Realignment

by Puzzled

Summary

The year is 1943. The Chamber lies unopened and Grindelwald roams unchecked. Neither Tom Riddle nor Albus Dumbledore is satisfied with the situation. Luckily when Hogwarts is attacked they’ll both have other things to worry about.
Tom didn’t hear the first explosion.

It might have been his time in the muggle world each summer, after his second year when the airplanes were dueling in the skies sleeping through explosions had been required at Wool’s. It had been harder for him, Tom had always been a light sleeper. At first the other children had attacked him in his sleep and then later, well they knew that they only stood a chance while he slept. He was nothing if not adaptable though, the sounds of violence soon became another obstacle he conquered.

He wasn’t the only one in the room though, old Slughorn was holding court and there was the usual rabble, children whose fathers and family held power and then the others, those who Slughorn saw potential in. Much to Tom’s irritation he was firmly in the second group. He had hints, his talents, that suggested he was greater and one day people would recognize this year as the one where he began his rise.

Tom’s thoughts were interrupted by some pale second year standing. The boy was in the yellow and black of the badgers, a quick scan revealed nothing to distinguish him from the faceless masses of that house but Tom did respect some of their virtues. He’d memorize his name and face anyways, Slughorn had shown an eye for talent when he found Tom and it would be foolish to disregard his expertise without more information.

The pale boy, reddening as the attention of the school’s ‘best students’ turned to him, stammered something.

“Speak up Mr. McPhail,” Slughorn’s voice carried throughout the dungeon. “Would your Grandfather have been Minister if no one could hear him?”

McPhail nodded rapidly, took a breath, “I said did any of you-”

The castle shook, dust fell from between the stones in the ceiling and the decanter of wine balanced on Slughorn’s desk fell and shattered. He finished in a softer voice that the sudden silence of the classroom left plainly audible.

“Hear that?”

Slughorn was already moving, leaving the boy behind as he whipped his wand in a complex pattern, launching a blue wisp that sped out the door and up the hall. “Alright all of you, follow me!” He waved the group forward, towards the hall when the castle rocked again. “Don’t dawdle you lot! Run!” He suited actions to words, yanking the laggards who’d chosen to gather their bags to the door with a single wide sweep of his wand and a few stinging hexes, ushering them out and checking no one had been left behind.

Tom was with the mass of students, normally he could barely tolerate being anywhere but at the edge of a crowd but he had an image, and being slow in a crisis or cowardly fleeing first was not it. Behind his calm facade he was worried though. Slughorn was not a feeble wizard, for all of his sycophantism, and if he was worried a fifth year, even one as talented as Tom, should be cautious.

As they streamed out of the dungeons more and more joined them, the professors and prefects were leading gaggles of nervous children to the Great Hall as the great castle continued to be hammered. The potions master gave a quick look over the students he’d escorted before turning sharply. Tom seized his shoulder before he could go.
“Professor, what’s happening?”

Slughorn ripped himself free, his mouth a sharp line utterly foreign to the portly man’s face. “The castle is under attack Mr. Riddle. Stay in the Hall and don’t forget your duties as a prefect, keep the younger children in line and safe.” With that he strode off, moving with an uncommon quickness to the doors where the other professors, save the fool Kettleburn and Dumbledore, were marshalled. They huddled and conferred, with Dippet moving his arms in short stabbing gestures. After a moment all but Merrythought left the hall, presumably headed for the grounds and the invaders.

Merrythought hurried back to the students a harsh expression on her scarred face. She moved her wand, yew and short Tom absenty noted, past her throat and began barking orders in her amplified voice.

“All students to the fireplaces, put the youngest closest. The floos are blocked but the Ministry will be breaking through any minute to get you all out.” She seemed to recognize that she was speaking to a room of terrified children and visibly searched for something encouraging to say. “Hogwarts has never fallen and no invader has ever breached the doors. This time will be no different.” The castle gave another groan as she finished and from the murmurs of the crowd they weren’t convinced.

She turned her back then, letting the group coalesce around the cold fireplaces as she closed the doors and began to apply spells to the thick wood. Tom watched with interest, there was nothing he could do until the floos lit up again and in the meantime Merrythought was a master of her craft, watching her work could yield dividends. He recognized some of what she did at first, the basic Locking Spell, Sticking Charms around the frame and then she continued past his knowledge, writing glyphs that shimmered as they sank into the wood even as the assault on the castle continued.

“Look up!” someone shouted from the crowd and through the sudden silence Tom knew the advice was good. Through the enchanted ceiling the sky was bleeding. Red bands stretched across the visible portion, staining the clear heavens. They thrummed with the castle, pulses racing across them as the aftershocks of whatever was impacting the wards left the castle vibrating.

Tom tore his eyes away from the sky, if something else happened the others would let him know, he was missing the chance to see the defences a skilled witch could emplace. As he turned back to the doors he was struck by the condition of the hall. Now, bare minutes after the beginning, the tables and the floors were coated with the dust of a thousand years, the tapestries were down and the neatly arranged benches had been skewed.

The entrance was no longer there. Merrythought had pulled the rock from the flagstones up to fill the door frame and was conjuring beasts and animating golems that dragged themselves from the floor and stood ready brandishing rocky maces. She turned almost as soon as Tom started watching, her wand never stopping as she shouted. “Seventh years in my class! Come up here.” Her speech was punctuated by the loudest crash yet, Tom was beginning to wonder how much more the ancient stones could take before collapsing into the cairn of Wizarding Britain.

The few in NEWT level Defense Against the Dark Arts trickled out the crowd, varying in confidence with Selwyn cringing and the aspiring duelist Abraxas Malfoy idly twirling his wand as he advanced with his back straight. “Listen up you lot, you’re the last line, if they get through me you’ve got to slow them down. That doesn’t mean you have to wait, as soon as you see the front of a target start cursing. Don’t be squeamish about it either, this isn’t class.”

Malfoy didn’t need the reminder, he showed off his arsenal of obscure and vicious charms at every chance he got, relying on the products of generations to narrowly maintain his superiority over the ‘the mudblood’. Someday he’d be paid back, Tom had sworn, perhaps even this year. For now though, he was another body between Tom and the attackers so he was tolerable, having your
enemies take each other out was an early lesson in Slytherin.

Speaking of human shields, Tom began to sink back into the crowd. He didn’t really think the castle would be breached but being closest to an escape route would only be prudent. Having the idiotic Gryffindors soak up any spellfire would be an added bonus, perhaps even that half giant could be useful.

A gasp spread through the crowd, everyone around him had their eyes turned skyward and Tom joined them, the formerly solid red bands were splitting, motes of light falling from them as the wards collapsed. The ceiling of the hall started to fade too, which was when the first shivers of fear went through Tom. The founders, witches and wizards whose ingenuity and efforts had rarely been surpassed in the centuries since, had created it. As the sky turned to stone suddenly the invaders getting in seemed more likely, the crowd agreed as screams split the air.

Over the din something else was audible, a rushing noise like vast wings, hisses and cracks; spellfire. Merrythought was facing the doors now, her wand glowing ominously, Malfoy beside her in a practiced and elegant dueler’s stance. The student’s screams were dying down now, replaced by scattered sobs. The spells outside seemed to have stopped too, for a moment Tom began to believe the professors had triumphed, that their last stand had halted the attackers at the door.

Merrythought’s transfigured stone cracking was the first sign he was wrong. Tom drew his wand. Whatever had beaten almost the entirety of Hogwarts’ defenses was certainly beyond him, but Tom knew he was meant for more, that death was not here for him today. And well, if he was wrong he wouldn’t die cowering, his story would not end in ignominy.

The fireplaces behind him flared up green, the sudden burst of light illuminating the far wall, with the ceiling a shadow of what it had been the great hall had grown dim, only lit by candles and the viridian glow of the floo. Merrythought turned, relief clear on her face as Aurors rushed through and moved to join her even as students moved towards the fires. She was just opening her mouth when the door shattered.

Standing alone in the entrance, the bodies of professors at his feet was a single man. He was short and somewhat scruffy, in tattered and dirty robes over what almost looked to be muggle clothing. His wand was low at his side, from the tip a sphere of perfect black hung, voraciously consuming the rubble he’d made of the door, stone blocks spun and swirled into the black and vanished crumbling as they approached it. For a moment all was still, the entire tableau frozen as his eyes almost hidden behind round glasses swept the room.

He moved first, launching his stygian ball over the crowd towards the fireplace with a swing that somehow conveyed the impression of immense mass. Tom felt the tug of the orb as it arced overhead and into the floo. The fires vanished, swept away in an instant and the fireplaces crumbled.

His action broke the deadlock, amid renewed screaming Merrythought’s army of beasts and stones rushed him accompanied by the curses of the aurors. The man was unfazed, lightning quick his wand traced a path at his feet spraying blazing drops of stone into the air that another wave froze and launched at incomprehensible speeds. Half the aurors dropped screaming, their wand hands messes of gore that the returning stones, now orbiting the sorcerer, left misted through the air.

The lucky few who had reacted fast enough to shield were just recovering even as the next spell left his wand, a deep blue wave that pulsed forth, throwing the remaining conjured beasts into the air and buffeting the aurors back. Merrythought had weathered it though, and Malfoy had been close enough that her shield had saved him, both of their wands sent spells down range, Malfoy’s a gleaming silver crescent and Merrythought’s a crackling burst of purple lightning.
The spinning stones intercepted both attacks, exploding as they collided and the wizard retaliated with a snap of his wrist that sent projectiles burning far brighter than the sun at them both. Merrythought somehow slipped aside, the old woman incredibly spright, but the light hit Malfoy. His scream filled the air, rising above the rest of the terrified crowd as the searing light formed shackles around him and lifting before brutally slamming into the ground with two sickening cracks.

If the loss of her last remaining ally worried her Merrythought didn’t show it. She sent a constant stream of curses that seemed to be the first thing to cause the man some trouble, sprays of water and his rocky shield absorbed them but his face twisted, showing an expression for the first time.

Despite the potential for his imminent death Tom was enraptured. This was what he had dreamed of when he thought of magic, of power and might sufficient to bend the world to his will. Power enough to carve his name into history, even conquer death. As he watched though he could see the end was near, Merrythought was slowing at last and her frantic energy was waning.

“Avada Kedavra!” Her scream launched the sickly green curse accompanied by the rush of wings and was met with an angry snarl, the black haired man twisted away lashing out with a bright pink whip that curled around Merrythought’s arm and cinched tight, leaving a smoking stump in its place. A stunner was the last thing that left his wand as he strode past the incapacitated and unconscious bodies.

The now silent crowd shrank backwards as he advanced, compressing against the wall until there was no more room to move. He stopped ten yards from the edge and glanced across the students, his green eyes flickering across their faces. A strange smile, almost a grimace, crossed his face before he spoke for the first time.

“You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you.” The words had a strange cadence, as if the wizard was reciting something he’d heard long ago. “I have great respect for the students of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood. Give me Tom Riddle, and none shall be harmed.”

For a moment Tom couldn’t move, shock flooded him. For the first time since he gained his magic he felt ice race down his spine. Around him students shrank away, he wanted to rage at their cowardice as they left a clearing around and behind him but he did nothing. Holding up his wand, thirteen and a half inches of yew had never felt so little, the green eyes of the sorcerer stared at him.

The wizard was motionless, almost long enough that Tom considered attacking, regardless of the likely outcome, before he seemed to shake himself and raised his wand.

“I am sorry it came to this Tom.”

His wand began to move, its tip glowing green. Then at the moment of his death Tom was captivated by it. The wand was intricately carved, long narrow and deadly as it began its final downward sweep, the wizard’s voice an afterthought as the bolt of green and the rush of wind seemed to trickle towards him.

The explosion of fire that Dumbledore materialized from was almost anti-climatic. Tom could only stare dumbly as he was saved by the one wizard who had always hated him. The curse was blocked somehow, there was a baby bird on the floor. Even now the bearded wizard, his auburn hair beginning to fade, standing between Tom and certain death frightened him. He would never forget their first meeting, the power and humiliation the man had brought, almost ruining the greatest day of his life, the day his nature was confirmed. Ruthlessly Tom came back to himself, nearly dying was hardly a reason to go into shock, just in time to hear the wizard begin to speak again.

“Step aside Dumbledore, this is for your Greater Good.” The words didn’t have an impact on the
professor, he stood tall with his wand raised against the man who had singlehandedly invaded Hogwarts.

“I learned the flaws of that vanity long ago.” He paused looking at the chaos left in the sorcerer’s wake, only slowing a little at the bodies strewn behind him. When he began again his voice was resonant in a way that made it seem absolute, unquestionable and powerful. “I shall give you one chance to depart even now, abandon your attack and I promise I shall seek no vengeance.”

A smirk crossed the wizard’s face before it was gone. “Always with the second chances.”

“I have come to see myself first as an educator, but it is said that the burned hand teaches best.” He stopped again, as if to take the measure of the man. “If you want a fight I’ll oblige you, but you seek only Mr. Riddle. Do you object to moving back? If you defeat me a few yards will scarcely matter.”

The wizard didn’t reply verbally, he merely crouched and leapt back impossibly far, covering most of the distance to the entrance and landing on the Gryffindor table without a sound. Dumbledore walked forward, his long legs covering the distance quickly even as the stone shaped itself into stairs as he climbed onto the dusty table.

The two of them, the greying wizard dressed in robes that could be best described as garish towering over the hall and the stained sorcerer, his coal black hair matching and as messy as his robes, faced each other across the table. It could almost have been a regulation duel, or the cliched painting of some war’s end, light and dark battling to the last. The invader certainly noticed the framing, he gave a quick salute and a deep bow, which Dumbledore returned with a flourish, before the combat resumed.

The contrast in looks was matched by their magic. Dumbledore was a master of transfiguration and it showed. Animals and constructs leapt from the floor fangs bared and weapons swinging. The entire world seemed to obey his will to smash his enemy, everything from chairs to the very fabric of space seemed to obey him. The other sent blinding rays that scorched and burned what they hit, strange glowing balls surrounded by lightning and pieces of metal that seemed to crack the air with their speed.

It wasn’t enough. For the first time the wizard was on the defensive, he had tried to replicate his trick with the stones, but they had morphed to ravens and attacked him, his burst of flame had obliterated them before Dumbledore twisted it into a burning lion that reared and slashed, the gust of wind that dispersed it flung shards of rock that melded seamlessly into a massive crowned golem that stepped forward reaching down before another black sphere buried itself in its chest and consumed it.

Dumbledore held up a hand at that, the sorceror threw one more spell then both combatants ceased and watched the golem crumble into nothingness. “Interesting effect, I’ll remember that one.” He lightly commented over the crashing stone as if it the destructive orb was nothing more than a new pranking spell.

The black haired man snorted, the first action that wasn’t the part of a soulless killer. “Always the educator indeed.”

When the last of the giant vanished, its obsidian crown shattering inward the two resumed. The sorcerer was now shrouded in a green and blue aura, Dumbledore’s efforts seemed to collapse as they hit the glowing field, the transfigurations and conjurations reverting into nothingness. The invader took the opportunity to begin flinging spells back, multicolored lights that burned the eyes, bolts of energy that were so wrong their sounds smelt foul and jagged blades that appeared to be tears to some other darker world.
Dumbledore was more than equal to them though, turning each away with wide sweeping gestures even as he advanced, closing the distance between the two of them. The sorcerer was looking increasingly panicked, human now as the professor strode closer seemingly unruffled by the power he was casually wielding and dispersing.

“You should have run when you had the chance.” Dumbledore’s voice held no malice, only the certainty of victory and the other wizard seemed to realize it. He didn’t give up though, launching spells that made the world scream even as he was driven backwards off the table. They both paused as he landed although Dumbledore seemed to exude power that left the man shrinking.

“I promise that you will regret your choice,” he spat before flicking his wand over his shoulder, sending another of his spheres into the upper west wall letting a shaft of sunlight through that fell on Dumbledore. The two of them faced off a moment longer, the contrast between the two never more evident, before they both moved blindingly fast, a shimmering blue bolt hurtled towards Tom even as Dumbledore pulled a wall in front of him that only just clipped it. The ricochet left another hole in the walls even as the sorcerer again leapt, no flew, retreating from the battle.

Dumbledore stood watching, still lit by the ray cutting through the dusty air as he began to look around the devastated room. He jumped from the table, walking quickly towards the casualties even as the students finally began to speak again, chattering and staring at Tom but not approaching any closer.

With the battle over the detached feeling was coming back along with a fierce exultation. Someone, not just anyone a powerful sorcerer, had come to kill him, Tom Riddle. What better sign of his destiny for him to have such an opponent, he had always known that greatness was his to seize, and here it was thrust upon him!

Consumed with his thoughts he didn’t notice Dumbledore’s approach until he was right in front of him. “Tom.” He managed to control his flinch and surprise. Looking up Dumbledore was flanked by two red robed men, aurors. “Tom, if you could come with us? These gentlemen have some questions for you.”

“Why are you coming?” As soon as he said the words Tom wanted them back, they weren’t part of his immaculate image. Dumbledore only laughed though, exhaustion sapping some of the joy from it.

“That man was defeated not killed, but he won’t attack anymore.”

Something, maybe the near death experience, was making his tongue loose. “If he won’t attack then why are you coming anyways?”

Dumbledore cracked a smile then, cutting through the dust and grime on his face. “He won’t attack, because you are with me.”
Tom stumbled over the rubble, the only reason he stayed vertical was the Auror who caught him as he tripped. His normal grace, presumably a gift from whomever his father was, had deserted him amidst the carnage. Looking closer no one seemed to be dead. Mediwizards had flooded the hall after the attacker retreated and their charms had stabilized the worst cases. There was blood scattered everywhere though, from the slaughtered conjured animals and the injuries. Merrythought’s arm was sitting by itself, the wand still gripped in her hand and a lone column of smoke rising from the scorched end. Whenever they'd rushed her off they’d forgotten it, of course with a curse like that it wouldn’t be going back on.

She was one of the unlucky ones at that, Malfoy and the aurors had been tossed around but their wounds were not directly magical and a few potions would go a long way in healing them. It was a sign of how much the professor had troubled the sorcerer, he could have killed everyone in the room with his talents and only by his will had there been no deaths. It was strange to think if she’d just been a little less competent she might have emerged unscathed.

It was troubling too, Merrythought had been far above Tom and the wizard had just played with her, only taking her somewhat seriously when she launched an Unforgivable. If it hadn’t been for Dumbledore Tom would have been dead, a fact which rankled until he reached the doors of the hall and he had other things to focus on.

The black orb had seemingly sucked in all of the dust and detritus from the battle along with the door’s rubble, the floor was as spotless as any house elf could wish but beyond the area of its effect the hall was a warzone. Scorches covered the walls, parts looked like the stone had been set aflame. Dippet was the first professor they passed, presumably the last to fall. A mediwitch was kneeling at his side casting charms with an air of angry confusion, at Dumbledore’s gesture they stopped to talk to her.

“How is your patient Healer Stennings?”

The witch looked up even as her wand continued mechanically. “He’s mostly fine, a few contusions and some minor fractures that a dose of Skele-Grow will cure it's only…” She turned back to the motionless Headmaster, well not quite still Tom noticed, his chest was moving. “His skeletal muscles, all the voluntary ones really, they’re disabled, he’s awake in there but he can’t consciously move a muscle.”

“He’s paralyzed?” The worry in Dumbledore’s voice was evident, for all the rumors about how much he coveted the job he did seem concerned about the man. “Is there any hope for a cure?”

Stennings nodded, keeping her eyes down. “The magic is weakening, and why would he use a curse that complicated when to kill him would have been so much easier? I heard he only tried to kill one person, some student.” She looked up then, her eyes moving from the aurors and Dumbledore to Tom. “You?”

One of the aurors stepped forward then, a short and wiry man who did his best to loom anyways. “We can’t comment on ongoing investigations. Don’t spread rumors.”

“Of course, of course,” she babbled, looking back and forth between them. If Tom had to guess it would be five minutes until she told everyone that aurors had escorted a Slytherin prefect out. Well
the entire Great Hall had seen, it was never going to be a secret.

Dumbledore took charge then, leading them off the path of destruction and up the stairs. “My office I think.” Tom took one last look at the damage to the halls and followed him, flanked by the two aurors.

Leaving the site of the attack was like stepping into a different world. Instead of the wreckage and dust it was just another Hogwarts corridor, one Tom rarely went down except for patrols but familiar nonetheless. They slowed as they reached a door. He’d never been to Dumbledore’s office and was surprised when they walked right past it. “This wall has its little joke, I think the castle wants us to stay young. Through here actually.” He pressed his hand into the apparent stone wall next to the door and it swung open, revealing a wooden frame that Tom was quite sure hadn’t been there a moment prior.

Dumbledore either didn’t notice or was used to guests being shocked as he strode in. With a single wave he conjured three tall leather backed chairs in front of his desk as he reached into his robe and pulled out the baby bird setting it on a perch. Tom glanced at it, even for Dumbledore carrying a baby bird was odd but- “You have a phoenix?”

Dumbledore grinned even as the ugly looking chick preened. “Perhaps you could say that Fawkes has me; but I flatter myself into agreeing with you.” Fawkes chirped briefly before putting his head under his wing. “We’re both lucky to have him though, he has a knack for taking me just where I need to be as you saw.”

The explosion of flame. Tom had thought it was just some obscure portkey variant that a professor might use to get through the wards, but it was the phoenix. “They can apparate through the Hogwarts wards?” Tom was beginning to think there might be more to light magic than he’d realized.

“Well it’s not quite apparition, their magic is not like ours of course, but if you want to ask about Fawkes we can indulge his ego later. These gentlemen have questions.”

“Quite right Dumbledore.” The older of the two aurors, his remaining hair going grey, pulled out a notebook and quill as he spoke. “Now Mr. Riddle if you could state your name for the record?”

The interrogation was brief: no Tom had never met, seen, or heard of the wizard. He had no idea why he was attacking or what he could have done to provoke him. Eventually the Aurors seemed to agree, they exchanged a look and stood only for Dumbledore to speak for the first time since they started. “Whoever the wizard was he hated Mr. Riddle, this was a crime of passion, not some careful plot.”

“How could you tell?” The younger auror beat Tom to the question but only just.

“I could see it in his eyes.”

The younger auror looked awed but the elder who had done most of the talking looked unimpressed. “Right then, we’ll make a note of it.” He had shut his book quite firmly as he said it and was halfway out the door a moment later. The younger one seemed to want to say something but after some slight indecision followed.

Dumbledore exhaled, too short and too sharp to be a sigh, but it conveyed his feelings quite well. “Mr. Riddle, try to remember that on your way up you shouldn’t step on too many people. They
surface in the strangest spots.”

“Of course sir.” The day which had started so well had truly jumped the track. Not an hour ago he had been marked for death and now he sat alone with the professor who had always hated him. He waited another minute feeling increasingly uncomfortable as the silence stretched on. “Sir? May I leave?”

He didn’t immediately respond and Tom was about to ask again when Dumbledore answered. “You know Mr. Riddle you remind me very much of a wizard I once knew.”

The day could in fact grow stranger, story time with Dumbledore had not been on the agenda. “Sir?”

“He was clever, too clever some said, and destined for great things, he knew he was destined for great things.” He stared at Tom now over his long steepled fingers with his vivid blue eyes gleaming. “The professors were charmed and he went forth and made allies, not truly friends but useful people who were captivated by his talent and drive.” Dumbledore wasn’t even looking at Tom anymore, gazing at the ceiling or perhaps memories only visible to him. “He eventually went too far and lost some of his allies, but for a man with a dream and power there are always more.”

“Who was he?”

“Take a guess Mr. Riddle, you certainly know his name.” Tom thought furiously, for all that he didn’t much like Dumbledore and didn’t want to humor him, he hated to seem ignorant. Of course this was Dumbledore, his story was likely allegorical or even more probably his own history framed as a fairy tale, it would fit the man’s narcissism and belief in the higher mysteries of magic to try to sway a child from his own path.

“You sir?”

Dumbledore frowned, his face twisting far from his usual expression. “Not quite, I was referring to Grindelwald. I can see how you might draw the conclusion though, there are similarities between all three of us if you look. Even if you don’t wish to see them.”

Tom was now very ready to leave the office, he had thought that the other teachers didn’t see through his genial facade but Dumbledore had apparently already identified his quest for power and worse had picked him out as a budding Dark Lord. “Is that all sir?”

“Not quite Mr. Riddle if you can restrain yourself just a few minutes longer.” Dumbledore shuffled through his desk looking for something until he gave up and turned back on Tom. “First, I was not wrong when I said that man hated you. There is a magic you probably haven’t heard of that lets one see another’s memories and emotions. His entire being, for the brief glimpse I managed, was enraged at my interference.” He paused as if hoping for Tom to volunteer a reason. Unfortunately Tom had as little idea as anyone so after the awkward pause Dumbledore went on. “Second, he is extraordinarily talented in combat, I’m sure you noticed he was leaving all of his opponents alive, due not to weakness, but his overwhelming skill. Third, you are safe where I am. However I have other responsibilities and I cannot be chained to the school much less guard your home in the summer.”

While Tom was still excited over the prospect of an epic enemy he was forced to admit that Dumbledore had a point. The other wizard hadn’t been slowed at all until Dumbledore had arrived with a bird he might as well have named Deus ex Machina. Of course the conclusions the old man stated were pretty obvious, so obvious that Tom was beginning to wonder why he had taken the time
to state them. Especially now, the castle was in chaos, the staff was incapacitated and hundreds of panicked students were in the great hall; it was hardly time for a chat about Tom’s inevitable death by an enraged mysterious wizard.

“While I am grateful for the advice sir, I don’t see that I have any chance then.” The one edge he possibly had, perhaps even just a place to hide, was nothing that he wanted to share with Dumbledore. Of course Dumbledore had just admitted to reading minds so he might already know. Tom started to think if he’d ever thought of his hunt in Dumbledore’s presence then stopped when he realized it might only alert him. The only thing to do was get out of here but Dumbledore didn’t seem to be finished.

“By yourself you don’t.” Dumbledore’s habit of saying a single sentence then patiently waiting for a reaction was beginning to annoy Tom, especially because it might be the reason he did it. “However you are a student and as I am a professor your well-being is my responsibility. I cannot promise safety outside the walls of Hogwarts but if you wish to avoid returning to your home you may accompany me on my tasks this summer.”

Tom was frozen, frantically trying to adapt his plans to this new option. Spending the summer with one of the greatest wizards in the world, especially one who could defend him should be an easy choice, but it was Dumbledore.

The wizard noted his indecision, leaning forward anxiously. “I will do my utmost to ensure you are protected either way; I do have some small influence with the ministry and Fawkes will carry me if I am needed.”

There was so much Tom planned to do, having a mind reading Dumbledore watching his every step might help for now at the cost of all his ambitions. No he would continue. He would find the Chamber, he would hide and survive the summer and then one day- “It’s not that I’m not grateful-” Dumbledore sharply cut him off before he could finish, “Mr. Riddle I implore you to reconsider. We have our differences, for which I bear no small blame, but are they worth your life?” His words came faster now as his voice rose. “That man came through the wards of Hogwarts without breaking a sweat; your orphanage or any other refuge you can secret yourself in will not match them. You’re just a student, talented but you cannot match his magic. You will have guards I promise, but one unconnected boy hardly merits enough to present an obstacle.”

“Nonetheless sir-”

“You don’t trust me and plan to hide. Don’t lie, you’re practically screaming it.” His formerly bright eyes were cold now, for the first time Tom saw some of the similarities Dumbledore claimed with the Dark Lord. “I cannot say you are likely to succeed, any wizard that skilled in combat will have ways to search you out, but it is your life. There are months yet until summer, I hope you use your time to find wisdom in addition to your paranoia.” He stood then, his tall frame towering over the desk. “We both have things to do, good day Mr. Riddle.”

Tom hurriedly retreated, already second-guessing himself. He had just turned down perhaps his best chance at survival, and all for ambitions he had yet to realize. Of course like Dumbledore said, he had months to change his mind if he failed. The stakes had been raised though, this morning he had been working to unseat Malfoy as the power in Slytherin and now he had to worry about his life.

His feet had taken him to the Slytherin common room and he muttered the password, not bothering to command it using his gift. Walking through the portal he was met by a sea of faces. With Malfoy
in the hospital it was the other prefect in charge, McKinney a short girl with long memory for slights. She had been speaking from the way everyone was arranged, but whatever she had been saying was far less interesting than Tom’s arrival. Normally the attention would be something Tom craved but today there were more important things than other students. They disagreed of course.

The better part of a hundred voices were raised and demanding answers. “Tom who was?” “What did you-” “Are you?” A sound like a string of firecrackers silenced the clamour.

“Mr. Riddle is still alive and thus has plenty of time to answer questions,” McKinney drawled, her wand still emitting puffs of smoke. “But as he spoke to the Aurors he cannot answer them until he is given permission.” The Aurors hadn’t mentioned any such thing to him, but one look at her was enough to see what she was up to.

“She’s right, ongoing investigations have to be kept confidential” he finished with a smile, it didn’t hurt to play along for now. Any time not spent answering idiots’ questions was well spent; trading a constant interrogation for one conversation was worth it.

As some of the Slytherins filtered out of the common room to their dorms McKinney moved towards Tom, he headed to a pair of armchairs and began casting charms to ensure they wouldn’t be overheard. When he finished McKinney still hadn’t arrived, he turned to look and saw she had gotten hung up talking to some first years who were throwing worried glances at him. They were just the first Tom realized, he had spent so much time cementing his reputation as the perfect student, helpful, skilled and courteous and that wizard had brought it all crashing down. Who now would easily trust a boy who had such enemies? Being above suspicion had given him much before, professors, the groundskeeper, even the librarian had been willing to look the other way or help. That was gone. Even Slughorn, how much would he aide a boy who had somehow gotten himself into so much trouble?

Tom was under no illusions when it came to his Head of House. The man’s actions were selfish, if he didn’t think Tom could help him all of the introductions and recommendations would disappear. He’d cut his losses and not endanger his own network by bringing in a mudblood boy with a murderer on his tail. He wouldn’t risk himself to save Tom. As McKinney finally sat down Tom was beginning to reconsider Dumbledore’s offer.
Repercussions

The weeks following the attack were nothing like Tom had ever experienced at Hogwarts. His first days had been difficult, a mudblood in Slytherin had to struggle for everything, but his talent had bought acceptance and had been securing primacy. Now though, eyes tracked him everywhere and rumors followed him. Malfoy had returned with even more of a grudge against him. Being effortlessly defeated in Tom’s defense had caused him to resent Tom even more. He was also working tirelessly to spread his enmity from Slytherin house, poisoning the entire school and magical society against him.

It stung but his efforts probably weren’t even needed, the Daily Prophet had done a full page spread on the attacks. Speculation on the attacker’s identity, Tom was clearly the brother or son since they both had dark hair. His motives, trying to purge muggleborns from Slytherin, chaos, performance art, or a frame job by Dumbledore. There was scarcely anyone in Britain who didn’t know Tom as the focal point of the most successful attack on Hogwarts ever. Few wanted to associate with that sort of notoriety.

With the loss of his followers and reputation Tom had thrown himself into finding the chamber. All of his work in finding allies, bowing and scraping for goodwill, had been ruined. He wouldn’t need them he vowed. He’d follow the mold of Merlin and Morgana, he would have so much personal power that he wouldn’t need servants.

So even as he stopped trying in class, he had mastered the OWLs material as a third year, he began to delve into different magics. He had seen what true masters of magic were and what they did bore little resemblance to class. The professors and other students noticed this of course, before he had been helpful and active in class, answering questions and handing in essays that showed a far greater grasp of magic than was required. Now he sat, isolated by choice and circumstance, and didn’t even bother to pay attention.

Dumbledore was the only one who remained constant. He still watched Tom closely, suspicion filling his blue eyes. He often looked as if he wanted to hold Tom after class but he never did, if not content with, then too reluctant to change the status quo. Besides, Dumbledore was busier than ever.

The other students watched the professor with awe, he had always been popular but now he was practically a god to them. Tom was forced to admit Dumbledore warranted it but it irked him. If Dumbledore was similar to Tom then when had he struggled, what had he ever had to work for past graciously accepting praise?

Dumbledore was no help for his problems, going to him would be to admit defeat. Besides he had gone further to find the chamber than anyone. He had started early, asking Binns about it almost as soon as he read of it. He had still been new to magic and as soon as he learned of Slytherin’s gift he hoped it would lead to his heritage. He’d learned better since, Parselmouths were rare but not restricted solely to one line. Tom was still hoping that he was the heir though. At the very least his gift showed he wasn’t a mudblood even if he had been reluctant to show it because of its reputation. Only Dumbledore knew.

He hadn’t planned to keep it hidden at first, only his natural discretion had kept it a secret as well as the lack of snakes. It had taken him an embarrassingly long time to realize that the carved and painted snakes throughout the castle would speak back. They weren’t very good conversationalists, snakes never were, but they had told him to find their king.
Others had given more clues, the ones in the Astronomy Tower had led him to a hidden room holding an ancient orrery. When he set the date so that Serpens crossed the meridian the star snake woke and asked if he sought the king. Tom had barely managed to stammer an answer, he hadn’t known stammering Parseltongue was even possible, which made the constellation strike his hand.

He had panicked at that, falling backwards trying to dodge and knocking the model from its setting in his haste. When he checked his injured hand there had been no blood or punctures though, the pain had been entirely magical. He hadn’t left it there of course, using a book he’d withdrawn back when he still had easy access to the Restricted Section he’d puzzled out a curse-breaker’s diagnostic spell to see if there had been other consequences. As he expected there was, the snake had marked him, leaving behind a trigger that other enchantments would react to.

Of course the ancient magic had long been superseded by tomb-raiders’ quests for gold. It had been revolutionary, at least a hundred years ahead of its time, but the march of progress rendered the complex key obsolete. There were spells to find anything that reacted to the key easily, Tom had cast them and found them, the other dormitories each held a segment. Before the attack Tom would have been able to charm his way into each and if Slytherin’s was any guide it would have been easy to find the next part. Now though he had to infiltrate each, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw had been easy, but Gryffindor was proving troublesome. He would have skipped it but according to the latest scholarship the fifth part of the key was required. The spell matrices were under-constrained; with only four parts and an unknown lock the last part could be anything.

Their common room, its location was nominally a secret but only the least curious didn’t know where all the dorms were after two years, was far from Slytherin. Its denizens were also hostile, the rivalry caused any green-tied student to be suspicious and their guardian, a portrait of a woman best described as Rubenesque, would happily gossip and report about any snoopers.

Tom had been working on further improving the spells so that he wouldn’t have to enter the tower but it was difficult. Curse-breaking was a demanding occupation and only the best had any success. Tom had no doubt that he could be great, it was not hubris to say he was a genius, but mastering a field that intelligent wizards took a lifetime to understand was not the work of an afternoon, especially with his other projects. He was hoping to get the spell to work well enough from his position three floors below the common room but it was slow going.

After a week straight he had taken a break from it, working instead on duplicating one of the attacker’s simpler spells.

“Circumversio Petrum!” The rocks he’d conjured leapt into the air, rocketing around him fast enough to make the air hum. It wasn’t quite right, the invader’s stones had actively blocked curses but Tom wasn’t sure if that was in the spell or if he had been somehow doing it manually. Either way a dense enough curtain would block anything a student could send while Tom worked safely from behind his shield. Satisfied with the spell Tom canceled it with a sharp slash, it didn’t go quite as well as he had hoped.

Rocks sprayed around the room, ricocheting off the walls and splintering the door. Tom dropped nearly instantly and managed to cast a more traditional shield that blocked the few rebounds and held it for a moment before standing. The room was trashed, little craters were on the walls, the window was broken and the door had chunks taken out of it. Reparo could only do so much, Tom would either have to find a new room and a scapegoat, or get to work transfiguring the damage back to normal. As he turned, examining the damage to the room, someone tried the door which had been knocked from its hinges. After that failure they tried again with more muscle, the door lurched in
with a squeal. It was Dumbledore.

“Hello Mr. Riddle.” His bright eyes swept over the room before he drew his wand and with three subtle twists and waves fixed the scars in the walls. “A spell got away from you?”

“Yes sir. It won’t happen again.”

The professor grinned then, so broadly it was almost difficult not to join him. “Mr. Riddle we both know that’s a lie, the stories I could tell you about my failures.”

Tom wasn’t quite sure how to respond to Dumbledore’s mood so he fell back to his old politeness. It had never persuaded Dumbledore before but things had been a little different ever since their talk. “Well that particular spell won’t get away, how’s that?”

“Much more accurate I’m sure.” He flicked his wand at the window and the remaining glass grew into a single pane. “If you want to have supervision while testing more advanced spells the staff will be happy to help. This is a school after all and your recent boredom has not gone unnoticed.”

Dumbledore’s voice held a studied disinterest, as if it were merely the weather they discussed. He was staring at the door too, not even looking for Tom’s expression. He began another spell, this one more complex apparently as it took more than just a moment’s effort.

Tom was about to refuse but Dumbledore’s work caught his attention. The door had been fixed on its hinges and sanded smooth within the first seconds and now it was the grains that were shifting. At last, it could barely have been twenty seconds but it seemed far longer watching, Dumbledore stopped with a satisfied air. “Well then, what do you think of that Mr. Riddle?”

He moved closer, staring at the door with greedy eyes. Where it had been simply sanded planks, the grains running vertically they now showed a castle from above, Hogwarts. There was something more though, he raised his wand to begin analyzing it but Dumbledore stopped him with a gesture. “Try opening it.”

He seized the handle and twisted, as he pulled the door open the grains changed and the bird’s eye view of the castle turned, rotating around the castle with the door. Looking closer students were visible on the grounds, walking, sitting, even a few braving the fall temperatures and swimming. He moved the door back and forth, watching the woodgrain warp and shift, entranced. “That was marvelous sir.” His admiration wasn’t feigned, despite their mutual acrimony Dumbledore was an incredible wizard.

“Thank you.” Dumbledore smiled proudly and cast a few more charms, these Tom recognized as locking and stasis ones, meant to fix to the spells. “I’ve been working on a system to monitor the grounds for uninvited guests, discovering how to make such images was a happy accident.”

