When in Rome

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/10057286.

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When in Rome

by XblackcatwidowX

Summary

COMPLETE. When Harry and Hermione inadvertently tumble half a century into the past, they find themselves in the same year as the notorious Head Boy, Tom Riddle. Both Harry and Hermione's courage will be tested when they are confronted by chances of romance from the most unexpected of places, and unlikely enemies hiding in the tallgrass. Lost in the past, they may well forget the way home.

Not DH compliant.
If anything has been clear to me, it is that I am a massive Potterhead (and am proud of it, RAVENCLAW PRIDE!!), so I’m kind of embarrassed to admit that this will be my first pure Harry Potter fanfiction – I’ve done crossovers, but have decided that it’s time to venture beyond those walls, into the mystical land of time travel…

DISCLAIMER: *sniggers* Well, duh, of course I was the one who created everything Harry Potter!!! *sniggers turn into sobs* Lies, lies, Harry Potter will never been mine... we all know that Ms Rowling is the true genius here...

“Shit.”

Hermione didn’t even have the breath left to chastise Harry’s vulgar language. Said vulgar-speaker trusted that she would have if she hadn’t been too busy clutching the stitch at her side, but as the situation stood, she didn’t. Instead, Hermione settled for a pointed look as she regained her dignity, leaning heavily against a desk in the empty classroom.

For the time being, Harry pressed his back against the classroom door, preventing any of their possible pursuers from easily breaking down the door. It was a very muggle manoeuvre, but it was an automatic response.

“Of all the idiotic things,” Hermione finally said, scraping her fingers through her hair in an exasperated motion. They settled into silence again, making it clear to Harry that she would not be elaborating on that statement.

“To be fair,” he said, after the pause, “Malfoy started it.”

“You didn’t have to fire the Melofors Jinx at him,” said Hermione coolly, “simply because he called you ‘scarhead’ and me ‘mudblood’. That’s really very tame for him, Harry. He utters those words every second breath he takes. The fact that he got such a reaction from you over such a minor thing is really going to boost his ego, you know.”

“But I took care of that, didn’t I?” Harry said, unable to stop the grin from stretching across his mouth in the face of Hermione’s chagrin. “Nobody walking around with a pumpkin as a head is gonna be feeling too up himself, eh?”

Hermione appeared to be losing a battle to keep from smiling herself, before she finally let herself freely show her glee over Draco Malfoy’s misfortune.

“Alright, fine,” she relented. “It was pretty funny.”

They exchanged smiles for half a second, before the expression dripped off Harry’s face, like soft ice cream melting in the sun. Harry knew that the last time he had left Hogwarts, he had left a very changed person. Subdued and reserved, smiles and laughter coming with difficulty. He felt like a young boy, forced to grow up before he even had a chance at a proper childhood.
Hermione looked away after he did. Nobody was more aware of these changes than herself and Ron.

“It doesn’t mean I approve even if the prat does deserve it,” she pouted.

“Says the one who punched him in third year,” Harry pointed out, to which his companion blushed.

“Tensions were high,” she muttered as an excuse, turning her head to look out the window, and Harry’s gaze followed hers. It was dark out, the moon sailing high through the sea of cold and distant stars. There was a hush over the castle which was almost tangible, even more so by night, ever since the death of the renowned headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, at the end of the last school year.

It remained that Harry had been tasked with the job of hunting Horcruxes at the time of Dumbledore’s death, but he had yet to carry out the task. Ron and Hermione remained adamant that they would be joining him in his undertaking, despite Harry’s protests. Technically, he told himself, he had already begun the job, due to what had occurred earlier in the year, regarding an empty cave, a crafty potion, a counterfeit locket and a hell of a lot of Inferi. Harry hated remembering that day. He hated remembering anything, period. Nowadays, the merest hint of anything from his troubled past sent tremors of hatred, regret and guilt coursing through his bloodstream, all at once. Memories of his parents’ faces in the Mirror of Erised, of Cedric Diggory’s frozen, staring face, of the twinkle in Albus Dumbledore’s bright blue eyes, and of the hope that had blossomed deep within him when he had first learned that he might, just might, find family with Sirius Black.

