry looked up past his husband to Tom, who had the weirdest look on his face. He reached up to tug on the man’s sleeve to get his attention.

“So tonight . . . gotta leave that nine to five upon the shelf . . . and just enjoy yourself.”

Tom looked down and nodded, so the three of them straightened up and moved around the corner for a better view.

“Groove, let the madness in the music get to you. Life ain’t so bad at all if you live it off the wall,” the Asian sang, casting a sultry look at his companion before snapping the fire whip up between the legs of a draugr and splitting it in half. “Come on, Tom, sing it with me!” he cried gaily.

His hair moved like silk in the wind as he danced closer to his companion, who reached out and pulled him in for a rough kiss. “Your singing voice is still for shit, Yuki, but your dancing has gotten immeasurably better,” the companion—another Tom?—said before releasing . . . Yuki. “And in case you hadn’t noticed, we have company.”

Yuki danced away again, hips moving in a way that should be illegal, the flame whip disappearing. “Yeah, gimme a second! I want to see if these undead things can line dance,” he said laughingly, then aimed his wand at a cluster of four. “Mwua ha ha!”

The other Tom reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose and shake his head slightly. It was then Harry saw that the man was indeed marked on the back of his hand, though he could not quite make it out. A look at Yuki showed that both his hands were marked. He glanced down at his own, then at Viktor and Tom.

Tom—his Tom—moved forward, so Harry followed, still eyeing Yuki more than the other Tom.
Yuki was singing again, and appeared to be using a non-verbal imperius curse on the draugr with only minor success.

“Mind if we join in?” Tom asked, one brow arched at the other Tom.

Dark green eyes gave them a once-over, then the man inclined his head. “Certainly. There’s plenty for everyone. Yuki!” he called.

The Asian man danced back over, looking a bit disappointed. “It doesn’t work very well, unfortunately. So, who do we have here?”


Harry looked closer and blinked. Both men had Grindelwald’s symbol on their right hands. But in addition to that, they bore the symbol for the Daedric Lord Meridia opposing, and Meridia was known to hate the undead. A contradiction?

Tom reached out to place a calming hand on Viktor’s arm, gently pressing it down.

“Oh,” Yuki said, smiling slyly. “Viktor Krum. Which means you”—his gaze shifted to Harry—“must be Harry. Oh dear, that means we have a minor name issue at hand,” he said, eyeing Tom.

The other Tom rolled his eyes. “Yuki and Tom Viator, but you can call me Viator to save confusion.” Then he turned away briefly and shot off a few spells at the encroaching draugr, exploding them, sending body parts and equipment flying.

“Tell me something,” Yuki said to Viktor, his black eyes gleaming, “do you even know what the symbol is, or do you just assume it’s something Grindelwald made up? See, this is kind of like the swastika that Hitler used. The symbol itself was in use ages before that, in Japan, India, Ethiopia, and many other places. It’s the same with this symbol. So before you get all trigger-happy. . . .”

Tom stepped in with, “It’s the symbol of the Deathly Hallows.”

Yuki grinned, nodding. “Give the man a prize. Oh, wait, we already gave you a present. It’s not every day you’re having a bit of fun and stumble over a known opponent to the Dark Arts actually using them on someone in the supposed privacy of his own home.”

“Champions of Meridia, huh?” Harry muttered, then pulled out his quiver and slung it in place, then retrieved his bow. “You people have fun talking. I want some practice.” He stepped around to the side and forward a half dozen paces, grabbed an arrow, nocked it, and drew. He dropped three draugr before Viktor stepped up off to the side and started flinging shock spells.

“Oh, we’re not using wizarding magic?” he heard Yuki ask, then saw the man run by wielding an ebony katana that glowed a sickly green. More singing erupted and even Harry found himself singing quietly, at least to the tunes he recognized and knew the words for. He also realized he must be slightly tone-deaf himself if Viktor’s wince was anything to go by.

Half an hour later and quite a bit of moving around that section of the city saw them having cleared out the draugr within easy reach. Harry Shouted, “Laas Yah Nir!” again and did a slow turn.

“There’s another group off to the south,” he said, “fairly large from what I’m seeing.” The analytical part of his mind noted that Yuki and Viator were both the gold of a non-hostile.

Yuki nodded, not even questioning his abilities, and reached up with his left hand. The music sphere shot into it and switched off, and was tucked away.
“You two look fine for more,” Tom observed.

He looked at Viktor to see his opinion, then nodded at Tom. “No reason not to,” he said, securing his bow and pulling out his dragon dagger to strap to his thigh. They began walking again and Harry pulled a water bottle from a pocket to refresh himself. After taking several sips he glanced sideways past Tom and asked Viator, “Why do you feel like Tom?”

Yuki laughed and said, “Because he is Tom?”

Harry exhaled in frustration and had more water, then said, “Is it simply because you know as much of the Dark Arts as he does?”

Viator chuckled softly. “No.”

A truly bizarre thought occurred to him then, which at first he dismissed with a roll of his eyes. Still, it nagged at him. Viator felt almost exactly like Tom magically. Over the years, as his sensitivity had increased, mainly from learning how to recognize enchantments and enchanting actual items, he had come to realize that each person had their own unique feel to them. Normally it was not something he paid much attention to because his subconscious felt the signatures of those around him, identified them, and let the matter drop. But he had expected these two strangers to ping against his senses. Neither of them did.

Yuki had said something which was meant one way, but could be taken another: literally. The world had been reborn before, so . . . With that in mind he shrugged and said, “You are—”

A sharp crack made him break off; Yuki had appeared in front of him out of nowhere, his body curling in on itself somewhat as Viator’s wand went up to cast a killing curse. Harry’s hair covered his eyes momentarily as his head whipped around, trying to figure out what happened. A gun fell from a window in a building up ahead, a body following it, tumbling down like a rag doll.

“Yuki?” Viator asked, seemingly unconcerned.

“Eh, I’ll be fine,” Yuki replied, straightening up and dropping something to the ground which hit with a metallic clink.

It was then Harry saw the blood; the man had taken a bullet for him. His eyes widened in horror and he dropped his water bottle. His hands came up automatically, healing spells erupting to help Yuki recover. “How—?”

Yuki turned around to face him and smiled. “Really good situational awareness. Thank you for the healing, Harry.”

He nodded dumbly.

“I don’t think you’d have died from that,” Yuki said, head tilting to one side, “but still.”

“Thank you,” Viktor said hoarsely.

Harry shook himself and combed his hair back out of his eyes. “Yes, thank you,” he said gratefully, ready to say more, but subsided when Yuki dismissed their gratitude with a careless wave of his hand. He bent down to retrieve the bottle and stow it away, then stepped back and shouted again, checking for any other beings in the vicinity. “We’re okay for the immediate vicinity.”

Tom sighed faintly and said, “Please keep checking, Harry. I’d rather that not happen again. It seems with the breakdown of normality the muggles are getting desperate. Even if you see something non-
hostile.”

“I will,” he promised.

Yuki laughed again and produced that sphere, tapping it before throwing it upward. Music started blaring again as he said, “If there are murderous muggles around I may as well enjoy myself,” he declared gaily, then danced off over toward Viator.

He was just getting ready to finish his earlier thought when a roar brought him up short. His bow was back in hand a second later and an arrow readied as he pivoted toward the sound. Out of the clouds came a Norwegian Ridgeback; either it was there for them or there were muggles around. Another Shout revealed the dragon closing in on a mass of gaseous blue. “A lot of indeterminates, so we have to be on guard for them turning on us,” he reported.

“Fine,” Tom said. “Distance attacks, then.”

Of course, by the time they got there most of the humans were already dead, burned beyond recognition. A few had found shelter from the fury of the dragon, but not many. Harry watched the dragon carefully even as he released arrow after arrow, ready to Shout to force it to stay grounded.

Yuki just charged right on in, despite what Tom had advised, warbling away and treating the dragon as something of a dance partner. “Has Yuki always been crazy?” Harry asked Viator as he loosed another arrow.

“More or less,” Viator replied, amusing himself by using his wand to pry scales off the dragon and pile them up neatly at his feet. The dragon did not take kindly to that, but Yuki was keeping it distracted, bouncing around like he was made of rubber and sticking it with that katana every so often.

Shortly thereafter it died and Viktor stepped up behind him to steady him as the dragon’s soul streamed to him. By the time he came down from his high and used Aura Whisper again the remaining humans were dead from their injuries, but the mass of hostiles was still off to the south.
Chapter 28

Viator gathered up his stash of scales and tucked them away in an obviously enchanted pocket, and Harry and Viktor went to loot what they could off the dragon’s skeleton, after which they all started walking again. Harry tried again to voice what was on his mind. “You are Tom,” he said, seeing Viator nod out of the corner of his eye. “Would I be wrong to take that literally?”

Yuki laughed. “He is Tom. That is his name.”

Harry shook his head. “Not that kind of literal. And you... So very close. It’s all a bit confusing. If this world can be reborn...” he said, then checked again with Aura Whisper.

Yuki moved over in front of him and began walking backward. “Would it help if I did this?” he asked.

He watched in bemusement as Yuki’s hair changed from ink black to fiery red and lengthened, his skin paled and his features shifted, and his eyes altered from liquid black to a very familiar green. He was looking at an older version of himself had he his mother’s hair. Yuki glanced up at the sky for a moment, asking, “How old am I again? Oh, right, thirty-something.” He grinned at Harry as his appearance shifted back.

He looked at his husband to see his reaction and did something of a double-take when he realized Viktor wasn’t even paying attention. His focus was called back when Yuki spoke again.

“Oh, Viktor and your Tom are blissfully unaware of this conversation,” Yuki said, a mischievous gleam in his eyes. “I am not without certain powers.”

“Yuki, get on with it,” Viator drawled.

Yuki pouted and nodded. “Tom and I are from a different dimension, where the conditions are, well, a bit different. No Aedra or Daedra, I’m afraid, amongst other things.”

He glanced down at the markings again.

“I hold the Deathly Hallows,” Yuki said, “so please do be aware that should they come up in conversation here you can treat them as nothing more than a story. Once I took possession—well, there can be only one.”

Harry was ineludibly reminded of Highlander.

Yuki giggled and tossed his hair back, still walking backward. “We’re here on holiday because a certain entity asked me for a favor. You see, what I said earlier was misleading. That bullet would have killed you, exploded your heart, so I took it for you. You’re a little too important for some silly freaked-out muggle to kill. The symbol of Meridia is simply because I knew you would recognize it and because we’re presently wailing on the undead. It made sense.”

“Have you always been crazy?” he asked, without conscious intent.
Yuki snickered madly and shook his head. “No, no. I was sort of sane the first time around, but then I stopped letting people walk all over me and did something absolutely cracked. It’s worked out extremely well, I admit, even if I am looperier now than one of those muggle fun straws.”

Harry glanced around quickly and realized that they had not actually moved far, despite that they were all still walking.

“Harry,” Yuki said, and the tone of his voice made him listen closely, “you have yourself one fine husband in Viktor. Cherish him. He loves you so purely it’s almost painful to witness. You have yourself one fine version of Tom. Honor him. He may not always be right, but he is sincerely doing his best to make sure you get through all this alive. Keep coming up with those interesting ideas you get. I’d have been bursting with pride to be you, if that tells you anything.”

He felt his eyes sting at that. “How long are you staying?”