A monitoring system, if it could track intruders having it search for Tom would be an easy expansion. His privacy, even if he found the chamber might no longer exist. He forced his fear down as well as thoughts of the chamber, he hadn’t forgotten Dumbledore’s ability to read minds. “Indeed sir?”

“Yes, intruders like our most recent may be obvious, explosions do tend to put you on your guard, but infiltrators are no less of a threat.”

That raised a question Tom had been wondering about and with this strange detente, they were conversing politely with almost no undertones, he might as well ask Dumbledore. “Why do you
think he attacked head on? He probably could have sneaked in.”

Dumbledore was silent for a moment, looking around as if to ensure he hadn’t missed anything fixing the room. “Hogwarts is said to be the safest place in Britain, that’s true up until a point. The wards around the castle were not erected by fools and every Headmaster has left his mark. Most made them better, at least three weakened them unintentionally, and a surprising number allowed them to be lowered in Quidditch point shaving schemes.”

His wand moved again and the rude table in the corner straightened with carved ivy growing up the legs as the scrapes and engravings of bored students were erased from the top. “However they are old magic at their heart. You grew up in the muggle world and are a skilled enough student that you think of magic logically. It’s a rare talent in the magical world precisely because the fairy tales you dismissed do have some truth. Sleeping Beauty, Rumpelstiltskin, Snow White, they all feature powerful magic falling to a simple illogical condition. The wards are similar, anyone hostile to the students will be frustrated. If your attacker had attempted to sneak in, his schemes would be thwarted, his plans foiled. In contrast his direct attack didn’t run against the older magic, he became the knight slashing through the thorns if you will.”

“So the wards only work against treachery?” Tom had noticed the lack of analytical thought before and had used it to his benefit. Realizing that there might have been a reason for the purebloods’ occasional idiocy was a rude surprise.

“Oh not at all, they are immensely powerful in all senses that you can think of and regularly updated, I just think the attacker chose to brave the more conventional ones rather than meddle with old magic. He did have some small success in that manner.”

Tom couldn’t quite hold back a shudder, seeing the green light collect at the end of the attacker’s wand was a memory he wouldn’t ever forget. Dumbledore either didn’t notice or was too polite to mention it. “Indeed sir. You’ve fixed the room though, was that all?”

“Oh no.” He conjured two tall leather backed chairs facing each other, his a warm red and gold and Tom’s dark green edged in silver. He folded his long frame into his and gestured for Tom to match him. “It’s in my capacity of Gryffindor’s head actually. There are some individuals who delight in causing mischief and their dream seems to be embroil me in it. My little display seems only to have encouraged them. Naturally before I enter the common room I use several monitoring spells I’ve picked up, if it’s nothing too irritating I generally redirect it to the perpetrators.” He smiled at the memory, if Tom was in his place the guilty would have been strung up by their thumbs not humored. “So imagine my surprise when I found the common room was subjected to some rather advanced analysis spells. Despite my house pride none of the lions are truly at that level.”

Tom froze, Dumbledore had discovered he was looking, this could be the end of his search. He could still salvage it, maybe. “Just a minor prank sir, I was hoping that it could make the other students see me as a peer instead of a doomed muggleborn.”

“Well then you’ll be happy to know your efforts led to me finding something. I had thought that you might also be looking but if it was just accidental you can wait for the reveal with the others.”

“No!” Tom almost surged to his feet, mastering himself at the last instant. “You can’t tell anyone!”

Dumbledore’s face was grave now, his smile gone with the light in his eyes. “Tom if you were planning to hide in the Chamber of Secrets, I grant it is a tremendous thing you’ve done to find it, I must again ask you to consider joining me this summer.”
“You’re just going to ruin the best chance I have to survive?”

“It is not your best chance, I believe that is with me, but I shall not.” Dumbledore looked old and tired for the first time Tom had known him. “Mr. Riddle, if you are so determined to risk your life I will keep your secrets, I only ask that you fully think out your actions. The Headmaster and the other professors are wary of you, they suffered during the attack and Merrythought was maimed. Whatever goodwill you accumulated has been lost.”

He held up a hand to forestall Tom’s protests. “I know that you had nothing to do with the attacker, but it is hard for them not to blame you, even with magic we are only human. If you are discovered you will be expelled, you will have your OWLs and retain your wand, but without me and Hogwarts your nemesis will find you. I beg of you, forget our past at least until the attacker is found and dealt with. Spending time with people you hate is an unfortunate reality of life, which if you insist on your present course you are likely not to discover.”

Tom stared at the floor, his hands clenched tight, he had no choice that he saw, the Chamber was exposed and he might as well make the best of it. “If you found out what I was doing you have the keys?”

“Four of them honestly. The guardian in the orrery was not cooperative but I was able to divine the remainder of the key.” Dumbledore stood as he offhandedly mentioned violating at least three arithmancy theorems. “With the key intact finding the lock was easy, Slytherin was skilled but if he was a thousand years ahead of his time we should all have cause for embarrassment. Shall we get to it then?”

“After you professor.”

As they descended the same feeling of excitement Tom felt during the duel returned. This was magic, unraveling a millennia old mystery hidden in the bowels of an ancient castle. Even Dumbledore’s unwanted presence couldn’t ruin it. They reached the end of the main stairs and continued on into the dungeons, quickly leaving the torchlit sections. Dumbledore silently cast some charm that didn’t seem to produce light but rather rolled back shadows, enough for both of them to see clearly.

“At first I thought hiding the entrance to the Chamber in the dungeons was foolish, it’s what everyone would expect, but considering their size perhaps Salazar was wiser than I thought,” Dumbledore remarked as they walked.

“There’s such a thing as being too clever sir.”

“Indeed, ‘Our lives are frittered away by detail… simplify simplify’” He performed the lock finding spell as he spoke, his effortless multitasking showing his mastery of a complex charm. “Through here I think.” A glowing frame had appeared as he cast, holding up his spell marked hand made the rock inside it dissolve. “The skeleton key does work then, I had worried that Slytherin..” His voice trailed off as hissing filled the air. Snakes were emerging from the walls and slithering towards them. Dumbledore raised his wand, no doubt to destroy them, but Tom stepped forward.

“Stop, I seek the king.” The snakes froze, the entire corridor which had been covered with writhing snakes was instantly motionless. “Let us pass.” They reared, their tongues tasting the air as they hesitated. The largest and closest moved towards Tom, and Dumbledore tensed behind him. He knelt as it flowed closer, with its narrow tongue flickering.
“You have the scent, and the mark. The king will decide.” With its pronouncement all the snakes vanished back into wherever they came from.

“What did it say?” Tom stood and smirked, the entire time Dumbledore had known everything and now it was his turn.

“The King will see us.”

“The King? A basilisk you think?” Dumbledore tapped his glasses with his wand and they expanded to something like a pilot’s goggles. As he drew his wand away the outline of the goggles seemed to cling to the tip until inside it another pair materialized and fell into his hand. “Their gaze is said to be deadly, these might protect us from immediate death.”

Tom accepted them, staring at the muggle goggles dubiously. “Might?”

“We pursue adventure and must by necessity court her friend mortal peril. If you wish to give up?” His voice trailed off, Tom couldn’t resist the dare.

He pulled the leather wrapped goggles on and cinched them tight. “I’m surprised you’re letting me come then.”

“You would no doubt successfully endanger yourself further if I refused. I try to avoid hypocrisy and the easy choices. In any event it’s been the better part of a thousand years. ‘The King’ is likely sleeping if not already dead.”

“Only one way to find out, shall we?”

“Indeed, I think we will need your gift though.” Behind the opened door inside the revealed vestibule another door, carved with a coiling snake, was shut. Tom walked towards it almost in a trance and traced the scales.

“Open,” The snake’s eyes opened and its head broke free of the door, its tongue lashed out and it seemed to nod before it slithered into the wall leaving a long dark passageway behind it. The two walked forward with Dumbledore calling forth a more conventional light that made the shadows sharp. The hall sloped down and continued for what felt like miles. Dumbledore was lightly humming as he strode along and Tom couldn’t find it in himself to be annoyed, he had done it, the Chamber was found! He didn’t need Slughorn or anyone else now, no one would dare to mock him now.

The passage abruptly ended, opening into a larger room that had a multitude of openings that all sloped up. “It seems that we didn’t find the only entrance.” Dumbledore sent several balls of light that hit the ceiling and hung, illuminating the entire room. There were scattered puddles and mud everywhere. “We’re not in the castle anymore, under the lake I would say. Over the centuries some water must have gotten in, if you’ll note the stalactites and stalagmites. There must be some magic to prevent it from flooding.”

Tom was barely paying attention to Dumbledore’s musings, instead striding towards another door covered with two snakes intertwined. “Open” the door split apart and Tom walked through it, heedless of Dumbledore’s call. He heard the professor catching up, splashing through one of the puddles, but he needed to see this first. It was a vast room with a vaulting ceiling held by pillars covered in snakes that seemed to move in the flickering green light. At the very end was a statue, a
bust of an old man with a smooth bald skull and a long beard. “I seek the king!”

Dumbledore caught up to him as hisses again filled the air. The statue’s mouth began and Tom half wanted to look away, if it was a basilisk they would be dead, lost forever miles below the school, but he couldn’t move his head, he needed to watch. Then it all went wrong.

An immense voice boomed forth. “Riddle! Your body will lie in the Chamber forever!”

Even before the echoes stopped Dumbledore seized him and threw him back as something long and low shot forth from the mouth to impact on a solid shield Dumbledore conjured. The impact rang as whatever had hit it circled back, skittering through the water at the Chamber’s edges sending up a fine spray. Dumbledore kept himself between whatever it was and Tom, his shield raised and his wand’s tip beginning to glow a sulfurous yellow. “Get your wand out and stay behind me!”

“Riddle!” The thing screamed as it moved, each step shrieking like nails on a chalkboard. “Riddle!”

It charged again, its speed causing it to blur, but Dumbledore was ready. A whip of fire cracked from his wand, severing the thing neatly into two pieces with the split glowing a cherry red.

Even divided its innumerable legs moved with frantic haste, scrambling helplessly to close the distance. The ruined construct was an immense insect, a centipede of gleaming silver. Its halves rolled and thrashed; its vicious mandibles snapped open and closed, struggling to attack even as Dumbledore banished it further away. He followed that with other charms that fixed it in place and stilled it, before a soft purple ray caused it to dissolve into puddles of metal. Tom stared at the remains, this had been left for him, the attacker had known he was looking for the Chamber.

His companion abruptly broke the silence. “Well that was unexpected,” Dumbledore remarked happily. “I had been getting a little bored, archaeology never was a passion of mine.”

Tom couldn’t say anything immediately, still trying to catch his breath, his hopes had been dashed, his refuge violated and Dumbledore was entertained? “That’s all you have to say? Someone is trying to kill me and somehow laid a trap in a room that hasn’t been opened in a thousand years!”

“Well unless you suspect the Flamels the Chamber has certainly been opened more recently.” Dumbledore was summoning lights as he spoke, and sending more scrying spells throughout the room as Tom’s dreams crashed and fell. “Or your enemy is the latest in a long line of seers carrying out a family vendetta.” His wand at last stopped and the old man turned to face him, all levity gone from his voice. “Either way I think your plan of spending the summer here is done. Put aside your paranoia. Tom, I will protect you.”

Tom’s anger was spent, he couldn’t even muster indignation. He had no choices left, no allies, no secret refuge and if he was going to die it wouldn’t be at Wool’s. “Alright professor, you win.”
“I don’t think you should declare yourself the Heir of Slytherin.”

Tom paused what he was doing, firing spells to find empty spaces into the walls, to look at Dumbledore incredulously. “Why not? It would solve all my problems! If they knew—” Dumbledore held up a hand to stop him.

“They. Think about who ‘they’ are.” He leveled his number three stare. Tom had started numbering them in anticipation of more conversations with excessively drawn out rhetorical pauses. “Tom, you seek power, and I will not try to persuade you otherwise. However those you would impress as the heir are nothing.”

“The richest families in England, nothing? The pureblood elites? As a mudblood I’m powerless, but as the heir? They’ll fall all over themselves to follow me.” Dumbledore kept up his steady gaze.

“You are engaged in something of a rivalry with Mr. Malfoy. He’s in many respects the pureblood ideal, correct?” Tom gave a reluctant nod when after an awkward moment it was clear Dumbledore expected an answer. “Yet you are two years younger and it’s only the collected efforts of all his ancestors that allows him to keep pace. For all their talk about ancient magic, hidden rites, and rituals, they’re no better or stronger. If you truly crave a power base of the desperate few scrambling to retain their grandfathered power, then by all means claim descent from Slytherin.”

“Without it I’m a disgraced mudblood with a murderer after him, I don’t think I’m going to make many friends like that.”

“You overestimate the attention span of the wizarding world. Your time in the public's eyes will be over soon.” Dumbledore turned his attention back to their search of the Chamber, sending a fine white spray from his wand that left mist along the walls. “Another thing, blood status. My mother was muggleborn and from your last name it seems likely your father was too, or perhaps even a muggle. If the two of us don’t count against pureblood superiority I don’t know what would.” He didn’t look at Tom as he spoke, instead scrutinizing the shifting fog he’d made.

Tom didn’t really want to continue the conversation without more thought, so instead he waved his wand vaguely at Dumbledore’s cloud. “What is that supposed to do anyways?”

Dumbledore smiled at the question. Tom rapidly decided that one of the advantages of their arrangement would be learning more of the professor's incredibly eclectic set of spells. He was a good teacher despite their lack of trust. “This? It’s a fairly limited divination spell. I tend to think most of that art is wooly, but there are some redeeming features. Whatever the mist covers you get an idea of where it came from. It’s quite limited, most of the time you just get a direction, but for these carved walls it’s quite useful. Can you guess why?”

The spell did seem limited if it was as vague as Dumbledore described, especially for walls that had never moved- “Doors. If you feel anything that came from somewhere then it’s an opening.”

The professor smiled. “Indeed, five points for Slytherin I think. Of course the hourglasses might not register them from here, they work throughout the grounds, but as we established we’re outside the wards.” He started misting the walls again, apparently unsatisfied with what he’d found.
“Any luck?”

“Regrettably no, which could mean nothing if the doors open and close in a more esoteric way. Your surveying spell might be more sure, if less quick.”

Tom launched a few more into the walls, they were meant to return if they found a gap and so far none had. It was boring and slow work, especially considering the size of the chamber and the limited range of the spell. “The attacker knew of the chamber first anyways, we might not find anything else down here.”

Dumbledore didn’t pause in his casting. “That’s true but I think we can draw some conclusions about our friend, he’s not patient. I don’t have any idea how he found the chamber. I didn’t recognize him as a former student for what that’s worth, but he probably didn’t give it a thorough examination.”

“That’s awfully flimsy.”

“He could have killed you at any Hogsmeade weekend. With his talents it’s not even in question. The attacker is reckless and inclined to quick actions, we can attempt to draw further conclusions.” With a long wave of his wand Dumbledore summoned a breeze, his mist swept into the walls and vanished through the impermeable rock. “But not tonight. I remember my youthful energy with fondness, but once you pass fifty staying up all night to research ancient mysteries loses something.”

Tom accepted their departure reluctantly. Normally he’d agree with a smile and be back in the Chamber in minutes, but there was the possibility of further traps. Exploring the chamber could wait, especially since it seemed so barren.

The two of them made the long walk back to the dungeons in near silence, Dumbledore had presumably fulfilled his dispensing wisdom quota for the day. It was well after curfew when they made it back into the main castle. “Until next time Mr. Riddle.”

“Good night sir.” Tom wandered back to the common room, trying to adjust his plans. Despite what Dumbledore said taking up Slytherin’s name would win him followers. Of course the proudest wouldn’t follow a halfblood, and they might even contest his status. He had no real proof other than being a parselmouth and Slytherin wasn’t the only line with the gift. It seemed a shame to waste the Chamber, but as long as Dumbledore didn’t reveal it he could wait. He could always gather followers from the other side and then fracture the purebloods by revealing his own status. He’d have to reevaluate their relative strengths.

Sleep came slowly to him. He’d spent more time thinking about the future than he’d realized and had to finish two essays that even with his current apathy took time to write. Even after completing them his mind was still racing, scrambling to find his new path. It was something of a surprise when he after he finally closed his eyes to find them open and looking at something other than the ceiling.

He was in a store, from the thick carpet and dark polished wood an expensive one. Long glass cases ran the length of the room and he half expected to see jewelry resting on velvet stands but instead there were wands. The cases were full of them, and as he walked down each slender stick was labeled. Mahogany, willow, oak and yew, all of various lengths and grouped by their cores. “You’re more organized than where I got my first wand.”

A voice came from behind him. “Ollivander’s? That old man has enough tricks he doesn’t need logic. But for those of us who don’t have two millennia of experience,” the voice moved closer and was revealed to come from a balding man who was well on his way to seed, “we need all the help
we can get."

“So should I go back to him?” Tom turned to look at the shelves on the other side of the aisle.

“If you go back to England now you’re braver than I’d imagine.” Tom stopped at the offhand comment lingering at the phoenix feather wands.

“Brave or foolish, I’ve been described as both. However I’ve rarely set out to antagonize a more powerful wizard.” Tom didn’t look back at the old man but felt a wand slide into his hand.

“It doesn’t take quite as much bravery when you’re shopping for a new wand. If you’re thinking about breaking the glass you’ll just hurt yourself.” He did turn at that, finding the old man with his wand raised. “Now why don’t we just sit here, talk about wands, and wait for the law. I’m sure they’ll be interested in meeting you.”

“Foolish then.” Even from his perspective Tom couldn’t tell what he did in the blindingly fast movements, only the results. The salesman was trussed up in ropes and doing slow cartwheels through the air. His face alternated between white and red as his fear battled gravity. “If you’d tried to curse me in the back it might have worked, but that would take the logic you’re so proud of.” He rapped the cases sharply with his wand and then with a swipe vanished the glass. After a moment of fumbling he pulled out a bag and with another wave summoned the wands into the small enclosure. “I was recently told the burned hand teaches best, perhaps taking your stock will be a sufficient lesson about assumptions.”

A buzzing feeling accompanied by a sense of pressure covered Tom and he raised an eyebrow. “Anti-disapparation? Really? What did you tell them? Also how? I thought I knew all the old spells.” The spinning old man remained silent with a stubborn cast to his face. “Fine then, I hope you remember the first rule about wizarding fights after this. Don’t have them anywhere you like.” He sent a bright red stunner at the man and then at the wall a spell that caused terror to rise in Tom; a pure black sphere.

It hit the wall almost silently, the debris from the impact rushing into it, leaving a jagged but clean hole as he walked towards it, his wand swirling, setting up layers of protections. “Wizard, you’re surrounded, throw out your wand and come out with your hands on your head.” The booming voice was slightly accented. German, he thought.

Tom snorted before summoning the unconscious man’s wand, flinging it out, and shouting a reply. “You are aware what they sell here, right?”

“You have ten seconds! If you do not comply we will use lethal force!”

“Plenty of time then.” Liquid silver began to spray from his wand and started to run over some solid surface, filling an invisible mold, the segmented legs being the first clue as to what it was. It started moving, twitching even before it filled out, almost prancing in its eagerness. Tom looked at it his mouth shifting to a smile. “Try not to die, Skrewtsky. *Oppugno!*”

The metallic horror shot out through the hole in the wall, screams greeted it even as he threw a glamour on the wall away from the hole, vanished a part of it and then disillusioned himself as he passed through the illusory wall without breaking stride.

Spell fire was lighting the night, the centipede was apparently far more dangerous than Dumbledore had made it look. He walked quickly away from the screams, but kept looking back, it wouldn’t do
to be hit by stray spells. It seemed Tom would be able to walk straight down the street and out of the fight, invisible and unnoticed in the confusion.

A green flash ended that, accompanied by a frenzied scream. “Verteilt euch! Findet ihn!” He sped up, trying to clear the radius of the jinx but the wizards weren’t giving up that easily. Balls of fire shot into the sky, illuminating the street with noonday light. His disillusionment charm was good, but with the bright light the distortion was visible and he had to jerk left to dodge a curse trailing turquoise flames. Tom glanced up the street and saw dark cloaked men charging, and back to see the same.

“England expects that every man will do his duty I suppose.” He spun his wand in his fingers before conjuring what looked like a lampshade that shined a red light at the Germans. Another wave made it brighter and it began shifting through the rainbow, just after the violet light vanished the screams came back and spells stopped coming. “Thanks Hermione.”

With that non sequitur he started walking faster, sending blasting curses into the ground and spelling up the rock shield he’d used around not only himself, but other distortions he created. That done he set them to weave around him as he joined their pattern in a high stakes shell game.

He was still disillusioned and half of the flares had gone out, leaving sharp shadows he swerved to walk through, making him far closer to invisible. He was sending rocks forth, some were stopped by shields, others split skulls. The Germans were faltering, fewer spells were coming his way and those that did were met by hurtling rocks and conjured flechettes. Tom kept advancing as they fell back, only occasionally lobbing spells to speed the retreating Germans. At last the pressure of the jinx vanished and he stopped. “Finally. Goddamn Nazis.” He spun on his heel and the world twisted and squeezed, when it stopped Tom was back in his bed.

He froze, the cold air and the scent of the dungeons was unmistakable and he was tempted to write the whole thing off as a dream. It had felt so real, but he’d had vivid nightmares before. Dreaming about his attacker was understandable, the man had dominated his thoughts since the attack; but those spells! He’d felt the magic course through him! Even now he remembered it. He’d gotten the hang of silent casting as soon as he learned of it but for all those he knew the incantations. He’d never tried to just to force magic to move as he wanted, not since he got his wand at least. Tonight though, he was sure he could. Screw it. He wouldn’t get back to sleep until he knew.

Tom slid out from under the covers, managing to suppress a flinch as his feet hit the cold stone floor. Normally he’d cast a warming charm but right now he had other concerns. He thought back to the sensation he’d felt when the centipede was summoned, the currents of magic that manifested as quicksilver. He held his wand low then thrust it lower. For a second he thought he’d failed until slowly, slowly, drops of silver began to emerge. It was nothing like the current the attacker had summoned and was glacially filled some shape. He could already see it wasn’t a centipede, it was long and thin, scales were forming, that was enough even before its top started to form, some sort of snake, perhaps a cobra.

It moved before it was complete, coiling even with its top half unfilled. The silver flooded to its tail and slowly filled out the remainder of the shape, moving up the invisible raised body like water in a pipe. At last it stopped, the snake was alert, flicking its tongue out and tasting the air. It looked up to him, he was about to try to speak to it when it dissolved.

The silver flooded to the floor and even worse started smoking. He tried to vanish the liquid metal but the spell only made it splatter further, and then it was on a rug that was starting to smolder. He watched it for a second, spraying it with water didn’t seem like a good idea and to be honest he could
hardly care less right then. His dream, no vision, it had been real. He had learned a new spell or at least the basis of one in it and he had no idea how.

A very small part of him wanted to tell Dumbledore, to see if the old man had any thoughts on the matter but he quashed it. It was his vision, his enemy, his destiny.
Field Trip

Tom never told Dumbledore about the dream. They spent several evenings together exploring the Chamber where he could have spoken but didn’t. The detente they’d had was slipping away. He still saw the necessity for the alliance, the attacker was too strong, too skilled to be resisted alone. There was too much distrust between the two of them for instant camaraderie though. Tom spent much of his time in the library or secluded classrooms, studying, playing, working to gain the fluency of magic the invader and Dumbledore had shown. It would be the work of years he knew, even with his talents half the feats he’d seen had seemed impossible. Performing them in the middle of combat with other spells maintained and with enemies attacking was definitely impossible, at least for now.

He was still working on the silver construct, his snake would only last moments and had none of the speed or power of the invader’s centipede. The magic felt right when he did it but there was more to the spell obviously. He might be missing some thought or feeling, the sort of thing many more powerful spells required. It wasn’t completely useless though, the silver was resistant to almost all spells save the physical, Dumbledore destroying it with fire had been lucky. He paused in his casting as a new idea struck him. Was it luck? The snake he’d half made dissolved as the thought distracted him. The professor was skilled and powerful, by the transitive property he could beat the entire Hogwarts staff. He might have known the weakness, even worse he might have deduced it in the split second he had after it charged a second time. That knowledge and power would be his one day, until then he had nothing to do but work.

“Mr. Riddle.” Speak of the devil and he shall appear. Dumbledore didn’t enter the room, peering in at the smoking remnants of the snake. “If I could have a moment of your time?”

Tom used the delay needed to deal with the increasingly acrid smoke to think on why Dumbledore was there. Oddly the spell resistant silver yielded to a dusting spell commonly used to clean potion work surfaces. “Of course sir, make yourself at home.” He used one of the professor’s tricks as he spoke, conjuring a chair for him and then another for himself. If Dumbledore’s chair was slightly lower and the front two legs a little shorter, well no one had ever accused him of playing fair.

Dumbledore sat without even inspecting it, leaning back so the chair teetered on its back two legs. “You agreed to accompany me this summer as I traveled. I think that besides your safety you will reap other benefits but that will be up to you. I’ll be leaving the castle this weekend and I think you would enjoy the trip.”

Tom sat back, a trip with Dumbledore could range from immensely boring to quite dangerous. Either way it would probably be better than school. Hogwarts was his first and only home but that didn’t mean he was averse to leaving its walls. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll come? Excellent.” Dumbledore’s wide smile split his face. “We’re headed to Geneva, there is to be some discussion over the current war and the impact of recent actions by the Muggle governments.”

“No one will question you bringing a student?” Besides being immensely powerful, not that wasn’t important, Dumbledore was only a professor. Even if he had an invitation he surely didn’t merit his own staff.

“Well there are two easy explanations for your presence.” Dumbledore’s chair was shifting beneath him as he spoke, the hard wood Tom had conjured morphing into deep leather cushions. “First, you announce your discovery of the Chamber of Secrets and become even more of a celebrity, I’m sure you’ve already given the matter some thought. Second, I announce you as my apprentice,
traditionally they follow their masters which would justify you accompanying me wherever I go.”
Tom had to suppress his visceral reaction to the thought of becoming an apprentice, there were far
too many stories about how the old vows could cause difficulties, even without his ambitions. “I shall
of course forgo the traditional oaths, I find them” Dumbledore’s mouth twisted, “distasteful.”

“So just in name then?” That could work far better, it would also have no long term consequences.

“Mr. Riddle you are extremely talented and skilled, I say that without any qualifiers, and under other
circumstances I would consider it an honor to teach you.” He looked down over his half-moon
glasses, his modifications to the chair in addition to his height had placed him back above Tom.
“However I do not think that there is sufficient trust between us to make such an arrangement
viable.” He stood, vanishing the chair beneath him. “We will be leaving Thursday; first by floo to the
Ministry, then to Switzerland aboard whatever contraption they feel best suits a mission of such
importance.” Dumbledore took several steps to the door before glancing over his shoulder.
“Personally I’m hoping we just use brooms, the last time they used the World Tree my robes smelled
like goats for days.” He vanished down the corridor leaving Tom speechless in his wake.

The time to Thursday passed in a blur, classes were as forgettable as ever and the people matched
them. Dumbledore had been right in the incident fading from people’s minds but Tom had seen their
true colors. The only power he could rely on was his. Followers, friends, allies, there was no point
when one wizard could singlehandedly shatter armies. Tom would be one of those wizards, he had
no other choice with the invader coming for him.

He stood in the Entrance Hall Thursday night, his finest robes were still the school uniform and he
felt distinctly underdressed. He had packed lightly, all of his possessions fit in a small valise he had
transfigured and charmed. He was forced to admit that the spatial expansion charms he’s used were
almost unnecessary, he really didn’t own much. He had his mind and magic though, with those he
needed nothing else.

Dumbledore swept down the stairs in his typical flamboyant dress robes. He wore an opera cloak
over them, with the night sky seemingly pinned to the interior. “You’re always punctual Mr. Riddle.
It’s a virtue that will serve you well.” He sent a stream of flame into a cold fireplace and pulled a
small bag from a pocket. He tossed it a few times, looking indecisive, an expression normally foreign
from his face. “Before we go a few last words of warning. First, the ministry is composed of
powerful and influential persons, not necessarily smart or even clever ones. They will likely ask
insulting questions and generally treat you poorly. The purpose of their power is ever to seek more
and that pursuit has consumed them.” The pouched he’d tossed hung an inch above his hand and he
looked satisfied even as he watched Tom to ensure he was listening. “Second, despite most of these
individuals lacking many attributes thought favorable, courage, principles, humor foremost amongst
them, there are exceptions. In my experience it takes a crisis to tell the two sorts apart, and more
irritatingly, by the next crisis they may have shifted. Try to restrain yourself from pointing out their
idiocies and treat it as a lesson in the human condition.” His impromptu lecture over Dumbledore
lobbed the pouch into the fire where it burst into the green flames of floo.

“Sir?” Dumbledore raised an eyebrow but he did stop. “If you feel that way about the Ministry why
don’t you do something about it?”

“Two reasons. First, because I have no desire to play their political games.” He didn’t continue,
staring into the fire absently until Tom felt forced to prompt him.

“And the second?”

“That Mr. Riddle, will have to wait until there’s a little more trust.” With that he strode forward into
the flames, loudly calling out “The Ministry.” Tom looked at the flames a little dubiously, then
He stepped out of the fire, brushing ash from his shoulders as he looked around the room. The room he’d emerged into was vast, dark wooden walls held up a cerulean ceiling marked with strange devices. They spun and progressed according to some mysterious logic, his eyes followed a spoked golden wheel that rapidly crossed the ceiling until it vanished into the far wall. The hardwood floor was dominated by a statue, no, a fountain, a witch and a wizard standing above a crowd of creatures. He would have kept looking but for someone slamming into his back.

“Get out of the way boy, stop gawking like a muggle.” His ears reddened despite his impassive face, the portly man who’d hit him strode rapidly for a knot of other older workers where he began to harangue them until someone put down a silencing spell.

“Alright there Mr. Riddle?” Dumbledore had returned, flanked by an imposing witch whose face seemed locked into a scowl. “Madam Jenkins this is my apprentice, Tom Riddle.”

The older witch didn’t seem to think much of him, only giving him a quick inspection before turning back to Dumbledore. “This is the one that madman was after?” At Dumbledore’s nod her nose wrinkled. “You always did delight in the exotic. Are you prepared for the conference?”

Dumbledore stroked his beard, looking to the ceiling as he thought. “I’ve reviewed your office’s papers, but I disagree on your proposed destruction of the Wards of Vercingetorix.”

“Only you care about the integrity of those fossils, they’ve been breached by every army that cared to.”

He looked pained, “Nonetheless-”

“Archaeology can wait until the Grindelwald question is dealt with, if you cared that much you had forty years to get around to them. Now ignoring Alesia do you have any other concerns?” Madame Jenkins seemed impatient, her words were crisp and quick. “The rumors of sacrifices in the East?”

“I doubt even Grindelwald would sink so low, emanations from works of that magnitude would be detected in any event.”

Jenkins stared at Dumbledore for a long moment before shaking her head briskly. “I hope you’re right Dumbledore.” If she had anything more to say she was interrupted by a gong and a man calling for their attention.

“All delegates for the Fourth Muggle War conference to the Arboretum please, we’ll begin the transit in the next ten minutes.” Dumbledore cursed under his breath and Tom swung to him, half shocked.

“Ingrid Thorsdottir’s work is a miserable way of moving.” Dumbledore’s explanation didn’t satisfy but it was all he offered as the crowd began to stream to the elevators. The three of them packed into a car with others and dropped, stopping in a narrow hall leading to a single door.

Passing through the tall door Tom only barely managed not to gasp. The ordinary hall was gone, they were in a circular room, a stone ring floor surrounded an immense marble walled shaft that vanished into blackness both above and below. A narrow beam of rock cantilevered out from the far side of the room, and led to the center of the shaft where a small dead tree seemed to be growing from the suspended plinth.

A man, a particularly unimpressive one even without the surroundings to diminish him, was waving his wand at the grey wood with what seemed like frustration. The crowd had filled the circumference of the room and were beginning to press together as the flow from the atrium continued. Dumbledore
leaned down to Tom, speaking in a low voice. “Ingrid Thorsdottir,” the distaste in his voice was evident, “was a contemporary of Ignatia Wildsmith who, as you know, invented the floo. Ingrid sought to create her own system and succeeded to an extent.” His explanation was interrupted by a shout of joy from the crowd. The tree had budded, leaves sprouted in an instant then the tree grew.

There was no other way to describe it, where there had been a dead sapling there was a trunk that both spanned the room and somehow remained in the small plinth. Trying to look at the joining made Tom’s mind scream in protest, he tore his eyes away, looking up the trunk. Somewhere far above them he had the impression of movement and some terrible intelligence looking down but after an instant it passed. While he had been staring the crowd had begun to move, witches and wizards marching along the cantilever into the tree.

“The great ash Yggdrasil.” Dumbledore’s comment smashed Tom’s thoughts apart.

“This inspired the muggle myth?”

“Sometimes a sufficiently motivated magician can make myths real.” They both turned, leaving the circular catwalk. Tom had been sure that he could have reached out and touched the bark from the ring but as they walked over the shaft the distance seemed to grow. “Or maybe the myths make themselves real. Either way it is the World Tree, from the dragon at the roots to the squirrel in the leaves.” The path along the beam led directly into a split in the tree, simultaneously a yawning crevasse and a narrow gap. Dumbledore frowned as he stepped into it, his voice echoing strangely. “And most regrettably the persistent odor of the great goat Heidrûn. I’ve tried several charms over the years but quasi-divine goats seem to have their own powers.”

Tom followed him in with not a little trepidation, the crack in the World Tree stretched forever ahead of them and behind them their entrance had vanished. Dumbledore didn’t notice or was too polite to mention it, continuing his complaint. “The worst part is the eddas describing Yggdrasil don’t even mention the goat, just a few deer. Now if this was called Læraðr I wouldn’t complain but the evidence linking the two is at best sketchy. If it wasn’t just a short walk to anywhere I’d do my best to lock this room and forget about it.” Even as he spoke they emerged into a courtyard.

The paving stones were split asunder, the emergence of the tree had not been kind to the masonry. Luckily the area was well lit by miniature suns or the entire British delegation would have fallen on the uneven ground. The stream of the diplomats had split into little groups, they all seemed to know their way around. Tom simply followed Dumbledore as his long strides led them to an opening in the white stone walls. Inside the smooth floors were covered in thick rugs, balls of flame floated at regular intervals in the center of the halls.

Madam Jenkins had been silent but she turned to Tom and gave him a quick smile. “I remember my first time here, old magic, all the countries showing off their legacies, you’d think it would get old but the wonder remains.”

Dumbledore nodded agreement. “Indeed, the first time I saw the Ottomans arrive in a wheel of fire ranks among the most incredible, only my first view of Hogwarts above the lake is above it.”

“Well if you’re apprenticing with Dumbledore you’ll have plenty of opportunities for some showy magic.” She split off with that, her luggage bobbing slowly behind her along another corridor. The two of them continued until they reached a larger room full of people. Their conversations in a thousand languages making enough noise to be a physical presence.

There was a smile on Dumbledore’s face as he watched Tom gawk. “Mr. Riddle, you’ve taken your first steps into a larger world.” Looking around Tom was forced to agree. Men and women of all colors, even shapes and sizes, he could swear he saw a half giant, mingled while trays holding
glasses of some liquor roamed through the hall. “We should stow our luggage then return here, much of the politicking.”

He was cut off by a tall man in dark robes with a chest like a barrel. “Dumbledore! You will pay!”

The shouting man didn’t seem to trouble Dumbledore, he managed to convey polite confusion in the face of the other man’s rage. “Hexenmeister Weber. Whatever will I be paying for?”

“The destruction of Hoffman’s Wands and the murder of our men!” Dumbledore actually looked confused now.

“Hoffman’s Wands? The second rate producer in what? Dresden?”

“Dortmund as you well know. Who else but you can singlehandedly slaughter so many? We will not stand for English interference!” Tom turned his attention from the room to the argument, he knew this attack, he’d seen it. Dumbledore’s hand on his shoulder startled him.

“I am far from the only wizard capable. The man who attacked my own apprentice or even that Russian maniac could have done it. There are many wizards of power without scruples in the world. Your war has seen to that.”

Weber glared at Dumbledore before spitting on the ground, carefully not on Dumbledore Tom noticed, then turned on his hell. “You’ll slip up one time Dumbledore. We’re waiting for it.”

He vanished into the crowd, through the ring that had formed among the spectators. Dumbledore gave them a wide smile and, not releasing his grip on Tom began to move swiftly towards the far wall. Once they’d penetrated the crowd Dumbledore let go, when Tom opened his mouth to question he gave a sharp gesture to stop him.

They left the room into a silent hall. After twenty yards Dumbledore spoke. “Another reason, not of the main two, that I avoid the government is that I’m already accused of acting illegally for England. Joining the Ministry would only confirm the rumors, especially for individuals such as Hexenmeister Weber.” The two of them passed down several more halls until they reached adjoining rooms. “Leave your things here. Each room has a house-elf who is only loyal to the guest staying there, they’ll unpack. For now we need to go mingle.”
Diplomacy

The rooms were opulent, suites with hardwood floors covered by thick rugs enchanted so heavily they pulsed with magic. The embroidery moved on them, the trees blew in some breeze while animals paced and stared up at Tom. It was beyond the moving portraits, the threading moved physically, but also limited. As he watched the images began to repeat themselves in a cycle, lacking the life found in the Hogwarts art. Dumbledore interrupted him just as he began to apply diagnostic spells.

“You’ll have time for that later.” The professor had lost his cloak of the night sky and had compensated by adding robes so bright that Fawkes appearing in a burst of flame above him looked dull. “The rugs fell out of fashion when a few wizards from Babylon discovered how easy it was to hide curses in them.” Dumbledore had turned and begun walking as he spoke, not even bothering to ensure Tom followed. “You may have noticed that the rug itself moves, it’s possible to have new spells form in ways that might not be immediately obvious. Naturally, humans as we are, that property was promptly weaponized and no one trusts them anymore.”