Oh, Sirius. Harry expelled a shaky breath, knowing that Hermione would hear it no matter how quietly he did it.

Ever since the holidays and the beginning of their seventh and final year at Hogwarts, Harry had been debating with Hermione and Ron when he would leave (or, as they liked to correct, when “we” would leave), and had been incredibly prone to erupting into bouts of frustrated shouting – quite frankly, it didn’t astonish him that everybody else in the school seemed to avoid being alone in the same room with him like the plague. With an exception to the ever-faithful Ron and Hermione. And Luna (but she was half nuts already, so). Harry was of the opinion that he (“we”) should have left during the holidays in pursuit of the real locket that the mysterious R.A.B. had nabbed. Hermione had disagreed, resolute that they would be wasting their breath chasing ghosts, and that they might as well actually formulate a plan of action (which was, at that point, virtually non-existent). Ron had sided with her, obviously, as he had become quite the typical image of a lovelorn teenager (“I am of age, Harry,” Ron had retorted when Harry had shared this opinion).

Then, earlier that day, it had come to Harry, Ron and Hermione that perhaps Voldemort, or rather Tom Riddle at the time of the manufacturing of the Horcruxes, had not only used Salazar Slytherin’s locket, but perhaps also artefacts of the other founders. Luna had helpfully offered (vaguely) the concept of Ravenclaw’s lost diadem over breakfast in the Great Hall when she had overheard them discussing the matter in hushed tones.

“But where do you find a bloody diadem which has the word ‘lost’ in its title?” Ron had asked as they headed to Charms class.

“Well, that’s obvious, Ronald,” said Hermione. “In the place where lost things go.”

*The Room of Requirement*. It was sound logic, Harry decided, so the three decided to sneak out that night under the cover of the invisibility cloak with the reliable companionship of the Marauder’s Map. Unfortunately, during their last period of Transfiguration, while attempting to
transfigure their partner’s nose to a carrot (“Quite useless, really,” said Hermione as she successfully transfigured Padma Patil’s nose to an orange, pointy vegetable and back again). Harry, in his usual distracted state of mind, turned Ron’s skin bright orange alongside a head full of leafy green hair. Ron had been ordered to the hospital wing and hadn’t returned for dinner or afterwards, which had resulted in Harry and Hermione seeking out the diadem themselves.

Along the way in the corridors, after accidentally dropping the Marauder’s Map, they had stumbled upon Draco Malfoy while crouching down to claim it again – literally. The Malfoy heir had sent them tumbling when he walked into them, revealing themselves, the cloak and the map.

Malfoy had stared at them with a nasty sneer forming on his mouth, before his eyes had been drawn to the map lying at his feet. Both Harry and Hermione had hurriedly pulled themselves upright, Hermione scrambling to snatch the cloak from the floor and Harry lunging forwards to grab the map, but the damage was already done – that much was clear from the widening of Malfoy’s eyes as he studied the map. Harry hid it within the folds of his robes, glowering at Malfoy as if the venom in his eyes alone could erase the other boy’s memory of their entire encounter.

“Whatever could you and the mudblood be doing out so late, pothead,” the blonde sneered, “with a map like that in your possession?”

His sneering was only half-hearted, though – since last year, he had been lacking in his usual slick demeanour. His complexion was constantly pallid, deep shadows etched beneath his eyes, and his tangled hair hadn’t been oiled back for longer than Harry could remember. A life of servitude to Voldemort was obviously not treating him well.

Not that Harry was one to talk when it came criticizing another’s physical image. He doubted that he looked much better than his schoolyard nemesis.