That grin came back. “Oh, not long. The main favor was to make sure that idiot muggle didn’t ruin everything. Things are going to hell in a hand-basket for the muggles and more and more territory will be warded away from them. Gellert is thrilled, actually, because he wants to rule the world, and the more constrained the muggles are the better, and the less opportunity they’ll have to resurrect their technology and fight back. This world is going to change so drastically.”

Harry nodded. “Am I going to go crazy?”

Yuki shook his head. “I’m not all-knowing. I can’t imagine why you would offhand, unless you should decide to give Sheogorath a hand. Poor guy could use one. But I kind of doubt the gods of this dimension would allow that to happen before all of this is over and settled. It would give you too much power, you see. Now, I have a few gifts for you.”

He frowned in disbelief. “You already saved my life.”

Yuki shrugged. “So?” He reached into a pocket and withdrew two spheres, then offered them. “Music. One vocal, one instrumental.”

He eyed them almost skeptically, but accepted them anyway. They went into one of his enchanted pockets.

Yuki then pulled out a piece of parchment and offered it. “A list of shrines and their locations. You can cross-check this against whatever information your fanged friend brings back.”

Harry took that, too, and tucked it away.

“You’re already working on Malacath and the goblins,” Yuki said, ignoring Harry’s reaction, “but you might consider Hircine. I would say Dibella, but the Aedra do not usually go in for the whole quest thing.”

“Any others?” he asked, not sure he actually wanted to know.

Yuki wrinkled his nose thoughtfully. “Well, it’s more who you should avoid. I recommend you stay away from Mehrunes Dagon, Molag Bal, Namira, Peryite, and Vaermina. Probably stay away from Nocturnal, but your friend already explained to you why that is.”

“Something tells me Occlumency is about as useful around you as it is the gods,” Harry commented dryly.

Yuki smirked wickedly. “Sorry,” he said, not sounding at all sorry. “It’s a perquisite I happen to
enjoy.” He looked offside for a moment, then said, “What am I forgetting?”

“Barty, other favors,” Viator prompted.

“Ah, right. The changes I made to Barty will stick,” Yuki said, “so no worries about his appearance reverting. He just needs a new name, like they did for you. As for the other favors, Tom and I have decided to meddle a little while we’re here, and coincidentally help you out, though not so directly critical as earlier. Keep an eye on the British Ministry.”

“Okay,” he said slowly, then asked, “Are house-elves in any way connected to the elven races of Nirn?”

Yuki looked at him intently for a few seconds, then blinked and shook his head. “No, actually, though I can see why you might wonder that. In places where wizarding magic crops up the house-elves tend to also. It’s just one of those things. Any other questions I may be able to answer?”

His brow furrowed, gaze drifting off to the right. Instead of going for specifics and risking his questions being rejected outright he asked, “Any advice?”

Yuki stared at him, a slow smirk forming. “So clever. I like you. Okay. Don’t worry too much about James and his merry band of idiots. Stick to honing your skills, like those rings, speed with that bow, and so on. Keep your eye on the end goal, which is Grindelwald. The why isn’t as important as the doing.”

“Alduin?” he risked asking.

He got an opaque look for that question.

“Did you have your own dark lord to deal with?”

The grin came back. “Oh yes, but not the one you have.”

“First time around?”

Yuki gave him a considering look, then said slowly, “The dimension I live in is not my original one. But because I had already obtained the Deathly Hallows and tried something really insane, I was . . . reborn, you might say, in a different one. Because of my powers and knowledge things turned out very differently, and they were already somewhat different to begin with. Having the Hallows does a number on your brain, subtle though it might seem to the one being altered, and I’ve changed because of it.”

He detected a certain delicacy of wording and wondered why. Odds were he would never know. What else could he ask? His gaze flickered to the side, toward Viktor. Grindelwald did not seem to be going after the magical population; his attack on Durmstrang seemed to be a singular event, and Dumbledore was something else entirely given that the man had defeated him in the past and led to his incarceration in a prison of his own making. The point being, he thought, that Viktor was likely safe if he continued playing for the Bulgarian National Team.

He sincerely doubted that his counterpart would spill the details on how to sneak into Nurmengard. He could ask why he wasn’t freaking out over being faced with himself of another dimension or all those dead muggles, but the numbness to that particular aspect of this lunacy would probably wear off at some point. There were any number of things he could probably think of to ask given enough time, but perhaps he should let it lie and be grateful for what had already been given, his life first and foremost.
Yuki smirked suddenly and nodded. “I definitely like you. Now, how about we get on with clearing out that other bunch of draugr?”

“Okay.” Yuki was suddenly elsewhere and they were making progress again. Tom and Viktor were, as Yuki had put it, blissfully unaware that anything out of the ordinary had happened. But because he wasn’t certain just how much actual time had passed in truth he Shouted again, doing a slow turn to ensure he knew what was around. The only blue was so faint as to not worry him, and the cluster of red was looming large still to the south.

He reported that and Tom nodded. They made their way to that group of draugr and spent quite some time clearing them out. Harry used his dagger and magicka for part of it, wanting to improve with that weapon, and for others he used the dagger and creatively employed magic. He also kept an eye out on Viktor in case he needed assistance in some way, and Viktor was doing the same with him.

Yuki, of course, was back to warbling and dancing, and Harry had to wonder just what had happened to his counterpart. He would have to do a little research on the Deathly Hallows because information on that seemed to be missing in his memories. It was also extremely strange to him that Yuki had paired off with Tom. Would he be able to share a memory of their little chat?

‘I’d really rather you didn’t,’ he heard in his head, causing him to completely miss with the spell he had just cast. Viktor shot him a questioning look, but he just shook his head and kept on fighting.

‘You can edge around this request, I suppose,’ he heard, ‘but I would really prefer you not attempt to share in full. It’s not like anyone can, you know, capture us and interrogate us for information, but we came here for you, Harry, not anyone else. They don’t really need to know what I’ve said, except obliquely. I could force you to comply with barely any effort, but I am asking, one Harry to another.’

Yuki cackled and jumped, spinning through the air and coming down on a draugr with that katana, slicing it in half like a hot knife through butter.

‘Okay,’ he thought, wondering if crazy was catching.

‘Maybe Tom and I will return someday for a true holiday, but for now. . . .’

Harry shook his head and concentrated where he ought to. On their way to the next bunch he spotted another group of indeterminates, called it out, then grabbed his bow when he heard the roar of another dragon. “I’m starting to get tired,” he said quietly.

Tom gave him an assessing look and nodded.

When they arrived at the dragon it was rather confusing scene. The draugr had also converged on the humans and the dragon was indiscriminately killing both. But, given that it had plenty to keep it distracted it was a fairly simple prospect for Harry and his companions to kill the thing.

“I’m starting to wonder if draugr can use portkeys,” he muttered, dropping another one.

Viktor snickered and set one on fire as Harry flung out his hand to reanimate one of the still whole but defeated draugr. Naturally, by the time everything hostile was dead the humans were also. He sighed. Grindelwald was really pushing his forces against the muggles. He was a bit surprised that any of them were left in the city, but he also knew that even if they fled to the less populated areas they would have trouble with food, and if too many of them congregated the odds of an attack multiplied. He sighed again as Viktor slid an arm around his shoulders and pulled him close.

“You ready to stop?” Viktor asked.
“Yeah. I’m tired, and I’ve seen more than enough dead,” he replied, closing his eyes for a moment against the sight of so much carnage. When he opened them he saw Yuki in his line of sight, giving him a wink, and felt himself smiling a little.

Tom strolled over, eyes watchful on their surroundings, and said, “Let’s go home.”

Yuki laughed again, rather psychotically, and vanished from sight. Viator just shook his head and vanished as well. Harry blinked, then reached out to touch the offered portkey. In Skyrim he put his weapons away and hugged Viktor. Surprisingly neither of the two said anything about the Viators—the “travelers”, he realized, wanting to laugh at the joke, but also finding it more than a little corny.

Viktor tightened his hold, then said, “How about we shower and then get something to eat?”

Two days later they went on another hunting trip, this time taking Severus, Lucius, Draco, and Barty along (for whom Tom had crafted a new wand, despite wanting his follower to master the rings). Before they left the safety of Skyrim Tom said, “Severus, you already understand what Harry is capable of, but for you other three it may be a bit of a shock. You will listen when he calls out reports on potential or definite hostiles. If we find nothing of note in Trondheim we’ll go to Oslo instead. Understood?”

A muted chorus of, “Yes, my lord,” was heard, so Tom held out a larger than normal portkey. They again stepped out of the safety of the wards that already extended quite a ways out from the magical shopping district.

Harry took a breath and Shouted, “Laas Yah Nir!” and did a slow turn, getting and situating his weapons as he did so. “Indeterminates north, a fairly large group. Hostiles closing in from the east.”

Tom nodded and asked, “Are you hearing any . . . words of power?”

“No. But given how it went the last time I don’t expect to until one shows up.”

“Very well. Let’s go.”

Harry readied his bow and led them on an intercept course, pausing once halfway to check with Aura Whisper again. They were almost there when he muttered, “I wonder if the muggles have somehow figured out that being closer to our wards lessens the chance they’ll be attacked, even if they can’t sense them.”

“You may well be correct, Harry,” Tom replied.

“If you can figure out a way to enchant some glasses or goggles with a detection spell, that’d be useful,” he said, then nocked an arrow and drew. “Time to dance, folks.” He edged around the corner and started shooting. ‘That’s wonderful,’ he thought. ‘Now I’m sounding vaguely like Yuki and the next thing I know I’ll be using that music sphere he gave me.’

Lucius, Draco, and Barty seemed more than a little taken aback at the sheer lethality of Harry’s bow, but quickly rallied and began casting their best against the teeming undead, who had already done severe damage to the humans they had caught. It was not unexpected to Harry’s thinking that the muggles all died again, which made him sigh. He checked to see where there was more activity and called it, then started in that direction.

As they were walking he blinked at something of an epiphany. Maybe one of the reasons Yuki liked to play music while he fought was to keep him from sliding into depression? He laughed.

“Harry?” Viktor asked.
“Yuki gave me something before he left, one of those spheres. I was just thinking that seeing all the dead is depressing, but the music helps to keep your spirits up.”

“And potentially draw in undesirables,” Viktor commented, “but I appreciate your thinking. I admit, Yuki seemed to quite enjoy himself.”

A sound off in the distance alerted him to something being not quite right. Another check with Aura Whisper showed him a cluster of hostiles, but not on the ground; it was coming from the air. He spun around quickly, checking the buildings, then said urgently, “Inside, now!” He grabbed Viktor’s hand and dragged him off to one that was still mostly standing.

The others followed and grouped up inside, and it was Tom who arched a questioning brow at him demanding an answer.

“That sounds like a helicopter, and if it is it means the muggle military is in the area. We look human so odds are they’d try to ‘help’ us, but if they figure out we’re magical all bets are off. They’ll attack.”

“Is it wrong of me to be hoping a dragon shows up right about now?” Viktor asked.

He looked at his husband for a moment, then snickered. “It would be kind of interesting to see dragon versus helicopter, especially if the helicopter has guns and possibly missiles.” He turned to Tom and said, “Maybe another bracelet, with things like Detect Life, Detect Dead, and if you can do it, for kicks, Homunculus Revelio? I just—” He looked away for a second, then continued, “What if Grindelwald gets wind of this weird bunch of people who can do this unheard of magic? Sends spies? Tries to kidnap one of us?”