“So why are they here in the middle of a diplomatic event? Won’t people be worried about assassinations?” The idea of magic that could hide other magic not through spells but simple complexity appealed to Tom, but also frightened him. He had spent quite a lot of his recent weeks studying how to defend himself and magic that would register as benign to all spells until some random condition was met was a threat he hadn’t anticipated.

“Well if you’re here it’s assumed you can handle some minor danger, the higher magics aren’t safe after all.” Dumbledore had looked at his watch as he spoke, a glittering monstrosity with far too many hands and had looked irritated at whatever he saw there. He sped up and with his long legs Tom was hard pressed to keep up without breaking into a jog.

“Surely if you’re careful—”

“Inside every person at this conference is the power to change reality at our whim. For all we teach you, all that you learn on your own I hope you realize one thing. Magic may be our greatest servant, but fire had that role once. Magic can create, destroy and everything in between. We may command it, but it cannot be fully tamed.” Tom wanted to ask more, for all of Dumbledore’s pedagogical skill in transfiguration he had never spoken so much on greater things. He had questions to ask, was magic sentient or aware, when would its wildness appear and could it be appeased or opposed?

Their entrance back into the main hall preempted them though, and he was forced to stick to Dumbledore’s side as he began greeting old colleagues and acquaintances and performing introductions. At Tom’s name most gave him a quick inspection, clearly wondering what had prompted two powerful wizards to take an interest in an otherwise unremarkable student. For all of Tom’s hopes about the conference it was turning out to be remarkably boring. The leaders and leading citizens of the other nations were no smarter than those at Hogwarts, and they were all concerned with such tedious minutia. Dumbledore had claimed everyone here could deal with cursed floors without effort but if this was what people with power like that did, he wasn’t sure he wanted it.

No. There had to be more, the world was full of magic and even if the people here were jaded and cared more for politics he didn’t have to follow their footsteps. He was meant for greater things, he wouldn’t squander his talent on erumpent harvesting regulations.
If Dumbledore noticed his increasing annoyance he didn’t react, tirelessly speaking to a parade of the inane and colorless, each utterly committed to their banalities. Tom snagged a glass of something from a passing tray, if he was to be bored at the event he might as well be drinking.

The champagne went down easily, and the glass was charmed to refill itself so he had no way to measure how much he’d drank but his increasingly hazy senses. He had lost Dumbledore in the crowd and somehow made his way to the younger section of the hall. Younger was a relative term, beyond the arm candy of the less secure politicians he was probably the youngest there by a decade. There was still more energy though, even if most of it was now being spent posturing for the rest of their nights. It still made more sense to Tom though, he could understand lust and desire. He kept himself controlled, but he could see how some would see it as a worthy use of power.

“So you’re Tom Riddle.” The sudden interruption surprised him. He’d been insulated from the crowd by his anonymity and alcohol, being directly addressed was jarring.

“I have that honor.” He turned to face the speaker and nearly froze. She was beautiful, blonde, statuesque, and she glowed in the bright hall. He reached out a hand for hers, he had some half forgotten idea he should kiss it or something when her glow vanished.

“I expected more.” She turned sharply and vanished into the crowd leaving Tom crestfallen in her wake. She had been captivating but he wasn’t here for that, the dismissal still stung though. He took another sip, gulp really, of champagne and nearly staggered when he took a step. The drinks had hit him all at once, the glasses or bottles he’d drank reducing his coordination to that of a precocious three year old. Somehow he made it out of the room, moving down half familiar halls in fits and starts. In what he might later recall as one of his greatest feats he made it to his room, carefully walked around the edge of the rug and fell onto his bed with the covers still turned up.

This dream was different. Tom stood in the crisp night air, occasionally looking down at a watch with faintly glowing dials. Having just seen Dumbledore’s Tom focussed on the mundanity of the watch he looked at now. It didn’t display planets or the weather or whatever else Dumbledore’s did, only days, hours, minutes, and a backwards moving second hand. It reached twelve and the world lit up.

It might have been his lack of sobriety but this dream or vision was softer. The explosions he heard were muffled, hardly causing him to react as he strode forward, his watch forgotten. His wand was moving absently, Tom felt protections settle on his shoulders and then another spell on his glasses that seemed to average everything’s brightness. The fires and further explosions dimmed but the shadows faded, it ended with the world in an early dusk.

He twisted on his heel and the world shrank around him squeezing, but this time the dream didn’t end with the apparation. He was in the middle of the explosions now, screams surrounded him along with sharp reports, gunfire. It didn’t stop him though, he put his wand in his jacket and seemed to be searching for something else. Tom only then noticed he was wearing muggle formal wear, completely inappropriate for a wizard and even more so for a warzone.

He had been convinced that the last dream was a vision but this one seemed so outlandish he was doubting his convictions even as he pulled an outrageously large gun from his jacket. He felt his face twist into a smirk as he looked down at it. “The things I do for the statute of secrecy.” Lightly holding the weapon with his left hand he continued to root around his pockets until he pulled out what felt like a bunch of dice. He threw them to the ground and then with that swiftness that still astonished Tom pulled his wand free and enlarged them before they stopped rolling.
The dice were crates and with another wave to remove their lids he could see they were full. The closest one held booklets, grey paper with an eagle over the word ‘Kennkarte’. The others held supplies, coats, boots, food, maps and money. Giving them a final check he tapped his wand to his throat and shouted with a magnified voice. “Dies ist eine Flucht! Komm zu mir!”

After his shout there was silence then a single crack accompanied by a feeling like a raindrop on his left arm. He turned and saw a piece of metal hanging in the air still spinning. He swung his arm up towards it, the gun was impossibly light, saw a man silhouetted against the bright smoke and held the trigger down. Brass fell to the ground, the ringing of the cartridges somehow still audible even as the gun spat fire. The man dropped but Tom was already looking away. Emerging from the smoke there were people, gaunt and suspicious but looking greedily at the crates.

He stared at them, prisoners in rags with half dead eyes and then down at himself, his black suit immaculate with the starched shirt so bright it shone. His face flushed and as he gestured, still using his left hand to the terror of the people as he spoke again. “Es gibt Versorgungen. Nehmen Sie alles was Sie brauchen und gehen.”

They still hesitated until one, braver, or maybe just hungrier lunged forward, grabbed an apple and then they all flooded to the boxes. They pulled coats on and tore into whatever food they could reach while others grabbed some of the booklets that shifted to match their faces.

Another droplet hit, this time in the forehead and screams broke out from the crowd as others fell. He swore viciously, pulling the gun to his shoulder and squeezing off a few rounds before drawing his wand and with two flicks and a slash created a translucent red bubble that rapidly faded as it expanded. He turned to the crowd which was only expanding as more and more prisoners came. “I’m sorry I can’t do more for you all, good luck.”

He twisted again, this time appearing in a lane between burning buildings. The people stumbling from them were better off, muscled and carried weapons, they were soldiers or guards and each one he saw he shot. Tom had never seen death like this before. His last dream had violence and men had died but they’d been far away, only lit by their spellfire in brief flashes. Here he could see them lit by their barracks both before his gun barked and the bloodied messes left after. His march was implacable, some resisted him but their bullets were useless. One man had feigned death and leapt to grapple before an actinic spark flung him back through a wall into an inferno.

He reached the end of the camp’s street and turned back to round the next corner, he glanced at his watch, only minutes had passed since he’d started. As if to answer more explosions, from further off this time, erupted and were greeted by a sharp satisfied nod. He looked over at the carnage, fires lit the night, even without the night vision spell he thought he’d be able to read. He drummed his finger on the stock of the gun, paused to look around once more, then leaned back on his heel and started to twist.

“Reducto!” Tom spasmed, turning his interrupted apparation into an awkward forward roll. He came up facing the other wizard as the curse flew through where he’d stood. His gun was pointed the right way so he shot even as the other man laughed. “Muggelspielzeug?” He raised his wand dramatically and its tip gleamed orange, right until Tom’s fire whip took his arm off at the shoulder.

“If it works.” He summoned the screaming man to him before freezing him in the air upside down at a height to keep their eyes level. He grabbed the man by his hair roughly and silenced him, glaring at the inverted pain-crazed man. “So why does a death camp need a wizard? Legilimens!”

Nothing seemed to happen for a moment until he suddenly released the other man and took a
staggered half step backwards. His face contorted, and even at his remove Tom could feel fury. He flicked his wand sharply and the man twisted, his remaining limbs shattered. Another spell flung him into a one of the fires which roared as he crashed into it. He watched the conflagration for a second before he disillusioned himself, the wet feeling far colder than any Tom had managed. He twisted on his heel and this time he was not interrupted, appearing in a warm and brightly lit hallway with soft music playing.

He started casting immediately, the silver centipede he favored emerged rapidly and immediately raced up a wall to lurk on the ceiling while other stranger spells came into being. At last he was satisfied, invisible but surrounded by a glowing aura and orbited by lumps of iron flanked by two more of his insects. Walking rapidly towards the door at the end he shot an iridescent green spell. The solid wooden doors dissolved into sparks that fell and vanished just before he reached them and entered.

The room almost looked like a hospital, beds lined the walls and sheets of parchment floated next to them to record their treatment. The illusion could only last an instant though, a second glance showed the difference. The beds were closer to slabs, men and women, even children were strapped to the metal frames. Half had long bloody cuts on them, runes carved deep into their flesh. Others didn’t but there were empty beds between them and one of the wizards had been pushing a wheeled cart with another torn up body away for replacement. The few prisoners who could move were staring at him without hope, resigned to whatever new horror he was bringing. For a moment everything was still, Tom was beginning to think the wizard acted so audaciously just to give himself that split second of shock, then he attacked.

The silver beasts burst forward, striving desperately to outrace the iron that had already been launched. They descended on the wizards they reached, rending and tearing them before they sought new targets, their gleaming silver claws untouched by blood. Only one of the wizards survived the first strike and his shoulder was mess of gore. He moved quickly despite his injury, shouting something indistinct and slashing his injured arm, letting loose a spray of blood.

Tom disarmed the man and waited, trying to determine what he’d done. The two centipedes reared and seized the wizard with their mandibles at his throat. “An inferi won’t stop me necromancer. Why even bother blackening your soul further?” He was applying new charms as he spoke, gleaming white walls rose around him and vanished while fiery runes scorched a ring below his feet.

The necromancer wheezed as he watched his blood run over the naked body in front of him. “Grindelwald did not teach us just to make inferi.” The corpse twitched. “We have done magic you can only dream-” His boast was interrupted.

The corpse had struck, her long thin arms lashing up and through the wizard sending a spray of viscera to paint the ceiling. With some command the centipedes attacked her but impossibly she withstood them. Her hands each held a mandible and the scrambling of the razor sharp claws against her body did nothing. She smashed the constructs together and they crumpled, melting back into their silver base. She screamed loud enough to shatter the windows and leapt.

The iron balls met her, hitting her and carrying her back to the far wall with the impact. They didn’t injure her though, she bounded forward out of the wall that had been cratered by her body and then she was joined. The worst of the bodies, some must have been dead were moving and the first had already ripped free of its bonds. A conjured red hot spear cracked through the air, it impossibly bounced off the new one’s chest before ricocheting through the ceiling.

He had no time though to wonder at the failure, the first was there and rearing back to knock his
head off until a gleaming white shield blocked her. She screamed and pressed her bloody arm against it. Her hand began to flake away as she struggled, her toenails were leaving gouges as she braced against the floor. Almost all of the flesh on her hand was gone, leaving only blackened bones, but the wall was moving in and she seemed to know it.

The sudden impact of the second and third corpses broke the equilibrium, he was knocked back reeling into the hall he entered from. The first howled victoriously as the other two bounded towards him. The last remaining centipede pounced on one and he hit the other with a jagged black blade but both were only slowed. The lone female charged but as she crossed his original position she was met by a pillar of sunfire that could be felt from thirty feet away. The column of white-gold flame punched through the ceiling and drowned out the screams of the remaining captives. At last it stopped, her smoking bones fell to the ground and stayed there.

The remaining two were moving before he could capitalize on the death of the first, one flinging the still writhing centipede at him as the other leapt the remaining distance. In the centipede’s flight he somehow liquified it and formed the remainder into a gleaming silver blade on the end of his already slashing wand. The sword cleaved the corpse with a blinding white light and by the time his eyes cleared the other had hit him.

The blow launched him down the hall, he bounced off the ceiling and then a wall before he rolled to a stop on the ground. If it wasn’t for the durability of wizards and some powerful enchantments on him, Tom knew the wizard would be dead. He might be in a second anyways. Somewhere between collisions one and four he’d lost his wand, he could see it’s polished length gleaming halfway down the hall even as the corpse stalked closer.

They moved simultaneously, the last beast flying towards him even as his right hand desperately called for his wand and his left- his left found the grip of his gun in a pocket and fired wildly.

The bullets hit him, somehow, impossibly leaving gaping holes where magic had failed. Both he had the inferi had the same expression of gaping disbelief as they stared at the wounds. It touched one almost curiously, looking at the blood on its fingers and licking it. The taste of blood seemed to revitalize it as it screamed and charged again, the bullet holes shrinking as it leapt the remaining distance.

A black sphere hit it and the corpse vanished in a spray of blood.

“Well that was a little anti-climactic.” He walked forward, giving the one he bisected a wide berth as he made it back into the room, no laboratory. The diagnostic spell he cast showed which of the prisoners were still alive, the dead he burnt with the same white fire he used on the first.

The living he healed, closing their deep cuts and vanishing the sores their imprisonment had left them. He conjured clothes for them and as they put them on, their initial fear mostly gone, he started to talk. “So do any of you speak English?”

One of the woman nodded and replied in a thick accent. “Yes, a little. What are you?”

Tom felt the eyebrow raise. “I’m a who actually. So this night is about to get a little weirder but I think a whole lot better for all of you.” He put his wand to his forehead and pulled a string of silver from it that he somehow tossed then caught in a glass vial. He threw it to the woman who’d spoken. “I’ve stormed the camp, if you go out those doors and take a right you should find a crowd that will lead you to the supplies you need to escape.” Most of them flooded past him at that, nearly running in their haste. He caught the woman he’d spoken to before she could join them though.
“I was hoping I could ask you do something if you don’t mind.” His wand moved as he spoke, sending cleaning and grooming spells at her until she looked almost human again. “I said I was a who, but I’m also a what. A wizard in fact.” She didn’t react to what was usually a world changing pronouncement. “Most of the time we keep ourselves hidden away, selfishly I think but that’s another matter. I need you to give this,” he pointed to the vial, “to the people I send you to.”

She stared at it, the silver liquid seemed to bubble. “Why me? Surely you can do it yourself with all your power.”

He smirked. “I’m actually a fairly wanted criminal, especially after tonight.” He dug into one of his pockets, grooping for something but giving up once he found a flask. He looked at it, his mouth gave a twitch that might have been a smile then tapped it with his wand. “Portus.”

She accepted it when he handed it to her, looking at the worn finish with some confusion. “Now remember, give them the vial and tell them to put it in a pensieve. They’ll know what it means.”

She looked up at him, confusion evident. “What’s that- no never mind. Who should I say sent me?”

He looked down at himself, his suit still unblemished. “James Bond-” She vanished before he could finish, the portkey activating midword. “Oh well, its not like anyone would get it anyways, at least tonight wasn’t a total failure.” He looked around the room one last time, launched a fireball into a far corner and then twisted. Tom woke gasping.
Peals

A ringing bell woke Tom. He jerked up from his bed searching for it. The sound was coming from right behind his ear no matter which way he turned. The sharp notes stopped after a moment, followed by a knock on the suite’s door. Tom looked down at himself, he’d drooled on himself in his sleep and his robes were hopelessly wrinkled. All told it was not how he wanted to present himself to the upper tiers of the wizarding world, even if they were a disappointment. The knocking hadn’t stopped during his inspection and he reluctantly moved to the front room to answer it.

“Good morning Mr. Riddle.” It was Dumbledore of course. Tom’s hangover chose that moment to make itself felt, the professor’s robes were bright enough to send spikes piercing through his cranium. “You missed some excitement last night, it’s set the entire conference aflutter.” He seemed to notice Tom’s state for the first time then, with a slow motion he drew his wand and gestured at Tom’s robes. “With your permission?”

Barely waiting for an answer he waved it, Tom’s robes seemed to shudder, slackening before tightening up again, this time almost entirely without wrinkles. He glared at the recalcitrant ones, then with two more twitches smoothed them. “I often had to help get my brother and sister presentable. It’s strange how some charms can retain their difficulty despite decades of practice.” He gave one more flourish and Tom felt an icy wave hit him then recede. The hangover left with it as well as the grime of the prior day. For the first time that morning he felt fully human. Dumbledore gave him a final inspection and nodded sharply. “That will do I think. We have a working brunch but I suspect its original topic will be discarded in favor of last night’s happenings.”

“What happened, sir?” Tom was once again half jogging to keep up with the taller man’s brisk strides. He had his suspicions, of course, but validation would be appreciated.

“Our friend decided to branch out from assaulting schools.” Dumbledore cast some some spell that made Tom’s ears pop before continuing. “He stormed some prison camp in Germany and apparently happened on one of Grindelwald’s more disgusting projects. He also gave a name- although it’s probably false - James Bonn.”

So far the events matched Tom’s dream and given the prior confirmation of the raid on the wand shop he was quite confident they were real and unaltered. He had no idea why he was having them, but occasionally getting glimpses into his enemy’s mind could only be useful. “Did he do or say anything to explain himself? And was he English?”

“He spoke English and rather poor German and his accent did seem to be from our little island. As for explanations, no, not really, his actions were just as baffling this time.”

“How so?” Dumbledore was pensive, looking to the ceiling as they walked.

“He freed the prisoners, muggles of no particular worth. They weren’t rich, influential, or even healthy and he staged a prison break at no small personal risk to free them. It hardly fits with a man determined to kill a random schoolboy.”

It truly was odd, Tom couldn’t imagine acting similarly. The images of the muggles in the camp stuck with him though, gaunt bodies with dull eyes that nonetheless had seized on the chance Bonn had given them. The crates of enchanted documents would have taken effort on their own, even if the rest of the supplies he brought were easy enough to procure with magic. Bonn had the power to
do whatever he wanted, losing to Dumbledore was hardly an embarrassment, and he was saving half-dead muggle prisoners. He must have had an ulterior motive, but what?

They entered into an airy room as he thought, the pressure he’d felt the entire walk vanished as Dumbledore placed his wand back into his pocket. Round tables with white tablecloths were dotted throughout the room and there was already a small queue at the buffet. “This was to be a discussion over the challenges in maintaining the Statute of Secrecy with improved muggle technology, but like I said I doubt it will remain that way.”

The two of them moved towards the food. Tom realized that the only thing he’d consumed in the last eighteen hours was alcohol and the smell of the bacon and fresh pastries was enough to make him salivate. After filling his plate just below the food’s angle of repose he turned back to the tables, looking for his place. He searched for a few minutes, he’d been distracted by the placards that seemed to simultaneously be in several languages as soon as he wasn’t directly looking at them, before he found his name. He managed to resist picking up the thick folded paper to analyze the spellwork, especially after he saw his tablemates were staring at him.

“So you are the apprentice of Albus Dumbledore.” An extravagantly mustachioed man broke the silence with a deep bass rumble. “And more relevantly today, the first target of our mysterious Mr. Bonn. Do you have any idea why?”

Tom stifled the urge to shift uneasily. Normally he relished the attention but here he was far from his comfort zone, barely knowing the rules. It wouldn’t stop him though, he’d already changed worlds and rose once in his life. Tom plastered on his broadest, most transparently insincere, grin. “I don’t believe there’s anything relevant I’m permitted to say,” he glanced at the man’s placard which was somehow legible through the back of it, “Herr Rasmussen.”

The man laughed, causing his portly frame to shudder. “So young Albus has already started keeping your secrets for you. That’s Flamel’s influence on him to be sure.” He leaned ponderously across the table, “You’re among friends here, are you sure you’re not going to share?”

“Don’t bother, he knows nothing.” The entire table started at the interjection. The blonde, the same blonde he’d encountered, sat gracefully as her plate followed her to the table. “We spoke, well I spoke, last night and little Tom here was as mystified as any of us.”

Rasmussen’s mouth tightened at the interruption. “Lady Clara, the Marquis sent you in his stead? Is he too busy fighting goblins to attend?”

She laughed, twirling her pale wand between her fingers. “Oh Steen. Just because you sold yourselves to those beasts for peace doesn’t mean we will. My father is keeping the creatures where they belong, under our feet and under the ground.” Her wand stopped abruptly, very clearly not pointing directly at anyone but close enough. Rasmussen and the others were fixated on the tip which was perfectly still but started to glow. Her smiled widened as she watched them, then the wand and glow vanished. “But enough about my family’s battles. Let’s talk about these new ones. Our friend James Bonn attacks at random. Tom doesn’t know why, do any of you?” Rasmussen had no answer to her drawled question but a pulsing vein.

Another of the people at the table, a balding man who had been silently spreading jam during the faceoff, chose that moment to enter the conversation. “How are you so sure of Mr. Riddle’s ignorance? Over seventy percent of murder victims know their killer. It is not so unlikely that he has knowledge of this matter.”
She gave Tom a quick look that managed to convey contempt, boredom, and dismissal all at once, Malfoy could learn volumes from her. “His thoughts betray him.”

“Legilimency is illegal, Lady Clara.” Rasmussen’s satisfaction was clearly audible. “Your father can’t protect you from a crime you’ve confessed to.”

Clara aggressively sliced a piece of melon on her plate, lifting it to her mouth as she spoke. “We are all diplomats here, what crime can I commit?”

Tom almost missed her rejoinder, focused on the magic. “Legimens” the wizard, Bonn, had said and now they were talking of Legilimency. The two must be connected and Clara had implied she’d seen his thoughts. Dumbledore had admitted such magic existed, but had given no further details. Now he had a lead. He’d lost his easy access to the Restricted Section, but he had no doubts that he could get in. The knowledge might not even be restricted at all, he’d find out more and master Legilimency and its counters like he’d managed with all the rest.

Consumed by his thoughts it took a second to realize the table was looking at him. “I’m sorry, I was distracted, can you repeat the question?”

The bald man answered him in his reedy voice. “Lady Clara suggested that Bonn was a hero, freeing prisoners, killing dark wizards and never killing any innocents. Foulata here,” he gestured to a regal elderly looking woman whose skin was so black as to soak up the light, “replied that Bonn being a hero means that you are the villain. I asked what you thought of that?”

“Everyone is the hero in their own story.” His trite reply didn’t satisfy them but as the silence stretched on Foulata at least appeared bored.

“Enough about the boy, it’s as she said, he knows nothing. We all saw the memory Bonn sent here though, what of Grindelwald’s men at that camp?”

“We cannot be sure the memory was real,” was Rasmussen’s quick answer but even he looked curious as to what the others would say.

“If we assume the memory was legitimate it seems likely that Grindelwald’s Germany is violating the Statute.” The last man at the table spoke with a bit of a twang. It gave Tom the impression he should be shooting Indians or driving cattle. “Now I can think of a few ways to trick muggles into handing over prisoners without knowing, but it seems to me that them cooperating is a mite more likely.”

“What does is it matter?” replied Clara airily, her drink in hand. “The Statue was flawed from the beginning, separating ourselves from the muggles was pointless.”

“Pointless? No one wanted to join the colonial wars. In Europe we were blessed with the Pax Romana, others were not so lucky.” The bald man was serious now, his eyes locked on Clara. “Your family’s obsession has blinded you to the larger world, you only see the loss of your knights against the goblins, for the rest of us it was the only way to prevent another Mexica war.”

Tom was lost. Binns never covered much besides goblin rebellions, but he had no idea that there was still fighting going on. As to the Mexica war, he’d never even heard of it. He wouldn’t confess ignorance though, better to stay silent and be thought a fool and all that.

“So we let them struggle along when we can do so much?” Real emotion was seeping into Clara’s voice now, “Magic is not a treasure to hoard, it is a gift. It is meant for more.”
“If you feel that way why don’t you join up with Grindelwald? He’s always made it plain he wants to reunify our worlds.” Rasmussen’s words seemed to surprise her. For the first time she looked her age, decades younger than their other table members.

“That’s different.” Even she sounded unconvinced and Rasmussen looked victorious.

“Another explanation is that he’s a mercenary, it’s easy to imagine a German muggleborn paying for their family to be rescued.”

The twanging man, Tom was pretty sure he was American, scoffed at that. “A wizard with that sort of power? He don’t need work.”

Foulata nodded in agreement. “If mercenaries were as skilled as you seem to think, there wouldn’t be a government left in the world.”

Baldy was also against the mercenary theory. “Indeed, I’m curious about his spells though. I didn’t recognize a single one and he looks too young to have made an entirely new set. That black orb in particular, Mr. Riddle, did he use that against your master?”

Tom had to fight down the urge to object to the term but he managed it. “He did, actually. Several times, first to take out the floo and then to destroy a stone giant.”

“Well it certainly seemed effective against those corpses. They had resisted a fairly broad array of magic up until then.”

“Not so well against bullets,” the American commented idly. “That was a shock for both of them it seemed.”

“That regeneration though, if they are Grindelwald’s work they’re a masterpiece. How many wizards could kill one before it closed and ripped their throats out?”

“So far, half of them.” Clara’s flippant comment caused the American to start laughing, nearly choking on his breakfast. “They are certainly worth further study.”

Rasmussen was less amused. “Already planning on putting more bodies on the frontlines?”

“Why shouldn’t muggles contribute to their defence? If you’re concerned about the Statute just remember dead men tell no tales.” Her smirk seemed forced now.

Foulata coughed and raised a hand, both turned to her. “Even if that German’s fate didn’t convince you, remember that necromancy rarely turns out well, even for the greats. Gagool, Cadmus, the Witch of Endor, all of them had cause to regret their actions at their deaths.”

The bald man, something Anderson Tom read, continued her thought. “Besides, I’ve heard rumors that your father has had recent successes in his efforts. Why risk his gains with prohibited and dangerous magic?”

“It’s a constant struggle. Neither my father nor I will live forever and if we can utilize new magics to permanently change the battlefield we will.” Clara’s response had the sound of a often repeated quote.
“Be that as it may, we’ve gone rather far afield.” The American munched on a piece of bacon as he spoke, his every gesture showing how irritated he was talking while he could be eating. “This breakfast is about keeping our worlds separate. It’s getting harder with cameras and radios and there’s no reason to think that their proliferation will stop anytime soon. It’s damned hard to obliviate film I understand.”

Anderson alone looked satisfied at the change in topic while the others seemed to prefer talking of goblin wars and necromancy. “My government has been developing a spell that we find most efficacious. Using principles of similarity we’re able to alter all non-magical copies of an image or sound at once. Eyewitnesses are notoriously unreliable in the muggle world, even if we’re slow off the mark once the original witnesses have been obliviated and the images changed no one will believe the second order witnesses.”

The discussion on the theory that followed was quick and almost entirely above Tom’s level. One consolation was that Clara appeared similarly mystified, but he paid attention to as much as he could. He never knew if he’d want to create a spell to affect any number of the same things but utilizing the fruit of the Danish Ministry’s research was only sensible. It also made up for his disappointment at the initial gala, the people around this table were talented in magic.

“Interesting work I’ll admit,” twanged the American who had at last cleared his plate, “but I think our real best bet will come with scepticism. Just last year millions of muggles decided that extraterrestrial invaders were in the sky, no one does now because it’s ridiculous. If we just ensure that seriously believing in magic is enough to get one ostracized from polite society we won’t even need to obliviate anyone, they’ll do it themselves.”

“Risky at best, keeping ourselves secret is surely worth a little effort.” Rasmussen seemed to sum up the rest of the table’s feelings.

A sudden bell made them all jerk upright, giving Tom flashbacks to his wakeup call. Turning this time he could see it’s source, a pale woman with dark hair was shaking her wand as if it she were ringing it. Clara smiled at the sight. “Figures she’d use Kibeth, everyone that went to school with my father loves that spell.”

Anderson was also visibly entertained by it. “One of our teachers had the habit of bringing back Egyptian relics, the bells were the easiest way to deal with them, and so much more.” He turned to Foulata who was distinctly not amused. “Bet you wish you knew about them back in Kukuanaland.”

Her voice was dry as she stood. “There are many things I wish I knew back then, unfortunately there is no magic to change the past.”
“So you met the Marquis’s daughter.” Dumbledore had come to collect Tom after the brunch ended. After they’d been called the tables had broken up and several delegates had chosen to speak. The crowd was far from attentive, in the corner Tom could see a group attempting to duplicate the silver centipede spell as Anderson droned on about the Danish project. He had to suppress a smirk as he watched them and resisted the urge to try to summon his cobra. The spell might not work perfectly for him, but at least he got something other than burned floors.

“Lady Clara? I suppose I did.” He didn’t know quite what to make of the woman. She was arrogant and young so Tom’s first impression was that she was another Malfoy, lifted to her position by her family. Rasmussen had clearly disliked her though, and she did seem to have some skill if he had been worried about her wand. “Why does she have a title?”

“Vanity.” Dumbledore steered them around a knot of wizards furiously whispering in... Russian maybe? “Before the Statute they were assigned to keep the goblins below the Alps and they were raised to the muggle nobility. It’s defunct and meaningless of course, but if you’re strong enough you can make people call you whatever you want. Their talents are wasted though, all they do is kill goblins.”

“We’re still fighting goblins? Why doesn’t Binns tell us any of this?” Goblin rebellions were incredibly tedious and had seemed entirely irrelevant, the only thing the creatures did now was banking. If he’d known there was active conflict with them in Europe he’d have paid far more attention.

Dumbledore looked almost surprised at the question. “Despite the Rätikon obsession with goblins they’re not especially notable. One family has been keeping the last free clans of them trapped for centuries. If it weren’t for that family’s intransigence they’d be integrated, the same as every other set of goblins in the world.”

He slowed and looked around, as if to theatrically check for eavesdroppers. “As to the professor's chosen curriculum, while I’ll never speak ill of a colleague, as a former student I can say his lessons are rather scattered. History is like the other subjects, if you wish to learn it you must work outside of class.”

It was a good point, Tom had always spent far more time on magic out of class. He had thought history useless and that had stung him today. There must be a better resource than the textbook, even if it just gave a cursory glimpse it would be better than the Hogwarts curriculum. “Why do they, the governors or Dippet-”

“Professor Dippet.” Dumbledore’s correction was amused.

“Right, why do they still allow him to teach if he’s so poor?”

“History isn’t seen as very glamorous. Other magics,” Dumbledore waved his wand and the two of them dissolved into smoke, fading through the crowd before resubstantializing at its edge, leaving the hall, “command more respect. Why worry about the past when the history of magic has been a solid climb ever since wands were created?”
Tom struggled with the thought that the past was irrelevant with a guaranteed brighter future. He didn’t really buy it, if nothing else people would hold grudges, but Dumbledore’s casual demonstration had distracted him as the older wizard must have known it would. “What was that?” He couldn’t keep the curiosity from his voice, he didn’t even really try.

“A precursor to apparating. It was discovered independently several times, the tribes of the Rub’ al Khali called it alldkhkhan aljinn, it translates to something like genie’s smoke I believe.” Tom had felt the sensation of apparating through his visions and the spell Dumbledore used was nothing like it. When they’d returned to solidity there’d been a blissful second where all of his senses were heightened, colors brighter, sounds sharper, and even the air against his skin had seemed full of meaning. Only for an instant though, the sensations vanished as they reappeared.

“Why did they call it that? Why isn’t it better known?” It had been far more comfortable than the wrenching twist.

“The name? I had Binns as well I’m afraid. However it has several disadvantages, not least the addictive quality of the transitions. There are stories of wizards who wasted away in the desert, constantly fading into and out of the material world. Obliviators ensure that any muggle witnesses think they’re mirages of course.”

“Well then why show it to me?” The addictive nature wasn’t too surprising, Tom could understand the weak minded craving that sublime moment, even remembering it half made him want to find the spell. It didn’t really fit Dumbledore’s persona though, he’d allowed Tom to move into danger before but he’d never exposed him to it.

“You may not be my apprentice in truth, but I am still a teacher. Part is that it illustrates an important lesson too many ambitious wizards fail to learn. Just because magic is old and rare doesn’t make it better.” Dumbledore had sped up slightly as they walked and the two of them were moving from the luxurious halls into rougher corridors. The rugs were replaced by worn carpet and scuffed stone. They were the only ones in them, the noise of the conference had faded with the opulence.

“And the other part?” Dumbledore chuckled before shouldering a door open, Tom followed and stopped short. The door, an entirely ordinary wooden door had opened to the ledge of a cliff. It was encrusted with ice and the warmer air of the corridor was rushing past them into the alpine air. “The other part Mr. Riddle,” he seized Tom’s shoulder, “is so you’ll have a little context in why we deal with the irritation of apparating.” Before Tom could react, to pull his arm away or something, Dumbledore had taken two long steps and with an entirely unexpected strength pulled Tom with him over the edge.

For a moment panic seized him, he was falling to his death in the company of a cackling madman. He knew he was made for more though. Tom drew his wand in an instant, the weeks practicing in the tower room made perfect as thirteen and a half inches of yew filled his hand. For a fleeting moment he thought he heard something, high and pure and triumphant, then he was moving. A cushioning charm was his first spell, the fall might not kill them now, his second move was to try to get over Dumbledore. He couldn’t stop his own momentum, but the professor might make an adequate braking system. “Arresto -”

The immense squeezing of apparating seized Tom then, the howling wind vanishing as the two of them appeared amidst smoldering ruins with crews of men working around them. Tom staggered free, roughly yanking himself away from the insane professor who was still laughing as he
disillusioned them both. “My apologies Mr. Riddle,” he had to pause to catch his breath. “Your face, oh you should have seen it.”

Tom was barely able to suppress the desire to do something supremely ill advised to Dumbledore. “What the hell was that?” The adrenaline of the plummet was leaving his system, the shaky feeling of coming down was becoming far too familiar. “Are you trying to get us killed?”

“Hardly.” Dumbledore’s voice was serious now, although there was a hint of mirth. If he could see him, Tom was sure he’d still be smiling. “It’s just that the only way to apparate in or out of that castle is the hole in the wards we left through. Nice reactions though, your planned use of me as a human shield was inspired.”

“And why did we have to leave the castle?” He was looking around their surroundings now, the burned buildings were enough of a clue, even ignoring the surrounding scenery. “You wanted to look at the attack site?”

“Indeed, excellent deduction.” Tom nearly froze, he’d been asleep when the memory was shown, he shouldn’t know where they were. He’d just have to brazen it out.

“Why now then? Won’t we be missed? Should we really be in Germany now?”

“You tell me.”

Dumbledore went silent, and since he was invisible Tom had to assume he wanted an answer. Of course this could just be another of his long rhetorical pauses, the professor was irritating like that.

Tom had never been able to resist a puzzle though, why was Dumbledore jaunting around a country that suspected him of a variety of war crimes? “You have an alibi. No one knows about the gap in the wards, so they won’t be looking for you.”

“Almost Mr. Riddle. I’ll admit I’m not particularly worried about them discovering I’m here, as long as they don’t discover I’m here. Gellert will have ensured there’s something to detect wizards of my caliber.” His voice was moving away as he spoke, Tom followed him towards another burned building.

“What are you looking for? The inferi?” From the vision that building hadn’t burned, they were poking around where the barracks had been. The men working must have been removing the bodies, the wizard had certainly left a few in his wake.

“No, the wizard, Mr. James Bonn, cast several spells out here. We can hope that he was the only wizard in the camp so the residue of his magic may be uncontaminated. In the laboratory his magic would have been mixed up with all the rest.” Tracking an invisible wizard was more difficult than it sounded, especially since Dumbledore apparently didn’t leave footprints.

“What good will that do? Can we track him with it?” Magical forensics had never really appealed to Tom. Diagnostic spells yes, but a spell was a spell was a spell. It didn’t matter who cast it and the results were almost always inconclusive. Dumbledore knew better it seemed.

“If nothing else we’ll be able to identify his handiwork, that is no small thing. A wizard like that? He’ll leave traces everywhere, you can’t develop that level of skill without practically breathing magic.” Dumbledore at last gave a sign of his existence besides his voice, several burnt boards shifted and a charred and crumpled form rose between them. It was the corpse of the first wizard
he’d fought.

The professor was entirely unconcerned about levitating a burnt body in the presence of muggles so Tom decided to stay calm. If worse came to worse he remembered the feeling of the wizard’s bullet shield, his magic had always responded to his need and Tom’s need to avoid being perforated by bits of lead was always extreme.

He waited as wisps of color, dark green and gold, gently floated from the body, they were more intense where the bones were broken and from the body’s ruined eyes. It must have been the spell residue Dumbledore referred to, although Tom had no idea how to read it.

It flowed out for what seemed like hours, the sun was bright and he could nearly see his shadow as the men cleaning the prison drew ever closer, but after what was only a few minutes Dumbledore was finished, incinerating the dead wizard’s body with a flame bright enough to leave Tom blinking. “Well I’ve got what I came for. I hope your first visit to Germany doesn’t put you off it for life. It’s a splendid country, full of beer, clocks, and well.. I suppose that’s enough.” He somehow grabbed Tom’s shoulder again, his own spell no obstacle to his sight. “Ready for the return trip?”

He actually waited for a response, the consideration almost startling Tom enough to leave him silent before he answered. “Wait, what’s your plan to get us back to the ledge?”

The humor was back in Dumbledore’s voice “Are you sure you want to know? You don’t want to dare mighty triumphs by looking without leaping?” Tom had to consider Dumbledore’s challenge, he burned to accept it, to show his talents but a larger part of him was cautious. The professor seemed to realize it, a shade of disappointment entering his voice. “Well, your choice, but try remember that Gryffindors aren’t the only ones who can be bold.” Something hit the ground as he spoke, a rug that rolled open to reveal carefully embroidered clouds racing around its edge. “They keep trying to ban these in Britain but I think they’re a little more fun than brooms. The lack of stability charms adds a certain _je ne sais quoi_. Step aboard then.”