If he had been any other person, Harry would have been amused. How the great Potter and Malfoy rivals had fallen since Harry had rejected the other’s handshake on their first night at Hogwarts.

“It’s none of your business,” he snapped in response to Malfoy’s rude question, his fingers itching to cast either a very strong memory charm or a nasty hex. Hermione grabbed his wrist, sensing his volatile thoughts.

“We could ask you why you’re wandering the hallways at midnight as well, Malfoy,” she said calmly, and the Slytherin abruptly averted his attention onto her.

“I happen to be Head Boy,” he said, “and am doing my rounds to pick up miscreants like yourselves.”

“Bullshit,” Harry put forward instantly. No way was Malfoy coming around the corner from the Room of Requirement because he was on Head Boy rounds.

“Language, scarhead,” Malfoy said coldly. “I’m thinking that confiscating that map from you is in order, as well as that cloak of yours. Might as well throw in fifty points from Gryffindor each, for being out after curfew.”

Harry swore at Malfoy viciously. He could almost hear Hermione groaning into her hand from behind him.

“Ah, yes, thank you for that reminder,” Malfoy added, because he couldn’t help himself. “How about another fifty for addressing your superiors in such a manner? Oh, and fifty from you too,
Granger, for being a mudblood.”

“You forget that I’m still the Gryffindor prefect,” said Hermione, her voice like icicles. “I could report you for such blatant abuse of your powers as a Head.”

“Who would listen to you?” Malfoy asked, with clear derision in his tone.

It was true. With Severus Snape as Headmaster and the rest of the professors under his thumb, there was absolutely nothing that Harry or Hermione could do.

Harry suddenly wilted, overwhelmed by a wave of hopelessness washing over him. How on earth was he meant to defeat a dark lord if he couldn’t even come out victorious from a wrangle with Draco Malfoy?

Malfoy, whose nose was trained to scent weakness, detected Harry’s defeat and smirked.

“Just as I thought,” he said, before rapidly summoning the map and cloak from Harry and Hermione. “Now I’ll take you to the Headmaster for your punishment.”

He turned and walked away, clearly expected the other two to follow him. Harry glanced at Hermione as she did to him, both wearing thinly disguised expressions of anger.

Malfoy half-turned, noting their lack of obedience.

“Is this going to take all night,” he snarled, “because I don’t want to be seen in the morning in the company of the likes of a mudblood, and you, scarhead—”

The word ‘scarhead’ had barely crossed his lips before Harry’s vision went red, and then he was drawing his wand, directing it firmly on Malfoy and enunciating, “Melofors.”

A giant pumpkin popped into existence, encasing the Head Boy’s head.

Malfoy unleashed a most unbecoming shriek of fury just as Harry came to his senses and wondered why in Merlin and Morgana’s names he had done that. Hermione latched onto Harry’s arm.

“Filch,” she hissed in warning, both pausing to listen for the tell-tale pitter-patter of Mrs. Norris beyond the solid barrier of Malfoy’s swearing at the top of his lungs.

“Get this fucking pumpkin off my fucking head, Potter!” Harry heard him screeching in a most undignified manner, right before they heard the first of Mrs Norris around the corner, followed by the Filch croaking from further away, “What is that godawful row, my sweet?”

Hermione looked at Harry.

“Run!” she said. Harry needed no convincing as the both swept past Malfoy, seizing both the map and the cloak from his hands and bolting for the nearest escape route.

They found the Room of Requirement easily enough, both silently begging for a place to hide, and it conveniently conjured a simple classroom for them, inside which the collapsed. This is exactly how the two found themselves looking out the window at the shimmering half-crescent moon.

“We had every reason to run,” Hermione finally said, breaking the silence. “Unlike previous years, we won’t have a voice of reason anywhere in this castle when speaking to Snape. And we
both know how much he hates us. He’d probably just expel us for breathing under the same roof as Malfoy.”

“Snape’s a murderer,” Harry said bitterly. “I don’t get how he managed to become Headmaster.”