Tom exhaled heavily and nodded. “Yes. You’re right. We can’t have you spending all your time checking.”

The sound became louder and Harry slid over to a window and peered around the edge. “I can only hope they aren’t using infrared in this direction,” he said, then Shouted again.

“Not that I’m advocating the tactic,” Viktor said, “but why hasn’t Grindelwald blown the military installations as well as their power sources?”

Tactically speaking that would make good sense and he nodded at his husband. “They’re headed toward the muggles,” he said, just as a roar drowned out part of what he was saying. “Huh, one dragon as ordered.”

Viktor palmed his face. “And?” he asked, looking between Harry and Tom.

“I think we can quietly sneak in behind the action,” Tom said, eyeing Harry, who nodded. “Very well. I shouldn’t need to stress that we should try to stay unnoticed. Let’s go.”

A not quite creep along the streets brought them to a point where they could see the dragon flaming the helicopter, which did indeed have guns, and was firing back. However, the sheer heat from the dragon’s breath was melting parts of the vehicle and Harry knew it was more or less all over. Indeed, the rotor mast melted enough to separate and the blades went whirling off to smash into a building as the main body fell at an angle and impacted the street and slid, coming to a stop up against another building.

He Shouted again and circled in place, then returned focus to the crash. No people were coming out, but the dragon was still there, so it could obviously sense that some of them yet lived. The mass of hostiles they had been heading for was closer and almost overlapping the blue of indeterminates.
They stayed back, waiting to see if anyone would emerge from the helicopter. The dragon flamed it several more times before flying off toward the action.

Another check had him nodding and heading on, arrow already in his hand. Several minutes later of cautious travel brought them to the site of yet more carnage. Harry and Viktor concentrated on the dragon while the others picked off draugr. Once the dragon was down and its soul absorbed, Harry switched his focus to the undead, easily taking them down with one arrow per, usually to the head.

Draco was doing surprisingly well for only having recently finished school. Durmstrang did teach what most people would label Dark Arts, but waited until after the OWLs to do so. Prior to that, of course, it was more of a mindset that helped, in the long run, to steer students away from what was commonly called Dark Arts addiction. He did, Harry noticed, stay close to Lucius rather than stand out a bit more openly.

He did another check and as he pivoted back toward the current action he saw a draugr sneaking up on—“Sev, down!” he yelled, drawing hard and releasing. The arrow shot through the space his stepfather’s head had been a split second ago and nailed the draugr in the eye, knocking it to the ground.

Severus came back up from his crouch and checked the space around him, then repositioned to a much safer location before sending more spells. Harry paused long enough to reanimate one of the defeated, summon a Dremora Lord, then bring another arrow to bear. Not even an hour later and Draco was breathing heavily, simply not used to such prolonged activity. That was when they heard more roaring.

Harry’s head snapped around toward it. “That’s not a dragon,” he said, and Shouted, then flinched when in addition to the roars he could hear heavy impacts and the sound of falling masonry.

“Giants,” Tom said sharply. “Viktor, get Harry up on a roof!”

Viktor scanned the surrounding rooftops, then stepped up much closer to him and held out his arm. Harry took it and braced himself as his husband side-along apparated them. It wasn’t long before they had all made the change in pairs. Draco and Lucius, Severus and Barty, with Tom joining the Malfoys. Harry kept his eyes on the glow, waiting.

“Will you bring in a few distractions?” Viktor asked.

“Yes. I can bring in a decoy and add a couple of other harassers, though I don’t think one of those draugr will last at all long.” The booming was getting much louder and he could see clouds of dust puffing up. ‘At least Draco is getting a chance to rest for a moment,’ he thought.

Two giants appeared from the floating debris dust, holding massive clubs they were using to knock holes in the sides of buildings. He glanced at Tom, got a nod, then Shouted, “Fiik Lo Sah!” As soon as his decoy was away he flung out his right hand to reanimate a draugr, then summoned another Dremora Lord.

Viktor and the others were already casting a variety of spells so Harry returned to launching arrows into the mix. The moment his throat recovered he Shouted at one of the giants, “Zun Haal Viik!” and watched with some satisfaction as its club went flying off.

“Control the other one?” Tom called.

He nodded, eyes still on the targets. When he was able he faced the club-wielding giant and Shouted again. “Gol Hah Dov!” A second later his target turned and started attacking its companion. They
seemed to be doing well until more roaring was heard.

“Shit,” he muttered. “Going to try something I’m not sure will work,” he called out. “A dragon ally might show up!” He looked up at the sky and Shouted, “Durnehviir!”

The clouds overhead billowed out and from them a dragon dropped, roaring in pleasure. “Qahnaarin!” it bellowed.

“Her successor,” Harry yelled back. “We could use some help!”

The dragon dropped to perch on a nearby rooftop and extended its neck to bring its head closer to peer at him. “Dovahkiin.”

“Drem yol lok. Geh. Valdis taught me how to call you,” he replied, slightly creeped out at its almost colourless, semi-undead appearance. “There are more giants incoming.”

The dragon’s head whipped around to look, and then it launched into the air and began to attack. Viktor reached over to grab his hand and squeeze it; he could feel fine tremors being transmitted and knew that his husband was a bit freaked out again. He pulled Viktor’s hand up and kissed the back, then released it and grabbed an arrow instead.

For a long five minutes Durnehviir battled the additional two giants as the humans continued to send their own attacks, against both giant and draugr. As his control slipped over the one giant he animated one of the dead ones and summoned another Dremora Lord. Durnehviir flew back into the clouds and vanished when his tether to the Soul Cairn recalled him; but by then they were down to just a single, wounded giant and only a handful of draugr.

Once those were finally down Harry checked the area again and sighed in relief. Tom apparated over and eyed him so he said, “I don’t see anything else at the moment. But Draco looks like he’s about to collapse.”

Tom nodded. “Head back to Skyrim. I’ll tell the others,” he said, then apparated again.

He slung his bow back and turned to Viktor, who had their portkey ready. He smiled and laid a finger on it.

Back in the entrance hall he had enough time to stow his weapons before Draco portkeyed in; the blond immediately skittered over with a look of awe on his face. “Oh, wow, Harry. I had no idea!”

He smiled. “Thank you?”

“Just wow,” Draco said, sounding almost like a squealing fangirl. “And that bow!”

He looked over at Viktor and scowled when he saw just how amused his husband was rather than sympathetic. “Er, well, right. I need a shower,” he said, then more or less fled.

Viktor caught up with him as he was undressing and joined him in stripping down. “I am sorry. It was just too funny seeing you in that position.”

He scowled again, but admitted, even if only in the privacy of his own mind, that it was amusing. Draco had calmed down by the time they assembled for dinner, but he still gave off an aura of excitement. Severus sat to his other side and very quietly said, “Thank you.”

Harry gave him a smile and nodded; words were unnecessary.
“I’ve realized, Harry,” Tom said, “that you have yet to say anything about those books and scrolls you brought back.”

“Oh, er. I guess I heard that bit about insanity and. . . .”

“I think, on further reflection, that the warning was meant to prevent you from becoming too interested in all that was there, to the exclusion of purpose and the test itself.”

He considered that. “Yes,” he said slowly, deciding that he agreed. “I’ll get them out and we can go over them. After dinner?”

Lily decided to drop a bombshell when she said, “I received another letter from James,” which got everyone’s attention. “He asked when I was coming back to Britain to be with the Order of the Phoenix again.”

He stared at his mother for a long moment, but was distracted when Severus started laughing so infectiously that he couldn’t help but join in. Most everyone at the table who understood was showing some kind of mirthful response.

Tom chuckled darkly and asked, “And how do you plan to respond, if at all?”

He had to lean forward to see around Severus. His mother had an indecisive look on her face, but finally she said, “I was thinking of saying that being a part of the Order almost got my whole family killed last time around, so not to expect me. I, er, divorced myself from that whole situation a decade ago.”

Tom smirked at her wording, as did Lucius.

She looked at her husband and said, “I have to wonder if next you’ll be getting a letter from Dumbledore. Or if he’ll try to persuade me once James gets a negative response. Now that I think about it I’m a bit surprised you haven’t already.”

Severus shrugged. “Dumbledore surely realized when I left so suddenly that his hold over me, however tenuous, was broken. It was certainly nothing he did that effected your survival or even safety in the end, and it is not as though he managed to secure some vague promise from me about future behavior. If anything he greatly underestimated the Dark Lord’s sanity and purpose that night.”

Harry suddenly realized he was missing information, which prompted him to ask, “Severus, what has he been doing all this time since Tom returned?”

“I never told him when my Dark Mark returned as it had been. Lily lived, which meant the Dark Lord—it was not until the attack at the World Cup Final that he assumed he had returned. He did ask me then and I had to show him that it was indeed back. He would have taken no other evidence than that of his own eyes for something of that nature.”

“He certainly underestimated that,” Viktor said.

“And your answer to why you never said anything?” Viktor asked.

“That I never felt it return and that I’ve felt such disgust since I overheard those words that I have never looked at my bare arm since that time and do anything to avoid seeing it,” Severus replied.

And whether that was true or not it made a fair amount of sense, and even showed loyalty to a master who had, in fact, heard his plea and spared the life of an enemy combatant. “All right,” he said. “So what has he been doing since then?”
“He seems to be convinced that the Dark Lord used something called Horcruxes to defeat death and has been searching for them, the idea being that if he destroys them all then the Dark Lord will be fully mortal again and can be killed for real.”

Harry laughed, and laughed some more.
Chapter 29

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After dinner Harry found the enchanted “pocket” he had stowed the loot from Apocrypha in and brought it to the library. He spilled out the contents onto a large table and tucked the “pocket” away. Glancing over the mess he could see that some of the books were things he had already read, so he now had duplicates. The scrolls, however, he wasn’t sure about. Valdis had told him about scroll-form spells, a one-use form of casting, so they could be those.

Tom reached over and snagged one, unrolling it and giving it a long look. “Spell scroll,” he said. “No idea if they’ll work for the uninitiated.”

He nodded and started setting aside the books he recognized as duplicates, not sure what to do with them. Those remaining may or may not be useful. It seemed Tom was correct in thinking that the danger of Apocrypha was not in the reading material he had looted, but in delving into the bounty of knowledge there in every structure to the point of becoming lost to it. If Hermaeus Mora was the Daedric Lord of Knowledge it only made sense that his Plane of Oblivion would be bursting at the seams with knowledge mortals might no longer hold. Odds were, staying long enough to try to assimilate all of it would turn you into a Seeker.

He wished Serana was back, but she had a number of clans to speak with. He had the list of shrines from Yuki; would his family accept that information? It might seem awfully convenient that the stranger who danced into and out of their lives would just so happen to have the list handy to give to him. Then again, they were so blasé about their appearances that perhaps it would be no different. How Yuki had managed that result. . . . Perhaps it was best he didn’t know, and there seemed to be absolutely no harm done to either of them; and maybe he was crazy after all to just be letting it go.

Having come to a decision he poked around in his pocket for the list and pulled it out, then slid it across the table to Tom. Tom scanned the contents, his head tilting curiously. “Why am I not surprised that there are shrines to all of them here in Norway?”

Maybe Tom assumed it came from Apocrypha?

“I will, at the least, check the one for Lord Malacath,” Tom continued. “If it looks fine the three of us can go.”