Tom did so and the pressure of apparating followed. The carpet bobbed in midair for a moment as its charms fought gravity, then the two of them began to smoothly ascend, reaching the ledge shortly. The door was still open and some snow had blown in, Dumbledore vanished it as he slammed the door and led them back towards the conference. “Well if nothing else you get to add two stamps to your passport, of course Germany’s you’ll have to forge. The trip was hardly a total waste and we still have what promises to be an excellent dinner ahead of us.”

Tom tuned out his soliloquy on the virtues of triple aged mead, he had learned a lot on the trip, not least the chosen alias of his enemy, James Bond.
The triple-aged mead, the name was due to some bizarre interaction of accelerated brewing cauldrons with inverted stasis spells, wasn’t entirely terrible. Dumbledore had noticed Tom’s difficulties with gauging how much he’d drank from a bottomless glass, he’d changed the subject of the table’s conversation to alchemy and demonstrated a spell to track how much liquid was poured from a container. He’d actually said the incantation and waved his wand broadly, Tom was torn between embarrassment and gratitude as he put the spell on his own drink.

Looking back on the first night it had been a squandered opportunity. He couldn’t bring himself to feel too guilty though, seeing what ‘powerful’ wizards got up to had been a disappointment even if the rest of the night’s events had somewhat ameliorated it. Tonight was far closer to what he’d imagined and hoped for. Dumbledore’s alchemical anecdote had spurred the rest of the table, more academics than administrators, to tell their own stories. A retired curse breaker, looking entirely ordinary past his tattooed arms and scarred hands, had described his raid on an Incan temple. It had been charmed to only open during the period of an eclipse, he and his team had only minutes to enter and destroy the locks before they’d be spending the next four years with the bones of Huayna Capac.

Of course they’d made it, but Tom was hooked. The magical world was far larger than he’d known at Hogwarts, if nothing else the conference had made that clear. For the first time since the Chamber of Secrets he had a new goal, he’d be the greatest wizard to ever live and everyone would know it. He ruefully admitted to himself that he’d put far too much stock in politics. Slytherin had blinded him, all of the maneuvering for fleeting advantages, the endless schemes, they had distracted him from what he once knew. Power was seized, not gifted, and magic was might. Now if he could only deal with Bond he’d be content.

At last the stories- one woman had been far too proud of her negotiations with giants- ended after the dinner had shifted to dessert and the mead to a sweeter wine. Tom had not indulged himself to anywhere near the same degree but he still felt a pleasant warmth. How much of that was due to the alcohol and how much was to his new ambition was an open question that he didn’t particularly care to answer. He left the table with new names and contacts, Dumbledore had watched him curiously but at the very least his charm had not deserted him. Dippet and Slughorn might have discarded him, but to the men and woman at the conference having a powerful sorcerer attack was enough to pique their interest. He’d be leaving England behind, being a prefect or Head Boy was nothing compared to the wider world.

Laying down for his final night in Geneva he was almost disappointed when no new dreams came. Seeing what his opponent was up to might end up being a crucial advantage. Of course, he could hardly expect such luck whenever it would be dramatically appropriate. Or could he? Dumbledore’s remarks on the occasional irrationality of magic kept him distracted through his breakfast. There was a link between him and Bond, if he were inclined to be unimaginative he might call it the bond-Bond, but he had no idea why it would appear. He hadn’t researched too much about the link. He had been, and was still, worried that Dumbledore was monitoring him far closer than he let on. His reading list would be an obvious thing to keep tabs on, his secret connection might not remain that way with the professor scrutinizing his every move. Something was strange about it, if attempted murder victims commonly saw through the eyes of their attackers it would definitely come up in the courts at least. Until he knew more he’d just have to keep an eye open for any information and be grateful for the window into Bond’s moves.

The British delegation split up after breakfast. It had been a quiet affair, many of the aides were
nursing hangovers if Tom was any judge, and Dumbledore told him they’d be making their own way back to Hogwarts.

The two of them walked through the halls, not speaking but hardly silent. Dumbledore was humming some tune, half conducting himself as the few passersby gave him confused looks. Their luggage was bouncing along to the half heard music, the professor’s occasionally taking the initiative to rap the floor and walls to add percussion. Other things were joining the song as they moved, a suit of armor had blown its horn in tune with a cheerful disregard for its lack of lungs and lips. As they passed the gates into a wide courtyard paved with stone Tom was half dreading what would happen next. He was imagining the birds chiming in or perhaps the surrounding mountains as bassos.

He hadn’t expected the music to stop without warning, both of their suitcases fell to the ground, Dumbledore’s accompanied by the crash of expensive things shattering. The wizard who stood in front of them was pale with rage, his wand trembling as he held it low to his side.

“Hexenmeister Weber.” A listener could not have accused Dumbledore of sounding any less than perfectly pleased to see the wizard. “What brings you here? If you wanted to see us off, speaking for myself of course, you didn’t need to.”

“Enough games Dumbledore.” Tom couldn’t help but be impressed by the wizard’s courage. He must know how powerful the professor was, he’d easily beaten the man who’d shredded every German he’d met, and the stout man was facing him wand out. “I received orders. Will you come peacefully?”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow, a magnificent gesture that managed to convey his appreciation for the joke while gently hinting the punchline was needed. “Hexenmeister, we are both aware of how such a confrontation would turn out. I must question what your master was thinking.” He waved a hand at the gathering crowd surrounding him but Tom watched him carefully, his larger movements had distracted the impromptu crowd from Dumbledore drawing his wand. Tom gripped his but he felt spells, shields and other more subtle things settle onto him as Dumbledore cast silently and entirely without wand movements as he spoke. “We are both diplomats now, are you willing to violate the traditions so egregiously?” The magic wrapping Tom was nearly stifling, additional layers kept settling on him even as Dumbledore stared at the German.

“He said you were arrogant, I must learn not to doubt my master.” The smile on Weber’s face was utterly incongruous with his former rage, and Tom felt his tactical situation.

“If it’s arrogance to think that a single average wizard will not present much difficulty, than I will concede Gellert’s point.” Dumbledore’s wand left his sleeve for the first time and the crowd, apparently unwilling to interfere, focused even more with the prospect of imminent violence. “Now will you step aside? I have places to be, and you ceased to be entertaining shortly after you first spoke.”

“Nein. Los!” The shout surprised Tom, who was Weber talking to? The spellfire coming from the crowd answered that question.

Dumbledore had moved before Weber said his second word. He’d slashed his wand down and a wave of silver light hammered out, Weber shielded it but some of the ambushers fell before Dumbledore was forced to erect a gleaming blue shield around them. Someone to Tom's right launched a sickle shaped curse, it hit the azure wall and they rang like a gong. Tom could feel his teeth vibrating with the immensity of the sound, the edges of his vision going briefly fuzzy. He had his wand out but he couldn’t cast, he didn’t know how the shield worked and had no desire to have his own spell hit him.
Dumbledore had no such doubts, using the respite as the wizards battered his shield to conjure floating head sized bronze pyramids around them. They formed a pentagon with their points facing out as golden beads of light began to race between them, if there was more to the magic it didn’t get a chance to finish. With a rush of wind, a sound Tom was already beginning to dread, the killing curse punched through the shield and struck one of the blocks. It exploded, sending shards of flaming metal at both of them, he was barely able to flinch before one of the spells Dumbledore had erected siphoned them to the ground. He didn’t have a chance to admire it. Dumbledore's shields had been brought down by the Unforgivable and the incoming spells were aimed right for him. Fortunately he had prepared for such an eventuality.

“Cercumversio Petrum!” The shrapnel around him jumped into the air, orbiting him at ever greater speeds. He’d learned how the spell had worked with time and practice, he could feel his magic holding the stones and debris in the air and he could feel the incoming spells. It was only a thought to have them intersect, the challenging part was to ensure that he didn’t waste all of his protection on a single spell. He was Tom Riddle though, magic was his birthright, and what might challenge a lesser being was nothing to him. Temporarily safe behind his whirling stones he felt it was time to retaliate.

Tom had thought a lot about how to fight with magic, he’d been on the receiving end of everything from pranks to the limited dark magic Malfoy had dared to cast in school. He’d thought he knew what combat would be like, Bond and Dumbledore had shattered that delusion. He’d reevaluated his approach since then, Dumbledore’s casual mastery of the world around him had dictated his strategy.

“Phosphourfenian!” The spell had barely left his wand before the air ignited, the man he’d targeted not even screaming as his breath turned to fire inside his chest. Flushed with victory he turned for his next victim- then Dumbledore was at his side. The professor seized his shoulder, he'd somehow passed unscathed through the racing stones and spells surrounding them.

Dumbledore whipped his wand through a complex pattern and then the world twisted, the mountain looming over the valley seeming to contort until the summit was at their feet. He dragged Tom with him before canceling whatever he’d cast. Geometry flowed back to Euclidean as Dumbledore turned to look at their now distant attackers. For a moment he stood proud and tall, every inch the mighty sorcerer and then he slumped. “I’m sorry Tom, truly sorry.” He bent low to pick up a rock, the motions those of a tired man, before he tapped it with his wand. The professor held it out to Tom and he lightly touched it, a great hook seemed to yank from inside his intestines as they spun into the sky.
Darker and Fouler Things

The portkey dropped them to the ground roughly, Tom staggered a few steps before he got his feet under him. Dumbledore hadn’t moved from where he landed, he was still hunched, looking defeated.

“I did not expect Weber to be so rash, but that is no excuse,” Dumbledore started walking slowly, with some surprise Tom realized they were at the entrance of Hogwarts rather than alongside a random road. “It is a terrible thing to take a life. I know that not everyone has the luxury of my power to make such choices easy, but I wish you had not killed that man.” They’d reached the iron gates, the winged boars looked over them as Dumbledore tapped the lock with his wand.

“It’s alright sir. You couldn’t have known.” Tom was still energized from his brush with death, some of that must have leaked into his voice as Dumbledore turned to him visibly startled.

“Mr. Riddle..” He trailed off, clearly uncertain what to make of Tom’s nonchalance. They kept moving towards the castle until Dumbledore tentatively broke the silence. “If you ever need or want to talk about it my door is always open.” They covered most of the remaining distance before he seemed to recover himself a little. “Except when it’s a wall I suppose.” He opened the towering doors into the castle’s antechamber. “And if you aren’t comfortable with speaking to me about it, the nurse will have the appropriate resources and will be extremely confidential.”

They reached the stairs and there their paths diverged. The professor called to him one last time, beckoning him back up a few steps. “Any future excursions will carry more risk, Gellert is more confident in his Reapers than I’d previously imagined. If you want to chart a safer course without me you may, I will do my best to protect you regardless.”

“What was it you said before sir? Something about courting peril? It’ll take slightly more than that to keep me from the wider world, especially since there’s been fewer attempts on my life outside the castle than inside it.” The words coming out of his mouth almost stunned him, but beneath the bravado Tom really did feel that way. Hanging around with the head of Gryffindor had clearly affected his judgement.

Dumbledore’s smile was melancholy, though his eyes had brightened at Tom’s remark. “As an educator I’m glad to see a pupil with such a desire to learn. Until next time Mr. Riddle.” He began climbing the stairs before he paused and glanced over his shoulder. “Oh, and don’t forget you have eighteen inches on vanishing charms due Monday, I expect more than your recent efforts from my nominal apprentice.” Tom flashed his most charming smile- the professor had never been easily manipulated before but he’d hardly been himself since the fight- then he descended into the dungeons.

Tom had been bored in school before he’d gone on the field trip, now knowing what was out there it was nearly intolerable. Tom was only paying attention to transfiguration now, his participation in the other courses was even more anemic than it had been. It hardly mattered, everyone knew he was going to get all of his OWLs, but whispering by his fellow students had been joined by annoyed looks from the professors. With complete confidence in his superiority he ignored them.

Dumbledore had been wise to caution him against digging for old and forgotten magic and for the most part Tom followed his advice. He read the latest periodicals for charms and potions and used his quasi-apprenticeship with the professor to pick his brain on the finer points of magic. Dumbledore looked increasingly harried as the term continued, the international situation continuing to demand
his attention, but he always had at least a little time for Tom. Tom wasn’t quite sure if he would have always been so helpful, or if it was residual guilt, but either way he benefited.

Tom had settled into a routine, wake up, eat breakfast, ignore classes, raid the library, and only return to his dormitory to sleep when it was absolutely unavoidable. It was something of a surprise when one night that routine was interrupted.

“Why do you insist on me wearing a helmet? Everything in these tunnels knows exactly who I am.” Tom was standing in a cavern, blue flames illuminating the rough walls and the armored woman opposite him.

“You’re wearing a helmet because I am.” Now that it was mentioned Tom noticed the faint discoloration at the edges of his vision. There was a slit in front of his eyes that appeared normal, but everything outside of that was subtly off.

“You do know that the spells on the armor work just as well without it? Anything that gets through them will render an eighth of an inch of steel entirely useless.” The woman struck a flirtatious pose as she spoke. Tom realized that with her face concealed her body language had to be exaggerated, she was used to wearing armor, even the helmet she was complaining about. “Besides this way I can’t see your-”

“That’s the point and you know it.” The conversation had the air of a repeated argument, the two spoke far too easily to each other for it to be the first time. “Our little friends know who you are but I’d prefer to remain anonymous. They might be trapped down here they’re not completely ignorant of the world. My raids have irritated Grindelwald, Dumbledore was already on my trail, and I doubt they’re the only ones. I don’t want to share my enemies with you.”

“You are selfish like that. I don’t know why my father likes you.” Tom felt his face shift to a smirk behind the metal.

“Well if he knew what we were doing-”

“No! Stop! The armor’s charmed so that we can be monitored for trouble.” She turned away, looking up at the roof of the tunnel. “Or so that busibodies can eavesdrop.”

“Isn’t he off doing important political things?”

The woman snorted dismissively. “That’s what he calls drinking with his friends. I’m more worried about the elves. Now enough chatter, I want to finish this so that we have time before he arrives back home.” She started walking down the tunnel, sucking the flames lining the walls back into her wand to create a bobbing blue light at its tip. “Are you coming?”

“I thought you didn’t want to talk about-” Tom was forced to dodge a hex the woman threw back over her shoulder. The movement in the armor was shockingly easy, before Hogwarts he’d read that knight’s armor was actually quite flexible. With magic added he was barely aware he was wearing it.

The two of them walked in near silence, the only noise their breathing and the occasional jarred pebble. At last the woman held up a closed fist, and Tom stopped behind her. “We’re close to their warrens, can you smell it?” There was a strange odor in the air. Tom couldn’t place it, but even in the stale and still air it was noticeable. “You have a spell to see in the dark? Use it and be quiet, we’re about to meet quite a few of them and surprise can only help.” The world went black as she extinguished her light then Tom felt his arm move as magic flowed around him.
Everything—the walls, the woman, his wand—was suddenly edged in silver lines, gleaming wires in an endless Stygian expanse. Tom would have stood and looked around for ages, content to see the results of the spell, but he was forcefully reminded he was just a passenger. “Ready.” She didn’t reply, only walking forward, rounding the corner onto a ledge and then Tom wasn’t the only one staring.

The spell he was using was impossibly limited, just showing the edges of the world, but even that was stunning. They were in an immense cavern, uncountable stalactites hung from the ceiling, the largest met by the fangs of stalagmites thrusting upwards. There seemed to be a pool stretching throughout, notable by its complete blackness with its absence of silver lines, its curved edges shifting as faint waves caused by water drops rippled through it. The woman gave Tom a moment to stand before gesturing impatiently.

She leapt from the ledge, falling the twenty feet to the ground and landing with no visible strain as Tom followed her. The armor was more enchanted than he’d thought, far more than just lightening charms. If that was all he’d have noticed the difference in his stride.

They skulked through the void, his eyes constantly moving from their surroundings, to the path, to the woman’s hips. Tom was paying as close attention as he could, listening and watching for the first sign of an enemy. Granted he couldn’t do anything if saw anything, but this could be practice at the very least. After what seemed an eternity of slowly creeping they heard the sound of hammers.

The woman waved her wand in a pattern Tom vaguely recognized and the sounds stopped, she’d blocked them somehow, a privacy spell. “They are making a new tunnel, father was right.”

“So what’s the plan? Go in and bust them up?” Tom felt his wand arm twitching, as if the prospect of violence was filling it with energy.

She managed to convey curiosity through the armor even before she spoke. “You know I’ve never met anyone who’s hated goblins as much as you. Someday you’ll have to tell me what they did.”

Tom’s wand was moving now, placing layered protections on each of them. The order felt almost the same as the one Dumbledore used, if that was unusual it might be a clue as to his true identity. “They acted according to their nature and it cost me far too much.” She waited for more but he only continued with his spells until he spoke with an air of finality. “I think we’re ready.”

“Well I’d give you a kiss for luck, but someone insisted on these buckets.”

“Just as well, I’ve already brushed my teeth this morning.” She gave a mock offended huff and then he dissolved her privacy ward before she could get another word in.

They slowed even more as they approached the work site, taking extreme care to avoid shifting loose stones. Color was coming back into the world, mostly grey, but the silver lines were now accentuating the world instead of being the only proof it existed. The hammering grew louder and now the occasional word could be heard, mostly curses in Gobbledegook. The woman peeked around a corner then waved Tom forward, they’d found them.

The goblins, there seemed to be hundreds of them, were larger than the ones Tom had seen in Gringotts. Most were armored in elaborately engraved and filigreed metal, the only ones unarmed were the actual miners and the goblins who were handling the tailings from the shaft. The extravagance surprised Tom, from all he’d known of goblins he’d expected them to be dressed in
plain black, if at all. Instead they wore jeweled helms, their weapons gleaming and glittering in the green light from the torches.

Tom’s focus changed from the goblins to an assessment of the cave they were ensconced in. It had a few other entrances than the one they’d come through. The others seemed to lead down and goblins were constantly streaming in and out. It seemed to be a junction between several tunnels which made the choice of it for their breakout more reasonable. He suddenly realized the woman was gesturing for him, they stepped back around the corner and he laid down another privacy ward.

“So we’ll just storm in and send them fleeing down the tunnels?”

She nodded but seemed far less excited at the prospect. “We need to teach them a sharp lesson, they have to learn there are consequences for trying to break the surface.”

“Fine by me. Ready then?” She nodded, Tom felt his mouth stretch wide into a grin and it began.

His first spell launched him into the heart of the cavern, a cerulean wave scattering the goblins around the crater his landing left. He didn’t give them a chance to recover, a wash of flames scorching the closest, slowest and bravest before the entire group had even realized he was there. His customary rocky shield surrounded him and goblins throughout the crowd began to drop at random as they were struck by the stones.

At that moment, when all eyes were fixed on him, the woman made her move. She stepped out from cover and sent bolts of energy into the masses, the bodies of goblins exploded from wherever the light of her spells hit. Beset on two sides, utterly unprepared for the ferocity of the assault, Tom could see the terror spread through the crowd. Switching from stunned incredulity to panic the goblins began to struggle to escape, chaos spreading through their ranks as the ring surrounding him disintegrated.

Tom didn’t let them run freely though, he chased them on their way with beams of golden light. It cut through their armor and flesh with equal ease, the hindmost dropping before they could make it to the tunnels. In only seconds they’d cleared the cave, the woman walked out to meet him, daintily stepping over the corpses.

“You only needed to scare them you know.”

Satisfaction was oozing from his voice. “I feel pretty confident I scared them. I doubt they’ll be coming back up here for the time being.”

“Who’s the time being?”

“What?”

“Is that an English myth or something? A time being?” The woman sounded half confused and only then did Tom understand what she meant.

“Yes, luckily English teachers keep it in check with tenses.” The adrenaline was draining away, apparently no one could be excited about present participles. “It’s just an expression, don’t worry about it.”

He walked over to examine the shaft, looking up it the goblins had burrowed an impressive distance in a short time. Tom began expanding the walls to fill it back in as the woman carved something into
the floor of the cavern. “You’re really leaving your crest here? I thought they’d know who you were.”

“A Rätikon always leaves her calling card.”

“Well that’s a nice policy. Are you about ready to head back up? You did mention something about wanting to beat your father there?”

She walked closer to Tom, managing to sway impressively despite her armor. “There’s another nice feature in the armor you know.”

“Oh?” The woman, Lady Clara Tom realized, raised a hand towards Bond’s face before moving to his shoulder. “They have portkeys built-in.” With that she tapped a rune and the hook through the stomach came as sharp as ever. Tom woke, gasping upright as the world spun around him.

He sat up behind his curtains, thinking furiously as he went over his dream. Bond was working with the Rätikons. He was close to Clara if their conversation had any truth in it at all. He’d mentioned wanting to remain hidden to prevent Grindelwald and others from knowing where he was and who he was helping, Tom’s visions had given him just the weapon needed. First thing in the morning he’d be looking for a way to discreetly inform an interested party.
Family

Tom was almost disappointed by how easy it was to send an anonymous message. Clearly he wasn’t the first with the desire. He’d actually almost been sucked into a book descriptively titled “Methods to Defeat Tracking and Interception in Magical Communication” about the historical back and forth before with truly heroic willpower he just skipped to the end to see what the most recent methods were. The book recommended post owls, and subsequent sources only confirmed it. They had some caveats, don’t use an owl you personally own, but government sponsored owls across Europe were sufficiently enchanted there was no way to find their sender. Handing the bird, a rather stout brown one with an imperious cast to his features, his letter felt decidedly anti-climactic. As he went back to the castle alone, it was a calculated risk to leave the wards as it was, he consoled himself with Dumbledore’s words. Current magic was generally superior to the rare and forgotten. It wouldn’t get him anywhere closer to his desired goal, except that with Bond troubled he’d have more to worry about than trying to kill Tom.

Tom stopped at the lake, the weather had taken a decided turn for the wintry even though there still was no snow, to think about Bond without further distractions. The man had tried to kill him twice, and his second attempt had been particularly terrifying. How had he known about the Chamber, how had he known Tom would even be aware of it? The suddenness of the attack and then his detente with Dumbledore had distracted him, but he had very real unanswered questions.

The chill wind raced across the surface, stirring the glassy waters, as he struggled for a reasonable explanation. Dumbledore had said the man hated him, he knew that to be from legimency now, but Tom couldn’t think of anything he’d ever done in the wizarding world to cause that sort of emotion. He idly considered that one of the children he’d tormented at the orphanage had secret wizarding connections, but couldn’t bring himself to believe it. The idea of someone with power caring about Billy Stubbs or anyone there was ludicrous.

If it hadn’t been Tom’s actions at fault, logically he was being blamed for another’s. That ran into a similar problem. He was an orphan, whatever family he had was lost. If he didn’t even know who his father was, Tom Riddle senior was apparently no wizard, how could Bond? The man seemed rational, even from a certain perspective heroic when he’d freed the prisoners. He could just be mad of course, but that wasn’t borne out by the other evidence. The idea of it being his family’s fault was his best lead yet, he’d have to dig into it.

His father, if he was a junior then his father was the senior, must be a muggle. He didn’t have much of an idea how to find the correct Tom Riddle, it wouldn’t be a common name but there was probably more than one running around. As to his magical heritage, he had two clues, his mother’s name Merope, and his middle name Marvolo.

He knew his mother probably hadn’t gone to Hogwarts, he’d managed to look at the past enrollment for the last century, there was no one by that name. It was possible she’d changed her name after leaving, but he’d ignore that chance until he’d exhausted all other options.

With his new objective he left the grounds, moving quickly through the almost deserted castle until he reached the library. There he paused, they had back issues of the Daily Prophet, he could look for births or obituaries, but there were thousands of them. He was fifteen, his mother had been young and that was all Mrs. Cole had known. It wasn’t much to go one, that still gave an enormous span to search for her birth. Ten years conservatively, between thirty two and forty two years ago for his mother’s birth announcement, assuming it was even in there. Perhaps there was another way, tax
records, a census- He walked to the front, to Madam Douille. “Are there any genealogies here?”

She raised an eyebrow. He’d always been polite but she had been one of the staff injured during Bond’s attack, he wasn’t sure how helpful she would be. She closed her book with a snap, the sound echoing through the empty library before she stood and strode off into the stacks, not waiting for him. She led him to a small section, crammed between histories of the British Isles and court records, with a flick of her wand several books lit up, their spines glowing faintly orange. “Here you are Mr. Riddle, the spell shows the ones most frequently consulted. Good luck.”

With that she turned to move back to her desk, Tom had already changed his focus to the now flickering books. Following the Founders, Does Blood Matter?: A Study, Nature’s Nobility, and the Pure-Blood Directory. With a sigh he swept them from the shelves, four books was better than four thousand newspapers.

The first three were busts, the third had been promising, but in the Pure-Blood Directory he had struck gold. At the time of the book’s publishing there had been precisely one Marvolo, Marvolo Gaunt. The Gaunt line was even descended from Slytherin, Tom allowed himself to feel confident, the evidence was promising. The book even had a location, vaguely mentioning lands in Little Hangleton.

Tom closed the book and replaced them back to their shelves. He was tempted to leave the castle and apparate there directly, he was confident he had acquired the needed grasp on the magic, but there were problems. First, he didn’t have a clear image of the destination, he’d never been to the village. Second, Bond had managed to trap the Chamber, leaving something at a home would presumably be easier. He’d have to enlist Dumbledore’s help.

The professor’s wall was open, looking as if the stones had simply folded into themselves. He wasn’t alone, several younger students, probably second years still restricted to the castle, were watching him slowly change a colorful songbird into a jeweled cup. Tom rapped on the door to announce himself. One of the smaller students turned and nearly shrieked at the sight of him, clearly he had not forgotten.

“Mr. Riddle, can I help you?” Dumbledore’s eyes were twinkling infuriatingly, they had spoken frequently since they’d returned from the conference, he must have thought Tom was there for more advice.

“It can wait sir. If I can return in an hour?”

“No need, I think we’re about finished up,” he glanced at the children as he spoke. They practically tripped over themselves to gather their books and quills as they stammered out their agreement.

“Now then,” a wave of his wand closed the door as he gestured for Tom to take a seat, “what seems to be the problem.” Tom gave him a quick rundown of the situation, the older man nodding along as he explained.

“So you want to try and find this man, your grandfather?” He was absently drumming his fingers on the desk, Fawkes chose that moment to appear in a burst of flames, clutching an envelope. He took it from the bird, slitting it open with a gesture making Tom envy his casual wandless magic. It wasn’t useful compared to a wand but for showing off or summoning a lost wand near at hand it was well worth it. Dumbledore scanned the letter, before placing it in a drawer and looked back to Tom. “My apologies, I’m waiting on urgent news but that wasn’t it. If you’d like to venture from the castle we can make a day of it, I’ll admit to some curiosity about your theory.” He stood and stepped around his desk, his arm out to dismiss Tom from the office. “Shall we say tomorrow at noon? I regrettably
have to remain as the staff member on duty until then, but I’ll meet you in the Entrance Hall.”

“Of course sir.” They split up as they left, the wall returning to its normal appearance even as a new door flickered into existence down the hall.

The next day Tom woke up practically bubbling with excitement. He didn’t often feel strong emotions, he tried to always project a calm demeanor but most of the time that was equivalent to wearing his heart on sleeve. Today though, he’d probably be meeting a member of his biological family, a descendant of Slytherin. A wizard who had done something sufficient to get Bond to attack in an attempt at revenge, someone with power. He was almost embarrassingly early for the meeting, leaning against the wall fifteen minutes before the agreed on time, watching the House Point counters move up and down.

“There you are Mr. Riddle.” Dumbledore had arrived, clad in robes that were slowly pulsing through an eye-searing rainbow. “Ready to go?” Tom nodded, not entirely trusting his ability to speak without insulting Dumbledore’s apparent colour-blindness. “Then let’s go, I’ve secured permission from the Headmaster.” The two of them walked to the gates, a reverse in almost every sense of their last trip with Dumbledore in a clearly excellent mood.

Passing through the gates that opened soundlessly before them Dumbledore came to a stop. “I managed to locate Little Hangleton. As far as I can tell the Gaunts are the only magical family there.” His wand moved as he spoke, his own robes thankfully changing to a more sober suit even as Tom’s robes changed to a thick jacket over slacks. “As long as we’re reconnoitering we should probably strive to remain inconspicuous. Of course once we find Mr. Gaunt it might be wise to revert, apparently at some point in the past they rejected Hogwarts for being full of Muggles.”

“Then where would they have gone to school?” For all of his recent boredom Tom couldn’t conceive of preferring another place to the castle, it was his home in all the ways that mattered. “They still do practice magic though?”

“Marvolo Gaunt’s name was in the Admissions Book, it was crossed out with a note that the family did not desire further correspondence.”

“No Merope then?”

“‘The Book’s magic is quite sophisticated, it would have known not to even write her name down. We’ll have more answers soon.’ He stepped over to Tom, his boots crunching in the gravel. ‘Shall we?’ Tom jerked his head in assent, suddenly nervous, and Dumbledore reached over before the sensation of apparition took hold.

They were in a gap between buildings just off the main street of a small village. Dumbledore strode out boldly, looking around curiously. “Little Hangleton. You know in these country towns you could be forgiven for some confusion between muggle and magical. As different as we are there are so many similarities.”

Tom didn’t see any, all he saw was a rundown town, almost deserted. The young men would be off to war and children and elderly were probably at church. The village was all he hated about muggles, it was dead, grey and soulless. Magic was vibrant, it made the world greater by simply existing, this village and its people were barely real. “Do you have any plans on how to find the Gaunt lands?”

“Yes actually.” Dumbledore took a sharp left, opening the door into a small store with a jingle. “Good day sir.” The proprietor looked startled, hastily lowering his newspaper ‘Reds Take Kiev’
Tom noticed.

“Hello gentlemen, what can I do for you?” Dumbledore perused the counter, it was distressingly bare, before gesturing at a pastry.

“I’ll have one of those and my student will have..” Tom pointed to the same thing for convenience. He had no patience for picking out food now.

“Certainly sir, if I could just see your rationing coupons.” Dumbledore almost looked flustered for a second before pulling out a blank piece of paper accompanied by his wand moving.

“Here you are.” The man accepted the ‘document’ without complaint, handing over the two items.

“As long as we’re here would you mind answering some questions for us?”

The man rolled his eyes before sweeping his hand around the empty store. “As you can see I’m far too busy for that. Go for it.”

“I’m a teacher at a boarding school. Mr. Riddle here was accepted on a scholarship but he’s an orphan, we came here in hopes of finding-”

“Riddle you say?” The shopkeep gave him a once over, tilting his head to look at Tom in profile. “You do have the look. They’re in the house up on the hill, they should be home as soon as the service is through.” Tom nearly froze, he hadn’t expected that. Dumbledore recovered first and smoothly.

“That is a piece of luck. We actually had come here for a different reason, a man called Gaunt.”

The shopkeeper raised an eyebrow, reassessing Tom now in a decidedly more negative fashion. “There was quite the scandal a few years back, Thomas Riddle and a Gaunt girl, Merry I think. They ran off and only Thomas came back, claimed something about witchcraft.”

Every word the man spoke was like a hammer, his father was alive, his mother had potentially ensorcelled him, and his entire living family might be within a mile. “Well you’ve given us a lot to think about.” Dumbledore managed to put the appropriate amount of disdain for the man in his voice, exactly as a teacher would to such a ridiculous tale. “Do you know where the Gaunts live as well? If at all possible we’d like to only make one trip, you know how it is.”

“Yes, yes, but at least the ends in sight with our boys back in Europe.” He moved to the front of the store, pointing down the road. “If you take that little trail you’ll pass old Gaunt’s cottage. Haven’t seen him in years, but that’s where he lived last.”

“Thank you for your time,” Dumbledore stood, leaving a towering pile of coins on the table, “and your discretion. Mr. Riddle?”

Tom followed him from the store, hastily swallowing the last of his snack. “We’re skipping the Riddles?”

“We can always return, but the point of this exercise was to see if Mr. Bonn's rationale was rooted in your family. I doubt a muggle family would be the impetus.” Tom nodded, struggling to keep up with the taller wizard’s long strides.
They took the path indicated and it quickly shrank, the hedges rapidly becoming overgrown as they continued. At last they reached a narrow opening, a dilapidated cottage barely visible through it. He met Dumbledore’s nonplussed look with one of his own, this was certainly not where he expected a powerful wizard to live. He shrugged and stepped forward when he heard a sudden shout.

“Muggles! Trespassers! I’ll kill the lot of you!” Dumbledore reacted instantly his wand flickering out to catch a sickly looking curse that he turned it into a parrot which squawked indignantly as it flapped away into the November air. Two more spells came forth that he merely slapped away as he strode through the hedges.

Tom struggled through in his wake, emerging just as Dumbledore disarmed the man, a spell holding him flailing in the air. “What do you want? Come to gloat have you?”

“Do you understand him?” Tom glanced to the professor in confusion before comprehension struck.

“Of course.” He turned back to man who had largely given up and studied him. He was filthy, his beady dark eyes pointing different directions his gasping breaths revealing a mouth that few remaining teeth were rotten. “Honestly? I would rather I didn’t.”

Dumbledore gave the man, Gaunt presumably, a once over and nodded. “It may be some consolation that you can’t choose your family.” With a few more wand movements he lowered the man and walked forward, floating him into the shack as he followed. “Perhaps you should ask your questions?”

Tom stepped up, staying just far away the man’s smell wouldn’t dominate. “What is your name?”

“Little mudblood thinks I’m going to talk to him?” He had rolled his head back, even with his eyes skewed neither was looking at him. “Wouldn’t talk to one if it were the last thing on this earth.”

Dumbledore shook his head when he looked to him, Parseltongue then.

“I asked a question.” At that the man twisted back, shock in his dark eyes.

“So sister did it after all.”

“Sister? Merope?” This creature was his uncle? Ignorance was bliss.

“The little slut wanted a muggle, wanted to roll in the dirt.” He thrust his hips forward as he spoke, deranged laughter spilling forth. “I guess she managed it. I can practically smell the shit in your veins.”

For an instant Tom’s vision went red and when it stopped the man was screaming, thrashing in the air. He hadn’t done that since the orphanage- since Dumbledore- the professor twitched his wand and Gaunt stopped screaming even as his eyes filled with terror.

“What did he say?”

Tom turned back, the professor’s eyes were cold. “He said things about my mother, about his sister.”

“So this isn’t Marvolo.” He looked at the man and then around the room. “A long way to fall for the heirs of Slytherin.”

“Thieves and betrayers are to blame for that! Filth!” That was in English and Dumbledore rounded
on him sharply.

“So you can talk. What do you know of this man?” An image of Bond sprang into life, his green eyes blazing.

“He stole the ring! Killed all the snakes, stuck me to the wall and laughed.” Gaunt’s voice was barely understandable, he was slipping between Parseltongue and English in his rage. “He said that you’d come, that people would come to finish the job he started. He thought he was so smart but I’ve got Slytherin’s blood, I’ve got some tricks! Awake!”

His shout triggered something—the floor vanished beneath them. Dumbledore was too quick though—he moved as they fell, his wand flickering to halt them both a foot beneath their prior level. Tom couldn’t appreciate the spells as the room filled with noise. “Food! Warm food! Kill!”

The basement was covered in snakes, writhing over each other in layers of black coils. “You’ll need to do better than that I’m afraid.” Dumbledore could only hear hissing, mere animals wouldn’t trouble him. The professor stepped forward, ascending invisible stairs back to the remaining floor. “When did you see him? How long ago was this?”

Gaunt cackled he’d fallen to the floor as Dumbledore’s focus shifted before answering, changing to Parseltongue halfway through. “Long enough for an egg to hatch! Kill them!”

A dark green serpent sprang up from the mass of snakes, its jaws distended, fangs glistening with venom. Dumbledore wrenched his head away before summoning Tom who had already begun to fall—Dumbledore’s platform had collapsed as soon as the snake, no the basilisk, struck it. A twitch of his wand sent a stream of liquid flame into the basement as he stepped towards Gaunt, flinging him out the window before following through a hole he blasted in the wall.

“Like I said, you’ll have to do better.” His voice was cold as he stood over the spread eagled man, his limbs pinned to the frozen ground. “Now you have two choices. Give me answers or I will take them.” With the failure of Gaunt’s attempt the fight seemingly left him and he nodded frantically. “Good. When did you see that man?”

“Two months ago, he just appeared then it was like I said, he took my ring gave me a warning and left! I’d never seen him before.”

“Your name and everything you think you know about Tom Riddle.” There was no warmth in Dumbledore’s eyes now, not for the first time Tom saw his claimed similarities to the Dark Lord.

“I’m Morfin! Morfin Gaunt! And Riddle? Merope fancied him, she must have gotten him when I went to Azkaban, the boy’s the image of him!”

“I suspect I know the answer, but did your father ever do anything to the thief?” He shook his head rapidly.

“Nothing! Never!”

“Very well.” Dumbledore stunned the man before straightening and turning to Tom who had watched the interrogation in shocked silence. “I’ll be sending him to the aurors, anyone mad enough to hatch a basilisk can’t be allowed to go free. You’ll be able to question him further there if you desire.”
Tom wanted to protest but he’d already met half of his family. What guarantee did he have he’d want to meet the rest. He forced the doubts down, there was no profit in hesitation. “What about the Riddles? What about my father?”

“If Bonn was here he may have left traps or wards, I’d prefer not to find them while protecting you and this creature. We’ll be back.”
Dumbledore’s actions over the next hours were nearly enough to make Tom consider changing his future career. He had known that Hogwarts was Britain’s premier school of magic, he had known the professor had spent years teaching, he hadn’t realized that fact would translate into a group of Aurors leaping into action at his word and imprisoning Morfin with no further questions. Some of that might have been due to the discovery of Morfin’s prior record, he’d been sent to Azkaban for cursing a muggle and a ministry investigator. Not just any muggle though, Tom Riddle Sr.

It was strange to think that he had a living family. Obviously he’d had a mother and a father but as a nominal orphan they were just ideas, things. Of course his father was still a thing, only a man who’d captured the attention of the heirs of Slytherin, such as they were. He’d go to see him, out of curiosity if nothing else, but he was a muggle- irrelevant.