“You-Know-Who,” Hermione offered. “Pulling strings, now that Dumbledore’s out of the picture. He’s going to overrun the ministry as well, anytime. It’s no wonder that the likes of Malfoy and Parkinson managed to become Head Boy and Girl, with Dumbledore gone.”

“Which is exactly why we should have gotten out of here during the holidays!” Harry snarled. “I told you, there’s no point hanging around here, it’s doing no good. We could have exterminated half of Voldemort’s Horcruxes by now if you had just listened to me!”

“Calm down, Harry,” Hermione said, narrowing her eyes slightly, just enough to pass as a warning. “You really have to control your temper better. It doesn’t help anyone if you get over your head about this.”

Harry paused, breathing in heavily through his nose. Yes, that’s right. He was also overreacting all the time now. Another thing to add to the list.

“Sorry,” he said quietly. “Let’s just figure out what to do now.”

“Obviously Malfoy’s going to dob us in, so that’s a problem.”

“We should have Obliviated him,” Harry said. “Now he knows about the Marauder’s Map as well.”

It was hard enough that back in third year, the invisibility cloak’s existence had also been revealed to Malfoy.

“Well, we didn’t.” Hermione closed her eyes. “There’s no point dwelling on that now. We need to think of something else.”

Harry moved away from the door, casting a hasty locking charm on it before beginning to pace.

“So let’s get this straight,” he said. “Malfoy deducts two hundred points from us because he can, attempts to confiscate my cloak and map, and is going to go and get Snape to probably expel us. Brilliant.”

“It doesn’t help that you spelled a pumpkin around his head,” Hermione said, throwing her friend a dirty look.

“Yeah, whatever, he deserved it,” Harry said, as if it was no big deal. “Maybe we could Confund Snape when we see him, and then he’ll get all confused when he’s trying to come up with some punishment and will assign us to do something really stupid for detention, and then we’ll be in the clear from expulsion!”

“That is the dumbest idea,” said Hermione. Harry rolled his eyes and moved to sit down heavily next to her in a seat, put instead found himself leaping back up with a strangled cry.

“Ouch!” he shouted, making Hermione jump, before looking down at the offender, only to find a golden necklace with an oddly familiar charm at the end of it. He picked it up hesitantly, holding it in the air to examine. Hermione’s eyes widened as she realised what it was that was being held up before her.
“Is this…?” Harry began.

“A time-turner!” Hermione finished breathlessly. “Where in Merlin’s name did you get that? We were told that they were all destroyed in the Ministry!”

“And the Ministry has never lied to us before,” Harry said, his tone bordering on wry. Hermione flushed slightly, then reached out to take the time-turner from him, scrutinising the golden hoops closely.

“But where did you find it?” she repeated, drawing a scoff from the other.

“Find it,” he said. “More like impaled myself on it. Right here, on the seat.” He gestured to the offending chair.

“It’s just… weird that it turned up for us,” Hermione said slowly.

“It’s the Room of Requirement,” Harry volunteered as an explanation, and his companion suddenly started.

“Of course!” she said. “The room knew that not only did we need a hiding place, but also a way to get out of this mess.”

“You suggest,” Harry asserted, “using the time-turner to go back in time?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, standing and walking a circle around Harry, all the while examining the necklace in her hand. “We could intercept Malfoy from beneath the invisibility cloak and put him out of order so that he’ll never find us. I think an hour should do the trick.”

“And I think that this idea is bloody brilliant!” Harry took the chain and put it around his neck, Hermione doing the same. “But wait. Aren’t you always going on about not meddling with time?”

“We can’t be expelled just yet, Harry,” said Hermione impatiently. “We have to find and destroy the Horcruxes which are in this castle if you’re going to have any chance of defeating You-Know-Who. Eliminating a dark wizard is the priority here, I think. And if we’re careful, none of this ever would have happened.”