Viktor looked pensive for a moment, then said, “You do realize we could all end up marked.”

Tom’s upper lip curled into a snarl as he nodded. “Yes. The ultimate irony of a dark lord being marked by a higher power.”

He brought a hand up to rub his mouth, and incidentally hide the smile forming. It wasn’t good enough, for Tom aimed a murderer’s glare at him. “Hey, at least then I wouldn’t be the only one prancing around with godly tattoos!” he said, grinning openly and toothily at Tom.

While Tom was off checking into the shrine Harry and Viktor were reading any and all books regarding Malacath. If the Prince required an offering the preference was for troll fat, sometimes a daedra heart. Somehow he thought Tom could acquire troll fat easily enough if necessary, and there was a summoning spell he could use. All of the Daedric Lords were like that. Sometimes they
wanted something, sometimes nothing, and sometimes you just stumbled over something connected to them and risked getting sucked into doing their bidding.

In this case they were deliberately investigating. When the three of them arrived at the shrine—for Tom’s check showed nothing in particular to be wary of—he looked up to see a well-muscled male figure. It wore a loincloth-type covering that reached down to and pooled on the pedestal the figure posed on, wielded a sword (which Harry found to be a bit odd given the artifacts he was aware of), and bore what he assumed was an Orsimer face, with pointed ears, severe underbite with oversized canines, and a snarling expression.

Viktor was looking around the clearing, into the trees. Harry saw the additional bracelet on his wrist and realized his husband was checking for others, living or dead. That being seen to he looked back at the statue and nearly fell over when it began moving, the figure straightening up from its threatening pose to an upright position, the back edge of the sword’s blade resting against the figure’s shoulder.

He quickly grabbed Viktor’s hand (for his husband had been facing away from the statue) and pulled him around. Viktor sucked in a sharp breath on seeing the change, and Tom was already both wary and fascinated.

“Lord Malacath?” Tom said quietly.

“Aye.” The figure’s mouth did not move, yet it was obvious from whence the voice came. “You seek to aid my goblin-ken in exchange for their help.” It was undeniably a statement, not a question.

“That is correct,” Tom said.

“Go, fetch the crown,” was the response. “I will call them to this place. You will negotiate, here, under my watchful eye.”

Tom took a deep breath and exhaled, his mouth tightening at the command, then nodded. “I will return shortly,” he murmured, then disappeared.

“Your friend is proud,” Malacath stated.

He smiled nervously, with no idea how he should respond, if at all. Viktor squeezed his hand and remained just as silent.

Tom returned, a silk bag in his hand; bare seconds later a party of goblins appeared, looking wary and somewhat confused. That changed when they saw the statue. Each of them bowed deeply to the figure of their god.

“It seems you have some allies,” Malacath stated.

The goblins all gave off an aura of confusion, shock, and disbelief, though none of them outright displayed their reaction or spoke of it. The one who looked to be in charge eyed the three humans, but its gaze came to a rest on Harry’s left hand after a lingering look at the right. “Blessed of Akatosh and Champion of Hermaeus Mora,” it said in a harsh whisper.

Harry released Viktor’s hand and took a step forward. “Yes,” he said. “Bormahi allowed Hermaeus Mora to test me.”

“Your father?” the goblin said. “You, a human?”

“Yes, my father,” he replied, frowning. Just how many beings understood even a portion of the
dragon language? “I am dovahkiin. My human father is of little importance.”

A look bounced around between the goblins before the leader spoke again. “I have my doubts.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” he said. “Why should you show trust when you have been shown so little? Would you like a demonstration, assuming you can even recognize the truth of it?”

The goblin sneered at the mild taunt, then nodded.

He contemplated that for a moment, trying to decide which Shout would make the best impact, then looked up at the sky and Shouted, “Strun Bah Qo!” The clouds overhead immediately thickened and boiled up, darkening the sky, then released a fury of rain and thunder and lightning, bolts striking the ground a reasonably safe distance away from their gathering. It lasted only a minute, but it was obvious that had enemies been in range they would have been skewered and fried by those jagged arcs of electricity. He looked back at the goblins to see their reactions.

The leader’s expression had smoothed out, at least as much as was possible for a being of his type, and the goblin was eyeing him intently. “Proof enough,” it said, nodding decisively. “Why are we here?”

Tom held up the bag and allowed the sides to fall down, revealing the crown. The goblins were good in that they allowed very little of what they were feeling or thinking to show through at the sight of the relic, but more than one had hands which twitched forward. The leader glanced at Malacath and back to Tom. “I see.”

“We had come to realize that you and yours may still follow the old ways,” Tom said, “and that the government of the British faction of my species, wizard-kind, had done a typically evil deed when it comes to others—and even, at times, their own. That being said, we went looking for information and came across references to this.” He twitched the crown. “Being in the midst of yet another war we were, naturally, looking for information at the very least, assistance if possible. Our foray to one of the banks proved to some extent that your people are aware enough of the gods to recognize their symbols, and indeed that you display those of Lord Malacath openly.”

The leader raised a brow. “So you retrieved the crown as a bargaining point. I must wonder if the type of information you’d be interested in involves the money flow for Grindelwald and his people, and if the assistance might include Nurmengard.”

Tom smiled faintly. “Of that nature, yes. We believe that he has regained control of the fortress and is using it for himself and his minions. Infiltration is a strong possibility. The money flow might be of use in terms of finding and removing his people, but if he’s not using one of your branches, and instead has his funds stored somewhere in Nurmengard . . . .”

Harry almost nodded to himself. Make it a point to show that the money might be a black hole and instead push for Nurmengard as being far more important. Even if they could track Grindelwald’s minions that way—well, discover who they were, more likely—what sort of actions would Tom advocate? Kidnapping, interrogation, and killing? A dead enemy couldn’t come back to cause more trouble, after all. A part of him recognized that as being hilariously hypocritical should it come from Tom considering the war he had sparked more than twenty years ago, with his minions spreading mayhem and death.

But for himself? If he ran across a bunch of Grindelwald’s non-draugr allies he most likely would not hesitate to shoot to kill. Or wound badly enough that they might be captured for interrogation. Still, killing during a battle was one thing; killing outside of that was something else. Could they even trust the various ministries to incarcerate anyone captured? He shot a sidelong glance at Viktor,
wondering what was running through his mind, then looked back to the goblins.

The leader was giving Tom an assessing look. The goblin stepped backward into the center of his companions and a low-voiced discussion ensued—in Gobbledygook, naturally. He glanced at Viktor again, wanting to smirk or smile; were they expecting them to not understand what they were saying? Viktor took that opportunity to step forward, even with him, and brush his hand with his own.

When the leader stepped forward again he and Tom began a spirited round of negotiations, which eventually resulted in exactly what Tom wanted. Primarily, any and all information regarding Nurmengard, plus the potential of the goblins being called upon to help dig their way close, or even inside. Aside from that they had the promise that the goblin nation would otherwise not interfere with Tom’s group in a negative way—not unless provoked to it, anyway. A table was conjured, and chairs, and the written documentation of the agreement was scribed right then. Harry, being dovahkiin, signed first of the humans.

He sighed unhappily when he realized another tattoo had appeared. It shared space with the one from Hermaeus Mora, that one having reduced itself in size to accommodate the addition. Viktor and Tom also sported the tattoo on their left hands, and Tom was scowling something fierce over it. But then, he had been the one to do the negotiating, so it only made sense he had been marked. Viktor, however, was somewhat of a mystery, but considering he had been there and contributing occasionally... .

Multiple copies of the resulting treaty were made. Most of them would go with the goblins, mainly so that every one of their locations would receive the news, to be presumably held by the local leaders. They carried back several copies themselves, with a verbal agreement to liaise through the Trondheim bank.

Over the next few days some interesting things were featured in the *Daily Prophet*, but the most important was a report regarding the British Ministry. Harry read that one with anticipation, hoping that Yuki’s promised meddling had come to light. And indeed, it had, or so he assumed.

Apparently, some sort of magical termite-like insects had infested the Wizengamot meeting room, the one they did all their non-public work in. They had weakened the supports so badly that a number of Wizengamot members had crashed through the seating and ended up bleeding out due to the sheer number of splinters driven into their bodies.

The *Quibbler*, Luna’s father’s paper, reported that the termite-like insects were attracted to a number of things besides wood, those being people of dark intent, cruelty, and hypocrisy, amongst other things. Harry snickered after getting through both articles. Amongst the dead were Minister Fudge, Senior Undersecretary Umbridge, Auror Dawlish, and various Wizengamot members. Neither paper had the full list of the deceased, but still.

Some time later on a message was picked up by a house-elf from the bank in Trondheim. The goblins had little to say about anything, but indicated that they were looking, both for a money trail and at the specifics of Nurmengard where they could find them.

Eventually, however, summer came to and end—at least for Luna and Bisera. They were packed off to Durmstrang for the school year, equipped with several versions of blood-bonded portkeys back to Skyrim. They even promised to keep an eye out on each other.

The next few months were punctuated by various events. Lily was getting larger by the day and was joyous over the life growing inside her, even as she became increasingly cranky and snappish. Gellert was having fun by finally going after the military installations. His people were everywhere
according to the reports, either co-opting muggle missiles to bomb settlements, or rendering those same missiles inoperable or vanished, such as in the case of nuclear weaponry.

Gellert’s people were also reportedly vanishing the remains of those same bombings, trying to eradicate the trappings of muggle society. He seemed to be leaving villages and small towns alone, but anything larger, or with a high population density, he was targeting. Truly, Harry wondered just how the reporters were managing to get information like that, but chalked it up to creative use of disillusionment, invisibility cloaks, or possibly animagus forms.

The greenhouse and the animals at Skyrim were doing well, and Harry and the others often went on hunting trips to try to whittle down the draugr population preying on the muggles. How Grindelwald was managing to find so many of them—? ‘Or,’ he thought, not for the first time, ‘should we be asking, how is he creating them?’ There were certainly enough mostly-whole muggle corpses around to be used as disposable soldiers and terror weapons.

Luna and Bisera arrived back for the Yule holiday and preparations geared up for the usual festivities, despite the sheer number of people dying around the world. It was not long after that that Serana reappeared, on the twenty-fourth. The adults were all moving to be seated at the dining table—as it was big enough to hold everyone for her report—when the sound of malicious laughter rang out, filling the room and thickening the air.

“No!” Serana cried desperately, her gaze darting around. “No! It’s his summoning day! No! It was never offered! You can’t do this!”

He would have asked, but—Harry found himself being ripped away. It felt like his skin was being clawed off, his insides shredded, his eyes boiled until they burst. And when he arrived—well, Viktor was also present, there in that bleak, blue-tinted, ruinous place with dead trees and architecture that reminded him strongly of the Daedric gear Valdis had stored away. What happened next was not something he ever wanted to remember. He retreated into his mind as best he could as his body was ravaged and violated, and to block out the frantic cries of his husband. When he came back to himself again it was dark. Someone was nearby and he couldn’t stop himself from flinching away.

“Oh, Harry.” It was Serana. Her voice was quiet; she sounded heartbroken. “I’m so sorry.”

It was dark, and yet he could see her clearly. How? “Who—?”

“Molag Bal,” she said.

That was all she needed to say, really. “Does that mean—I—?”

“Yes. I’m afraid so. Viktor, too. You—you won’t dream, Harry. We don’t dream.”