Dumbledore was at last finished interfering with the forces of justice, he strode into the antechamber, eyes flashing around the room before alighting on Tom. “Mr. Riddle, ready to meet your paternal family?”

Tom stood, smoothing his robes. If he was at Hogwarts he could have simply spelled them, but here he’d be fined at best for the minor magic. “It would be nice to collect the set.”

The professor quirked an eyebrow at that, but didn’t speak, merely indicating for Tom to follow him. The two of them left the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and entered the atrium, last time he’d been captivated by its architecture but now he just wanted to see what sort of man his father was.

They exited the Ministry, the sun was already low in the sky, and Dumbledore grabbed Tom’s shoulder as soon as they reached a marked apparating point. The now familiar feeling began and ended- the two of them were once again in Little Hangleton. It seemed more sinister with the long shadows than with the noonday sun. Before it had been lifeless, now as the two of them climbed past the needlessly cliché graveyard, it looked dead.

The Riddle House was atop the hill. Its broad lawns served to make it look grander in isolation as the setting sun illuminated it, the westward windows gleaming orange. Dumbledore had replaced their disguises from earlier, the transfiguration so flawless that Tom only noticed the change when he looked down to see his robes were gone. The professor was studying the path as they walked, looking almost puzzled. He drew his wand and made two passes before he jerked to a halt.

“Mr. Riddle.” He was holding his wand in a ready position as he slowly spun, his eyes sweeping the manicured grass. “We are not the first wizards here today.”

“Bonn?” Tom was inordinately proud of himself for not slipping up. “Can you detect his magic? That was what our trip to Germany was for, wasn’t it?”

“That’s what it was for.” Dumbledore wasn’t entirely paying attention to Tom, he’d withdrawn something golden from his jacket and was watching a needle on it flit to and fro. “But this magic, it’s different.” He snapped the device shut and stowed it again. “If I had to describe it, I’d say it tastes subtly different, spicier somehow. In any event he knows I have his measure and I flatter myself that others will not be so bold. Excelsior.”
Tom followed him as he continued towards the house but he noticed the professor didn’t replace his wand, in response he palmed his, the choice between death and a fine was easy. The graveled drive terminated in a loop at the front door. Dumbledore quickly paced to it, and without hesitation sharply brought the knocker down three times. With that he stood back and seemed take an extreme interest in the shrubs lining the steps, leaving Tom standing in the center of the door as it opened.

There was a moment of stillness as the man who’d opened it and Tom stared at each other. He was tall and dark haired, somehow focusing on their superficial similarities made it easier to ignore that Tom could have been his twin. This was his father then.

“Err, hello?” It was quite convenient the the elder Tom spoke first, the younger doubted that he’d have managed anything much more coherent but with the conversation started he had another moment to reflect.

“Mr. Riddle?” Or Dumbledore could step in. “Mr. Tom Riddle?”

“Yes?” His voice was distracted, his eyes hadn’t left Tom’s face yet.

“We would like to speak to you about matters of some import. May we come in?”

“Um,” He moved back and to the side, beginning to wave them in when he stopped short, his wide eyes now locked on something else, Tom’s hand, his wand. “No!” He went to slam the door but Dumbledore was quicker, his wand flicking out as the door froze in place despite Tom Sr.’s actions.

“I regret the necessity but we require information that you might have.” Dumbledore stepped forward, his long legs carrying him over the threshold as the other man shrank back. “Once that is over your son and I will leave and I very much doubt you shall see either of us again.”

Their drama had acquired an audience, an old woman and a grey haired man were on the stairs, watching their child back away from an old man armed only with a stick. “Messrs. and Mrs. Riddle, if we could all move to your parlour?” He took their silence to be assent and walked to his left, utterly confident in his direction despite never having been in the house before.

They did reach the parlour and the professor claimed the lone armchair, conjuring another beside him for Tom, Mrs. Riddle managed to hold in her shriek at the sight, before waving the Riddle family to a couch.

“Now then.” His tone was light and airy, hardly appropriate for the subject matter. “Let me tell you a story, stop me if you heard it before.” He threw a beaming smile around the room, the Riddles flinched as one as it passed them. “Once upon a time, there was a young witch. She came from a poor family and was worked to the bone to support them. Her one joy in life was the hope of leaving. Desperate for an an escape, she fixated on a handsome man she often saw riding past.” The three muggles didn’t seem to understand what he was talking about, merely trading panicked looks. “Through some misadventures her family was removed, leaving the young witch free to do whatever she pleased. Her fixation had turned into an obsession and her magic was enough to achieve her goals—”

“Stop!” The muggle Tom surged to his feet. “What’s your game? What do you know about that bitch Merope?”

“We have come a long way and gone to a not inconsiderable amount of trouble to find you Mr. Riddle.” The professor’s voice was cold and it cowed the muggle who sank back into his seat, his
terrified parents next to him. “My ‘game,’ has two goals. First, introducing to to your son or
grandson, Tom Riddle. He’s a fine boy, one whose accomplishments at his young age would be
enough to make any parent proud.” Tom didn’t flinch or flush under their gaze, he had hoped for
more from them than visible terror.

Tom Sr. was back on his feet, his anger conquering his fear. “He’s no son of mine! His mother
spelled me, stole my mind and will, my life!”

“He is innocent of his mother’s crimes—”

“What do you want? Money? Recognition? You’ll get nothing!” Despite the muggle’s words Tom
felt a slight glimmer of respect at his boldness. Not many would have the strength of will to shout at
Dumbledore, his presence was usually enough to deter such displays. “Now get out of this house!
Go!”

“I regret that we have one other matter to attend to.” Despite the man’s looming presence, he was as
tall as his son promised to be, Dumbledore remained seated and unperturbed. “Have you ever seen
this man?” Bond appeared next to him, slowly spinning as the illusion faced each of them. “No?
Never? Very well then.” The professor stood and Tom joined him, walking out as the muggles
remained frozen behind them. The professor couldn’t resist a parting stroke. “It must be terrible to be
so afraid as to not wish to know your family.”

The two of them exited the manor, Tom squinting into the setting sun, Dumbledore’s glasses had
darkened to block the glare. “Well that was unfortunate.”

His father had rejected him, his mother had love potioned a muggle, his uncle was mad, unfortunate
seemed an understatement. “Yes.”

The walked in silence for a moment before Dumbledore apparently felt compelled to speak. “I once
went fifteen years without speaking to my brother if it’s any consolation. They may yet come
around.”

“To tell the truth professor, I can’t imagine ever wanting to see them again.”

The professor nodded. “Understandable. However despite what we’ve learned today was a failure,
we still have no idea why Bonn is after you.”

The air seemed to thicken around them, Dumbledore’s wand flashed and the pressure stopped
increasing but even with the respite Tom felt ill, his head heavy like with a bad cold.

“I can answer that.” The voice, Bond’s voice, came from everywhere at once, Tom searched
frantically but he couldn’t see him or the telltale distortion of a disillusionment charm. “I won’t, but I
so rarely get a straight line that I couldn’t resist.”

“Mr. Bonn I presume?” Dumbledore was unruffled, his wand moving through intricate patterns as he
spoke.

A laugh rang out, the choking as he got himself under control was eerie as it surrounded them.
“Another one? Actually the name is Bond, James Bond.”

“My apologies, your messenger misspoke.” Dumbledore had turned and was facing an otherwise
unexceptional bit of grass. “What do you want Mr. Bond? I have beaten you once and we both
know how another such confrontation will end. Your spells keep you as trapped as us.”

“We don’t need to fight.”

“True, leave and cease your vendetta and we need never quarrel again.”

“That’s something I can’t do.” Bond’s voice was coming from a single location now, however it was moving about behind them.

“Well then.” Tom felt the power Dumbledore drew, in an instant he changed from amiable to terrifying. “I feel we have reached the point where words yield to wands. Any final remarks Mr. Bond?”

“Just four: Arianna knows her killer.”

Before Bond had said something expecting an impact, something about the greater good, but this time it worked. Dumbledore nearly staggered, mortal for a moment before he recovered, a visible nimbus of power around him. “What did you say?” His words were thunder as his wand flashed forward- the world seemed to shriek as something plowed a furrow a yard wide and a hundred long into the grass. He wasn’t satisfied with that, a thousand fireballs followed, tracing the contours of the hill and racing until they seemed to blend into shifting lines of flame. “Who are you? Did Gellert send you?”

To see the professor enraged, his magic flooding the world, was something Tom could have done well to avoid. The ground under their feet was changing, from gravel to grass to wood to marble, all without Dumbledore’s direction as he continued sending beams of light scything across the hill.

“Cadmus actually.” Grindelwald’s mark appeared in the air, the inscribed circle darkening as Dumbledore stopped short, staring at the image. “You can ask her yourself, you can beg her forgiveness. Just give me the boy.”

For a long and terrible moment Tom feared that Dumbledore would do it. The desire was plain on his face, his wand loosely gripped, almost forgotten. He didn’t know what Bond was talking about but whatever it was Dumbledore, the moral exemplar, was tempted. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?” His question was almost a whisper but Bond somehow heard it over the roaring flames.

There was triumph in his voice. “She’s a lovely girl, somewhat confused but she was very clear on the events of her death, an argument with Aberforth. Shall I go on?” Again Dumbledore hesitated, and Tom gripped his wand, it might be futile but he wouldn’t just be handed over like a side of meat. Bond had found his lever, Dumbledore had defended Tom but never liked him, this would be it.

“No.” Dumbledore straightened, his grip on his wand growing firmer along with his voice. “I don’t need to speak with her. I know what she would say to me for that price.”

“A pity.” There was a terrible blinding light- Tom felt his skin burning- and then blessed darkness.
There were words in the darkness.

“...condition stable...”

"How did he..."  

“...we will avenge...”

Tom tried to jerk up but couldn’t- something held him in place. For a terrifying moment he thought he was captured, that Bond had sadistically left him hanging in the stygian expanse. His eyes refused to open, they were sealed shut somehow and he could feel his magic gathering, ready to respond to his needs-

“That’s enough Mr. Riddle.” the unfamiliar person's words did nothing to calm him, his power was like a torrent inside him, he needed light, fire-

Some spell hit him, and with it came clarity as he recognized Dumbledore’s voice. “Calm down Mr. Riddle, you’re in the hospital.” Tom froze, his thoughts racing back to the last thing he remembered, that impossibly bright light. “You’ve been in a coma for four days, they had to regrow your entire epidermis. If you wait a moment you’ll be able to speak and move again.”

Now that he’d mentioned it Tom could feel something peeling off of him, it was a peculiar sensation as it slowly moved up his body and he had to resist the urge to try to thrash. At last it reached his head and he was able to suck in a breath before his eyes were cleared.

“What happened?” He had to shut his eyes as soon as he opened them, the dim ward was far too bright, the light was like needles driving into his mind.

“After his initial spell, a modified sunburn hex if you were curious, we dueled.” Dumbledore did not sound happy but Tom pressed on with entirely uncharacteristic optimism.

“Did you defeat him? Is he done?” The professor had been confident before the battle but his sigh answered the question before he spoke.

“No.” He heard Dumbledore shift, sitting or just moving in a chair. “We fought, as soon as I gained the upper hand he fled.”

“I thought you said his ward would hold him?” The feeling of the magic was not easily forgotten, it had weighed on him and made the world more solid, less magical in a way.

“I thought it would, I don’t know the magic he used to defeat it.” Dumbledore’s admission of ignorance sent a chill down Tom’s spine. With the professor at his side he had felt safe, confident that Bond couldn’t touch him. That was revealed to be untrue, wrenching his eyes open for a second before the pain drove them shut he saw Dumbledore looked old, his beard shorter than it had been the last time he saw it.
The professor continued, his words soft with his mind clearly focused on the battle. “He was less restrained than when we last fought. Shielding you was more difficult, unfortunately your father’s lawn will never be the same again.”

Tom couldn’t care less about the muggle. “How come his spell didn’t get you as well?” It wasn’t the question Tom wanted to ask, Ariana, Grindelwald’s symbol and Cadmus had that honor but it was the only one he thought Dumbledore might answer.

“My glasses have a number of charms and my robes rather more.” His voice changed as if imparting a great secret. “When I was younger I had red hair, even in Scotland I burned. Ever since then I’ve had the relevant spells on all of my clothes. I must say that I didn’t expect them to save me in a duel though.”

“It was just a hex then?” Tom opened his eyes again and managed to force himself to keep them open. The ceiling seemed far too close for him to be in a bed. “A pranking spell burned me that badly?”

“And the grass down to the dirt, your father’s house has been bleached white, and your entire front caught on fire.” He leaned back in his chair. “The Obliviators had a field day.” He at last seemed to notice Tom’s mounting panic. “Don’t worry, you’re fine. Burns are easy to heal, the only challenging part was removing the transfigured cloth.”

Looking down at himself he did seem entirely normal, if paler than usual. “So they knocked me out for four days for nothing?”

The nurse finally spoke again, startling Tom at least. “Well we had to remove all your skin so you wouldn’t have a double thick set on your back.” She seemed to notice Tom’s horrified look and hastily continued, “It’s much better than it sounds, it also prevents melanomas and acne.”

Perhaps understanding she wasn’t helping her case she only cast a few more spells. One dropped Tom onto the bed from where he’d been floating a foot above it, another conjured robes behind the privacy screen, and then she left, throwing one last look over her shoulder.

Dumbledore stood and moved to the window, looking out over the grey London skyline as Tom shrugged his robes on behind the screen. “You have other questions.”

He nodded then realized the professor couldn’t see him. “What happened there? What did he offer you?”

The professor didn’t look back as he spoke, seeming to find something worth studying in the muggle city. “Some of what he spoke of is not for public consumption, you’ll forgive me if I don’t share the details.” Dumbledore turned to face him, the pale light from the window combined with Tom’s aching eyes served to hide his expression in shadows. “The rest you would find out on your own, so I’ll save time and tell you. I knew Grindelwald when we were both young, there was a legend we chased, the Deathly Hallows.”

One of the long pauses Dumbledore was so fond of ensued as Tom racked his memory for what they could possibly be. Just as he drew a blank Dumbledore continued. “Three artifacts, the myth says they were tricked from Death himself by three brothers, an unbeatable wand, a perfect invisibility cloak and a stone that would bring back shades of the dead. The tale continues that anyone who holds all three becomes ‘the Master of Death’ for whatever that’s worth.”

“It must be more than a story.”
“The wand is certainly real, or at least a wand that elevates its holder to new heights of skill and depravity. The Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny, the Elder Wand, it’s had as many names as wielders.”

Tom reached for his wand as Dumbledore spoke, finding its comforting warmth even as his thoughts raced. “So what does Grindewald’s mark or Cadmus have to do with them?”

“Grindelwald’s mark represents the united Hallows.” The professor began drawing it in the air, leaving lines of fire behind to illustrate. “The Wand,” a line, “the Cloak,” a triangle around it, “and the Stone,” an inscribed circle. “Bond claimed to have the stone, Cadmus Peverell’s Hallow. It’s a treasure almost beyond measure, to speak with the dead. You may console yourself with the thought that he values your life quite highly.”

“My death I should think.” Dark Lords, ancient magic, psychotic killers, this was nothing Tom wanted to deal with after waking up from an induced coma. “Do you think he really has it?”

Dumbledore looked towards the window, his silence not rhetorical this time, but contemplative. “I don’t know, and I can’t say I enjoy saying that so much.” He took a step away, twirling his wand absenty. “He seemed to know things he shouldn’t have any way of knowing, but it is an extraordinary claim.” The professor seemed to shake himself, letting weight off his shoulders as he continued with more energy. “We’ll just have to ask him when he’s caught.”

Tom nodded as he stood, finding his shoes at the foot of the bed. “It won’t be my first question.”

“Quite right, well now you’re up and-”

They were interrupted by a knock on the door that only barely preceded the door opening to admit a red robed Auror. “Dumbledore? Can’t keep your nose out of anything can you?”

“If I could it wouldn’t be quite as crooked I suspect.”

Tom recognized the auror then, the grey haired man who Dumbledore had tried to make a cautionary tale. He had never gotten his name though.

The man snorted as he pulled out his notebook, a quill leaping to attention above it. “And you’re going to insist on being present during Mr. Riddle’s statement?”

“He is my apprentice, in loco parentis as they say.”

“Very well then.” He addressed the quill then, “start. Case number three five six four, Auror Robertson receiving the statement of Tom Marvolo Riddle on November Eleventh Nineteen Forty Three.” He finally looked up to Tom who was very glad to be dressed and out of bed. “Albus Dumbledore has previously stated that you and he were on a trip to meet your father and after the meeting you were attacked by the wizard known as James Bond. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Dumbledore also stated that you previously had met Morfin Gaunt, your maternal uncle who was subsequently arrested for the unlicensed breeding of a Class XXXXX magical creature, specifically a basilisk. Do you believe there is any connection between that and the attack?”
Of course there’d been a connection, Bond had attacked Gaunt, his motives were inscrutable but there was a link, why didn’t Robertson know already? Dumbledore must have kept it a secret, or was it a trap? What was the point of the lie? “I couldn’t say.” He’d chosen his path, he’d have to see where it led him.

Robertson raised an eyebrow but didn’t immediately ask another question, flipping back through his notebook. “Back in September you said you didn’t have any idea why Bond attacked, has that changed?”

After the previous question it was nice to have a straight answer. “No.”

“Well if you think of anything feel free to let us know.” The auror stood, visibly annoyed. “Keep your master’s secrets if you want, but remember who’s actually looking for the man.” He opened the door, pausing for a partian shot. “Make sure you know who’s on your side, try Aberforth if you want a Dumbledore you can trust.”

Tom didn’t have anything to say immediately after the warning but he got up to follow Dumbledore towards the door before he raised a hand to stop him.

“I’m afraid you’ll be spending another night here Mr. Riddle. The staff wanted to keep you for observation, something about a low quantity of phlegm in your blood sedimentation.” Tom wasn’t a doctor, all he knew was that muggle medicine had discarded the idea of humors and hearing about them here did not fill him with confidence. Of course muggle medicine couldn’t casually regrow all of his skin so trusting the healers seemed sensible.

“Is that a problem?”

“They didn’t seem too concerned, in any event I brought gifts to liven your stay.” Dumbledore reached into a pocket, far further into it than euclidean geometry should allow and withdrew several newspapers as well as textbooks Tom recognized as being from his extremely well secured trunk.

Ignoring the breach of privacy he accepted the stack, setting it on the bedside table. “Is that all?”

“Not quite.” Dumbledore reached into a different pocket and withdrew what looked to be a silver light switch. “I have to return to the school, an unfortunate reality of teaching, but if you flip the switch I will return.” Tom accepted the device, already feeling the need to dissect it. “The portrait of George Samson can also be used as a last resort, he has another frame in Hogwarts down the hall from my office. I hope you enjoy your conscious stay, but I advise you to avoid the pudding here because if you try it you won’t.” With that dubious wisdom imparted the professor swept from the room and was gone, leaving the room feeling empty.

Already resigned to a boring stay Tom shuffled through the pile. Transfiguration, potions, runes, none of it appealed to him. He picked up the Daily Prophet instead and nearly dropped it.

The picture was of a burning castle, its walls shattered as wizards tried to douse the flames with gouts of water. "Rätikon Castle Burned! No Survivors Found!"
For a moment the headline consumed him. ‘No Survivors Found!’ Was it possible that Bond was dead, that he’d been killed while Tom was unconscious? Reading the rest of the article left him doubting that. The paper claimed there were signs of strange magic, Grindelwald’s Reapers left torn apart or impaled and burned by iron spears. Only one body had been found at the time of the printing, the old Marquis. As he folded the paper neatly Tom realized that even in death they’d given the man the title he’d claimed, his power had bought him that much. With nothing else to do but sit and stew Tom picked up his transfiguration book. He could write the essay in his sleep, or while thinking on the events half a continent away.

The hospital was a strange place, Dumbledore had arranged for him to be the only patient in the wing. The only noise came from muggle London and even that was muffled. When a man came by with his dinner the shock of the door opening was nearly enough for him to jump. The man was either too polite or jaded to comment which Tom was grateful for. It wasn’t enough that Bond’s attack had left him temporarily bald, but he had to look a fool in front of others.

The food was fine in any case, unremarkable but enough that when he had finished there was still a decent amount leftover. In the orphanage he would never have left food on his plate, that was a luxury that magic had brought him. Tom nearly vanished the remainder, the slight extravagance always thrilled him a little, before remembering that while outside of Hogwarts he was legally no more than a muggle. That thought soured him on any thoughts of finishing his dinner. He left the plates where they were and moved to the bedside table where Dumbledore had left his switch.

There was only so much he could do without his wand. Diagnostic spells were obviously out, and that left the more passive magics. He traced the backside of the switch, the little silver box positively thrummed with magic. There was a small seam, almost imperceptible but his fingers found it along the edges. He wasn’t foolish enough to pry it open, if there was enough power to send a message to Dumbledore through the Hogwarts wards releasing it haphazardly would probably cost his fingers. Instead he set it down, thinking about the use of such a device. Wizards had the wireless, owls, portraits, whatever that blue thing Slughorn used was, but Dumbledore had something else. Knowing him, something better.

It would be a useful spell to know, unfortunately his ability to quickly learn Bond’s spells only applied to that one man. Of course Dumbledore would probably teach him the spell if asked, unless he had a reason to keep it secret. Either way it was a problem for another day, he should probably finish off the homework so the professor would stop asking him about it.

The essay was actually somewhat interesting, not the parts needed for class but the future work they laid the foundation for. At the end of the year Dumbledore would start them on human transfiguration, naturally Tom had already read the theory. He hadn’t been able to practice it much, not wishing to experiment on himself when the first part of the chapter was filled with such dire warnings. The essay covered the desire of things to return to their own true forms and the difficulties that brought to transfiguration, as well as the strange effects reported when people were turned into inanimate objects.

He was caught up in his work almost accidentally, writing far more than needed as he continued expanding on the thesis. It was almost embarrassing but Dumbledore was the one professor Tom wasn’t confident he would effortlessly surpass and striving in his class felt like the first needed steps down that path. When his door opened a second time he didn’t even bother to turn for the orderly.
“The plates are on the table,” he gestured vaguely back towards it as he looked over his last paragraph. When the expected noise of shifting silverware or footsteps didn’t occur, some people seemed to forget they were wizards, he turned to see what the problem was. It wasn’t the orderly at all, instead a scarred man with pale eyes and his wand out stood in the doorway.

Tom didn’t move immediately, his mind racing. “I’m sorry, I believe you’re in the wrong room.” Falling back to his manners was a reflex even as he groped for the switch with the arm the man couldn’t see.

The man stepped inside, reaching into his robes for something as he kept his eyes locked on Tom. “Is that so Mr. Riddle?” That settled it, Tom flipped the switch and then a lot of things happened at once.

The pulse of magic from the box nearly staggered him, the summoning spell from the man finished the job as Tom was yanked from his chair, one hand flung towards his wand, calling it as he flew away. A burst of fire filled the air - Dumbledore - but he was too late. The man stepped forward into Tom and hit him hard, the feeling of a portkey seized him just as his wand reached his hand.

They spun together for a near eternity - the hook of the magic ripping through his stomach sharper than ever before - until at last they were spat onto the floor of a dark room. Tom was on his feet instantly, his father might have disowned him but his grace couldn’t be taken back, and his wand was already moving.

His first spell, a solidified blade of air, hit and that made the difference. The scarred man tried to rally but Tom was the greatest student to ever walk Hogwarts. In seconds it was over, the man left hanging upside down and bound from head to toe.

Tom summoned the man’s wand and snapped it, exulting in the terror that the scarred man showed. If this was what Bond or Dumbledore felt how could they not be fighting their entire lives? The rush of power, of adrenaline, nothing he’d ever done had ever matched this moment.

He raised his wand to the man, the slightest effort of will causing the tip to glow an actinic blue. “Where am I?”

He just gasped, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly with his eyes locked on the end of Tom’s wand. “Where am I? I won’t ask again.” He let a little spark jump from his wand to the man’s shoulder, he contorted as much as the ropes allowed him and screamed.

Tom felt a sneer form on his face even as he realized that he couldn’t have the man making noise. “That wasn’t an answer. My next spell on you is going to have a more permanent effect.” He gave the threat a second to sink in, spinning to look at the room in more detail even as he put up a privacy ward.

The room was circular, several doors led away in seemingly random directions. Each was tall and made of dark wood, the only peculiar thing was the metal shutters that were on rails above them. They were covered in gleaming runes, not glowing they were plated with silver or some bright metal, and he could feel the magic on them from yards away. Wherever here was he didn’t really want to be there anymore.

“Well?” The time without Tom’s attention had given the man courage. There was a defiant look in his strange eyes and he spat, or tried to, at Tom.
The spittle never made it out of his mouth, a flick had made the man nearly choke on it before he relented and let the man speak. “You’re in Nurmengard and you won’t be leaving.”

Tom managed to keep his sneer in place, inside was an entirely differently matter. He was in Grindelwald’s fortress, now that he was looking his mark was everywhere, the symbol of the Hallows.

Absently he waved his wand at the man. Perhaps in self defense his mind had leapt back to his homework assignment, human transfiguration. Now was as good a time as any to try.

“Mutationis!” It was the next best thing to a nonsense word. Randomly shouting ‘change’ in Latin wouldn’t normally do anything, but Tom was anything but normal. He forced his magic, his intentions, into life. The man was suddenly shrinking, he screamed in an increasingly high pitch as he shrank. The ropes fell away from him as they dropped around him until at last there was only a small wooden doll, its face twisted in terror, hovering in the middle of the room. Tom let it fall too, the figurine landed on the floor with a sharp crack as he turned to look back at the doors.

He was in Germany, surrounded by hundreds of miles of foreign hostile country and that was only a problem for after he escaped the headquarters of Europe’s reigning Dark Lord. He’d been brought here, presumably the doll was meant to take him to someone who would now be waiting. He had limited time to get away before someone else came to look for him.

Hadn’t he just been criticizing people for not thinking like wizards? He felt for the wards that Bond had put up, that feeling of solidity in the very air that he’d later realized was present at Hogwarts and Geneva. It was absent, this room must be the location for all the magical transportation in the fortress. The strange shutters over the doors must be in case anyone unwelcome came in. Luckily he was headed out.

Tom gathered up his power, focused on his destination, home, the gates of Hogwarts, and spun on his heel and for an instant it seemed to work. Something caught him though, flinging him to the floor even as a klaxon filled the air. His time was up.

Men would be coming, wizards older, more experienced, and more dangerous than Tom himself. He couldn’t count on Dumbledore coming for him, if he could he’d already be here and Grindelwald would surely have prepared for his old friend. He was on his own.

There were five doors to the room, his mind flashed back to Merrythought’s actions at Bond’s first strike. He mimicked them, hitting the doors with locking and sticking charms before starting to pull the flagstones up to block them. After a moment’s work he left one mostly clear, if he guarded all of them he ran the risk of guarding none. After a minute, more time than he’d expected he’d run out of spells. Four of the doors were impenetrable masses of stone, it might have been easier to go through the walls. The fifth he started placing protections behind, traps, wards, invisible bubbles full of phosgene, and then as a final measure one of Bond’s silver constructs, his cobra coiling next to the door. He made several low walls throughout the room, and then disillusioned himself just as the door shuddered in its frame.

Tom crouched behind one of his walls, reviewing what he could possibly do. He had few illusions he’d be making it out of the fortress but everything in his life had been improbable, there was no reason for that pattern to break now.

The door finally gave in and the first man in was through the door was too fast for the cobra, but not for the gas. He collapsed choking even as the door filled with other Reapers. The cobra got one, his
screams quickly stopping as in a bizarre side effect his spraying blood seemed to turn to silver and then Tom joined in.

He banished a wave of spears forward, one man was hit but shields sprang up among the others who were flooding the room. They were cutting through his traps, some more fell but they were too many.

One of them shouted, his accents rendering the spell even more foreign and a wave of purple light filled the room. Tom felt a sudden warmth as the wave hit and his disillusionment dropped. A hail of spells followed it, most missed but enough hit to drop his shield and destroy his closest cover. He dove for his next wall as a sparking indigo bolt clipped his leg. He made it but the limb was dead, utterly unresponsive. It was nonlethal though, emboldened by that Tom pulled himself atop the wall and found himself staring at the glowing tips of wands held by angry men.

“You are coming with us Herr Riddle.”

Rough hands seized him, his wand was taken and he was dragged from the room, bodies and shrapnel littering the floor. There was a pool of smoking silver, his snake had sold itself dearly, and then he was in the fortress. The stone walls were smooth and polished, hovering balls of light shone as they moved past offices and barracks filled with bored faces, watching the teenager being carried through as if it was nothing unusual. Perhaps it wasn’t.

At last, after ascending innumerable flights of stairs they reached a door. It was distinguished by the pale wood, the fortress had been universally dark before then, and the symbol carved into it, Gindelwald’s mark. One of the men stepped forward and it opened before he could knock.

Tom’s first view of the Dark Lord left him unimpressed. He was blond and young, far more youthful than a man of sixty should look, even for a wizard. He smiled when he saw them, looking grateful for a distraction from whatever was on his desk. His smile faded when he saw his disheveled men. “Problems?”

The man holding Tom shoved him forward, his still numb leg wasn’t enough to keep him up and he fell. “Kurtz is dead, others might be.”

Grindelwald stood, looking almost disappointed. “He is the apprentice of Albus Dumbledore, surely you thought to take precautions.” He walked around the desk peering curiously at Tom. “No matter, see to your men. I will handle the boy.” If they didn’t like the orders the men didn’t argue, immediately filing out leaving Tom alone with the Dark Lord. He was lifted to his feet, magic depositing him in a conjured chair that he couldn’t help but notice was identical to the ones Dumbledore made. “Now what shall I do with you Mr. Riddle?”

“You could send me back to England.” He laughed at that. He sounded like the sort of man who laughed easily and often, presumably when not advancing the state of the art for necromancy or taking over sovereign governments.

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“After I’ve gone through all of the trouble to get you here? No Mr. Riddle, you’ll be staying for a little.” He turned pulling two glasses through the air followed by a bottle. “Who else gives me leverage on two of the most dangerous wizards in Europe?”
Rhymes

If Nurmengard had one similarity to Wool’s it was in the bombers overhead. Fleets of planes raced through the sky, American by day, British by night. Occasionally they’d fall trailing flames leaving his guard who thought himself erudite to wax about Icarus. If it weren’t for the portly middle aged wizard his captivity wouldn’t be so terrible, but Grindelwald had seemingly thought it was funny to take his wand and assign an utterly forgettable wizard to be his guard. In his more optimistic moments he thought it was so that when Dumbledore arrived in fire nothing of value would be lost, but as time went on those moments came few and far between.

He hadn’t seen Grindelwald since their initial meeting. They had shared a glass of schnapps, muggle made oddly, and then he’d been assigned to his rooms and given his guard. The accommodations were comfortable once he ignored the fact that it was a cage and he had nearly complete access to the library. He had no wand though, he hadn’t even seen it since he’d been brought down in the transport room. Without it he couldn’t even open his spell locked door. After a month of captivity, a duration with absolutely nothing to do with how long it took for his hair to grow back, Tom decided that he was through waiting for Dumbledore. He’d be escaping on his own.

That was easier said than done. Grindelwald was a peer to Dumbledore at the very least, he’d built Nurmengard himself so the protections would be both complex and clever. This wasn’t a story where the plucky hero escaped through exploiting contrived errors. The difficulty was further increased by the near constant surveillance he was under, the only times he was alone were at night and in the bathroom. At all other times the smiling fat man was watching.

Without a wand he was limited to the most basic magic. He’d fallen out of practice with his old talents and even with them he couldn’t hope to beat a competent or even half trained wizard in a straight fight. He hadn’t planned to fight fair of course, but being hopelessly outclassed by his opponents was beginning to get a little old. He could beat plenty of wizards, he had beaten plenty of wizards, yet he was forced to contend with Bond, Grindelwald and then wandlessly with a round man and a Dark Lord’s fortress. “Just a little parity, that’s all I want.”

“What was that?” The man had heard his mumble and was looking rather like an mole as he looked over the brim of his paper.

Tom faked a smile and shrugged. “Just talking to myself.” The half-hearted evasion satisfied his guard, he nodded and went back to reading. That was another thing annoying Tom. The paper, he’d been given the english edition as soon as he asked, was still full of Bond’s raids. If anything they’d intensified since his capture. He’d picked up an accomplice as well, presumably Lady Clara, and the two of them were striking any target they could find with impunity. Tom wasn’t sure what to make of that given Grindelwald’s plan. Had Bond rejected the offer? Did he suddenly care more about Grindelwald than Tom? Or had Dumbledore gotten to Grindelwald first and offered to stay idle as long as Tom was spared?

If that was the case than Bond’s increase in tempo might be to motivate Grindelwald into handing him over afterall. Presumably at some point he’d do enough damage that him stopping would be worth potentially fighting Dumbledore. Dumbledore didn’t seem like the type of man to shy away from hard choices though, if he had to trade Tom for the good of the many he probably would. Whatever the reasoning, Tom needed to get out sooner rather than later.

“Do you have any books on the history of magic?” The guard looked delighted to be spoken too, it
couldn’t be too exciting to watch a wandless teenager.

“The library here is second to none. I can bring you the directory, one of the Lord’s earlier efforts in enchanting, and you can choose the books you like.” Tom nodded, his mind already moving on.

The directory was interesting, a book with seemingly infinite pages with a short synopsis of every book in the library as well as its location and status. Hogwarts would do well to copy it, assuming it was even possible. Books were notoriously difficult to enchant, the publishers were constantly trying to stop people from copying them. Dark Lords didn’t need to worry about intellectual property laws though.

Dumbledore had made the point just before his last trip to Germany that ancient magic was almost never better than what was currently taught. That was true in nearly everything he’d found, however without a wand it was his only option. Regrettably he didn’t have unlimited resources or hundreds of slaves to sacrifice so he couldn’t duplicate the most studied magic, the wards of the Egyptians. If he looked a few hundred miles to the east there was another solution though.

The rugs in Geneva had been discarded because they could be the center of a trap that couldn’t be detected magically. Considering that his minder would check anything he was working on that would be perfect. It all had to look innocuous until the final moment, right before his escape. If he was able to duplicate the properties of the rugs he’d be able to build up his resources until he was ready and perhaps also lull the guard into complacency. Once he’d escaped his room and disabled the fat man he’d need to beat at least one more person and steal their wand. Tom would have planned to simply steal his minder’s wand except that it was such an obvious move there must be something planned to stop him. For all he knew the man might not even have his real wand on him, he’d never even seen him do magic.

It wasn’t a great plan Tom knew. Anything that started with ‘learn and master a forgotten branch of magic’ and ended with ‘somehow defeat numerous trained and alerted wizards and leave the Dark Lord’s fortress unscathed’ could probably be improved but he didn’t see any other options. He was in the hands of his enemies and that couldn’t be tolerated, no matter how gilded the cage was. There was nothing for it though, he’d never been afraid of hard work and this was his best shot.

Days turned to weeks, if his guard was intrigued by his newfound dedication to painting he didn’t mention it. He would often come and watch Tom work, content to observe the slowly shifting shapes as Tom refined his animation charms. He had carefully scrutinized the rune work that set the paint in motion but the deeper plan seemed to elude him. It also eluded Tom for now, but he was getting closer. There were times when the ink on the paper was almost right and he could feel the potential. The first part of his plan was coming together.

It was an unwelcome surprise when his routine was interrupted just before it was time to begin surreptitiously testing. Two men, one scarred and wary, the other a tailor, entered his room as the first visitors ever. Under the eyes of the presumed Reaper the tailor performed his work, using the measuring charms he’d first seen so long ago with his first robes. The only other one who seemed to realize the absurdity was the tailor. He kept throwing nervous looks at the Reaper and Tom, clearly wondering what a teenager had done to merit the attention of one of Grindelwald’s foot soldiers. He was swift though, scarcely ten minutes after they entered they were gone, leaving a somewhat confused Tom behind.

“What was that?” at this point he didn’t care too much about his image with the guard, he was killing him when he escaped so exposing ignorance or unease was acceptable.
The guard, they’d never exchanged names as again Tom planned to kill him before it mattered, was as happy to explain as ever. “You’ll be attending the Lord’s Yule celebration next week, naturally you’ll need appropriate clothing.”

He hadn’t realized so much time had passed, magic had always been able to capture his attention but he’d never lost track of the month. “Who will be going?” He’d be leaving his cell, that had the potential to dramatically ease his plans and the fortress was likely to be less disciplined on the night of the party. If he could get his creation working it would be his best chance to make his escape.

“Well Lord Grindelwald,” of course the most powerful wizard in Europe would be a bit of an obstacle, “as well as many of his men and of course dignitaries from around the world.”

Tom went back to his painting, turning the idea over in his mind as he toyed with the runes. Trying something in the same room as Grindelwald was practically a guarantee of failure, however there was nothing lost in preparation. He’d be ready.

The actual event was a revelation. Grindelwald was ascendent and wanted people to know it. The main hall of Nurmengard was meant to awe. Entering it was to walk through the sky, all of Europe was at their feet, apparently the most realistic map ever. The center was Germany and in case anyone missed the symbolism Grindelwald’s chair, throne really, was atop Nurmengard. Clouds passed through the crowds and tables, snow was falling over northern Europe as thin wispy clouds skated across the moon over Italy. The cities were dark, blacked out in fear of bombers, but Tom saw flashes over the Mediterranean. Waking closer he approached the flashes, like fireflies. Peering as closely as he dared he saw planes, impossibly tiny fighters, dueling over the ocean. It was almost as if they were watching Europe in real time, but that was- clearly it wasn’t impossible.

Watching the room he could see people realizing what they were seeing by their slack jaws. One man had even conjured a magnifying glass and had gotten on his hands and knees, searching for something in southern France. Others looked nervous, wondering what else Grindelwald had if he was revealing this as a casual show of force.