“Sound logic,” Harry agreed. “Let’s go then, before Filch or Snape come and try to break down the door.”

Hermione turned the loops of the charm a single time, and immediately the world rushed into a blur around them, and through the window they watched the moon sinking beyond the horizon, before the sun rose and fell and the moon emerged again, all happening within a heartbeat, but it didn’t stop there.

Harry watched with no small amount of alarm as time continued to rush past them, accelerating faster and faster and it wasn’t stopping… He tried to open his mouth to say something, anything, but he found himself unable to as everything continued to whirl around them, and soon it was moving so fast that he wasn’t even able to distinguish the sun from the moon anymore, and all he could see were bright lights from each direction.

And then it stopped.

Harry abruptly threw the chain away from his neck, lurching away to lean against a table, nausea clouding his vision. Hermione was in no better shape, sinking down to the floor with a feverish glow to her skin. Both gasped for breath, before finally Harry broke the silence.
“What was that?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” Hermione clambered back to her feet, her hands shaking. The moon was hanging low in the sky, the night young once again. “It looks like we went back more than one hour.”

“It seemed to me that we went back a couple of years,” Harry said, with no shortage of trepidation in his tone. Hermione smiled at him, a smile which was crooked with barely concealed worry.

“We can’t have gone back years,” she said. “That’s impossible. Five hours is the limit on these. Everyone knows that.”

Harry didn’t bother arguing, because he sincerely hoped that she was correct, and the view of the sun and moon’s spiralling journey had all been an illusion. He reached for his cloak and map on the table, but to his great alarm, found that they were no longer there.

_We went back a few hours_, he told himself. _They’ll be back in your dorm, obviously._

The two exited the Room of Requirement cautiously, in hopes that Malfoy wasn’t lurking around the corner, but found absolutely no one. As they moved down the corridors silently, passing by the moving stairways, Hermione paused.

“Do you hear that?” she asked in a hushed whisper, and Harry paused also, straining his ears. Sure enough, floors down below them, they could hear the movement of the student body, coming through the entrance hall.

“It sounds like they’re going into the Great Hall,” said Hermione. “Maybe it’s dinnertime?”

“My intuition told me that I would find somebody here,” an elderly voice murmured from behind them, and Harry knew that if he had been a cat, his hackles would have been standing on end right at that moment as he and Hermione slowly wheeled around to view the speaker.

Harry went pale as he took in the auburn hair and beard streaked with grey, the slightly lined face and those tell-tale, bright blue eyes which he had thought would never pierce him again.

Hermione grabbed Harry’s arm, squeezing it as she drew nearer to him in light of the turn of events.

And Harry whispered, “Dumbledore?”

Chapter End Notes

I am currently proof-reading and editing all existing chapters, so if there are any typos I've missed, apologies, and feel free to let me know. Cheers!

Also, Firespawn created a wonderful fanfic trailer which you all should definitely check out! Leave her some love, she's done a great job and I'm crying (T▽T)
The beautiful thumbnail can be seen [here](#).

XblackcatwidowX
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Albus frowned outwardly now at such a bizarre question.

“I believe that it is September the first, 1944,” he said, and if anything, both students looked even more sick than they had before. Ah. Albus abruptly understood the reason for their strange behaviour, impossible as it was, and he levelled them with a calm gaze.

“And when is it that you two have come from?” he asked.

“September the fifteenth, 1997,” the girl said, a dazed note to her voice. “Fifty-three years in the future.”

Chapter Notes

Thank you for comments, kudos, and followers in general. All greatly appreciated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What I mean is, Professor,” the young man said, blushing. “Sir. I… how are you…?”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand your question, dear boy,” said Albus Dumbledore, examining the two unfamiliar students’ stances. They were holding onto each other in clear alarm, which had Albus internally frowning, before he moved on to their uniform. They were very clearly Gryffindor, judging from the crimson and gold ties around their necks and the crest of a roaring lion on their robes. Judging from their appearances, everything seemed to be in order – the right age to be in one of the two N.E.W.T. years, though their uniforms were different from the ones the rest of the student body wore… there was just one minor problem. Albus had no idea who they were.