He laughed, and the sound of it to his own ears was high and thin and brittle. “Why!?” he shouted.

Serana stiffened for a moment. She sighed and said, “Because of me. He told me—none of the others heard it—that it was because of me. Because I’d hung around all of you for so long. He probably would have done the same to Valdis had she lived. I’m one of his ‘special ones’ and he thought that deserved some . . . meddling.”

“And the others?” he asked, his voice bleak and wintry. “Down the road? Will my mother be hauled off? Someone else?”

“I don’t think so,” she said slowly. “I think . . . Akatosh got involved.”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then pushed himself up into a seated position.
“He couldn’t . . . entirely undo what happened,” she said, “but you’re not quite like I am. For one thing, your eyes are still green, but—”

He might no longer be able to dream, to have nightmares, but he would never, ever forget, not with the effects Occlumency training had when mastered. He suffered a full body shudder before his mind shied away from his ordeal. “Where is Viktor?”

“Here, in the same room. Different bed. I expect he’ll wake up soon.”

He had never tried locking any memories away. Tom might know best how to handle what he had not been able to retreat from. If nothing else, Occlumency was right at that moment helping him to flatten his emotions, squash them down so he did not have to feel the fear, anger, and despair over what he could not forget. Partial denial sounded really good just then. “Still green, huh?”

“Yes. But the pupils look slitted now, which is odd.” Serana seemed to understand that he was shying away from certain things and her tone had become less sorrowful. “Maybe it’s the Dragonborn thing.”

He could not recall Paarthurnax having eyes like that, but there was a metallic sheen to them which made seeing the details problematical in the first place. “What about the other form?”

“Hm. I have no idea,” she said thoughtfully. “I can only hope it’s not like mine. It is pretty damn ugly, after all.”

Valdis had not been very complimentary while describing when Harkon had changed forms in front of her. The flying part would be nice, though. He became aware that he could hear something, a thumping, and realized he was hearing not only his own heartbeat, but those of Serana and Viktor. He could also discern their scents.

“As far as powers go, though, those take a long time to develop, so I wouldn’t concern yourself with anything of that nature.”

“And is there a cure?” he asked, though he figured he already knew the answer to that.

“If there is, I don’t know it. Or rather, I once knew of someone who knew how to cure vampires back on Nirn, but he’s long since dead, and I’m not sure it would have worked on one of us anyway.”

And if Akatosh had gotten involved, to mitigate some of the effects of the transformation to Vampire Lord, but had not removed it, well. That said something. Being a vampire was not the upsetting aspect, it was—‘Don’t think about that, Harry,’ he admonished himself sternly. “Is there even a point in transforming?” he asked, vaguely aware that Viktor’s heartbeat was speeding up, as was his rate of breathing.

Serana snickered. “Sure, if you want to be able to cross water without swimming. But there’s a water-walking spell for that. Even an enchantment. The wings weren’t meant for flying, just hovering and gliding. You’re a lot stronger, faster, and can take a lot more damage, but if you’re any good at fighting in the first place, no, not really.”

“What about feeding?”

“I can go for several days without needing blood, but it’s best to feed daily,” she advised. “I always take the time to make up blood potions—I’ll show you how—so that I have food wherever I am. Regular food tastes nice and all, but it doesn’t do much in terms of that hunger. You can feed from animals, but it doesn’t taste as nice. The nutritional value is almost the same though. Blood is blood,
for the most part. Would you like to try a blood potion?"

As soon as she said it he could feel the hunger lurking in the back of his mind. “Can they be made
from donated blood? And yes, please.”

Serana moved slowly when she reached into a pack at her feet to retrieve an oddly-shaped bottle; it
looked about the same volume of a muggle can of soda. She moved just as slowly offering it to him.
Once he took it she said, “Yes, actually. There’s no reason why you can’t get donations and make
the potions that way.”

He pulled the cork out and sniffed. It smelled like blood, yet not. It still had that coppery tang to it, but—something about it was different. A change in perspective, perhaps? Or other ingredients
necessary to make the potion and not have the blood go bad? He took a cautious sip and hummed as
it rolled around on his tongue. It was very nearly the most delicious thing he had ever tasted. He
swallowed it and had more, until the bottle was drained. He set it aside on the table, along with the
cork.

“We don’t dream?” he asked, and realized his voice had cracked.

Serana made an abortive gesture toward him, then shook her head. “No dreams. You’ll want to be
careful of healing spells. But Necromantic Healing will more than suffice.”

He nodded and glanced at the pack. “Could I have another?”

As he was drinking that one he was grateful Serana had not asked a stupid question such as, “Are
you all right?” It did make him wonder just how badly off he had been once returned to Skyrim, and
what they had gone through—“My mother?” he asked quickly. “Is she—?”

“Ah.” Serana nodded. “You have a sister now. Clover. She’s in fine health, and your mother is also
fine. She was pretty close to delivering anyway, as you know.”

He relaxed and nodded. “Is it—when is it?”

“The first. You were . . . gone for a while.”

Flames burst into being and Harry flinched before whipping his head around to stare at his husband.
Viktor had ignited a Flame Cloak around himself on waking. “Viktor,” he called softly. “We’re
home.”

Viktor sat up abruptly and looked toward him, his eyes wide and staring.

“We’re home,” he repeated. “Serana has been explaining some—” He broke off when Viktor slid off
the bed and stood up, then immediately moved over to get into the same bed he was in. He flinched
again, but Viktor paid that no mind.

The next thing he knew he was being planted between his husband’s legs and held closely. He could
feel fine tremors being transmitted from Viktor’s hands to him through the thin shirt he was dressed
in. The Flame Cloak felt kind of nice, actually, even if it was playing havoc with his vision. He
offered the bottle to him, saying, “You hungry?”

Viktor apparently had no intention of letting him go anytime soon, so Harry continued to sip. “So,
um, what day was she born, then?”

“The twenty-fifth,” she said wryly.
“A lifetime of not getting two sets of presents, then,” he said with a sigh. The more he sat there wrapped in Viktor’s arms the more he relaxed. They were actually in their room, he realized; it was just that a second bed had been added. “Ah...” He glanced at the bottle in his hand. “Can you... go let everyone know we’re awake? But no visitors. Not yet. Viktor can send a patronus or I can use my bracelet. Uh...” He looked around, wondering where all his gear was.

“Everything was returned,” she assured him. “It’s all in here, in your room. I’ll leave the pack. It’s got a number of blood potions in it. And I’ll let them know.”

“Thank you,” he said softly. “For being here when we woke up.”

She gave him a sad smile, nodded, and slowly departed.

As soon as he heard the door to the main hall close he set the potion aside and burst into desperate, harsh, gut-wrenching sobs, knowing the wards would keep the sound from anyone outside the suite.

After his breakdown—and Viktor had joined him in it—they had drifted off to sleep, worn out by the emotional storm. On waking up, however, he only just barely prevented himself from a full-on attack against the person binding him.

Viktor was appreciative of the fact that Harry had not nailed him in the face with fire. If nothing else, Viktor’s insistence on keeping hold of him was going to break him of his unthinking fight-or-flight reaction. He also got his husband to finally drink one of the blood potions.

“This is quite good,” Viktor said after taking a sip, then he drained the bottle and reached for another.

Harry smiled faintly and looked down at his bracelet. After waking up they had showered—a bit warily—and gotten dressed properly. None of it had been of any use against a Daedric Lord, but it still made him feel safer. A message had come in from Tom: Status? “Tom wants to know how we’re doing.”

Viktor laughed. It was not as crazed as Harry’s had been, but it still wasn’t pleasant.

He sent back: Still alive. No visitors yet. “Your eyes are still black,” he ventured, having noticed that Viktor, like himself, had avoided looking into the mirror.

Viktor started to say something, paused, and took another sip instead. Then he said, “I am glad for that. You like my eyes.”

“I do,” he affirmed. “How do we get past this?”

Viktor snorted. “I don’t let you go until you stop flinching away from me and until I stop wanting to break everything in sight and watch it all burn. Then we move on to being around other people. And then...” He had another sip.

He looked down. The thought of sex was just unbearable at the moment. He let out a long, shuddering sigh and nodded. “We’re going to have to get a resupply on the blood at some point.”

“True. But Serana or a house-elf can leave more just inside the front door. At least Serana knows what we went through, even if it’s been millennia for her.”

“I think that’s why she was the one waiting.”

“Yes.”
In the week that followed there were a number of additional breakdowns, stern self-lectures about how it was Viktor holding him and that he had to stop reacting so pathetically every time he was touched—he noticed that his husband was not entirely steady himself when he unthinkingly reached out to him for comfort at times—and hesitant, halting talks about what had happened. It was like readying oneself to shove an arm into a vat of acid every time.

He learned that his eyesight automatically adjusted when it got dark to have exceptional night vision, and that very bright sunlight, while not harmful (though he did not plan to test that while “starving”), was very hard on his eyes. Blood once a day was all he needed to survive, but mere survival was not attractive. His hearing was enhanced, his sense of smell, and tactile feedback.

And that Viktor’s stubborn perseverance was desensitizing him. It had the effect of slightly dulling the memory simply by virtue of repeatedly prodding one of its triggers. He assumed without asking that Viktor’s tactics were having the same effect on him, just from the opposite side of the equation.

The girls had returned to Durmstrang by the time they came out; it was simply easier that way. Luna would most likely have refrained from crowding them, but he wasn’t too sure about Bisera. So he and Viktor emerged from their suite one morning for breakfast, arriving at the table first, and sitting at one end together where Lily usually sat.

The house-elves had obviously learned from Serana how to make blood potions as some appeared on the table as soon as they sat down. In addition to those was a more normal breakfast, and Harry amused himself with seeing how things differed from before in terms of taste. He could hear and tracked the sound of Tom coming down the hallway and wandering in, and kept an eye on the man as he noticed them, paused, then slowly moved to sit down in the seat to Harry’s left. “Morning,” he said quietly. Viktor simply nodded.

“Morning,” Tom said, also leaving off the “good” part. “You’ll be interested to know that we have received a report from Merry Olde England from Lucius via one of his contacts. It seems that Edward has been inflicted with some sort of cursed magical item.”

His brow arched up as he piled some eggs onto a piece of buttered toast.

“It’s a fork. Apparently, he cannot set it down. It has drained and stunted his magic, so he’s unable to cast anything.”

Harry absorbed that, taking a bite of his food, then started snickering madly at the thought of his twin trying to do anything while having a fork stuck to his hand. Dressing and undressing, relieving himself, showering. One wrong move in an expression of exasperation and he could put an eye out.

“Serana went off into gales of laughter when she heard,” Tom continued. “Apparently, it bears a striking similarity to an artifact of Lord Sheogorath, and may in fact be it. The Fork of Horripilation, or ‘Forky’. It was once used by a champion to kill a large creature called a netch in order to earn Sheogorath’s favor.”

‘I wonder if Yuki had something to do with this,’ he wondered, though it was a long shot of an idea. It had been months since the incident at the British Ministry, after all.

Harry had finished up his food and was savoring a bottle of blood when Serana wandered in and took a seat next to Tom. She reached out for the blood potion that appeared in response and uncorked it, humming happily after she had a swig.

“So,” he said, “the Fork of Horripilation?”
She laughed and nodded. “It’s a two-pronged metal fork with a wooden handle. Sheogorath keeps ‘misplacing’ the thing or forcing people to complete quests using only that as a weapon. Every time I fantasize about one of my fellow Nords being forced to use it I laugh myself silly.”