The Dark Lord himself appeared then, conversations stilling as he passed through the room, all eyes followed him as he walked through the Fulda gap before reaching his seat. At his nod the majordomo rose and with a quick motion a peal rang forth, commanding obedience.

“Saraneth.” Tom started at the voice from just behind his shoulder. “My apologies Mr. Riddle.” He turned to find a familiar face, the Dane from the brunch, Anderson. He waved Tom forward, both of them moving smoothly through the crowd that was suddenly as coordinated as any dance. “I had thought to seek you out before we were sent to our seats, are you well?”

Tom’s thoughts involuntarily went to the papers up his sleeve, one fold away from releasing destruction and fire. “Well enough.”

Anderson seemed to sense something as he gave Tom an obvious searching glance, his eyes lingering on his arm before nodding sharply. “Your master has been striving through all diplomatic channels to secure your release. It is rumored that the ministry has forbidden him to leave Britain.”

“Since that would stop him.”

“No,” Anderson drew the word out as they kept walking, “no it wouldn’t. He’s probably planning something but extracting you from Nurmengard would take something best called deus ex machina.”
“I know that Grindelwald planned to use me as a lever on Bond and him.”

Anderson smiled at that, his eyes brightening. “I think he can count that as a failure, Bond has killed every Reaper he’s found, and Dumbledore..”

They’d reached their seats, somehow everyone had found theirs simultaneously and sat. Tom wanted to grab his water, his mouth was suddenly bone dry, but he was worried that lifting his arm up to take it would damage his folded spells. Keeping delicate and powerful magic in close proximity to his unshielded arm was clearly not an optimal strategy. He’d have to endure possible dehydration as he waited for his chance.

Grindelwald stood as the chatter died away, all present looking to him.

“My friends welcome!” His voice was light, he seemed impossibly happy atop the dais. “It is my very great honor to have you all here for the tenth Yuletide of the German Empire!” Tom was thrown by the choice of words, and also the language, why was he speaking English?

“A rather refined translation spell across the entire hall.” Anderson had noticed his confusion. “It turns all words into the language the listener is most comfortable with. Gellert is certainly trying to make an impression.” Anderson was awfully bold to be so casual about the Dark Lord, especially enough to interrupt his speech.

He shook his head and turned his attention back to the wizard who was now extemporizing about the glories that awaited all of them when they rose above the muggles. “They outnumber us a thousandfold, yet all their efforts can be superseded by a dedicated wizard.” He gestured to the floor then. “They have dedicated hundreds of their brightest minds to fireworks, seeking to travel the voids between the stars and thinking only to use it as a weapon.” He was growing impassioned as he continued, pacing narrowly along the table. “Look at it, such beauty, such potential and they think only of bringing fire and death to their enemies! It took simple charms and imagination and here we sit amidst the firmament, like the gods of old Olympus or Asgard.”

His smile grew even wider as muttering filled the hall. “Who can doubt that united we can go further? Now we sit and watch but together we can command! We can create such glories that the ancient world and myth will forever be overshadowed!” His wand appeared in his hand, long, knurled and hauntingly familiar. “Join me on this journey, leave behind the lesser minds and step forward, the heavens and everything beneath them will be ours!” Thunderous applause filled the room, and not all of it was from his followers, even Anderson was clapping politely as he looked almost wistfully at Grindelwald.

“A tempting dream.” That was the last thing he said before their food appeared. At last dessert arrived and Tom was growing increasingly nervous. He hadn’t expected to have a chance before the dinner, after the food during the dancing and conversation had been his plan but the time was rapidly approaching.

Anderson noticed his unease but didn’t comment, instead making conversation with the table about the sourcing of their dishes. No one could quite agree on who had first invented the frozen flames that had served as an amuse bouche. The conjured food was nutritionless of course, but the flavor and texture was an experience normally Tom would have enjoyed, one of the luxuries he had always been denied.

Grindelwald stood then as the scraping of forks and knives died down in response. “My friends, if you will permit me but a few more words before we move on to happier pursuits. We have here
many distinguished guests but one of them has always held a special place in my heart and I have watched him come all the way from Scotland to join us here tonight.” Tom watched Grindelwald, his omnipresent smile was even wider than usual, his wand twirling between his fingers. “Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Albus Dumbledore!”

Tom nearly wrenched his neck as he searched the room for the tall wizard, his fading auburn hair was entirely absent from the room. Anderson pushing his chair out next to him made him swing back, the Dane was standing and shifting, seemingly unfolding into the professor’s lanky form. Awkward clapping filled the hall, the only enthusiastic ones were Grindelwald and an inebriated man whose companion was trying to shush him.

Dumbledore looked around the room, his blue eyes sparkling and he somehow managed to shallowly bow to the entire party in one motion. “Thank you Gellert, and may I say that the party thus far has been delightful.”
Retrenchment

Tom and Dumbledore were ushered to the head table, the waiters had looked far more prepared for violence than anyone he’d ever seen. They went without incident though, reaching the elevated dais and finding that there was room at the previously packed table. Dumbledore politely nodded to a few of the other guests while Tom glanced around the table. He had a good memory for faces and he didn’t think anyone had left but- the twisting around the edge of the platform was the key.

“Unbounded spatial expansion?”

Grindelwald looked almost surprised that Tom had spoken, he’d been watching Dumbledore approach, but after an instant he was delighted. “Indeed Mr. Riddle. I’ve been toying with it ever since your master used one to effect your escape from Geneva.”

“You’ve overcome the upkeep issues then?” Dumbledore was peering at the boundary of the region. “I’ve always had difficulty keeping them going for too long before they shook themselves apart.” Tom followed his gaze and had to look away, there was a wrongness in the warped space. He took a moment to steady himself then turned back. The table’s back edge was still straight, that was a truth he could cling to. The far corners were right angles and the near ones were obtuse making the near edge parallel with the- Dumbledore’s hand guiding him into a chair was a relief.

Grindelwald was smiling, amused at Tom’s reaction and slowly twirling his wand. “Spatial expansion really needs some mental expansion to get used to,” with a gesture servants put wine glasses in front of them and one came holding a steaming bottle with tongs. “As to the upkeep,” he stopped twirling his wand and looked at it with fondness, “this wand tends to make concerns like that a lesser matter.”

Dumbledore let the waiter, or sommelier perhaps, pour before he continued. Tom was distracted by the molten gold coming from the bottle, wisps of steam wafted from it even as the bottle groaned as it rapidly cooled. “Well you’ve piqued my curiosity and gone to so much effort so I’ll give you your moment. That is the Elder Wand?”

Grindelwald took a sip from his smoking glass and couldn’t conceal his grin. He put the glass down and a bit of the liquid was stuck to the upper edge, it was as viscous as molasses. A drop fell onto the table and burst of flames rose around it before vanishing, leaving the varnished wood behind unscathed. He set the wand down, perilously close to the golden bottle which still had globs of molten metal rolling down its sides. “It is.”

“It seems you can’t go anywhere without tripping over a Hallow these days.” For a moment the table was silent, the others had been listening and Dumbledore’s irreverent comment had been enough to disrupt their conversations.

“Yes, Tom was kind enough to share the location of the Resurrection Stone.” He punctuated his statement with another sip. That revelation made Tom wish he was confident enough to take a drink. It was one thing to know that his mind could be read, another to have it thrown in his face. “Or should I say you were kind enough Albus? Surely teaching your apprentice occlumency would not be too much to ask?”

“It wasn’t much fun when we learned and I think his talents lie in another direction.” Dumbledore was unfazed as Tom instantly reordered his mental curriculum. “Magic is best learned by following a
wizard’s interests, I wouldn’t want to stunt his growth in favor of creating a shadow of myself.”

Grindelwald raised his glass, as if to acknowledge a touch. “True, my Reapers will never reach the heights we’ve found as long as they blindly follow my instructions. As for the boy I suspect,” Grindelwald’s blue eyes met his for an instant, “no, I know that right now mastering occlumency is his most fervent desire.”

“Getting what we want—”

“Oh don’t turn this into some sort of morality debate Albus!” Grindelwald slammed back the last of his drink and then seemed to notice that neither Tom nor Albus had touched theirs. “Try the immortality!”

“What?” Grindelwald looked confused briefly before understanding flashed across his face.

“The ambrosia.” He pronounced the word very deliberately, sounding it out almost.

“Your translator?” Dumbledore was inspecting the golden liquid, swirling it beneath his crooked nose.

The Dark Lord still was chagrined but as he refilled his glass he seemed to recover. “Yes there are a few kinks left in it. This is the largest area I’ve ever cast it on and by far the most languages at once. So far I think it’s worked well.”

“How does it work? The desire to be understood?” Grindelwald shook his head proudly.

“If I was only concerned about what I said that would be enough. I had to go deeper, this spell is based on that most central of human desires, the desire to understand.” He let out a laugh then, such a joyous sound that it couldn’t belong to a necromancer, to the conqueror of Europe. “Can you imagine when I get it working to its full potency? Everyone, all across the world, one language. We will be back to Babel!”

Dumbledore was silent, slowly drinking the molten gold as Tom looked between him and Grindelwald. “Is understanding really the most central desire?”

The Dark Lord was apparently willing to humor him while Dumbledore thought. “What would you suggest instead Mr. Riddle?”

Tom’s mind raced. He was certain that most weren’t driven by ideals, but what did drive people? “Food and shelter, safety.”

Grindelwald looked almost disappointed. “Maybe that’s what an animal desires, but we are better than that.” He was slipping into a cadence, this speech was something he’d given often. “We are above the muggles, even as they are above the apes. With magic the world is given to us. It follows that nothing of its baser structure can be what we truly want, for we cannot covet that which we already have.”

Dumbledore broke in then, finished with whatever he’d been thinking through. “It’s good for a man’s reach to exceed his grasp—”

“Yes! Browning, exactly!” Grindelwald was elated again, he turned to Tom seemingly overflowing with energy. “The poet had it best, heaven cannot be easily found, and with magic those things you
mentioned are trivial. Understanding though?” He seized his wand and with a single slash a clock, an intricate mass of churning gears, thumped onto the table “I can turn nothing into something but that gives me nothing new, only through studying-” another wave expanded it, the gears still rotating even as they exploded outward to reveal the slowly ticking heart- “do I gain anything. How can anyone’s central desire be anything but understanding?”

Tom felt a tug at the idea, he had always wanted magic to be more than buttons into beetles and here it was spelled out. It was a quest- no that tug was not metaphorical.

Something on his face must have shown. Dumbledore looked to him concerned, his hand moving towards the pocket where he kept his wand, and then the tug, a jerk now, hit Tom again. It pulled him up, barking his knees painfully against the table as Grindelwald and Dumbledore both drew their wands looking skyward. There was a thunderous crash- the ceiling seemed to explode as a black shape gleaming with burning runes plunge through it. It halted just above their table as screams filled the hall.

The pull had subsided and Tom took the opportunity to take a look at the object. It was a bomb, a muggle bomb. Well it was more than that, all across the cylindrical iron shape were words written in fire accompanied by others shining blue. It was also pointed straight at him, as he sidled experimentally the tip moved to follow him.

“A wardbreaker!” The interruption had not dampened Grindelwald’s mood one iota. He waved his wand and the splinters which had also hung in the air zoomed back to the ceiling where the wood and paint melded into a seamless whole. The crowd was still uneasy and Tom couldn’t blame them, having a five ton bomb crash through the roof was enough to unsettle anyone’s nerves. “Please everyone continue, there is no need to interrupt the festivities.” He waved his hand and the band started again, only taking a few measures before they merged back into the background noise.

Satisfied with his efforts he sat down again, staring at the bomb enraptured. “Bond is certainly pulling out all the stops isn’t he? Hallows, assaults on my men, and now trying to blow up my party.” His eyes met Tom’s again and he had to steel himself not to look away, not to show weakness. “It’s such a pity no one has any idea why he’s after you. I wonder what he could do without his obsession.”

“A wardbreaker you said?” Dumbledore was staring at the bomb now, his eyes flickering across the runes.

“Yes, I’m not surprised you haven’t heard of them.” Grindelwald glanced to Tom and lowered his voice, as if he was imparting a great secret, “I so rarely got the chance to teach Dumbledore anything, let me tell you it is as great a pleasure as ever.” He picked up his wand and the clock vanished as an illusory castle appeared atop the table. Men walked its walls as a besieging army seemed to march from a forest that was suddenly growing from the surface. “Back before the statute when both world were still joined there was the problem of the ancient wards. When one king wanted to take his neighbor’s lands they could be such an obstacle, naturally they needed to be overcome.”

Grindelwald was waiting for a response, he shared Dumbledore’s annoying habit of rhetorical questions that were only revealed to be a question and not rhetorical after an awkward silence. “By wardbreakers.”

“Not the most imaginative name yes. Utterly resistant to magic, so far that spells touching them often collapse as does transfigured material, they fell out of use once large scale wars did.” He looked to
the bomb above them, suspended by magic despite his words. “Of course there were counters, but they imposed a cost. Now that Bond is playing with them I’ll have to implement some.”

“A succinct summary Gellert.” Dumbledore had stopped reading the runes and he was looking around the hall, slowly turning from the dancing guests until he reached Tom and met his eyes. Tom’s mind erupted in pain and the his thoughts shifted, some inexorable force driving them to a memory.

He and Dumbledore were sitting in a room he’d never been in. It was featureless but for the leather chairs and stone walls that no matter how much he tried would not come into focus. Dumbledore gave a slow nod when Tom’s attention came back to him and after another of his interminable pauses began to speak.

“Mr. Riddle I apologize for the discomfort but this needed to be done. In a moment this memory will be over, and when it is you need to move quickly. Use the papers you have hidden and fire them at the wardbreaker. With the wards down Fawkes will get you out while I hold off Grindelwald.” A diagram of the plan had appeared as he explained it, the illustrations of Dumbledore and Grindelwald dueling incongruously cheerful, as was Tom’s escape in step two. “Be ready in three, two, one-”

Suddenly the world was back and in motion. Tom lurched to his feet, aiming his arm while hoping that he wasn’t about to blow everything short of his shoulder off. With his left hand he squeezed the papers closed and flinched away, even in the best case-

He was on the floor, still with two arms and the world around him seemed composed entirely of murky water. His eyes weren’t his only dulled sense, there was a ringing in his ears and then a new sound rising above it, courage and victory and above all fire. Talons clamped onto his shoulder and then he was moving, his body burned away yet he continued, surrounded and nourished by the phoenix song. He was still, but he knew that he wasn’t even as he was aware of all the fires in the world, from candles to the earth’s molten core. There were other songs in the flames than Fawkes’s, different tempos and melodies but somehow they blended together to form one harmonious whole. He couldn’t imagine leaving this realm, of immortality, of power and life but he could feel the trip coming to an end. The parts of him that had burned away were returning, bringing an entirely unwelcome solidity.

The real world felt cold. He was in Dumbledore’s office and Fawkes jumped from his shoulder and with a lazy flap of his wings landed on his perch, looking almost insufferably proud. He couldn’t help but stare at the phoenix. He’d felt a shade, the barest touch of his power and the creature seemed to be inspecting his master’s desk for treats. Tom didn’t know how long he sat there, just watching Fawkes but when Dumbledore arrived he could barely move from his stiffness.

The professor’s robes had seen better days, they were scorched and torn and the hem was bleached white. Dumbledore himself looked unscathed but weary. He slowly moved around to his chair, hissing when he bumped his desk, he hadn’t gotten away scot free then. For a moment he was silent, looking at Tom over his steepled hands. “Are you alright Mr. Riddle?”

Tom shook himself, he’d been barely aware and Dumbledore’s question brought him back to himself. He did a mental survey, all limbs and digits were present, no pain except for a dull ache and his right arm was a little cold, oh his sleeve was gone and- there was the pain. He doubled over his arm, sobbing and clutching it to him as the runes branded into his arm burned. His skin was scorched, it had bubbled and then there was blessed relief. Dumbledore had cast something and was shuffling through his desk rapidly. Fawkes’s arrival stopped both their efforts as he laid his head on Tom’s arm and shed a single tear.
“Healing tears, of course.” Tom was still in shock, otherwise he wouldn’t have mentioned something so obvious, but watching his flesh flow back together, the brands fading to white scars as his skin recovered was enough to knock him off-kilter. “Thanks Fawkes.” Dumbledore was startled, he hid it but Tom noticed it before he too nodded and thanked Fawkes.

“Past the burns are you alright?”

The world was coming back into focus, and Tom repeated his check, this time with no surprises. “Fine sir. Thank you for coming.”

“You have my apologies for the necessity. I didn’t expect Gellert to be so bold.”

“What do you think he will do now?” The professor was a little thrown by the transition but shook his head.

“I can’t say, I knew him once but those days are gone.” He stood again, wincing slightly and waved for Tom to get up. “It’s a problem for tomorrow Mr. Riddle, despite Fawkes’s fine work I think we should both make a trip to the infirmary.” He pushed the door open, holding it for Tom to follow. “Besides I suspect you have enough of a backlog in your schoolwork that you won’t have time to worry about him.”
A night in the infirmary left Tom with a clean bill of health. Dumbledore had taken two potions then vanished, but Tom wasn’t quite able to duplicate his escape. In any case the privacy was what he wanted. He’d managed to avoid answering most questions after his first brush with celebrity, but he hardly thought he’d be so lucky this time.

Beneath the cool sheets all he could think of was fire. He’d burned and passed into something very much divine, like a sacrifice. That word didn’t really capture it though. For all of Dumbledore’s disdain for ancient magic there was something in the old and forgotten, if only a mystique that modern languages couldn’t quite capture. His mind went back to the runes he’d learned and now were branded into his arm. They were a mix of alphabets, cuneiform, flowing Arabic and the comparatively normal Greek. He’d liked the idea of the Greek gods when he was younger. If his magic had followed some theme when he first seized his power he might even have assumed he was some sort of deity. Those dreams had been long eclipsed by reality but staring at the ceiling his mind was drifting back to the battered copy of Bulwich at Wool’s. The Greeks had sought to propitiate their gods with burnt offerings, reducing bulls and sculptures to ash to ensure that their essences made their way to Olympus. That was the way phoenix travel had felt. He’d burned completely, a holocaust, the phoenix fires bringing him into contact with immortality.

Lying in the infirmary on starched sheets and the noxious scent of potions filling the air such thoughts should have seemed ludicrous. Fawkes was just a bird, magical of course but magic was well not mundane, rather its antithesis but it was something known. If immortality was so easily reached why hadn’t it been seized? Dumbledore was surely right that newer magic was better, the runes scorched into his arm showed that at least, but phoenixes had been around since the dawn of civilization. He couldn’t have been the first to feel the flames and crave them.

Waking up to the nurse performing diagnostics, her wand motions swift and sure, wasn’t enough to dispel his thoughts. She let him go with a final stare at his burned arm and Tom exited into the strangely empty halls.

It took him an embarrassingly long time to realize that they were deserted because it was winter break, that all the students with homes had returned to them. It was a relief. He truly hadn’t been looking forward to questions and hopefully the novelty of his return would be gone after a week or two. With the castle almost empty he could go back to his research and practice. It had been so long since he was able to truly do magic, the runes and folded paper barely counted compared to what he could do with a wand.

A wand that was in Germany, the last time he’d seen it had been in Grindelwald’s hands. For a moment he entertained the thought that Grindelwald would send it back. It seemed the sort of gesture that Dumbledore and he were fond of, sporting to the last. Tom had been hungry but he changed his destination from the kitchens to Dumbledore’s office, he was his best bet for aid.

“Mr. Riddle, you’re up early.” Dumbledore’s voice was warm as he looked up from his desk. “Sit down, if you please.” There wasn’t a chair present but Tom decided to run with it, one of Dumbledore’s last lessons had been on spontaneity.

That line of thinking led to nowhere but the floor and a startled and choked back curse from the professor as he hit the flagstones with a cushioning charm. “Perhaps I should have phrased that better.” As Tom got to his feet a leather backed chair shimmered into existence behind him. “If nothing else that confirms you’re in good physical health if a bump like that didn’t phase you.”
Tom kicked the chair lightly, just to make sure it was there this time, before sitting. Dumbledore raised an eyebrow but Tom didn’t reply. The remark that leapt to mind about burned hands teaching best seemed in poor taste. There was also something else strange that he couldn’t immediately put his finger on, it was only when the professor seemed to make an aborted gesture that it came to him.

“What happened to your beard?"

Dumbledore looked down sadly, his previous flowing beard was now close cropped. He looked far younger, but also nothing like himself. “Well while bearding Gellert in his den, if you’ll forgive the pun, he managed to land one hit. Luckily it was as minor as I thought, far better than the spells I elected to block and dodge, but it did have rather grievous consequences.”

“You could try potions you know…” It was somewhat absurd to be offering sympathy over the state of a man’s beard but Tom had felt decidedly off kilter ever since he’d left Germany.

Dumbledore almost looked offended at the suggestion. “If you need magic to grow facial hair you don’t deserve it, Gellert was always a little jealous in our younger days. His grew in all patchy, especially compared to well,” he reached where it had used to be, “the magnificence I had.” They shared a moment, well perhaps Dumbledore thought they shared a moment while Tom was wondering why his life had changed course so drastically, before the professor clapped his hands briskly and sat up straight. “While I’m always available for facial hair advice I suspect you’re here for a different matter.”

“Yes sir, my wand.”

“Gellert didn’t let you keep it? He must have thought well of you then.” That was a nice way of looking at it, but in the end he was still wandless.

“I half thought he might have given it back, but—”

“He would have once I’m sure. Ruling Europe has no doubt cost him some sense of fair play.” Dumbledore stood and rounded his desk to the fireplace, waving for Tom to follow in his wake. “To Ollivander’s then, I have it on good authority that there will be another wand there close to yours.”

He held a pot filled with silver floo powder to Tom and after he’d grabbed a pinch tossed it into the flames. “Diagon Alley!” Tom looked at the green flames with some trepidation, after phoenix travel he was probably spoiled for life but Fawkes was absent. He flung his powder in and followed.

The heart of magical London was far divorced from the city outside, the war had never touched it. It was full of crowds that Dumbledore cut through effortlessly, his head visible above the throngs. Tom remembered his first time here, alone but determined to prove himself. He still felt shades of that but watching the bustle of ordinary witches and wizards they seemed almost as alien as they had before. In Hogwarts he could forget it almost, but after what he’d seen Diagon was almost tawdry, the grandeur and glory of magic almost entirely absent.

Even Gringotts, the edifice holding the vaults he’d once craved, was diminished. He’d lived Bond’s slaughter of the goblins and felt his disdain for the creatures, the hatred that had filled every slash of his wand. Magic was might, and people were content to haggle over newt’s eyes and used cauldrons. He didn’t understand how Dumbledore could stand it.

The professor was clearly enjoying himself as he walked through the brisk winter air. Compared to the Scottish Highlands it wasn’t terribly cold, the normal Hogwarts robes were thick enough for balmy London but Dumbledore was relishing it, exhaling great clouds of steam that shifted and-

There were shapes in his breath, the professor had his wand in his hand and was twitching it as ships
sailed and dragons curled into the sky before dissolving into the cold air. For a moment Tom was
enchanted, shaping such an ephemeral thing and having it retain its qualities was truly brilliant
magic- then someone jostled him and the spell was broken. They reached Ollivander’s soon after, the
shop was as silent and dusty as his first visit.

“Good to see you Garrick.” Dumbledore spoke to the empty room and the wandmaker emerged
behind them with a dry chuckle.

“Still annoyed after all these years Albus?” He spoke to Tom in what was clearly meant to be an
aside, even though his whispery voice made the distinction less than clear. “On his first visit he
jumped so high I thought he’d break the ceiling.”

“Misadventures aside, we are here-”

“For a wand. Yes, it’s a wand shop.” He turned to Tom, silver eyes intent. “I remember yours, one
of my best. Thirteen and a half inches, yew with a phoenix feather core.” He jerked his head towards
Dumbledore. “From his phoenix in fact.”

Ollivander moved closer to Tom and reached for his arm, Tom let him move it with a light grip. The
old man seemed particularly interested in the brands on his forearm but didn’t comment. At last he let
Tom go and turned back to his counter and his wall of wands. “I was sure when you walked in and
nothing has changed my mind. I have just the wand for you.” A box shot to his hand and he held it
to Tom almost reverently.

Tom removed the lid and saw the wand nestled in its velvet box, darker and shorter than his old one.
He took it out, and while there wasn’t the same burst of sparks as his first he felt it connect, his magic
linking and filling the wood.

“It’s quite different in character from your previous, holly to yew is a major shift, but the core is what
dominates it.” Ollivander still held the box but he clearly recognized Tom wasn’t giving the wand
back. “I don’t know quite what you got up to with that other wand of yours but this wand will work
for you just as well as your first. Eleven inches, nice and supple.”

“Excellent, thank you Garrick.” Dumbledore paid while Tom held his new wand. The magic within
it was begging to be released, to shape and change, to impose his will upon the world. He could
hardly wait to return to Hogwarts, it had been far too long since his last true spell.

Dumbledore’s pace on the way back was frustratingly slow, almost as if he as intentionally annoying
him. As soon as the thought crossed his mind Dumbledore spoke. Tom wasn’t sure if he’d rather be
worried that Dumbledore could read him so well or be concerned about potential legilimency.

“Garrick wasn’t mistaken about the difference between your wands, but I think he overlooked some
factors.”

Tom responded even though he wasn’t sure if Dumbledore was attempting a rhetorical pause. “Yew
and holly are diametrically opposed.”

“Life and death true, but the symbolism is hardly that clear cut.” They’d passed the fireplace they’d
entered the alley from and Tom resigned himself to waiting the conversation out before he could
truly rejoin the magical world. “You’ve had more contact with a phoenix than most, they’re seen as
the paramount example of light magic, their songs bring courage and their tears heal wounds.”

Fawkes was there in a burst of flames, the shoppers around them recoiling as he circled once trilling
before settling on Dumbledore’s shoulder. All at once the crowds turned away and ignored them,
Tom was quick enough to see the professor’s wand vanish back into his sleeve as the crowds flowed around them like a rock in a stream.

“It’s easy to look at them and just see their virtues, but at their heart they’re fighters, they reward the brave and the loyal in battle.” Tom snuck a glance at the bird. Fawkes was sitting tall and proud, he was fierce, his beak curved and his talons sharp. “I won’t say there aren’t causes worth fighting for, dying for, or even killing for, due to my failures we’ve both experienced that.”

Tom kept pace, dodging through the slush. “I don’t follow professor, beyond the obvious what does this have to do with my wand?”

Dumbledore slowed, visibly considering his words. “I remember the first time I flew with a phoenix. It does change you, magic of that magnitude can’t do anything but.” A few more steps passed in silence. “You’ve just escaped from some rather harrowing circumstances, not entirely without cost. At times like these most people grow reflective, they start to wonder about their natures.”

“Didn’t you say that it should change me? Wouldn’t I be right to wonder?”

“We’re all shaped by our experiences, but you shouldn’t let them dominate you. Despite your wand changing from yew to holly, you’re still the same wizard who took it at eleven, you’re still a fighter at your core.” A small smile flashed across his face at his pun before he continued. “Fawkes wouldn’t have deigned to carry you or heal you without that, he wouldn’t have saved you in the first place if he didn’t recognize your potential for courage.”

Tom thought as he walked, the desire to do magic almost forgotten. He’d been changed immensely by Bond’s attack, his plans, his goals, his beliefs. He’d felt the strength of Fawkes’s magic but-

“How could he possibly know that?”

“How do boggarts know your worst fear? Magic.”

“That’s hardly an answer.”

The professor was amused as he turned to a fireplace and made it burn green. “Actually I find that it almost always is.”
Reinvigoration

His new wand was different, lively. It was trite to ascribe that to the holly wood, but his yew wand had been sharper in some ways, more clinical. In contrast the holly gave his spells more animation. His silver snake seemed more alert, its once blank eyes now showing emotion. The supple wood seemed to flex and flow with magic. It was subtle, but he could feel the difference as he went through the wand motions. Some spells sprang forth from the holly where others were sluggish, as if they needed a stiffer base to truly shine. It varied by spell, and he could still perform the magic, but for the first time he was beginning to sense the deeper magic Dumbledore spoke of.

There was one type of magic that was utterly unaffected by the change in wands. Fire. The phoenix fire wouldn’t release its hold on him, he could almost hear it in his dreams. Pulling flames from his wand was as close a substitute as he could manage. When his magic flooded through the core he could almost imagine himself back in the inferno.

He wasn’t blind to the dangers, he recognized that some magic could be addictive, but back in Hogwarts he had almost nothing better to do. Classes had resumed and his fears about the student body’s reactions were proven true. He could feel eyes on him constantly. The spell to tell whenever anyone was looking at him had seemed like a good idea at the time, but the constant sensation was growing wearisome and he was having trouble removing the charm. Conversations stopped when he approached, and he hadn’t bothered to see what the back issues of the Prophet had said about his European vacation.

It didn’t truly matter, he was better than them, but it would be nice not to have to constantly pay attention to how he acted in public. Viewing it as practice for his future celebrity was almost the only way he could stand it. Watching Malfoy squirm whenever he looked at him was an additional bonus.

Tom would have liked more information about whatever Bond was up to, but the news was as useless as he expected. He’d even gone as far as to purchase muggle papers in the hopes of finding something, but Grindelwald’s war was an even larger distraction for them. The only thing coming out of Europe for them were pictures of burned cities and the retaliatory German bombers. Compared to that one man, no matter how skilled, wouldn’t be noticed despite his almost cavalier disregard for the Statute.

With nothing to do but wait for Bond’s inevitable reappearance he had plenty of time to practice his occlumency. Dumbledore had given him a thin book, he recognized the print as the result of a charm that turned script to regular type, and told him to practice ‘clearing his mind.’

It was an odd thing for him to do, Tom had always been a thinker, a schemer, his mind racing along its courses. To suddenly think of nothing was difficult, almost brain-deadening. Finding anything else at all to do was a relief. Even though keeping his mind secure was nearly his highest priority it was intensely boring and maddeningly unproductive. Telling this to Dumbledore was met only with a nod.

“It’s a thankless task I agree.” They were in his office, Tom had conjured his own chair just to be safe. “But if you wish to travel through the upper echelons,” they both knew he did, “then keeping your thoughts to yourself is crucial. You’re not the first I’ve tried to teach the art, the book you read is mine, and it’s always been painful.”

Tom looked at his still scarred arm before meeting Dumbledore’s eyes. “I can handle the pain.”
“Your tolerance is not what makes me reluctant,” the professor glanced to Fawkes who merely tilted his head, “but you have already demonstrated a need for this. Attempt to clear your mind if you would.” Dumbledore spun his wand through his fingers as he waited, then lifted it. “Ready?”

Tom barely had time to nod before a hundred nails were pounded into his skull. Dumbledore’s magic was like acid, burning away at his very self. His thoughts, memories, dreams— not those! He ripped free, barely staying in his seat, already sweating after a bare instant of contact.

“Well done Mr. Riddle.” Dumbledore by contrast was unruffled. “Merely being able to detect a probe is the first step, although I confess that was far more heavy handed than I would have needed.”

“Grindelwald’s felt—”

“Nothing like that? No he wouldn’t have.” The professor looked contemplative, it was sometimes hard to remember he and Grindelwald had once been friends. “We learned together—practicing on each other and those we met. A certain subtlety is needed to maximize its utility and we were both determined to master it.”

In contrast to Dumbledore it was easy to see the dictator with the easy laugh idly picking thoughts from those around him, from waiters to Wizengamot members. “So what you just did, that’s what the easy version?”

The professor held up one long hand in caution. “Yes but legilimency is just as difficult as occlumency in its way. I will say it’s far easier to learn, progress is much more evident and it doesn’t require the same sort of pain. If you do feel pain like you just experienced you may be confident that your adversary is either incompetent or sadistic.”

The pain had seemed to exceed that of being burnt, but with the way the mind handled it he couldn’t judge its true magnitude. Either way he was in no hurry to experience it again. “Will blocking it grow less painful?”

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. “As the defender it’s not your choice. You need to accept and endure it.” He raised his wand again. “You can’t grow too nervous about it either, clear your mind.”

Hours later Tom stumbled back to the dorm, feeling entirely wrung out. Dumbledore had made him try to block him for an eternity, barely giving him a respite. At last he’d sent him off with a bar of chocolate and the promise that this was the only way he knew to teach occlumency. Tom only made it into his bed with extreme difficulty, taking three tries to set the various wards he usually performed as an afterthought. It was hardly a surprise that the one night he truly wanted to sleep, to rest his mind, Bond returned.

“You think we’ll find their safehouses written down?” The voice was Clara’s, he was kneeling over a drawer, flipping through records.

“Well they stopped telling their agents about more than the ones they were to use. Schultz over there—” being behind someone’s eyes as they jerked their head was nauseating and Tom barely got a glimpse of the two boots on the the other side of the desk, “didn’t know, and this drawer is enchanted to resist the standard library spells.”

Clara stepped over the prone body fastidiously. “When did you learn so many book searching spells as to have a standard set?”
“One of my best friends was obsessed with them growing up, if we hadn’t been too busy I guarantee it would have been her life’s work, or at least a hobby.” The documents Bond was paging through were covered in dark ink, dense print filling them to their borders. “There’s a constant arms race between publishers and researchers though, they’re tricky to cast now, which is why the paper is so full.” Tom pulled one free and started to run his finger down a list, addresses apparently. “They didn’t want to waste effort.”

Clara moved behind him, he could feel her warmth on his back. “So now we have our locations, no thanks to our fine hexenmeister.”

He stood, still with Clara against him. “There’s only ten of them, we could hit them all tonight.”

Her chin hit his shoulder as she nodded. “Any we don’t clean up they’ll just shift.” There was venom in her voice. “I want to keep making an example of them.”

Tom stepped away, stretching a hand out to her. “I’ll never be against killing Nazis.”

She took it, smiling. “Who cares about Nazis?”

“Can’t imagine.” was the sardonic reply, then he twisted on his heel and they spun through the world.

The two of them emerged into a dark Parisian street. Or Tom assumed it was Paris, it looked as he imagined it should but he’d never made it there. Grindelwald’s grand tour was truly substandard. Clara was casting charms on herself, Tom was following her example and the magic made the air feel heavy. He studied the house as his centipede slithered from his wand, it was entirely indistinct from the others on the block. There were no lights visible, but he could see curtains drawn across the walls. After a moment of fruitless study some spell of his made the world turn blue, except for red vaguely man shaped blobs arranged throughout the house.

“I’ll take point. There’s three of them.” Clara nodded, then her wand moved, Tom recognized both the motions and the feel of an anti-apparition jinx. He was charging before she finished.

His creature burst forward in front of him, smashing through the door that exploded in response. Tom didn’t follow it though, a sharp gesture propelling him up towards the second floor windows. Glass shattered around him, he was on his feet before the Germans could turn back and his wand lashed forward twice. Both of them fell in pieces, then Clara was in the house. A column of blue-white fire roared from her wand, straight through the ceiling leaving only a burning hole.

Tom vanished the flames after a second, then walked forward to inspect the damage. Clara’s blast had bored all the way to the roof, the star studded sky was bright above the blacked out Paris. “Nice one.”

She smirked. “On occasion I try, lest you grow too full of yourself.”

“Can’t have that I suppose.” He whistled and his construct surged up the stairs, capering and leaping like an affectionate dog. “Good job skrewtsky.” He raised his want to dismiss it then a series of cracks rang from the streets.

Clara met his eyes, nerves mixed with eagerness filling hers. “It was a trap.”
Tom was casting more shields and refreshing ones he’d already layered. “We can’t be sure of that.”

“Maybe it was a fast response team, but they’re here.” She wasn’t idle either, her wand was moving until she stopped with a muttered curse. “They’ve put up their own wards.”

The impending battle didn’t have an effect on his tone. “We’ve beat them before. Do that spell of yours, the one that sees who will win a fight.”

“That’s not at all what it does.” She was focussing though, sweeping her wand through precise motions. “It just compares everyone on my side against everyone on the other, divides muggles and goblins by eight then gives me a sense of which is-” her wand stopped- “larger. James they’ve got at least fifty wizards out there.”

“Fifty?” He rolled his shoulders. “We might need to use some tricks then.”

“I didn’t think you had any left.” Clara was peering into some mirror, from the glimpses Tom got it seemed to show the street and the wizards. “They’re getting into position.”

“Well get ready,” Tom was watching his wand twist with horrified fascination, there was more power gathered then he’d ever even dared to imagine. Whatever magic Bond was doing was titanic, immense energies balanced on the end of the narrow length of elder, he had the Elder Wand! Bond didn’t stop for his revelation. “Cause this may feel a little weird.”

Clara was enveloped in a bubble that’s edges were turning slowly grey, then she blurred. Spells lanced from her wand at an impossible rate, blasting the wall away and then the Germans. They were completely unprepared for the onslaught, hundreds of beams pouring out as the world around them turned hostile. Clara raised monsters from the cobblestones, twisted the German’s bodies, and set half the road alight with blazing green fire.

Tom’s fascination with Bond’s magic, some sort of accelerated time, wasn’t enough to distract him from the toll it was taking. His hand was shaking, tremors racing up his arm as Clara cut a swathe through their enemies. The anti-apparition jinx fell and so did Tom, dropping heavily to his knees. She slowed into visibility for an instant, then he bore down on the magic, keeping it going through sheer force of will, and she sped again. Tom’s vision went grey around the edges, but he kept going until Clara looked back then burst from her bubble.

She pulled him up roughly, angrily. “Spinnst du oder was?”

Tom swayed against her. “Maybe? You know I don’t speak English- German whatever.”

“Typical.” She gripped him by the shoulder and they were gone from Paris.

His headache was back though. Tom lay in the darkness, trying to think about what he’d just done and seen. On all his previous excursions he’d been desperate to try the magic Bond showed. The construct, the rock shield, apparating, the bubble was nothing like them. He looked to his bedside table where his holly wand rested, he couldn’t imagine using it to rip a sphere of the world free from the river of time. Not yet.
Realizations

“Legilimens!”