“Um, sir,” the young lady said quietly, slowly emerging from behind her companion’s shoulder, though neither of them relinquished their hold on each other, as if the other was a lifeline. Bright brown eyes were lit upon the professor, looking rather as if she had just seen a ghost. “What’s the date today?”

Albus frowned outwardly now at such a bizarre question.

“I believe that it is September the first, 1944,” he said, and if anything, both students looked even more sick than they had before.

Ah. Albus abruptly understood the reason for their strange behaviour, impossible as it was, and he levelled them with a calm gaze.

“And when is it that you two have come from?” he asked.
“September the fifteenth, 1997,” the girl said, a dazed note to her voice. “Fifty-three years in the future.”

“And what circumstances brought you here so… unexpectedly?” Albus probed gently.

“We found a time-turner,” said the boy roughly. “We were only meant to go back one hour. But it malfunctioned or something. And here we are.”

“As we speak,” Albus said, “the new first-years sail across the lake to the castle for their sorting. As Deputy Headmaster, they are my charges, so we don’t have long to discuss this. We shall have to keep our meeting brief. Firstly, do you know how to return to your time?”

“No,” the Gryffindors shouted in unison, and Albus held up a hand to steady them.

“This means that you will be attending the school year until we find a solution for your problems,” he said, then requested, “May I ask what your names are?”

“Hermione Granger,” said the girl. “I’m Muggle-born, so nobody would recognize my name if I kept it.”

Albus nodded his agreement, before turning his attention to the boy.

“Harry Potter,” he said. “My name’s Harry Potter.”

“Of the Potter family,” Albus murmured. “Fortunately, there are currently no Potters under this roof this year. Fleamont graduated eighteen years ago, but still, it would do not good for people to trace you back to the Potter family tree when you shouldn’t yet exist.”

“Fleamont,” Harry repeated softly, rolling the name across his tongue experimentally. He looked at Hermione. “Fleamont. He’s probably my grandfather, isn’t he?”

Hermione instead gave him a warning glance.

“We shouldn’t be telling you such details, should we, Professor?” she said. “Or it could alter the timeline if you became aware of things from the future that you shouldn’t.”

Albus approved of this logic. Smart girl.

“Very true,” he said. “While I promise to guard your secrets like my own, this does not mean that you reveal to me what lies ahead in the future. Though judging from the expressions that you looked at me with when I first spoke to you, I am probably dead in your time.”

Harry choked. Albus chuckled.

“I thought as much,” he murmured, and observed as a sort of dark fury began simmering up in the boy’s eyes, before he abruptly snapped, “You were killed by—”

Hermione slapped a hand over Harry’s mouth, cutting off the words.

“Honestly!” she exclaimed. “What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to stop that slimy bastard from ever—”

“You can’t!” Hermione cried. “You can’t, Harry, or you’ll ruin the entire timeline and we wouldn’t even be here! You may as well announce to the world what is going to happen with You-Know-Who…”
“That happens to sound like a really good idea,” Harry retorted, directing a glare onto the shorter girl now. Albus very nearly opened his mouth to interrupt the immature feud, predicting that neither of the two would back down, when both softened their gazes, the disagreement quickly dissolved.

“We’ll figure this out,” Hermione said, her eyes imploring, “without blurring out everything that we know.”

“Alright,” Harry said, though he still looked highly tempted. “Fine. What’s the plan then?”

“First of all,” Albus said, “I shall have to inform Headmaster Dippet of your arrival, I’m afraid. He will understand if I explain the situation. As it stands, the pair of you shall masquerade as transfer students from Beauxbatons Academy of Magic. We are of cordial terms with them.”

“But I don’t know any French!” Harry said, alarmed, turning to face Hermione. “Do you?”