“Does that mean Edward will have to go questing?” ‘With complete incompetence,’ he added privately. So far as he knew his twin had never learned anything about non-magical fighting.

“Depends on who inflicted him with it,” she replied. “If it was Sheogorath, I’d assume so. But Mephala likes to meddle in mortal affairs. Edward is thought to be the Boy-Who-Lived, so messing up his day...”

Viktor snorted softly. “He could do with some humbling. They can just wrap him in cotton wool and pack him away for the time being. That’s assuming he was of any use in the first place.”

“Oh, word has filtered in that Edward has been joining the battle against the draugr,” Tom said, “and being quite the hero. At least, that’s what people have been assuming he is. The attacks have been just as prevalent in the UK as anywhere else. Most of London is gone. Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Cardiff... It’s all being reclaimed to nature and placed behind wards to keep the muggles away.”

“What did the vam—the vampire clans have to say?” He closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head.

“Well,” Serana said, “plenty of them have been around for a long time, so they know things normal humans don’t. One clan in particular claims that Grindelwald built Nurmengard atop a very old, extensive ruin. From the descriptions it sounds a lot like a place such as Saarthal, which was an ancient Atmoran city. Even when Valdis and I went through there it was packed with draugr. I’d liken it to one of the Ayleid ruins, but they were one of the elven races, and draugr are a Nord thing.”

“So it’s possible he learned how to create them because of that?” Viktor asked.

She hummed. “I don’t see why not. It would depend on the ruin. If it had been a Dragon Priest’s domain there may well have been writings on the subject. Or if there was still a Dragon Priest hidden down there, waiting, it’s possible he could have managed to immobilize it and read its mind? I don’t know. They would’ve had to have known the process. I wouldn’t doubt there are other ruins scattered around that he could have plundered for Deathlords and the like. Most of the ones we’ve seen are all the baser types, simply able to wave a weapon around, so it would make sense that he’s conscripting the muggles into his army.”

Iskra and the remainder of the Krums arrived at that point, and Iskra rushed forward before stopping dead. She let out a wavering sigh and slowly walked over to take a seat next to Viktor, the others slotting into seats to her right.

“Hello,” Viktor said, sending a nod their way. “We are as well as can be expected.” His tone was repressive.

Iskra’s eyes welled up with tears she did not shed. Plates of food appeared for the newcomers so they turned their immediate attention to that.

“And he’s probably—maybe—taught that process to his generals?” Harry asked, just to get the conversation going again and the focus off the two of them specifically.

Tom looked thoughtful. “I think he would have had to. There are too many draugr in too many countries. Even if the ruin was a city of immense size, there would still be a finite limit to space.”

“All right,” Viktor said. “So in addition to Gellert himself, we have to track down his people. Unlike
your Death Eaters, who mostly melted back into society, I’m having trouble believing Grindelwald’s
minions would let the momentum stop even if Gellert were to be captured and dealt with.”

“More than likely,” Serana said. “I’m still waiting on information, though, about Nurmengard in
more detail.”

“Any additional information about Britain while we were—”

“...Rufus Scrimgeour has taken over as minister,” Tom said. “He’s mostly talk, propaganda, and
looking good.”

“But not doing anything,” Harry said.

“Essentially. He’s been holding Edward up as a symbol.”

Viktor snorted again. “Not much use right now, is he.”

‘The anger and bitterness will dull,’ he told himself. ‘Honestly, I think he’s done me more good than
I him.’ “Can we go on a hunting trip?” he said suddenly.

Tom blinked at him. “I don’t see why not.”

“Good.”
They ended up in Oslo, which still had a fair amount of muggles roaming around. There was little point in bothering with Trondheim any longer due to the steady attacks, ever increasing wards, and removal of rubble and destroyed buildings. Harry was gratified to see Viktor taking out everything he felt on the draugr, finally having an outlet for all the rage he just knew his husband had penned up inside him.

He was doing some of the same himself, almost gleefully setting things on fire. He even caught himself laughing at one point, which caused Draco to give him a weird look. He found it vastly entertaining to use Chain Lightning and watch the electricity arc from one draugr to another, to see them all shake. By the time they were worn out Viktor was in a much better mood, which made Harry happy. It had been a good idea.

That night he slowly leaned in and kissed his husband for the first time in a while.

“I don’t think we should go anywhere near Hircine,” he said after they showered.

Viktor shook his head. “Hircine might not be evil, per se, but I’d just as soon stay away. I don’t want to be thrown into a hunt where I might be the prey, just for the chance at better dealings with werewolves.”

Harry finally got to meet his sister. His mother brought a bassinet down to dinner that evening, one with a sound-muting charm on it so conversation wouldn’t disturb her, but so that Lily could spend time with everyone. Harry thought she looked really tired. His sister looked cute enough, but then, she was his sister. He was supposed to think that. Her eyes were still “baby blue” and he wondered when they would change, and to what colour.

“It’s really kind of weird having a sister eighteen years younger than I am,” he murmured, then carefully gave his mother a hug.

She settled her arms around him loosely, then sat back and smiled at him. “But I had so much fun making her!” For just a split second her expression twisted in remorse at her unthinking jest, but then she pasted a smile on her face.

He crouched down next to her chair so he could whisper. “Don’t—don’t change your behavior too much, okay? Be you. It upsets me when people walk on eggshells. I mean, I’d rather you didn’t ask about it, but—”

“Oh, I’m just going to pretend I didn’t see it if you act a bit odd, until I no longer have to not see it anymore.”

“Or something like that. We’ll get beyond it. Eventually.” He could hear Viktor quietly conversing with Pavel in the background. “How are you holding up?” he asked, nodding toward Clover.
“She’s exhausting, but less so than the last time. I mean, I had two of you to take care of. Even with house-elves it’s a lot of work. Severus is torn between his base dislike of children and bemusement over this little creature he helped make.”

Harry glanced over at his step-father to see the same exhaustion, but also the secretly fond looks he cast at Clover. Maybe he would tease the man later on. They would hopefully get back to working on his Potions Mastery, after all. Well—he stood up and moved around to Severus’s side so he could ask, “Ah, I know you’re probably really busy of late, but, is there some kind of schedule I can be following that won’t always need your presence? I’ve already lost a couple of weeks on my mastery work.”

While Severus was thinking he glanced over at Viktor again, wondering if he would be all right going back to quidditch practices. If anything, the timing of their abduction and initial recovery coincided with the holiday, so it wasn’t as though any absence had to be explained. But then, a seeker’s job wasn’t to wave a beater’s bat around and try to knock other people out of the sky. Perhaps flying in and of itself would give Viktor some sense of release, or freedom, from events.

“Yes,” Severus eventually said, “but I would feel better if you were to have someone with you. Even Draco would do. You know how volatile some potions can be.”

He nodded. “I can do that. Just get me something. I need a little extra stability.”

Severus’s countenance darkened for a moment. “I will.”

Life went on. Harry got a lot less twitchy and angry, Viktor became a lot less bitter and angry, and they continued to go out on hunting trips to keep down the draugr population, as well as remove any uppity dragons. If they weren’t willing to listen to Paarthurnax, well, so be it. Harry had also taken to listening to those music spheres Yuki had gifted him, though he refrained from singing unless he was alone, to spare the ears of others.

They were on another hunting trip in Oslo, mainly because that city hadn’t been bombed into nothingness yet and still had a number of muggles hiding out in it. In some countries there were muggle-haters joining in on the “fun” of killing off the muggles, but that did not seem to be happening in Norway, much to Harry’s relief. Perhaps it was because Norway was a formerly neutral country (even though it had only really lasted about thirty-five years that century) and right next to Sweden, which still was. That sort of thing might have filtered down to the magical population in some way.

Tom, Severus, and Barty were along—Severus had desperately needed a break and Lily hadn’t minded, so he was dragged along. They had finally gotten word about the exact location of Nurmengard and the surrounding territory, and were all out to bleed off the frustration of arguing back and forth over how to plan an invasion of the place.

“You know the drill, people,” Harry said, using Aura Whisper to get an idea of what was around. The bracelets, while very helpful, did not have the same range his Shout did, so he still used it every so often. Even his vampiric version of revealing auras had more range. “South, indeterminates, with hostiles closing in from the west.”

Tom nodded and gestured, so off they went, pausing to scavenge anything of use along the way. Harry had his usual weapons in place, and even Viktor had a set of daggers strapped to his thighs, Harry having managed to create some very credible ones fashioned from dragon bones and enchanted with Shock and Paralyze.

He sighed on getting close enough to the confrontation. Half the muggles were dead and the other
half were in the process of dying. Draugr were all over the place, though surprisingly there was a 
dead giant present. “Do you think the muggles have guns?” he whispered.

“I don’t hear anything like that,” Viktor said, sweeping his gaze around the area. “Besides, where could they possibly still be getting ammunition? Unless they’re making it themselves. There are certainly enough hunters in this country.”

Tom said, “Less talk, more action.”

“Right.” Harry swung his bow around and drew an arrow, and set to work. The giant was pressed 
into service once it became clear that, once again, they were not going to be able to save anyone. He 
also got to absorb two more dragon souls. He had just finished absorbing the second one when 
Severus sucked in a sharp breath and caused Harry to whip around to see what was wrong.

Heading toward their group was Albus Dumbledore, leading a bunch of his people.

“For the love of Mara,” he muttered. “What are they doing here?” He turned away again and went 
back to shooting draugr, seriously unhappy that Dumbledore had probably witnessed him absorbing 
that soul and knew there was something very special about him.

Dumbledore and his people apparently did not have any ethical issues with “killing” the undead and 
they simply joined in. As soon as the current batch was wiped out Harry moved behind Viktor and 
out of the line of sight so he could use Aura Whisper again, then said softly in Japanese, 「East of 
here. Hostiles only right now. Probably roaming for a target.」

Tom cast a covert look at Dumbledore’s group, then nodded, so Harry led the way. Naturally, the 
Britons followed them. A swift look over his shoulder revealed that Dumbledore looked like he was 
having a grand time, which was odd considering he had heart problems. James was with him, which 
made Harry’s stomach clench with unease, along with Sirius, Remus, and some woman with neon- 
bright hair he had never seen before.

“It’s a lovely day, isn’t it?” Dumbledore said conversationally.

Harry rolled his eyes up to the sky in a silent plea and kept going, feeling comforted by the feeling of 
Viktor’s hand at his waist. He was rather surprised that the old man wasn’t questioning the former 
Death Eater in their midst. They arrived at the next batch and started in again.

“I was hoping,” Dumbledore said during a brief lull, “that we could speak about combining forces.”

「Fucking hell,」 he complained.

「Just ignore him,」 Viktor said, downing yet another draugr.

He could hear James, off to the side, wondering out loud why his not-squib son was using a bow, of 
all things, instead of magic.

「Can I accidentally-on-purpose shoot him?」 he asked hopefully.

「No,」 Tom said curtly, then looked sharply toward a familiar sound.

Harry groaned. 「Two giants? . . .One dragon. Just great. I wouldn’t care if these idiots weren’t 
along for the ride.」

「Complaining won’t solve the issue,」 Severus said. 「Worry about them later. Or not at all, if we 
simply portkey out once this batch is handled.」
One giant was killed just as the dragon crashed down, unable to fly any longer. Harry pressed the giant into service; after all, the Britons had already seen him do weird things.