Dumbledore’s will and magic bored against Tom’s mind. The professor described Occlumency as a shield, but that was only barely the case. It felt more as if Tom was trying to blow away an auger, deflecting it through force of will or hurled memories. The most potent memories made the probe stick, Dumbledore wasn’t able to search for his target as the magic instead showed whatever Tom wanted.

For a moment they shared a memory, Bond’s entrance to the school and his subsequent duel, and Tom was able to keep the spike from penetrating further. Until of course Dumbledore broke free, flickered through the other battles Tom was willing to share and seized his true target, what Tom had eaten for breakfast that morning.

“I fear Mr. Riddle, that one day you’ll no longer be able to eat as you do now.” If seeing the death and destruction in as much detail as Tom could manage had shaken the wizard it didn’t show. Th older man patted his stomach with almost a melancholy expression. “All the magic in the world won’t stop your metabolism slowing, and that rich food just starts to build up. I’ve often thought it was a good metaphor for increasing power, just when you have the ability to completely choose your diet you have to work to make sure it doesn’t have negative consequences.”

“And then there’s Slughorn.”

“Professor Slughorn.” Dumbledore’s amusement was visible despite the rebuke as he flipped open his pocket watch with its bewildering dials. “Horace has made his choices, perhaps material things and the slightest hint of hedonism are worth it to him.” He flicked the golden mechanism shut with a surprisingly solid clunk and stood, gesturing for Tom to follow him. “We’ve gone a little longer than I’d thought, it’s getting much harder to see what you’re thinking, but I do have a job here to keep me in candy.”

Tom turned as Dumbledore paused just outside his office’s sham door, a twirl of the professor’s wand triggering an array of wards and monitors. “Do you really think that teaching is the best use of your time, what with..” Words failed him, as they all too rarely did. It was more than just Grindlewald he was thinking of; all the magic that he’d seen in his too brief expeditions from the castle, Dumbledore could be immersed in that all the time. To spend his years instructing those who’d never be able to reach or even see those lofty peaks seemed almost an unfathomable waste.

Fitting for a man who’d spent the last hour boring into his mind the professor knew what he was thinking. “Well I do have the summers free.” They set off towards the more central part of the castle as Dumbledore was silent. For once Tom was sure that the pause wasn’t a rhetorical gambit, that the wizard was truly considering his words after his flippant dismissal.

“I’ve told you that modern magic is superior to that of years gone by.” He wasn’t so gauche as to nod towards Tom’s newest scars. “But it doesn’t get that way through the lone efforts of geniuses, although they surely help. Instead it’s dedicated effort by teams of witches and wizards that push the frontier forward. I think that by helping with those, elevating the skills of others, who if you’ll forgive the arrogance aren’t as intelligent or talented, will lead to the most good for the magical world.”

They had at last reached the intersection in the corridor where their paths diverged and Dumbledore
stopped, apparently unwilling to end the conversation without finished his point. “Besides that, I’m a master of transfiguration, a science that lets me change the world at a mere whim. Shaping and changing minds with only the most delicate tools, that’s a more interesting challenge for me now.” Satisfied with that the professor strode off towards his classroom and Tom entered the great hall for a late lunch.

He chose an almost deserted section of his house’s table, and sat. He summoned slightly more food than he normally did, if he wouldn’t always be able to eat as much as he wanted without turning into a walrus he might as well enjoy it while he could. He’d at last managed to suppress the spell that gave him a flickering awareness of others looking at him, it was obvious why no one used it when he realized it was almost impossible to turn off, which led to the sudden occupancy of the chair across from him coming as a surprise.

“Riddle.” It was McKinney, the seventh year female prefect. “Deigned to come and mingle with the hoi polloi?”

It was a ludicrous question, Tom had taken almost all his meals in the great hall since his return in an unsuccessful effort to seem less alien. It told him how she wanted the conversation to go through, with Tom defending himself.

“Yes, I usually can’t stand the sight of them but I have to keep up appearances.” She had almost enough control not to show her surprise, but he could see it in her eyes. Dumbledore’s refusal to engage people on their terms had taught him that accepting the framing efforts of others was the first step to losing an argument. He let the gap in the conversation stretch longer, keeping his eyes locked on hers as she gathered her thoughts.

Just before she was about to speak, he could see her tense, he cut her off. “Of course, after spending time among the greatest wizards in the world it is a bit of a step down.” That time the surprise was visible past her eyes, his continued agreement with her unspoken assertions was throwing her. Unspoken, his mind seized on the word. He’d always been able to tell when people were lying at the orphanage, was there more to that? When he’d stopped being as sure when he arrived at Hogwarts he had dismissed it as something only muggles were susceptible to, but what if it had been like his other wandless magic? Could he have been performing legilimency all these years without noticing?

Now was not the time to wonder, not when he had McKinney on the backfoot.

He still felt the certainty of what to say though, regardless of its source. “It is what I deserve yes, the apprenticeship to Dumbledore and the curiosity of the powerful.” There was more than surprise on her face now, there was the slightest bit of fear as he continued and raised his voice for the benefit of the other Slytherins who were nakedly eavesdropping. “The thought had crossed my mind of whether or not it’s still worth dealing with the other students.” He didn’t look towards Malfoy, keeping his attention on her. “After contending with the truly powerful I don’t really see the point of playing schoolboy games.”

It was a gauntlet thrown down, the official ending of his pureblood ambitions, even if his audience wouldn’t see it that way. The confrontation had been inevitable, his efforts to insinuate himself into society had stalled with Bond’s attack but if he wanted to walk his own path he had to impress on them it was by choice, not as a result of his failures. Dumbledore had been right about their grasping efforts to hold power, but the decisive ending of his conflict with Malfoy would lay the foundation for his more independent future.

“Enough about me though, was their something you wanted?” The little drama went unnoticed
beyond their table, most students had far better things to do than plot about political maneuvering but Slytherin was different. Students there attempted to play games with power, and their fumbling efforts were practice for later life. His pronouncement would topple their little chessboard, and Malfoy would have no choice but to keep playing the same old game. He didn’t have the flexibility to move beyond it, he’d never had the shock of the real world suddenly intruding.

Just because it was ultimately irrelevant didn’t mean it wouldn’t be fun though. It would be a lie to say that Tom didn’t relish the chance to put his old rival in his place. He’d started his meal with the deliberate choice to enjoy himself, defeating Malfoy one last time before delving into the newest mystery of legilimency seemed just the thing.

McKinney still hadn’t responded, too shocked by the disruption of ordinary events, so Tom just nodded politely at her and set to eating his steak as past his immediate radius the table buzzed with the newest gossip.

Throughout the rest of the day the impact of their one-sided conversation was visible in the agitation of his housemates, they were locked into their own views and saw it as a resumption of the struggle for dominance with an impossibly arrogant move. At dinner even the other houses noticed something was going on, except perhaps the Gryffindors who seemingly were content to listen to an enormous third year lovingly expounding on dragons.

When Tom stood from the table after finishing the last of his meal there was an audible buzz, especially after he started the walk towards the common room. He deliberately took a secret passage to lose anyone watching him, if this was going to be his last play of the game he certainly wasn’t going to be waiting for Malfoy.

After a suitable interval, spent reminiscing and considering all the times he’d been sure of what others were thinking he set off to actually arrive at the common room. Opening the entrance with the password, cumulus, he found a tableau as everyone in the room became acutely aware of his presence. Tom gave the few bold or brash enough to look at him a polite nod, and then waited. This was Malfoy’s turn, he had to respond to what he saw as an outrageous provocation.

“They grow up so fast these days, they think they’re real wizards as soon as they get a wand.” The prefect’s voice was pitched to be overheard and it was as clear a start to the conflict as anything. “I remember this one little muggleborn who was so excited to join us that he saw himself as more than just a passing curiosity.”

“What was he really?” One of Malfoy’s cronies kept to the script, disguising his speech as a dialogue.

“A waste of magic, unworthy of the attention of his betters.” He was no longer even pretending to speak about anyone other than Tom, his gaze locked on him. Tonight, more than any night before, that was a mistake. “The son of a squib so desperate that the only one who would touch her was a muggle.”

Tom had known what was coming an instant before he said, the white-blond boy’s thoughts laid bare before him, but that wasn’t enough time for him to collect himself. Somehow defending his family from slurs felt familiar, as if all his life he’d been ready to take revenge on their behalf. He wouldn’t have lifted a finger for any of them after their meetings, but death had at least prevented his mother from disappointing him.

His magic sang with phoenix fire as he raised his wand and spells flickered through his mind. Even
enraged he knew better than to duel seriously, igniting Malfoy’s lungs inside him was not an option as satisfying as it would be. None of Bond’s spells would serve him here, a simple bludgeoner was enough.

Even shocked Malfoy was quick enough to respond, snapping up a shield that barely deflected Tom’s curse, bowling over an unlucky girl. Tom didn’t let up though, flinging two more spells before attempting to summon the table behind the seventh year.

The solid wood sped towards him, knocking over more spectators, but Malfoy with a shout and a slash seemed to ripple as a shell of steel surrounded him. The table shattered as it crashed into the suddenly armored student, and Tom momentarily let his surprise overcome him. Dumbledore had been right about newer magic, but that didn’t mean that there weren’t a few old gems kept secret.

Giving the duelist time to breathe was a mistake, one that he capitalized on as for the first time Tom had to avoid a spell. It was poorly aimed, but he recognized it as the same one that Malfoy had tried against Bond, a gleaming crescent that left a smoking crater in the wall of the common room. Well that changed things.

The flagstones beneath Tom shattered and spun into the air around him. There was a gasp from one of the more foolhardy students who had remained in their battlefield, they recognized the author of his shield. It wasn’t only them, Tom could see, feel, the fear in Malfoy’s eyes as his casting became desperate.

Single stones exploded as they intercepted the curses and Tom advanced, his rocky maelstrom surrounding him as he came ever closer to the increasingly terrified prefect. This was what he’d allowed himself to forget, that magic was beyond simple spells, that its strength it could change the world in grand and subtle ways.

Secure behind his rampart he reached out to the space around Malfoy, grasping the volume and fixing it in his mind. It was the work of a moment to decide what to do, and when he did his course of action was obvious.

“What is the meaning of this!” Slughorn’s voice was stentorian as he roared from the entrance. Considering the splintered furniture, cratered walls, small fires, and the softly sobbing girl who’d absorbed Tom’s bludgeoner he perhaps had cause.

“He-“ “Malfoy had an accident with self-transfiguration.” Tom’s statement was only subtly magnified but it was enough to be heard over the shouted recriminations. He glanced away from the professor to look at the result of his final spell.

His opponent was still entirely coated in metal, but far more than the sleek armor he’d formed himself. Tom had covered him with another layer a yard thick, submerging all but the prefect’s still moving but now silenced head beneath several feet of steel.

“He was showing off some spell to make armor, and it just went wrong.” Slughorn raised an eyebrow, but for this the rules of Slytherin’s political game were in his favor.

“I see.”

“I was just about to try and help, but…” The professor’s gaze slowly followed the line from Tom’s initial position to where he finished, and the gouges and scrapes that his swirling stones had carved into the floor.
“Perhaps it’s for the best that you weren’t able to help him then.” With a wave of the fat man’s wand Malfoy was lifted into the air and floated towards the door. “When performing self-transfiguration into another substance it’s important to not come into contact with more of it without taking precautions. Otherwise certain spells, specifically those to vanish, shall we say steel, might take off the transfigured layers of the caster. It’ll be a night in the infirmary for Mr. Malfoy I’m afraid.”

Slughorn spun on his axis as the door to the hall opened again as his cargo bobbed in front of him as he walked. “Oh and Mr. Riddle?” he called over his shoulder.

“Sir?”

“See that this is all cleaned up, and perhaps help the others understand that it’s not to happen again.”

With that the passage closed and Tom was left alone in the center of the battered room as students began to emerge from whatever cover they’d found. He slowly turned, and there were none who would meet his eyes. He stopped when he found McKinney, who was just as nervous as the rest of them and waited until she looked up.

“Like I said, I’m done with schoolboy games.” He waited for her to break the silence and respond, but she could only manage a nod. “I hope you all can deal with the mess, I’d hate to come back down here.” She nodded again and Tom left, exultant.
Despite Tom’s new resolve events continued to proceed somewhat normally. Prior to his winter vacation he had allowed his schoolwork to decline in quality, it dropped even further after his conflict with Malfoy. He couldn’t be bothered to show the professors what he knew anymore, all of what they taught was trivial, too simple to even bother with. None of them seemed to know what to make of his lack of effort except for Dumbledore who continued to assign him more challenging work that only barely could be considered transfiguration. Those assignments he did assiduously, they were the only way he had to learn new magic beyond self-study.

He had hoped to learn more of Bond’s tricks, but none had been forthcoming. His dreams were largely empty, Bond had vanished from the world’s stage and from the glimpses Tom got he seemed to be somewhere cold, with vast featureless expanses of snowy plains. Tom had of course consulted an atlas and a directory of plants to try to track him down as best he could, but it was useless. Bond could be anywhere from Mongolia to Montana, all the grasses and steppes looked the same to his untrained eye. Either way he was far off, except for one glittering evening where Tom caught flashes of happiness as Lady Clara spun across from him through a crowded ballroom.

Attempting to cross-reference that had been a larger surprise, he’d forgotten Valentine’s Day, an event usually characterized by the necessity of dodging love-struck witches and attending Slughorn’s party. Neither had been required this year, which Tom could only view as a good thing. He didn’t need others for his magic.

Nonetheless Hogwarts was chafing. Intellectually he knew that the wards and Dumbledore’s presence were what kept him breathing. Bond might be otherwise occupied, but whatever had motivated him in the first place was probably still a factor, and as long as it was Tom would need to watch his back. The memories of the Chamber, when his theoretical sanctuary had been violated still held power, the surety that Bond would keep coming until he was dead. Tom was still bored though. Dumbledore motioning for him to stay after class one grey February day was a welcome respite.

“Mr. Riddle,” the professor had waited until the other students had left the classroom, the Ravenclaws looking back curiously while the Slytherins didn’t dare to. “Despite the outcomes of our previous excursions being so mixed I was wondering if you’d be up for another?”

Mixed was a slight understatement, they’d been attacked by Reapers in Switzerland, Bond in Little Hangleton, and then Reapers again at the hospital. He barely spent a moment thinking before nodding.

“Excellent, Minister Spencer-Moon is sponsoring a small gathering to celebrate,” Dumbledore momentarily seemed at a loss for words, “well nothing really, and I was invited. Normally I wouldn’t attend, but he’s started inviting more individuals from his old department and I’ve found magical accidents to be a fertile source of innovation.”

Compared to their last trip it didn’t seem to measure up. “You don’t seem especially enthusiastic about it Sir.”

“I’m not, but I do think it’s a good idea. I’ll explain more on the way if we can’t meet before this Friday, but for now…” The professor gave a glance at his groaning desk, it was covered in the essays that most of the class had written and then to the rapidly emptying halls. “Despite your recent efforts,” his tone made it clear what he thought of them, “this does remain a school and I do have
Tom nodded and summoned his bag before heading towards the door.

The evening of the eighteenth was cold and clear, once again Dumbledore was waiting in the entrance hall for Tom. Despite both of their efforts they had been unable to meet, so still all that he knew of the party was that the Minister had organized it. He was looking forward to it, novelty was almost always satisfying, but he doubted he’d be so lucky in the people he met this time.

Dumbledore was dressed as garishly as ever, his robes iridescent and fluorescing almost enough to be sickening. In comparison Tom felt neat, he’d spent part of an afternoon learning tailoring charms after an advertisement in the back of Arithmancy Annual had caught his eye. He’d had vague ideas about layering in the sort of charms he’d played with in Nurmengard, but the complexities of clothing had provided an hour or two of entertainment. He partly justified it by the connection to creating asymmetric shields with shaping the conjured fabric, but truly it was just novelty again.

“We’re apparating today.” Dumbledore swept towards the doors as Tom arrived. “The floo at the Minister’s residence is always somewhat cramped, it was designed for people without the moral fiber to reach our heights.”

“It wasn’t their poorer diets, or lack of as advanced healing?” Tom noted with some satisfaction that it wasn’t quite as hard to keep up with the older wizard’s strides. His father might have been a waste in most important ways, but at least he’d passed along the general vitality and height his mother had lacked if his uncle was any guide.

“I prefer to think that growth is linked to general grit and the willingness to keep on going when everyone else falters.” The slight grin on the professor’s face was the only hint that he wasn’t entirely serious. “Or at least that’s what I told my younger brother when he never quite managed to match me. He of course saw it differently, saying it was just an excuse to look down on him both literally and figuratively.” The pain that had been in his voice the last time he talked about his family wasn’t entirely gone, but it was muted. “In any case, a walk through Diagon and the cold will be a pleasant memory after we’re trapped for a few hours in the hot air.”

They had almost reached the road to Hogsmeade and Tom slowed, half remembering what had happened the last time he’d walked out with Dumbledore. He was moving again before the professor could ask. Neither Bond nor Grindelwald had stopped him, their memories wouldn’t either.

The boars loomed over them as the wrought iron gates swung open, Dumbledore stepped closer and gripped Tom’s shoulder before the whirling feeling of apparating enveloped him.

He’d never been to Diagon at night, and it was even stranger than normal. London was at war, and when the sun set the city was dark in an effort to hide from German bombers. The Alley was just as bright as ever, shop’s signs were illuminated as shoppers and diners wandered unconcerned. That was what power afforded, the ability to disregard obstacles and problems that were impassable walls to the weaker.

Tom doubted that any of the wizards present besides eventually him and Dumbledore could have raised the protections that kept them safe. Despite that, among the crowds there was a serene confidence that he felt was somehow lesser than the almost arrogance that the Londoners had cultivated during the Blitz. Without the drive, the sharp edge, their natural gifts were squandered.

“The party is an opportunity Mr. Riddle.” Dumbledore didn’t bother to lower his voice, and now that
Tom was no longer lost in thought he could see that the attention that the professor usually drew was absent. “I flatter myself that I’m more informed than most, but in the end I’m only a school teacher. The Aurors and the members of the diplomatic corps will know about our mutual friends, and often people are happy to share what they know when even slightly flattered.”

“They’ll just tell us?” It was true that Tom didn’t have a high opinion of most people, but he’d thought that it would take slightly more effort to get officials to reveal the truth. “No legilimency required?”

People were continuing to stream around them and ignore them, making Tom more convinced Dumbledore had done something to hide them.

“Does it really surprise you?” Dumbledore was slowing, they were reaching the end of the shopping district which presumably meant they were close to their destination. “You have a gift for making friends, when you choose to use it, and human nature is remarkably constant. The lessons of Hogwarts go far beyond magic.”

Tom suspected that Dumbledore knew exactly what he thought of his Hogwarts friends, but he only nodded. As the professor was hinting letting people retain their illusions could be useful on its own.

The more literal illusions vanished as he followed Dumbledore out of the Alley and into muggle London. The bustling and bright streets were replaced by empty darkness.

“The Minister doesn’t live in the Alley?”

Dumbledore sped up slightly as he checked his watch. “As I understand it he and several other quick thinking investors bought up property damaged in the Flood a few years back. They promptly charmed it so that the previous owners couldn’t notice their new construction and now enjoy the dubious pleasures of the sights and smells of Whitehall.”

Any response to that Tom could make was silenced by rounding the corner to see the houses in question. They gleamed, light shining from the windows and off the polished marble façades. Compared to the gloom and disrepair around them, the scuffed and battered streets and buildings they looked almost unreal.

“A little gauche I agree.” Dumbledore of all people complaining about clashing tones was nearly enough to make him stop walking, but the promise of warmth and the possible presence of the sane made Tom continue.

A wave of their invitations at the door made it swing wide open, spilling noise and cheer into the street. There wasn’t anyone to greet them, but Tom felt his cloak lift from his shoulders and fly towards an antechamber, followed by the professor’s crime against humanity.

There wasn’t much to distinguish the crowd that awaited them from the others Tom had seen, aligned with Grindelwald or not. There was less diversity in color and dress than at the ICW, and the attendees were perhaps a little less martial than at the Yule Feast, but it could easily belong to either group.

“The guests here are somewhat more concerned with magic than the average government worker.” Dumbledore had noticed his observations, and if his uncanny skill at teasing out thoughts relied on legilimency Tom’s fledgling shields couldn’t stop it. “Other groups in the Ministry are concerned with what you’d see as paltry matters, but these ones have kept their focus on their gifts.”
“And they’re looked down on for it?” Perhaps it was a little hypocritical to think less of the others, until recently Tom had been focused on more mundane power, but he’d had the strength and insight to move beyond it.

Dumbledore adroitly snagged a pair of floating flutes, handing one to Tom with only the slightest motion of his wand betraying that he’d done something to the champagne. “Among other reasons. Many of the members of the magical accidents group are new to the wizarding world, they lack the institutional history and friendships that flourish in other departments.”

Tom took a small sip from his glass as he followed Dumbledore deeper into the house, the conversations growing more animated as they traveled to the core of the party. Whatever the professor had done wasn’t detectable, and once again outside Hogwarts he was forbidden from doing anything that could reveal it. “But with the Minister coming from them won’t it rise in prestige?”

“Of course, but they’re only just entering, this is the old guard primarily.”

They crossed through one final doorway and at last Tom saw the minister. He was an unassuming man, short and trending somewhat to fat, but his influence was almost tangible. The entire room, the largest, was orbiting around him. His closest group was hanging on his words, and beyond that the other clusters were keeping as close an eye on him as was polite, some even less. It was a mark of the professor’s stature that they could proceed directly to the central group.

While they were able to join his circle the conversation didn’t immediately change. The only indication that they had arrived was the lightning appraisal that all members of the group, bar the Minister, gave them. The man finished his anecdote to mild laughter before turning his deep-set eyes on the two of them.

“So this is the boy you’ve caused such a scuffle over.” His words were quick, clipped and nearly spat out. “I can’t say I’m annoyed at you haring off, but if you do it again without telling me you’ll be sorrier. There’s more to the war than one boy, and a lot could have been done knowing that Grindelwald wouldn’t be showing up.”

If the reproach had any effect on Dumbledore it wasn’t discernable. “I felt a personal touch was the best guarantee of success, and he knew I was coming in any event. Your men would have been lost.”

“Sometimes that’s what they’re there for.” The Minister’s attention had already shifted though, focused on a newcomer making his way in. “Enjoy the party gentlemen, I’ll try to come around later.”

Dismissed the two of them left the epicenter, moving back towards the periphery. Dumbledore was searching the party, his height allowing him to scan the crowd before he finally found the group he was looking for. “Here we are Tom, these men will probably be our best-“

The flash and roar of the bomb ended his sentence. Somehow Dumbledore had thrown up a shield, but around them there was blood and terror. The windows had blown inwards and holes had been blasted through the stout brick wall, leading to further torn gaps in the crowd.

The only unscathed section was immediately behind Dumbledore, who was surprised for only the second-time that Tom had known him. That more than anything, than the fires, than the continuing explosions or the now audible flak and sirens throughout the city scared him.
Dumbledore’s inactivity only lasted a second before his more typical energy returned. A wave of his wand conjured a long rope and another twist sent it snaking carefully around the worst of the wounded. “Portus.”

Nothing happened, the groaning, screaming, and worryingly silent wounded remained writhing in place. The professor’s face hardened and Tom felt the array of shields that were a fixture of the upper level magical combat come into being around them both. “This was no accident.” His voice filled the room, and throughout it all that could turned to him. “The wards were broken, this was a deliberate attack. We must expect further violence, and it will be here.”

Stretchers were coming into being beneath the casualties, although they weren’t animated. It was atypical, but an instant’s thought revealed the reason. Dumbledore’s conjurations would remain, but any spellwork that moved them would fail if the professor was disabled. “Those who can’t fight must leave, and take the wounded with them. The rest of you—“

“Will come to Diagon with me.” Spencer-Moon had emerged from the party, surrounded by a ring of Aurors and wizards blistering with power. “Those who can’t fight shall go to the Ministry, it’s close and its wards are holding. Diagon is under attack and requires reinforcements.”
Reappearance

The Minister’s words shocked the crowd into action. The group of hard faced witches and wizards around him grew, the power collected starting to stir the air as continuing explosions rocked the city. Dumbledore looked between them and the smaller group levitating the wounded that Tom had joined, clearly torn.

“I’ll be fine sir.” Tom was certain of no such thing, but Bond was far away and the attack wasn’t aimed at him. The Ministry wards were old and powerful, being sheltered by them would surely be safer than hanging around outside in a burning city. More immediately if he wished to be seen as powerful being chivvied around by Dumbledore wouldn’t help. Risks had to be taken, and fortune favored the bold.

The professor nodded, he had obviously wanted to help deal with the attackers, and he turned to join the minister’s force. That left Tom alone with the casualties, their moans and cries silenced only the deafening blasts.

“Boy! Help lift the stretchers!” The woman who snapped at him had a pitted face, and there was blood on her robes that didn’t seem to be hers. “If any owl shows up to complain about your magic I’ll kill it myself.” She spun after the admonishment, touching her wand to her throat before roaring at the milling and shocked remainder with an amplified voice that shook the air. “Listen up you scrubs! We’re leaving this place and walking five blocks to the Ministry. The more time we spend here the better chance another one of those things hits us.”

“But if we-“ The man who protested was silenced by a stinging hex that drew blood.

“We’re not staying, but if you want to die alone you can.” He was cowed, holding his hand to his bleeding cheek and gaping. “Anyone else? Good. Now let’s go!”

With a wave of her wand a third of the stretchers rose and began to follow her towards the shattered windows. Another angry slash vanished the obstacle as she strode into the street. Tom lifted his own stretcher and followed her into the burning hell that was London at war.

The drone of bombers and the higher pitched scream of fighters filled the air. Tom remembered the Blitz, and he remembered when it had ended, the Luftwaffe’s strength thought to be broken. Clearly they hadn’t agreed with that analysis. Flak blazed through the sky, the tracer rounds chasing planes that flitted through the clouds of smoke and floodlights leaving death in their wake.

The woman leading them didn’t seem to care as she rushed through the streets, dragging the group by sheer force of will. The cataclysmic explosions wracking the city weren’t enough for her to break stride, her resilience in the face of danger inspiring the rest of them.

Ahead of them Tom could see muggle soldiers rushing, dragging hoses as they fought the blazes. One crew managed to get their line attached and started to play a stream of water against the flames. Out of nowhere a line of bullets stitched across the street, eviscerating the squad and puncturing the hose. The plane that did it was long gone by the time their strange procession passed them, but it had been long enough for the water to flood the street. The blood of the bodies shined black before flashing red in sync with the explosions.

Someone in the crowd cast a reparo on the hosepipe, stopping its angry thrashing as the pressure was
contained, but then they were gone, leaving the dead and dying lying drenched in the street behind them.

“That’s the Ministry!” Their leader’s voice was solid in the chaos, her sheer confidence rousing the others. “We’ve almost made it, one last rush!”

Suiting actions to words she doubled their pace, almost jogging as she led them down the street for the entirely anonymous building. The only thing distinguishing it from the other similar government buildings surrounding it was the lack of damage. The only sign of the attack was a scorch mark on its front steps.

The tired and scared group followed her, the sight of their destination and safety inspiring them as the rest of the city continued to fall into chaos. They crossed the last hundred yards in a near dead sprint, the solid oak doors opening as they arrived and the skeleton crew inside began to help move the floating stretchers inside.

Their leader held up the healthy just outside. Her eyes were flickering from the rapidly shrinking number in danger, the workers dealing with the wounded, and the state of the city. Tom just watched her, someone with her power and drive would probably have better instincts that his own, and by remaining calm in a crisis and not pushing through the seething crowd he’d further his own reputation. That concern rapidly vanished as he saw her eyes widen, and then her wand moved.

Tom didn’t know how he followed what happened next, perhaps some of Dumbledore’s preternatural speed had rubbed off on him, but he could see the streamlined black casing of the bomb hurtling down as the witch went through the pattern of a shield spell. The burst of heat and light foundered on the invisible ramparts she’d summoned, but the noise and flash were stunning on its own. The blocked explosion ignited the trees lining the street, and the sudden blazing light was enough to reveal the stress lines on her face. She watched the fire for a bare instant, making sure it was no further threat, then turned back to watch the last of the crowd scuttle in through the doors. The inferno reduced her to a silhouette against it, her emotions, any sign of her triumph, were invisible through the glare of the fire.

The second figure bursting from the flames was just as dark, but a line of fire followed its strike as it carved a gaping hole through the witch’s abdomen. There was a single frozen moment as the spray of blood landed on the crowd, seemingly carrying the heat of the blaze with it. The creature’s almost contemptuous backhand knocked the witch into the flames, using the hit to launch itself forward. Tom ran.

His action spurred the rest, the wounded forgotten as the remaining survivors sprinted through the door. Tom was quicker than them, his youth and initiative letting him get through the opening and into the safety of the wards.

“Close it! Shut the fucking door!” He didn’t know who was screaming, but he agreed wholeheartedly. He threw a glance behind him, the steps and door were splattered with blood as the inferi battered against the suddenly visible wards at the threshold.

The monster was wearing clothes, dark fabric that was scorched but still clung to its body, the blood sticking the sodden material to its torso. Bits of the monster seemed to fleck off of its hands as it struck, a miasma forming as its flesh was slowly disintegrated by the defensive spells. They were thinning though, and the creature screamed in triumph as it ripped a hole in the silvered air. In a move more serpentine than of the body it wore the inferi squeezed through, its clothes evaporating as they struck the lingering remnants.
Spellfire greeted it, but the monsters had given Bond pause and no one here could match him. Tom ran, fleeing the shouts and screams as the beast hunted its prey.

He saw the elevator he’d taken once before, but any thought of escape through the Yggdrasil vanished when he saw the scrum forming in front of the shaft. Instead he turned running into a dark maze of offices and desks. He could build a fort, shelter. He didn’t need to kill the inferi, only hold out long enough for somebody, Dumbledore, to defeat it.

The screams were changing in tenor in the atrium behind him as Tom began to erect his defenses. Each time he’d seen this done they’d failed, Merrythought’s, his own in Nurmengard, the thought wasn’t enough to stop him. He couldn’t match the offensive power needed to beat the creatures, and further running would only end with a claw through his back.

Around him the desks shifted to stone and morphed into crude walls. He didn’t summon his snake, he remembered how easily Bond’s centipede had fallen, but he did charm the floors around him to be frictionless. The inferi could probably just claw through the slick layer, but it would buy him more time.

Just as he started to worry about what else he could do the screams stopped. It was a pregnant moment, he knew the monster must have won, but he hoped he was wrong.

An instant later the screams resumed, but they were triumphant, the hunting shrieks of the newly raised corpses.

“Pass Auf!” The new voice carried through the atrium, the deep tones resonating with magic in a way entirely separate from the deafening cries. “Voran!”

The pounding of feet approached, seemingly driven by the wizard’s commands. Two of the bodies paused at the door to the room Tom was hiding in, looking for all the world like hounds searching for a bird. One of the bodies was still dressed in the long coat of the Aurors, the other he recognized from the enormous gouge in its side. The necromancer Bond killed had been right, the things Grindelwald made were far beyond simple shambling corpses.

They saw him the same time he did, the darkness was no obstacle to their sight, and their cries were different, announcing they’d found prey.

“Phosphourfenian!” His spell found purchase, but the Auror’s corpse charged forward as its lungs burnt white, gouts of flame erupting from its skull.

The slick floor tripped both up, their bodies sprawling and thrashing as they tried to find purchase. It would only be a second until they were up again, and Tom desperately struggled for something.

Fire, more fire was the answer and as he forced his power through his wand he could hear the triumphant courage of phoenix song.

The burning Auror evaporated as a column of sunfire tore through him, but the other inferi was as capable in death as she’d been in life. With inhuman strength she flung herself to the ceiling, puncturing the plaster with clawed hands and scuttling ever closer. It was a struggle to bring his wand to bear on her rapid approach, he wrestled the flames with his will and main force but he couldn’t catch up as she raced towards him.
“Nein! Nein! Hier!” Just before she reached him the shouts of the wizard outside rang through the building. The corpse didn’t hesitate as it sprinted back, dropping to the floor and almost vanishing in its haste.

Tom couldn’t enjoy the sudden respite, his hungry flames had ignited the ceiling and he could hear the beams overhead cracking. He had no choice but to follow the inferi in its flight, charging headfirst into unknown danger as his wand sang of valor and victory.

The atrium was a charnel house, the risen corpses had left their blood behind and scattered limbs littered the floor. Nothing was moving, no restless dead profaned the night. The witch who had done so much was finally still, her torso separated from her legs by yards.

At the entrance two armored figures stood, surrounded by a cloud of racing stars. The Reaper, it could be no other in the black robes, was hung on chains of lightning before the taller one, his head clasped in front of him in metal gauntlets with their eyes locked together.

The German was thrashing and screaming, only his head remaining fixed in placed, before he was flung negligently away, his flight through the orbiting balls of light leaving him with new holes that spat brilliant blue beams. Tom was almost frozen, the comfort of his wand’s warmth nearly lost to the sudden overwhelming fear. Bond was here.

Neither he nor, it had to be Lady Clara, had noticed him yet, and Tom knew he couldn’t waste the chance. He broke into a flat-out run toward the elevator shaft, a blasting curse leaving his wand.

“James!” The explosion of the expanded metal door had drawn their attention, and the second it took for Bond to spin and recognize him was an instant too long. He was at the shaft and jumping, one last spell pulling the dismembered corpse of the witch beneath him.

Bond’s reflexive attack shattered the stonework above him as he dropped, rubble and shrapnel scattered around him, Dumbledore’s shields still holding. “Arresto Momentum!” He meant to stop at the Yggdrasil chamber, but he fell too fast, barely slowing enough to make the impact with the top of the elevator car bruising rather than bone crushing.

He wanted to rest, to groan and pull himself up slowly, but Bond was just behind him.

An effort of will pulled the doors open and Tom scrambled up, leaving the mortal remains of the witch who’d done so much behind him.

The hall before him was featureless, black tiles, none of the artificial windows and a single black door at the end. He sprinted towards the door, past the faintly glowing blue torches. He didn’t know what was down there, but at this point he’d take anything.

He shouldered the door open. It didn’t resist him at all as he burst through, and it bounced off the wall and closed as Tom was forced to a halt. All around him were doors, ringing the round chamber, and as he stopped they started spinning, accelerating until he was surrounded by a blur of wood and stone.

“I don’t have time for this!” He wanted to lash out, but before he could the doors stopped, one jerking forward. Not questioning his good luck, he ran for it. If nothing else Bond would have to search for him.

The room he entered was full, both of clocks and Reapers. His sudden arrival seemed to stun them,
but Tom was beyond surprise.

“Confringo!” His shouted spell took a heavily burdened Reaper right in the chest. His load, golden
hourglasses, exploded with him, spraying him and others with gray dust. Whatever was hit by the
dust withered, screams of pain and rage filling the air as the Germans saw what he’d done to them.
Tom didn’t have time to admire his handiwork, instead sprinting forward into the screaming masses.
He needed them as cover, if he was among them their spellfire would hit their comrades.

He didn’t know what the dust was, but he knew he didn’t want it touching him. Bond’s first lesson
would serve him again.

“Cercumversio Petrum!” Around him the splinters of gold and clouds of dust rose and raced. The
wizards caught in it eroded, their very flesh worn away by the shrapnel and sand. Tom didn’t bother
to cast another spell, only charging towards the rest of the Reapers.

His shield caught their attacks, and then shredded the attackers. In what felt like seconds he stood
alone, surrounded by wreckage, dead men, and his own swirling magic. He had done it once again,
he had emerged triumphant against fearsome odds.

The hammerblow striking the door behind him broke him from his congratulatory mood. There was
no cover in the room, his spells had seen to that, but there were two other doors. Another smash,
followed by a crunch showed someone had succeeded in ripping a crack in the door. Tom launched
the remainder of the dust and his circling shield at the entrance, maybe he’d get lucky, and broke for
the closer exit.

He came to a halt nearly instantly, the frigid room was dark and full of tall shelves dimly lit by blue
candles and dully glowing orbs. Tom mastered himself quickly and moved again, disillusioning
himself as he ran between the long corridors formed by the towering constructions.

The door he’d entered through opened again and he turned to look back as the dark room was
partially illuminated, the crystal spheres gleaming in the cone of light. Bond’s armored figure
vanished before the light did, and Tom dropped, pressing himself against one of the shelves as he
tried to think of a plan that didn’t end with him dead.

Bond’s voice filled the air before he came up with one, and Tom listened, hoping more than anything
for a reason behind the relentless chase.

“It’s more fitting than you know that you’ll meet your end here Tom.” Tom dared to peek around the
room, he couldn’t see anything and Bond’s voice was coming from every direction. “Prophecy has
ruled both of our lives, and I’ve lost more to you from these chambers than any man should bear.”

“Why! Why are you doing this?” After he shouted Tom couldn’t say why he did it, except that after
a night of death and fire his reserves were almost spent.

Bond slipped into existence just in front of him, his wand tip already glowing a sickly green. “It
doesn’t matter why I’m doing this, only that I am. Goodbye Tom.”

“Avada Kedavra.” “Phosphourfenian!” Once more phoenix fire and song roared into the night, but
this time it didn’t stop.

A line of shining golden light connected their wands, and the little of Bond’s face that could be seen
through his helmet contorted in rage. “How?” He snarled unhinged. “You lost that wand!”
All around them glistening beams formed a cage, roughly shoving back the high shelves and causing
the crystal orbs to fall and shatter.
Disembodied voices spoke from the mist and smoke released by the broken glass, but all of Tom’s
attention was on the bead of light midway between their wands. He could feel it pushing against him
as his wand began to vibrate, the holy wood audibly straining against the magic.

Whatever was happening Bond seemed to be ready for it. He thrust his own wand forward and the
ball of light rocketed along the string, smashing into Tom’s wand with a surge of heat. A wave of
ghostly fire seemed to emerge from his wand, harmonizing with the still glorious chorus. Bond didn’t
wait though, he wrenched his wand away and the song and light vanished.

“Too long I’ve waited!” He roared as he lashed his wand back one final time.