“I’m passable,” she said. “I’ve always done extra-curricular languages – the Asian and African languages are fascinating, but I’ve usually been more focused on the European-based ones. It’s amazing how much your English knowledge is supplemented by things like French and German. It’s really very rewarding, Harry,” Hermione continued earnestly. “I could teach you the basics, if you want.”

Harry looked towards Albus beseechingly, and the professor fought to not chuckle.

“That is a very kind offer, Miss Granger,” he said, “but is not necessary. It would be simple enough to say that you transferred precisely because of Mr Potter’s lack of French knowledge.”

Hermione’s eyes lit up with eager understanding, while Harry looked nothing but disgruntled.

“Great, paint me as the idiot,” he said crossly.

“I assume that Miss Granger’s offer holds,” Albus said. Harry quickly shook his head.

“I’m completely fine with being the idiot,” he said. Hermione laughed before Albus continued.

“Now, Miss Granger, you may retain your surname, but you, Mr Potter, had best pose as my nephew to avoid awkward questions about your family.”

Harry shook his head tersely, meeting Albus’ gaze straight-on. There was a strange glimmer in his eyes, cold and sharp as shards of emerald.

“Thank you for that generous offer, sir,” he said, “but I would rather not become a Dumbledore. Wouldn’t it make sense for both of us to adopt a French surname, if me and Hermione are transferring from France together? We could be siblings or something, if that’s okay with you, ‘Mione.”

“Harry and Hermione Delacour certainly has a ring to it,” Hermione agreed, fishing up the first French surname that came to her head. She grinned slightly.

“Well,” Harry said, “I’m sure Fleur wouldn’t mind.”

“Of course Phlegm wouldn’t,” Hermione said. “But the two of us look nothing alike. We couldn’t pass as siblings. Perhaps cousins?”

“Cousins, yeah,” Harry said. “I could be your mum’s nephew or something.”
“Mum has an older brother,” Hermione said. “You could be his son. And the story could be that you came to live with me and my parents because your parents died?”

“I’m already familiar with that story,” Harry said, “so we might as well use it. Your family would be much better company than the one I ended up with, though.”

Hermione shot him a sympathising look.

“If we’re from a French wizarding family,” said Harry, “it doesn’t explain why I don’t really know French.”

Albus drew out his wand.

“We may have to change that story,” he said.

“Good riddance,” huffed Harry. Albus ignored this comment.

“Coming from a French family makes it difficult to not have a knowledge of French,” he carried on. “But I happen to have learned a simple charm from an Australian wizard many years ago which distorts the vocal cords and can mimic accents. Do a simple swishing movement with your wand, like so, and recite nice and clearly, *Francorurn Vox.*”

Hermione absorbed the spell like a sponge and turned to Harry.

“*Francorurn Vox,*” she said, mimicking the swishing motion with her wand as she pointed towards Harry. There was a twinge visible in his throat, before nothing.

“What did it do?” he asked, then cut off. “Bloody hell. I sound like a Frenchman.”

“It’s very effective,” Hermione remarked. “Just traces of an accent, but it sounds natural. Try it on me, Harry.”

Harry cleared his throat, swished his wand and said, “*Francorurn Vox.*”

It appeared to work, as the next time Hermione opened her mouth, her voice resembled that of a person whose first language was French. It was rather fetching, Albus thought.

“The charm lasts twenty-four hours, so each morning you should take care to cast it on yourself again. The accents should keep the students off your trail for a little while,” he informed them briskly. “Hopefully for long enough to find you both a route home. The first-years are leaving the boats right now, I believe, and so I must leave to meet them. I will inform the Headmaster of your situation, and you will both be sorted last. You may enter the Great Hall after all of the new students.”

“We already have a house, sir,” Harry insisted, and it was obvious from his vexed expression that his accent was already getting on his nerves.