“What the hell language is that, anyway?” he heard Sirius say.

“Ah, Japanese,” Remus replied, taking out a draugr that got too close.

Harry had put an arrow right through the dragon’s eye, killing it, when disaster struck. The beast’s soul started to stream toward him, and then it all went black after an agonizing pain to the back of his head.

Harry kept his eyes closed when he woke, already aware that he had been stripped of his gear and weapons, even his rings. He listened carefully and heard three men nearby, speaking quietly, saying such awful things about what they planned to do with him. They were speaking in German. He slit his eyes open just enough to take in what was around him.

He was in a cell. Bare stone walls, a rough cot, and a door with a grate at about head height so that his jailers could see in, but only if they were standing right there. A twist of his vision showed that they were nowhere near the door, and one of them was seated. Two of them moved away, to go prepare for Harry’s “interrogation”.

‘More like torture,’ he thought. ‘So, first thing, get out of this cell. Second, retrieve my gear.’ He slid off the cot soundlessly and cast invisibility, then ghosted over to the door. He paused to do another check to see if anyone else was nearby or moving in his direction, then aimed a paralyzation spell through the grate. The guard stiffened up and slid sideways off his chair, hitting the stone floor with a muted thud.

Harry backed up, considered for a moment, then Shouted, “Bex!” The cell door popped open with ease, causing him to smile faintly. The unfortunate guard had his mind plundered before being drained. He had, after all, been getting a decent workout before being kidnapped, and was hungry. All his things were being kept in a lockbox at the guard station. Apparently they planned to sort through everything later, preferably after they had gotten him to talk. He had only just finished getting dressed and got everything back into place when the auras of the two from before showed up again, moving toward him.

The dead guard was tossed into the cell and the door closed, and Harry slipped into the shadows, and waited, and then threw out a mass paralyzation spell. The quieter he was, the better. He read their minds, too, then dragged them into the cell and slit their throats. With no one else shown to be coming he finally reached for his bracelet to trace a message out to Tom: Nurmengard. Status good. Three dead.

He realized he was feeling a little off when he started giggling quietly. ‘I think those might have been the first proper humans I’ve ever killed,’ he thought. ‘Well, aside from Miraak.’ He flipped his chain-mail Chameleon bracelet over and walked off, looking for more members of Gellert’s forces to kill, but had to stop and check his message bracelet when it twitched and alerted him to a response. He ran his finger over the metal, then let out a quiet huff of frustration and flipped his chain-mail bracelet over, unable to read the message clearly just by feel.

Tom sent: Situation?

He cleared it and sent back: Escaped cell. Killing minions. He flipped his chain-mail bracelet back over and skulked off. As long as he was there he might well wipe out anyone he could find. And, perhaps, figure out what the deal was with the ruin the place was built on top of. He could only imagine the arguments that were going on back wherever Tom was—Skyrim, probably, because he
could not see them all standing around with Dumbledore’s idiots watching on—about how to respond.

He had killed several more of Gellert’s men—he always checked their minds first, just in case—before his bracelet twitched again.

Tom: Portkey out?

Harry: Wards.

Tom: We’re coming.

He bit his lip and looked around, then sent: Will keep an eye out.

Because of that he stayed visible, but kept to the shadows. A glance out one of the windows showed that he was several floors up, so he moved methodically through each level and cleared them out, also stowing away anything of interest. He was on the first floor and had just taken out two more minions when a wavering blue blob showed up in his peripheral vision. He checked with Aura Sight and saw three gold life-forms moving around on the floor below him. He sent: First floor. Clearing it out.

He was shortly joined by Tom, Viktor, and Serana. Viktor immediately rushed to him and pulled him into a hug, then started checking him over.

“I’m fine. Between the enchantments and vampiric healing, whatever they did is . . .”

“They bludgeoned you,” Viktor whispered. “I turned when the dragon died, to help as I always do, and saw it happen. They had crept in behind us all in the confusion. Portkeyed you away before any of us could stop it.”

“We wouldn’t have been so damn distracted if Dumbledore hadn’t been there,” he snarled. “I’ve already killed everyone I could find on the floors above,” he said more normally. “I checked them all first, though. Haven’t run across any other prisoners.”

Tom nodded. “Your giant went berserk when you were taken. It started clubbing anything that moved. We tried to get a portkey trace, but so much magic had been used already it was useless, so we left.”

Viktor produced his bow and handed it over. Harry took it and put it away. “I’m feeling a little giddy, so if I start giggling again, pay it no mind.”

Viktor frowned, but Serana just looked knowing.

“So, since we’re here, want to find out about that ruin?” he asked.

Serana looked at Tom and shrugged, a faint smirk on her lips. Viktor growled; that was no surprise. Tom nodded. “We’re here. We wanted to do this anyway. This just wasn’t the way—let’s go. We’ll take out everyone here, find the access point. . . .”

“Okay,” Serana said briskly. “Let’s get to it.”

Serana and Tom made up one team, Harry and Viktor the other. The fortress went down a good ten levels underground and they systematically wiped out every one of Gellert’s minions who had the misfortune to be there, and liberated anything of value or possible importance. Eventually they came to a very odd room on the lowest level.
Serana just nodded and pointed at how the walls were carved. “That’s Nordic, all right. Very typical. And that, my friends, is a claw key door.”

Harry eyed her for a moment, then pulled out a stylized talon. “Like this, you mean?”

“Yes. Was that the only one you found?”

He nodded.

“Perfect. Look on the underside. It should have symbols that’ll match up to those rings on the door.”

Sure enough, the claw had three small discs with symbols on the “palm” of the thing. “Bear, owl, dragon?”

Serana nodded and moved forward, then started forcing the rings to spin, one by one, then held her hand out. Harry gave her the claw and she slotted the talons into place, pushed, turned, and then let it rotate back before removing it from the door. The whole thing began to rumble and slowly slide down. “Nords were pretty clever in making these things such that they lasted millennia, but they weren’t exactly. . . .”

“Bright?” he suggested. “I mean, I just grabbed it because it looked interesting. But if I’d stopped to examine it more closely. . . .”

“Yeah. Exactly.” She handed the claw back. “You’d be surprised, though, just how many Nords of Valdis’s time were too dull to figure that much out, even having a claw and a door right in front of them.”

“Well, I probably would have remembered myself given a little time. Valdis certainly mentioned more than a few of these,” he said, feeling a bit stupid for not having made the connection before Serana had pointed it out.

“We have to decide what to do, here,” she said, keeping an eye on the then open door. “Do we investigate deeper, or. . . .?”

He looked at Tom, who was eyeing the access point thoughtfully. “The most I expect to find is more draugr, to be honest. However, if we plan to destroy any possibility of Grindelwald ever accessing the place again, we should have at least some idea how deep the rabbit hole goes so we’d have a better idea of how to approach and resolve the issue.”

Harry used Aura Whisper and did a slow circuit. No one was approaching from the fortress, which meant Gellert was elsewhere still. There were definitely hostiles inside the ruin, though. “Well, there’s something in there, and on more than one level.”

Tom finally nodded, as if to himself. “We make a quick foray inside. We have no idea when Grindelwald will return and realize his people are all dead. We can’t necessarily afford to stay here much longer.”

With that they pressed on inside, slaying draugr and poking around. According to Serana it was nothing special, though there was no telling just how deep the place went. Three levels down Tom called for them to halt. Once there he said, “I’m not willing to risk going deeper. Harry, do a check for warm bodies while I consider this.”

He nodded and used Aura Whisper again. There was the barest hint of some kind of life in the distance, but it was so faint he could not tell what it might be. When he reported that Tom nodded and led them on a retreat. When they got to the room with the stairs leading to the door level he
stopped and began etching runes into the floor. “Cover the room in this rune sequence, quickly. Walls, floor, ceiling. I’ll power it up once that’s done.”

Harry took a good look and started working. For some reason Tom wanted to blanket the room with protection, but for what purpose he could not divine. With three of them at it the work went quickly. Tom ushered them up onto the stairs and used his rings to push magic into them and one by one they glowed with power.

Before they retreated again he moved to the door opposite and conjured a whole lot of lava. Harry was more than a little in awe of just how powerful Tom was, and for all he knew the man was translocating the stuff straight from a volcano. When Viktor saw what he was doing he joined in, until Tom signaled that it was enough.

They retreated up to the door level and, after Tom and Viktor had a quick whisper, the two began conjuring some kind of oil, using gusts of air to spread it out to coat everything. They kept doing that all the way out, Harry keeping watch, until they were back on the other side of the claw door. Tom waved them back, aimed his wand through the door, and sent Gubraithian Fire at the oil.

“Time to go,” Tom said. “Use your bracelets. I’ll lead, you follow my heartbeat.”

And off they went.

Back at Skyrim Lily burst into tears on seeing him. She rushed over and engulfed him in a hug, sobbing all over him.

A week later word filtered in that Gellert was pissed. And for some reason he was taking it out on Britain. Even the smaller muggle settlements were going up in firestorms.

“Maybe he figured out where I originated from?” Harry mused.

“It’s possible,” Lily said. “I mean, someone on his side obviously caught you in action, knew you were a threat. So long as he knew what you looked like he could probably figure it out if he’d seen any pictures of James and Edward.”

“So he may think I retreated back to our beloved homeland after being kidnapped and escaping?” he asked skeptically.

“I don’t know, honey, but it’s a possibility. I mean, Dumbledore and James were there. That may be exactly what he thinks.”

“It’s not outside reason,” Severus said.

“So basically, if we plan to go after him, we either wait until he’s somewhere else, or just go there and hope to stumble over a fight he’s participating in.”

“Essentially.” Tom shrugged.

“We still have no real idea of why I’m the one, but I am feeling more than a little peeved at being kidnapped by the guy’s flunkies. True, I took next to no real damage and did my own bit to put a serious dent in his operation, but I really feel like I ought to do something about him, at some point. Then maybe some bright soul can figure out how to trace where his minions are, the ones creating all these damn draugr, and take them out, too.”

Lily sighed. “I kept hoping a day like that would never come. You know, that he’d suffer an inconvenient accident, choke on a chicken bone, something along those lines.”
In the end, four of them temporarily moved to the house in Hogsmeade, a good a place as any to scout out the situation. And if Grindelwald believed that Harry had retreated to the auspices of Albus Dumbledore, well, then they’d be reasonably close by should the man decide to attack Hogwarts.

The day finally arrived that Grindelwald marched his forces on the school, sending wave after wave of draugr on ahead of him to announce the start of that day’s entertainment. Harry, Viktor, Tom, and Serana all made sure they were geared up and slipped in behind Gellert’s forces.

“You dare!” the man roared. He sounded a bit upset that they had wiped out a number of the draugr accompanying him as a guard.

“I could have sneaked up behind you and kidnapped you,” Harry called to him. “You know, like you did to me?”

Gellert cackled. “And it was so easy, too!”

Harry rolled his eyes.

“You have no idea what you’re dealing with, boy! I have more power than you can imagine!” he crowed.

Tom muttered something under his breath in disgust, even too low for Harry to make out, and shook his head slightly.

“Is this the part where the bad guy goes off on a Soliloquy of Evil before launching into the big battle?” Harry said quietly.

Tom surreptitiously cast a few detection wards around them, to alert them should anyone attempt to sneak up from behind. Even though the vampires of the party would hear something approaching, once the fighting started for real, they wouldn’t have that luxury any longer.