“Indeed. *Avada Kedavra.*” The newcomer’s sudden interruption, the green flash and the rush of
wings stunned Tom, but not Bond. The older wizard was already rolling, but the spell wasn’t aimed
at Bond.

Tom watched the green bolt strike his chest, and the world shifted.

He could see his body lying on the floor and he could hear a pounding heartbeat as he stared at the
smirking Dark Lord through the thin slits in his helmet.

“He was mine to kill.” Each word dripped menace, but Grindelwald waved it off with an airy flick of
his wand.

“Don’t worry, to the rest of the world he will have been.” The blond wizard glanced behind him,
listening to the battle beyond the walls. “In fact one such observer is coming. His outward geniality
may fool most, but I can assure you that when he finds you with young master Riddle at your feet he
will be anything but forgiving.”

“And what’s keeping me here, now that my task is done? I’m not the one with the greater good
obsession and a legion of Nazis.” Tom could feel further magic developing around him, Bond was
playing for time. “You’re the only one alive who’s even seen me, and I don’t think you’re the most
credible witness.”

“Perhaps my word that the lovely Marquise will remain unharmed?” Grindelwald’s smile never
wavered. “She is formidable, but my Reapers have their talents and without you by her side we were
able to capture her.”

Bond’s hands clenched so tightly that the metal of his gauntlets seemed to flex. “And do you expect
me to surrender?”

The thought seemed to amuse Grindelwald as he laughed, just as joyous as he’d been in
Nurmengard.

“No Mr. Bond. I expect you to fight and delay Dumbledore, and then I expect you to die.”

Grindelwald vanished as the main door exploded open, the professor standing tall, shrouded in flame
with Fawkes on his shoulder. His blue eyes were shining, casting an eerie glow on his curiously
blank face as they traced from Tom’s body back to Bond.

“This ends now.”
Dumbledore didn’t say a word, his wand twitched and the entire world shuddered as something hurtled at Tom. He couldn’t even muster a defense- he felt his shields rip apart before the spell struck his armor and flung him to the ground. If Tom had truly been in control he would have died again sprawled on his back, but Bond was made of sterner stuff.

He was in the air- flying- no falling as the suddenly inverted gravity tossed him upwards. All around him the orbs shattered, a cacophony of voices emanating from the suddenly released mist. Bond landed on his feet, crunching glass beneath his boots on the vaulted ceiling. Dumbledore had recovered from the change almost as quickly, standing in what seemed to be a fortress of frozen air, crenelated with jagged shards that caught and refracted the blue light strangely.

Bond attacked, not wasting the moment’s respite. His customary black sphere hurtled upwards, but dissolved before it reached halfway to the professor who retaliated with a burst of hungry flames. Bond almost didn’t react before cursing and rolling. Tom felt the pain- lines torn into his back through his enchanted armor- but if his enemy noticed it didn’t stop him. Instead he spat a word as he whipped his wand around and the world went silent for a single moment.

The doors to the room imploded inwards, and everything else not secured followed them as a colossal sound filled the air. It was too loud to comprehend, and for the first-time Dumbledore seemed startled. Bond charged forward, slashing with a line of violet light that left molten stone and flame in its wake. The professor’s ramparts collapsed before it, but a second layer turned it back, reflecting the beam to the floor before Bond changed approaches.

With a wave, he seized one of the few intact orbs and shot it towards Dumbledore. The older wizard used Bond’s tactic, dissolving his platform and dropping to dodge even as his needle like counter melted the homing sphere. Gravity returned to its former direction before Dumbledore reached the ceiling, Bond launching a spell as the professor hung at the apex of his fall. The trick was less effective a second time. Without even looking he held his arm up where a bloody taloned Fawkes seized it and carried him to the ground as he rained spells at Bond.

Tom couldn’t focus on the spell work, his attention had been seized by the sight of his body, trapped amongst the rubble of the shelves and spheres. One arm was visibly broken, even ignoring the limpness it had found in death. His eyes were open, but dull and covered in the dust that caked the room.

For the first time he was able to wonder what had happened, he had died but he remained. The killing curse killed, that was it. Grindelwald could have done something, a cosmetically similar stunning spell was conceivable, but would it have fooled Bond? And then why would he be with Bond, Grindelwald had penetrated his mind, it was possible he was aware of the connection, but would he have been able to force it, or was this latest trip nothing more than coincidence?

No, he was dead, Tom felt that with bone deep certainty, steadfastly ignoring the fact he no longer had bones. Did all murder victims jump into someone’s head on death? It seemed odd that he’d be in Bond’s mind rather than Grindelwald’s, but the visions had been odd from the start. For the first time he regretted not telling Dumbledore about them, the professor might have had insight, not that it would do him any good now.
A tearing feeling brought him back to the battle, the world seemed to have split and he was seeing everything from two angles. Bond had abandoned subtlety and was simply firing waves of curses at Dumbledore. The professor was defending himself with his usual aplomb, but the doubled offensive was working, the attacks were getting closer before he dispelled them and Bond seemed to have a new manic energy.

Once again Fawkes interfered, Dumbledore vanished in a burst of flame. As Bond frantically spun searching the world snapped back into a single focus with a wave of pain. Bond flung himself into a roll, narrowly avoiding the chunks of smoking gore that Tom knew he’d just been occupying before stabbing his wand into the ground and shouting a word that warped the world.

Golden threads spun into a translucent shield around them, and Dumbledore’s first few spells ricocheted into the walls before the professor paused, visibly considering the changed circumstances. Bond was sucking in huge gasps of air as he held his wand with both hands, the holly was vibrating as the threads approached it and were avoided by Bond’s careful sweeping motions.

“You only delay the inevitable.” Dumbledore was cloaked in power with Fawkes on his shoulder, all around him the debris of the battle vibrated. “Your shield will fall, and after…”

Bond laughed, but Tom didn’t need to feel his senses to detect the false bravado. “My goal’s been achieved tonight. All of this is just posturing now.” He straightened to his full height, the armor squeaking as the bent plates ground against each other. “I don’t fear death.”

There was a familiar song in the air, the skirling joy and elation of a phoenix cry. Tom felt Bond smile, he wasn’t the only one who had felt that fire then. Fawkes shifted on Dumbledore’s shoulder and the old man looked sad as he gripped his wand.

“Why all this carnage? What did Tom ever do to you, he’s- he was just a boy.”

“He was a snake.” The words were flat, and Tom could feel Bond’s rage through his clenched fists and pounding pulse. “He destroyed everything good in my world and I only wish he’d suffered more.”

The professor was unaffected by the vitriol. “I had once hoped that your skill and power indicated that you could be reasoned with, that no deluded fool could achieve so much, but clearly I was mistaken.” Dumbledore’s raised his wand and a pinprick of searing flame ignited at the tip. “You’re a mad dog, and there’s only one thing to do with them.”

Everything happened at once, Bond’s shield burst into flames as Dumbledore attacked, then a titanic force smashed him through the last standing shelves before pounding him into the stone wall hard enough to crack the stone. It felt as if an elephant was standing on his chest, every breath was agony before a red bolt almost lazily struck him, ripping his wand away. The second bolt hit to his left, and with an effort Tom wasn’t sure he could match Bond slowly wrenched his head to see the professor pinned to the wall and disarmed as well.

“That one line shows the lack of imagination that tore us apart my dear Albus.” Grindelwald strode forward as he materialized, the detritus of the battle parting before him, not even the omnipresent clouds of dust settled on his robes. “He’s a mystery, altogether too intriguing to be destroyed without cause.”

“What you call imagination more civilized men call morality.” For the first time that Tom had known him there was true anger in the professor’s voice. “I was a fool when I was young, and I was an old
fool when I didn’t oppose your rise with all the strength I could muster.”

“Well you live and you learn.” The dark lord affected an untroubled tone, but Tom thought he could hear a lie. “And I intend you to live a long life enjoying my hospitality, whereas Mr. Bond will live until I’ve discovered everything hidden beneath the seething anger and violence.” With a wave of his hand befitting a muggle conjuror more than a sorcerer-dictator Grindelwald had two wands in his left hand.

“I’m particularly intrigued by the presence of two identical wands. Thirteen inches, holly, and with the core of the same phoenix feather.” He raised his hand closer to his face as he studied the wands. “I can’t help but think there’s a story worth hearing behind that.”

Bond’s eyes were locked on his wand, wands, Tom wasn’t sure how to react to the revelation, and despite the crushing weight he felt his mouth shift to a grin. “Lumos!”

Out of all the knowledge and power that Bond had displayed, a mastery of arcane arts that approached those of men twice his age who were giants in a world of children, he chose the first spell that most wizards learned?

The sudden searing light was blinding and for a bare instant the pressure lessened, and Bond acted. He had a wand in his hand and with the vaguest of waves the force on his chest was gone entirely and he fell to the floor before an explosion rocketed him away from where he’d hung. Grindelwald looked elated as he stared at Bond, scarcely concerned by the wand pointed at him.

“I had thought Dumbledore was losing his touch when you escaped him time and time again. I see that I was being uncharitable.”

“Don’t pretend to virtues.” Bond sounded exhausted, despite his sudden change of fortune. Tom could feel every bone in his body ache, and he couldn’t see how Bond could possibly oppose his fresh opponent. Tom would prefer Bond dead of course, but he doubted that his bizarre possession would happen twice. Where there was life there was hope, and Tom wasn’t willing to give up a shot at some sort of reversal after only minutes.

“I’m afraid that the heavenly virtues aren’t those I aspire to. Prudence, justice, temperance and courage always struck me as more befitting a leader. Humility is beneath me.”

“It does need to be taught.” The Elder Wand twitched in his hands. “Conveniently there’s an educator at hand.”

Grindelwald’s smile grew wider as Dumbledore drew himself up and brushed the dirt from his robes. The professor examined the wand in his hand, Tom couldn’t see if it was his or Bond’s-Grindelwald must have dropped one, before he gave it a wiggle that Tom recognized as a complex shield that Bond favored.

“If this is to be my triumph I won’t have it said that I was any less than honorable. Your wand, Professor.” Grindelwald’s contempt for the title was audible as Dumbledore easily caught his gracefully arcing wand.

The professor looked between Bond and his onetime friend, the three of them formed a roughly equilateral triangle in the ruined chamber. He began walking slowly and the other two shifted to keep him in the same relative position before he drew to a halt.

At first Tom couldn’t see why he stopped, then he managed to realize that the crumpled mass at
Dumbledore’s feet were his mortal remains. He bent down and closed Tom’s eyes, and deposited the holly wand on his chest. That done, he stood and faced his opponents. “There is no honor in killing children. There will be no glory won tonight.”

Fawkes shrieked his agreement, once more on the professor’s shoulder.

“That is not entirely for you to decide, Albus.” Grindelwald was almost quivering in anticipation, his eyes darting between Bond and Dumbledore as his wand sketched patterns in the dusty air.

“It is.”
Renaissance

Dumbledore’s words should have been the start of the violence, but no one moved. Bond’s eyes were flickering between his two opponents, and Tom wished that he could control them to get a better look at his mangled body.

“Surely you remember how this goes Albus, first we bow.” The professor didn’t move, but Bond’s attention was fixed on Dumbledore’s hand. It was clenched tightly, tighter than it should be for magic. Grindelwald dipped his head anyway, although he didn’t look away from the other two.

“It’s too late for niceties.” The professor was doing something, Tom knew it, but he didn’t know why the others were letting him.

“Mr. Bond, I beg you to forgive Albus. He knows that’s never true.” Grindelwald reached into his robes, fumbling for something before he withdrew a handkerchief. “In such matters manners reach a paramount importance. Now then,” he flourished the cloth, “I shall throw this up and-”

Bond moved.

The spell he sent blistering at Grindelwald cracked the air. It went right through the startled wizard leaving a red mist hanging all the way to the wall it smashed into. Bond didn’t hesitate, flinging something blue at the still standing corpse before rounding on Dumbledore who was drawing burning sigils in the air.

The professor didn’t bother to block the attack, the magic sent towards him faded as the characters just grew brighter.

“That was rude.” Grindelwald was still upright, looking down as his chest reconstituted itself. “You’ll suffer for that presumption.”

“I’ve fought immortals before.” Tom could feel the effort Bond put into sounding unimpressed.

“Clearly not very successfully.”

Bond smirked, it was still peculiar the way the muscles twisted without his control. “I’m feeling good about my chances tonight.”

“Pride goes before destruction.” Grindelwald raised his wand-Bond was fixated on it-then his other hand flashed towards the floor. A wave of something flooded out from the shattered chalk, the world went grey and dark, before snapping back into focus. Tom couldn’t see what had happened before Bond stumbled over something behind him. It was his absurd gun, but it was coated in viscous looking fluids and wrapped in dark fabric, his cloak.

Dumbledore was in similar straits. His robes were shockingly dull, and detritus, from correspondence to candy was littered at his feet along with a twitching Fawkes. Grindelwald strode forward unencumbered.

“That cost the lives of ninety-one muggles, and I have to say it was cheap at the price.” He effortlessly blocked two more of Bond’s projectiles before letting the third hit him. “Ancient magic isn’t very efficient, but when you’ve got the resources,” his voice didn’t suffer for the absence of
lungs, “it can really shine.”

Chains rose from the ground, silver and gleaming with a fey light, but they shattered when they touched him. Bond didn’t try anything so exotic, instead with a flash of green and the sound of rushing wings he used an unforgivable.

It never reached Grindelwald, a specter appeared in front of it screaming before bursting into rapidly fading flames when the spell tore into it.

“Predictable.” Grindelwald sounded disappointed. “My turn.”

A sun appeared in his hand and Bond flinched away from the painful light. His armor burnt hot before he conjured a solid block of stone in front of him to shade him. It only lasted a second before it shattered- sending scorching stones towards him. He caught them in a whirlwind around him, the vortex shield he’d favored, but the pebbles turned into wasps and attacked.

A wave of force pulped them, or most, but some were made of sterner stuff and kept coming. Bond stabbed his wand towards the ground and the world went silent as his breath ripped itself from his lungs. The wasps fell to the ground like the rocks they’d been- before the world’s sounds returned with a thunderclap.

Bond was panting, his hands shaking, and only the professor taking up Grindelwald’s full attention gave him the required respite. Bond glanced at the two men, and then the open door. Tom didn’t need legilimency to see his thoughts.

He didn’t make the choice Tom would.

Some spell called up the aurora around him, it shined green and purple and Bond seemed to draw comfort from it. He rejoined the fight with a burning spear, it punched into Grindelwald and stopped, blackening the flesh near the red-hot metal.

Grindelwald ripped it out of himself and at Dumbledore with a gesture, it fell apart into a cloud of rust before it got halfway there. Bond seized the chance, calling down lightning as the professor struck with a fiery whip. For a moment as the two wizards flung spells at the Dark Lord together it seemed as if he’d fall, that nothing could withstand their barrage of twisted magic and arcane power.

The wizard was reeling, but he got his feet under him, dropped something, and with a wide slash the world broke around them. The three of them hung in stygian darkness, Tom couldn’t explain how he could see the others, but they were perfectly clear, the only other things in the world.

“Equivalent exchange.” Grindelwald’s voice was sensuous, bizarrely so. “I thought that the two of you would neglect such magics. There’s power in self-sacrifice, and in oaths, all those things that modernity ignores.” Bond looked around desperately, searching for anything.

"We're all away from reality now, nothing we do here will affect the poor Hall of Prophecies or each other. Old Magic." He waved grandly into the black. "Of course adjusting it so that the sacrifice didn't have to be mine was a challenge. Luckily I have souls to spare." The Dark Lord snapped his fingers and the world returned.

An incredible pain seized him, along with an acrid stink that made his eyes water. He could hear Dumbledore scrabbling in the distance as Bond’s fingers spasmed on his wand and his knees went liquid.
“No Albus! No bezoar for you I'm afraid.” Grindelwald had known this would happen-his delay had been to let the poison spread! Another wash of burning pain made Bond groan, his inhuman tolerance at last overwhelmed. He was thrashing, his armor shrieking as it scratched the stone floor. “Such a simple thing. All your valor and skill reduced to this by a muggle concoction.”

Grindelwald was barely audible over the roaring of blood in his ears, but Bond’s thrashing had some purpose, he was raking the ground with fingers made clumsy by the gas. He somehow got his hands on his wand, needing both to hold it as his muscles rebelled. He waved it, but nothing happened before the poison once again triumphed. The last effort seemed to exhaust him. Bond slumped, only the continuing full body shudders revealing his torment.

“It’s a shame all the orbs were smashed.” Grindelwald’s voice echoed off the walls. “So much effort wasted.”

The world was going dark now, apparently the poison was reaching deeper, and Tom could feel panic as his second death rapidly approached. A flash of light drew his attention, some disconnected part of him thought it was the last firing of the optic nerves, but a blessed coolness emanated from it. Maybe there would be no pain, last time it hadn’t hurt.

No, he wouldn’t be so lucky. Light returned like a knife stabbing into his brain, one final surge, and Bond was up and rolling his wand in his hand.

His body was still racked with tremors but he managed to stutter out a word. “Waddiwasi!”

Something shot at Dumbledore and the old man convulsed.

Grindelwald wasn’t blind to the circumstances. He sent a spell that launched Bond into the wall, cracking the stones behind him. He turned to Dumbledore, but the professor had his wand again and brought it down sharply.

One note rang out, pure and terrible. The pain he’d felt before was nothing in comparison, it was as if a thousand needles pierced and stung and tore at him. The world went grey and cold, and some force seized Tom, flinging him from Bond.

It was a frozen instant, the closest comparison he had was to the phoenix travel but there was no warmth here. He could see the others, their true selves he somehow felt, beyond their bodies. Dumbledore shone white and gleaming, Bond a burning gold, but it was Grindelwald that he stared at.

Ghostly bodies sprang from his spirit, hundreds of them. Their twisted bodies evaporated like morning mist beneath the sun. Grindelwald’s image, his soul-what else could it be, had started as something incomprehensibly greater than the others but it was diminishing as the individually pale and weak spirits vanished.

Tom looked down, his own spirit-his very soul! - was fading before his eyes. Dumbledore and Bond were being pulled back into their bodies, returning to their mortal lives. His was over, his body was broken.

Or was it? He’d survived his death-the killing curse didn’t wound- and he had no choice. True death was better than perpetual imprisonment behind the eyes of his enemy, and he wouldn’t fail. He couldn’t.
The memory of phoenix song, of magic and life and eternal flame filled him. More than a memory! Fawkes was singing from the ground where Bond had lain dying. Tom forced himself forward towards his mortal shell, towards his wand, and the embers of magic it still held.

It was harder than anything he’d ever done, his soul resisted it. The fire he’d summoned wasn’t enough to overcome the frigid wasteland for a disembodied spirit, but he crawled forward. Each inch seemed to take a lifetime, but beyond him the world was trapped in a single instant as he grew closer.

Tom felt triumph as the resistance decreased, the icy pain was washed away by a warmth he recognized as he sped up. Some barrier seemed to break as he crossed the last feet, his soul crashed into his body and the world went dark.

Pain came back first.

There was the deep throbbing of his broken bones, the sharper sting of cuts and gashes, the lesser ones like the grit and dirt in his watering eyes, and beyond that the damage minutes without oxygen and flowing blood had dealt him. He welcomed it all.

His eyes were almost useless as he opened them. All he could see was darkness and bursts of actinic light, but after a bare moment he could feel a weight on his chest, and a familiar presence.

Fawkes’s tears were cool and soothed as they dripped across him. The world came into focus with a blessed absence of agony, and he met the bird’s eyes to see inhuman wisdom and understanding. He sang a note of victory and courage, as pure as the sound Dumbledore had used to drive out souls.

Tom seized his wand and rose.
Standing up was a choice Tom regretted immediately. For a moment the spellfire stopped, as the three wizards watched with awe. Or rather two were awed. Bond let out an inarticulate cry of rage and for the third time that night an unforgivable was launched at Tom.

Masonry leapt to block it before Tom could react, then Dumbledore was at his side. He grabbed him by the shoulder and the two of them disintegrated into smoke. He barely had time to enjoy the clarity of materializing before they were insubstantial again. They’d left the room he’d fallen in and were back in the round antechamber.

The doors spun dizzyingly once more, but Dumbledore knew the trick. “The Ministry!” Before the walls could stop rotating a flickering beam punched from an empty door frame, disintegrating what it hit on the far side of the room. The two of them dropped as the bar revolved above them, it slowed as the doors did, but it had served its purpose in delaying them.

“Leaving so soon?” Grindelwald was the first through the door, stepping from the moving door onto the stationary floor as easily as another might board a yacht. “I don’t think any of us are quite satisfied just yet.”

Banter was not something Dumbledore was interested in. Space bent as the exit door was suddenly at their backs and open. Without looking he pushed Tom into the hallway, not turning his back on the Dark Lord and the newly arrived Bond. If he had he would have seen the Reapers waiting.

At last there was an enemy he could fight!

Tom didn’t need words, he didn’t need a practiced spell. Instead he lashed his wand forward and remembered the phoenix song. Fire lanced out, carving into the walls and through the startled wizards. They ignited before they could scream, and Tom sprinted past their drifting ashes towards the lift shaft.

A shrieking wail triggered some reflex and he dove. A crackling ball of light raced over him and into the lift, leaving it a shattered ruin of rubble instead of an open pathway to escape. The rocks were large though, and they couldn’t be airtight.

Before he could attempt the genie’s smoke spell the professor was there. The rocks shifted to water and retained their shape for a bare instant before splashing down in a torrent that Dumbledore flung them both into. The water wasn’t pure, Tom was forced to shut his eyes as sand and grit washed past them, and then they were through it. He blinked the water away and was just able to see it rise into a wave behind them before something froze it with a burst of blue-white light.

Fawkes was with them, and the professor seized his tail feathers. Tom followed and with two great beats of his wings they were rising through the remnants of the lift. Beneath them he could see flickering lights refracted through the icy wall, and then world went silent. The phoenix beat at the air impotently as they coasted to a stop- no, not at the air, Bond must have removed it once more.

Dumbledore didn’t wait for the blast of the atmosphere returning, the stone walls of the shaft bent to form a floor beneath them and opened to reveal a warren of offices. Air rushed past them in an increasingly deep howl, but more importantly not further beneath them. Tom couldn’t imagine a lack of oxygen stopping either wizard long, but for a pleasant moment in a night far too short of them he imagined Bond and Grindelwald rolling on the ground choking out their last breaths.
There wasn’t any more time for schadenfreude as the professor broke into a sprint, and Tom ran after him. An incredibly bright flash made the entire floor in front of them gleam white, and shadows from it cut like knives as a sudden gust of wind blew past them. The shaft was clear once more, but they’d gained ground. Around them Reapers were everywhere, completing their orders and missions undistracted by the drama beneath them. Dumbledore didn’t even bother to attack them, navigating the twists and turns of the ministry’s lower levels without hesitation. Tom found himself thinking that it would be an incredible mess to sort out on Monday, apparently after long enough even mortal peril ceased to be enough to keep his mind focused.

The hunting scream of an inferi brought him back to himself just as they reached a stairwell. They pounded up the flights, taking the steps three at a time. Tom barely was able to even react to a leaping monster before Dumbledore deflected it into open air past them and left it falling helplessly. A Reaper stepped onto the landing just above, his arms full of books and papers, and Dumbledore’s spell hit him like a thunderbolt.

Another level higher and they were in the atrium with escape at hand, at least until the professor skidded to a stop just in front of him.

“Albus, you should have taken the lift!” Grindelwald was already there, his ever-present grin more a smirk. At his side were Reapers glimmering with shields and defenses, one of whom had his wand on the kneeling Marquise’s neck. Her blonde hair was stained with blood, and her aristocratic features were twisted with fury.

Bond was there too, by the crater he’d made when he first attacked. He was almost vibrating with anger, and for the first time it wasn’t directed at Tom. Instead he was entirely focused on the dark lord, and even his armor couldn’t conceal the tenseness as he waited for any opening.

Tom half expected Dumbledore to make a quip about exercise, but his voice was glacial. “We are leaving. Anyone who impedes us will fall without my care or concern.”

“Oh, come now.” Grindelwald almost sounded exasperated. “If you were capable of that none of this would have happened. The last time you acted in anger broke you and sent you into your absurd little exile.”

“Circumstances have changed Grindelwald.” The professor’s manners were finally gone, and Tom wasn’t the only one to notice. “This time there’s nothing in front of me to feel guilty about destroying.”

“Very well.” The Dark Lord nodded in acknowledgement, his smile gone. His next words lacked all affability. “Kill them all.”

The first to die was the reaper over Lady Clara, his head vaporized before the rest of him was sucked into a stygian portal. She still fell, dropping bonelessly to the ground, and Tom couldn’t help but enjoy Bond’s scream. He had more immediate concerns though. What seemed like all the magic in the world was flying at them, and the professor’s shields seemed far too thin. With nothing else to do he attacked.

His spell killed a Reaper who’d looked vulnerable, setting his lungs aflame, but then the first volley was on them. Impossibly it broke, parting around them like a wave as Dumbledore once again bent the world. There was no time to admire the spellwork, the Reapers wouldn’t give them a respite, but through luck or wisdom the professor knew he didn’t need to strike. Bond was there, and he was violence.

The floor erupted, molten spikes ripping through shields and flesh alike. Their shouts of pain echoed
through the atrium growing ever louder until it was painful, blood was running from Tom’s ears as
the noise intensified into a knife stabbing into his mind. The few Reapers who were still standing felt
Bond’s fury next, claws made of lightning ripped one apart, another vanished into a bloody mist as a
third was torn apart by his bones suddenly tripling in size.

Grindelwald wasn’t idle, although even he looked taken aback by the sudden death of his army. His
body was rimmed with a white shell that ate every spell Bond flung towards him, but the Dark Lord
wasn’t looking at the enraged wizard, his eyes were on the professor.

Dumbledore was advancing. The ground beneath his feet was smooth, the wreckage and blood
Bond had covered the room with vanished leaving a path of bare stone in his wake. In his hand was
an iron cage of lights that grew more crowded with every spell Bond cast. Grindelwald’s eyes were
on it, apparently confident enough in his shields to not give Bond his full attention. Dumbledore must
have seen some change in the dark lord’s expression, because he banished the cage towards him as
the bars broke.

Grindelwald vanished behind the explosion of arcane might, all the most painful deaths Bond could
imagine had been set free not even a yard from him. Tom had seen too much of the wizard to believe
that would be enough, but as he blinked away the spots from the blinding light he still hoped.

It had hit him at least. The regeneration the Dark Lord had earlier displayed was still present, but this
time it wasn’t perfect. His shredded robes matched his skin, except for his face which impossibly
remained unmarred. His grip on the Elder wand was as sure as ever, and it spun in his hands as he
once again dueled against Bond and Dumbledore.

It seemed they’d all spent their various tricks, the battle was degenerating into the same sort of
slugfest that students casting their first hexes indulged in. The difference was the scale. The atrium
had started the night as an exemplar of craftsmanship, the entire room dedicated to the skill and
power of British wizards. Any single spell cast by the titans would have ruined it.

Bond’s black orbs left massive craters in the walls as they pulled in bodies and broken rock alike.
Dumbledore contented himself with arrows of blinding flame that left searing afterimages across
Tom’s retinas as they ignited the wooden paneling and melted stone, and he didn’t even have words
for what the spells Grindelwald retaliated with did. The three of them stood amongst rubble on
increasingly narrow columns of solid ground as their shields only protected their immediate
surroundings, the flagstones unable to survive the forces mustered.

Bond flinched first, taking a step back into empty air that left him off balance for an instant too long.
Grindelwald lashed out with a plane of force that was only visible from the dust trapped across its
face, it struck Bond with a sound of crumpling metal and sent him bouncing limply over the jagged
floor.

The sudden change put the professor on the back foot, his posture becoming more defensive now
that the Dark Lord’s sole focus was him. Grindelwald could see it too, for the first time his grin was
back. Dumbledore’s perfect defenses of the start of the duel were gone, and he was forced to actively
block half the spells instead of relying on his shields.

Tom needed to do something, he wouldn’t survive an instant of Grindelwald’s fury and there was the
chance that his presence was distracting the professor. He doubted it, he had the feeling that all
involved had forgotten about him the instant Lady Clara fell, but being far away from this duel was
his best option, despite the phoenix song he could still faintly hear. He ran, and instantly knew he’d
made a mistake. Grindelwald sent some spell towards him, and Dumbledore’s block didn’t fully stop
it.
The impact knocked him to the ground and he felt his skin tear. He wanted to scream, but in an effort of will he clamped his teeth shut and lay still. Standing would only make him a target once again, and Dumbledore’s effort to save him had left the old wizard in an even worse position.

Grindelwald was exultant, smashing his old friend’s shields, casually swatting away his counter attacks and even worse seemed to be building for something. Tom’s wand was hot in his hands he could change this, but once more he stayed still, determined to stay alive, and it went cold. No amount of phoenix song would drive him against Grindelwald as he was now.

The two wizards looked like pugilists at the end of a bout, Dumbledore was swaying on his feet and the Dark Lord had the look of a champion waiting to throw his final punch. Some spell Grindelwald used distracted the professor an instant too long, and he seized the chance. Out of all the corpses specters rose, their wands changed to swords and spears. Dumbledore raised his wand, perhaps to try the sound that he’d used once before, but a keening whine filled the air and Tom knew that no note however pure would pierce it.

Tom couldn’t see the professor’s expression, but Grindelwald’s told him all he needed to know. “Don’t worry Albus. You’ll see her soon.”

The shining ghosts charged the professor, Fawkes was there in a burst of flame but there was no miracle this time. The bird was knocked from the air before the first specter could get close. They ran straight over the pit, the missing floor not stopping them, and Tom couldn’t ignore Dumbledore’s sudden slump and resignation in the face of death.

“No!” Grindelwald’s shout was the first clue something had gone wrong, but the ghostly spear through his heart was more definitive. He tried to raise his wand, but a bolt of red ripped it from his hand before a sword took it off at his elbow.

Dumbledore caught the Elder Wand as the ghosts surrounded Grindelwald in a ring of steel. The Dark Lord looked stunned at the reversal, his eyes fixed on the still living and standing Bond.

“How?”

Bond gestured sharply with his wandless hand, and a ghost slashed Grindelwald across the back of his legs, dropping him to his knees. “It’s ironic that you of all people would forget the Hallows.”

The Dark Lord almost seemed to forget his position, and Tom could see the wizard that had waxed eloquent on translation spells. “Then it’s not a legend? You’re the Master of-“ A sword swung.

“Death?” Grindelwald’s body collapsed and the specters vanished with it. “I doubt it.”

Bond’s words were the last either of them spoke for a time as they both looked at the corpse of the Dark Lord. Tom stayed still, he had no doubt that the curious truce would end the instant Bond knew he was alive and despite their previous battles he didn’t know if Dumbledore could prevail this time.

The professor broke the silence at last. “Why him? Why Tom? What could a boy have done to you?”

“He could have done everything, not that it matters now.” Bond turned and walked towards Lady Clara, her bright hair still shining with blood. “It’s over.”

He knelt at her side, pulled off his gauntlet, put his bare hand on her face and for a single electric instant went still. Tom knew what he had to do- rolled to his feet and cast.

“Avada Kedavra!” The green bolt hit Bond cleanly in the back and he fell just as Clara jerked up gasping.
Bond’s armored weight crushed her to the ground, but he could see her face as blood drained from it. Heartbreak and terror competed as she saw Dumbledore looming over her.

Just as Tom felt the fullness of his victory the apparition wards he’d only been faintly aware of dropped and Aurors flooded into the shattered atrium. He knew what they would see, he and Dumbledore standing triumphant over the bodies of Grindelwald and Bond.

Lady Clara’s scream provided all the accompaniment the moment needed, before she disappeared with Bond’s body in her arms.

The crack of disapparation ended the moment. The new arrivals flooded forward across the wreckage to congratulate them, but Dumbledore vanished before they could reach him, and none seemed to miss the professor. It was Tom they surrounded, Tom they praised, Tom Riddle who triumphed.
Dumbledore’s wall was shut. So was the false door that pretended to be the entrance to his office, and Tom knew that the man inside preferred it that way. Whatever else could be said about him, and an awful lot had been said and written about Tom in recent months, none would argue that he gave up or scared easily. Even so he felt a little trepidation as he knocked on the wall. For a moment the stones stayed rigid before they slipped aside to reveal the professor’s chamber.

Tom hadn’t been there in months, Dumbledore had been absent for most of them, and the changes were legion. Most obvious was the open window, letting in the summer air, but past that the room was spartan. The numerous devices and objects with no discernable purpose were gone, the sole remaining decoration was Fawkes’s perch. The phoenix looked the same of course, immune to the passing of time and shifting circumstances. At last he dragged his eyes from the bird to the professor, recognizing that his delay was driven by nervousness.

Dumbledore had changed. His hair was shot through with white, the auburn at last losing the battle. His beard was neat and shorter, no longer the flowing expanse he’d been so proud of. His eyes were still the same piercing blue, but the face around them was colder. Tom had seen the face before, through Bond’s eyes.

“Mr. Riddle.” The manners remained, but the geniality had greatly decreased. “What can I do for you?”

The question wasn’t one he had an answer for. Since the battle in the Ministry Tom hadn’t seen Dumbledore in private, a change that had been jarring yet lost amidst the other results of his victory. He was tempted to prevaricate, but the older man knew him too well for that.

“I just wanted to,” he was grateful for the occlumency, just to be certain that the professor couldn’t know exactly how ill at ease he was, “clear the air.”

“Regarding what?” Dumbledore stood from his desk and moved to the window, looking out across the sun-drenched lawn. “I felt your remarks to the papers were quite illuminating.”

Tom barely remembered the aftermath of the battle. He’d been drunk on magic, on glory, on his resurrection, and the story that he’d told his audience had surged out without his conscious control or direction. He had killed Bond, and nothing could induce him to lie about it. He’d given credit to Dumbledore for Grindelwald, the professor’s exit hadn’t allowed him to contradict the story. “I was curious about your sudden distance.”

“Curious?” Dumbledore turned back towards him, backlit by the bright afternoon. “If my reasons were obvious to you I suspect the distance would never have been created.” It wasn’t like the professor to dissemble, but he’d said enough.

“Because I killed Bond? He’d been trying to kill me for months!” Tom was glad he hadn’t been invited to sit, leaping to his feet would have showed a greater lack of control than his shout.

Dumbledore wasn’t shaken or taken aback, not that Tom expected him to be. “Because you used an Unforgivable.”

“So? I’ve set men’s breath aflame inside their chests, turned their blood to molten silver, hell I ripped
a Reaper’s skin out of time! What makes one lousy curse so different?” He was still shouting he noted, and he’d advanced.

“The Unforgivables are different.” Dumbledore’s voice was even. “And the circumstances more so.”

“He was a wizard of enough power to walk through the Hogwarts wards, to wage a private war on Grindelwald. Cursing him in the back was the smart thing to do!” He tried to match the professor’s tone, but by the end he was raging. “We don’t all have the luxury of chatting with our enemies or being able to fight them head on!”

“You’re correct. I won’t pretend that you didn’t have cause.” Dumbledore met his eyes for the first time since he’d come into the office, and Tom felt the temptation to dive in and see what the professor was trying to say. “You once asked me why I didn’t join the government.” Tom didn’t have the patience for the customary rhetorical pause.

“You said your reason would take a little more trust to share.”

“Or a greater cause.” Grindelwald’s sign, the symbol of the Hallows appeared once more in the air. “I wasn’t willing to trust myself with power. I know that I am not immune to its temptations.”

“And?”

“You’re the greatest student I’ve ever taught, perhaps the greatest to walk these halls. You drink in knowledge and magic like nothing I’ve ever seen, and you use it with such fluency I’m gratified to witness it.” Dumbledore stepped away, this time to Fawkes. “If I can’t trust myself with the strength I have, if I’m unwilling to take responsibility for the problems I can solve out of fear, how can I give another the same ability? Gellert wasn’t wrong when he said this was an exile, that I’d retreated from the world.”

The professor sat back down, almost slumped. “And here I am, with more power than I know what to do with, each of my actions rippling forth to unknown ends. All I can do is try to do what is right, as best I can see it, rather than what is easy.”

“And you don’t think I can do the same?” Tom was back at Wool’s, back to their first meeting.

The piercing eyes rose up again. “Do you think you can? I’m confident I can’t. It’s why I came here and why I’m now leaving Hogwarts.”

His words didn’t register for a moment, Dumbledore was Hogwarts, he was the magic of the castle and the wizarding world embodied into a single man. “You’re what?”

“Leaving. Surely you noticed the change in décor.” The emptied office took on a new significance. “Europe is a mess, much was raised that must be put down and I don’t trust others to do it properly. Inferi have been terrorizing the east, there’s an infestation of dementors sweeping from Poland, and of course with the Rätkons out of the picture there’s a horde of goblins storming out of the Alps.”

Tom couldn’t help but feel a surge of pleasure at that, another enemy brought low, but the conversation pulled him back. “And you think that you’ll do more good battling creatures than teaching children? What about your passion to shape the world at one remove?”

“I can be more confident in the immediate results, and that is something I’m willing to accept.” Dumbledore straightened up, and for a moment it was like the events of the ministry had never
happened. “Now Mr. Riddle, before you go I have something of yours.”

The professor waved his hand, and Tom would have been convinced it was simple muggle legerdemain except for the faintest twist of magic that accompanied it. Out of nowhere Dumbledore had a wand in his hand, Tom’s old wand. “I was in Nurmengard rather briefly, and I happened upon this and I felt you might want it back.” Tom numbly accepted the length of yew. “I’m curious which of the two you’ll favor now. I myself am going through something similar.” Dumbledore stood and ushered him to the hole in the wall. “I’m sure you’ll do great things Mr. Riddle. Good luck.”

Tom stood in the corridor as the wall closed behind him. Yew in his left hand, holly in his right. The symbolism didn’t escape him. He could feel the phoenix fire at their hearts, banked for now but he knew that with a few simple choices it could be brought back its full fury. There was some utility in having two wands he decided.

“No need to choose yet.”

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