There was a fair amount of fighting going on at the other side of the army. He had to assume that Dumbledore’s Order was involved, maybe some of the staff. After all, school was in session, so Grindelwald had to be betting that his old nemesis would come out in order to protect the students.

Or maybe he had expected that Harry would have come out.

Harry was feeling just a bit cocky, if he was honest with himself. Maybe Yuki had had more effect on him than he realized. Or, maybe, being kidnapped by Molag Bal and—yeah. And then kidnapped again. Maybe he was just cracked at that point. He waited not so patiently through Grindelwald’s grand speech—it would have been more impressive had the man actual living minions with him—and then blinked in utter shock.

“Did he just say something about a pact with Alduin?”

“Yes, yes he did,” Serana replied.

“What does that mean?” Viktor asked, then glanced back behind them briefly.

“Don’t have a clue,” she said, “but I expect it’s not the least bit good.”

“It sort of makes me wonder: did this happen when he fought Dumbledore? Did he have his Soliloquy of Evil, and did Dumbledore then have one, before they actually got around to the fighting part?”

Tom snorted in amusement.
Gellert finally shut up for a few seconds longer than normal, then yelled, “Witness my power! Tremble before me!”

Harry sighed and readied himself, then blinked again in shock when Gellert transformed into a massive dragon, at least three times the size of a normal one, and launched himself into the air. “Oh,” he said in bemusement. “I guess that’s why.”

He cracked his knuckles, got his bow ready, and tracked the dragon’s flight path. As it turned toward them and made to do a strafing run at them, he inhaled deeply and shouted, “Joor Zah Frul!”

The dragon screamed and crashed into the ground and slid, earth flying up to either side. Tom and Serana went left, Harry and Viktor went right, and all four of them began to attack. The second his throat cleared he shouted, “Krii Lun Aus!” He kept nailing the dragon with arrows between shouts while the others laid into it with whatever magic or magicka seemed best. Serana and Viktor would occasionally check the space behind them and to the sides, even with the proximity wards Tom had cast up. An actual living minion might show up and cast from a distance.

“Joor Zah Frul!—Strun Bah Qo!” He was . . . extremely surprised and puzzled as to why Gellert didn’t change back, actually. In the end it didn’t matter. Marked for Death had seriously weakened the dragon’s resilient hide, Storm Call had rain to blur its eyes and arcs of lightning to hit not only the dragon but also the draugr, and Dragonrend, of course, to keep him on the ground. Gellert’s fire breath in that form was simply fire, and that was nothing really to be alarmed about, even as a vampire, not with all those embedded enchantments.

The only thing Harry wasn’t surprised by was that when Gellert died, he merely, immediately, transformed back to himself, and he did not absorb the man’s soul. After all, he was just a human who had some “pact” with a real dragon.

Harry refrained from using Storm Call again because he could see that the Hogwarts forces had gotten a lot closer and he didn’t want to completely ruin their vision while there were still plenty of draugr to be killed. So he used his bow, Fire Breath, and Lightning Storm against them. As soon as they were down to the last few he stowed his bow against his back and he and Viktor moved closer to Tom and Serana.

The last one went down to a Shock spell sent by Serana. Dumbledore, James, and the others were standing a few hundred yards away, just stunned at the spectacle Harry had created during the fight. Harry looked at the others, saw they were ready to apparate away, and sent a cheeky wave at Dumbledore as he took Viktor’s arm and Serana took Tom’s. Then they left.

Epilogue

It was a fine day outside. It was pissing rain and thunder rumbled threateningly overhead. Lightning cracked and arced through the sky in a glorious display of nature’s fury. Harry and Viktor were taking a walk after having worn themselves out in the bedroom, knowing that the rain would be refreshing and the lightning, should it hit them, would barely tickle. And then a portal opened up right in front of them and they entered it before they could stop moving.

Some indeterminate amount of time later they reappeared in the forest. They returned to Skyrim, to a number of people who were, admittedly, feeling a bit frantic at their disappearance.

“There’s something I need to do,” Harry said, more or less ignoring all the questions.
Viktor looked at him and nodded. “There is.”

“Which is?” Tom demanded.

“There’s a little something I need to reclaim,” Harry said cheerfully.

“Is that—is that what I think it is?” Serana asked, eyes wider than normal.

“This?” Harry twirled the staff in his hand and smiled at her. “I don’t know, my dear. I’ve not bothered to read your mind.”

Serana covered her eyes with one hand and groaned.

It was then that Tom noticed neither Harry nor Viktor had markings on their hands any longer.

“What the hell happened?”

“It’s called apotheosis, Tom,” Harry said. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, we can talk more later.” He reached out to take Viktor’s arm, and the two of them disappeared into a pale purple portal.

At Hogwarts the two of them strolled on up to the gargoyle outside Dumbledore’s office suite and Harry tapped it smartly on the head with his staff. “Open up.”

The gargoyle ignored him.

Harry used the Wabbajack and it turned into a mouse, which skittered off in a squeaking panic. He sighed theatrically and entered the stairwell with his husband, and let it wind them upward. At the top he went down the short hallway and rapped several times on the large door there with the metal cap of the staff.

After a startled silence the door popped open and they heard, “Come in, please.”

He walked in and twirled the staff, then pointed with it and conjured up a wonderful little loveseat, though it was strangely higher off the ground than was usual, then the two of them took a seat and stared at the old man.

“Mr Krum? Mr Evans?”

“That would be Messrs Krum, actually. Surely you heard that we were bonded last summer,” Harry said disapprovingly. “After all, Viktor is a teensy bit famous. I heard the girls all fainted in distress when they heard the news.”

“Er. . . . Would either of you like some tea? Some nibbles?” Dumbledore offered like a good host, eyeing the grapefruit perched on Harry’s left shoulder.

Harry shook his head. “No, no, haven’t the time, I’m afraid,” he said, resting the Wabbajack against his right shoulder, more or less parallel to the floor.

“All right. May I say, you were magnificent at the battle,” Dumbledore said, somewhere between admiring and dismayed. “Was that Tom I spotted with you?”

Harry looked at Viktor for a moment, letting his brow crinkle slightly. “I’m fairly certain that was his name. But then, I know at least half a dozen people named Tom. You sort of lose track after a while. Now, to the purpose of our visit.”

“Oh?” Dumbledore peered at him intently, then winced and touched his hand to his temple.
“Oh dear, I do hope you weren’t tempted to peek. I’ve been told it’s bedlam in there!” Harry said brightly. “So many interesting events in my life, you know. Could easily drive a man insane. So. I have come to understand that one of your little people has an artifact of mine. I figured since the Big Blowout Battle at the End came up right on schedule that I would reclaim it.”

Dumbledore looked a bit discombobulated at that.

Harry was helpful and said, “Yes. An artifact. Of mine. I understand that some Edward person has it.”

“Forky?” the grapefruit said hopefully, in an adorably babyish voice.

“Yes, Stanley. I know how you miss him. Don’t fret, we’ll get him back.”

The grapefruit beamed a smile.

“Ah, I’ll just send a note asking him to come up, shall I?” Dumbledore finally said, eyeing the grapefruit warily.

“Splendid!”

Dumbledore set about writing a short note and called for a house-elf to deliver it. When he looked back up it was to see that the grapefruit was on Viktor’s shoulder and Harry was having a staring contest with Fawkes.

“I wonder how well draugr work as an alternative fuel source,” Harry mused. “I mean, they burn awfully well. Not so sure about the smell, though.”

Dumbledore coughed uncomfortably and fetched a sherbet lemon from a dish on his desk and popped it into his mouth while waiting.

Eventually Edward barreled up the stairs and said, as he entered the office, “Headmaster, did you know your gargoyle is missing?”

“Is it?”

“I know you,” Edward said somewhat accusingly. “You’re Krum. And——”

“Your long lost twin!” Harry caroled, not deviating from his staring contest. “Isn’t it wonderful? But that’s not why I’m here.” Fawkes finally blinked, then huffed, so Harry turned his gaze on his brother. “You are, however it happened to come to be, in possession of an artifact of mine. I’m sure you’d love to be rid of it.”

“Forky?” Stanley repeated, just as hopefully.

Edward looked down at his left hand and scowled. “This damn thing?” He thrust his hand out rudely.

As Harry reached out to pluck the Fork of Horripilation away the hand holding the Wabbajack twitched. Remus, who had been doing his best to sneak into the office without being noticed, transformed into a platypus.

“Oh,” Harry said sadly, “my hand must have slipped. No matter! Now see, Stanley? You can play with Forky again.” He handed it to Viktor, who tucked it away in a pocket.

“If I may ask,” Dumbledore said slowly, “what exactly is that fork?”
Harry affected to look surprised. “Why, it’s the Fork of Horripilation, of course. And see, all my life I’ve been hearing about what an erudite man you are. I’m just shocked that it’s not true. For example, have you ever heard of Quagmire, the Shivering Isles, or Evergloam?”

Dumbledore shook his head.

A strange squeaky growling sound could be heard from behind as Harry looked at Viktor in patent disbelief. “What is the world coming to these days?” he asked. To Dumbledore he said, “I’m afraid that trying to explain the fork to you would be inadvisable at this time, as you are clearly not educated enough to appreciate the answer,” then belted out, “Haskell!”

A pale purple portal appeared and from it stepped a balding, older-looking man dressed smartly in black. “You bellowed, my lord?”

“Indeed. Run back to the palace and fetch copies of the books explaining the Aedra and Daedra, and bring them here. Quickly now, or I will roast your liver and feed it to the platypus back there.”

“Yes, sir,” Haskell said boredly and portaled out again. Edward walked away, muttering about not getting the attention he deserved. Barely a few seconds later Haskell portaled back in with a stack of books in one hand.

“Excellent. Just leave them on the edge of the desk, there’s a good man.”

Haskell made a tidy pile of them and portaled out again. Harry and Viktor got up, the loveseat vanished, and Harry said, after glancing back, “The transformation should wear off soon. Nothing to worry about.”

Before they could go, however, James Potter rushed in, looking somewhere between wild and relieved.

Harry arched a brow at him. “Oh look, the sperm donor. I have something for you. A gift.” He pulled a long, intricately carved staff from nowhere and offered it to the man, who took it out of reflex. Four little creatures poofed into existence behind him.

“Ta ta!” Harry said, and the two of them portaled out. Except, they really didn’t. The manifestation that time was purely for effect.

James frowned. “I came because Edward said his brother was up here, but—what the hell are those things?”

Harry and Viktor snickered together quietly, not that they needed to. It was just more fun that way. Unless James could get some sucker to take the Staff of the Everscamp off his hands, he was stuck with four of the beasts following him everywhere for the remainder of his life—or until Harry decided to take pity on him.

Remus popped back to human form at that moment. “I feel really strange,” he said woozily.

Harry and Viktor exchanged a look, then Harry, feeling uncommonly helpful, decided to write a message on the were’s back, through his clothing.

Remus began wriggling around like he had ants in his trousers and started taking his shirt off. “Is there something wrong with my back?” he asked.

“Oh. . . .” James said less than helpfully.
Remus turned around to look at him, at which point Dumbledore said, “It reads: Should there be any unforeseen negative side effects, feel free to send an owl to the Palace, New Sheoth, Shivering Isles.”

“Wha—?”

Later on, it was found that Remus had become a wereplatypus.

Chapter End Notes

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