And how proud I am to have individuals such as yourselves in my house, Albus thought to himself. However...

“I’m afraid that if you were sorted fifty-three years in the future, that is not exactly valid as of this year,” Albus said, lifting his wand. “I’ll have to erase your house colours, I’m afraid. And your uniform is a bit too updated for 1944. I hope you don’t mind me transfiguring it into the proper uniform, and you can order more from Madam Malkin’s.”
Both looked sincerely unhappy with this arrangement, though neither argued. Albus waved his wand, casting a non-verbal spell over the two, and their robes transformed into the proper uniform.

“No need to fret,” he said cheerfully. “If you both wish to be re-sorted into Gryffindor, the Sorting Hat always takes your preference into account.”

“A second time?” Hermione murmured. “It seems quite unlikely to me.”

Albus smiled softly.

“If you’re true Gryffindors at heart,” he said, “then that is where you will always find a place to call home. I must be off now to greet the first-years. If you two would wait outside the Great Hall until their sorting has finished, you will both be summoned when it’s time.”

“Alright, sir,” Harry said glumly.

Albus turned on his heel, and before he left, he said, “Welcome to back to Hogwarts, Miss and Mr Delacour.”

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“I feel so naked in these clothes,” Harry said, tugging at his plain black tie and sighing. “You know, vulnerable. And kind of homeless.”

“It won’t be long,” Hermione said, and her expression was grim.

“And this bloody accent,” Harry added. Hermione nodded her head vehemently in agreement with this sentiment, before brushing her hand down her new, crisp blazer.

The uniform of the ‘40s was very much different from the ones which they were accustomed to. It still consisted of the plain white button-down shirt and the tie which would no doubt magically change into the house colour, but from there the similarities ended. They each wore a thick grey V-neck jumper, and an equally grey blazer with the Hogwarts emblem on the breast pocket. Hermione was additionally clothed in a pleated skirt, Harry in trousers, also astonishingly grey. He was of the opinion that he looked like a little grey mouse.

The two stood outside the Great Hall, listening to the voice of Albus Dumbledore calling out the names of the first-years one by one, followed by the Sorting Hat shouting out different houses, right before the applause erupting from each individual house table at the given time.

Harry found that he was surprisingly unaffected by the late Headmaster’s presence. It felt normal to have him there. No, it was something else which was nagging him, raising his pulse slightly higher than could be considered natural.

“I didn’t think I’d be nervous,” Harry said, “but I am. About the sorting.”

Hermione gave a curt nod in agreement, verifying her own concerns about it.

“I don’t think that I’m going to make Gryffindor again,” she said, “no matter what Dumbledore says.”

Harry tried to smile at her reassuringly, but it came out feeling wonky on his face. His own fears echoed hers. He abruptly cut off his poor excuse of a smile from his face, deciding to be honest with her.
“Same,” he said. “Last time, the Sorting Hat very much wanted to put me into Slytherin.”

“Did it?” Hermione said, vaguely interested. “You never told me that. Well, I… I had an argument with it about ending up in Gryffindor. It thought that I was a Ravenclaw at heart.”

“Mm.” Harry ran an agitated hand through his hair, achieving nothing but tousling it further than before. “I can’t believe we’re back in 1944. It’s a bit more than I bargained for.”

“It makes me wonder who we’re going to meet here,” said Hermione. “Probably the family members of all the people at school. I mean, back in our time.”

“Can you think of anybody who would be in Hogwarts right now?” Harry asked.

“I didn’t make a point of memorising the birth dates of people,” Hermione retorted. She tacked onto the end, “Cousin,” with a note of humour in her voice. Harry didn’t smile. Hermione sighed, and persisted, “Even if I become Ravenclaw and you become Slytherin, hopefully we’ll figure out how to get back to our time quickly, and we won’t have to stay for long.”

Harry had no response to that. Because deep down, he knew that he wouldn’t mind staying away from the Second Wizarding War. For a little while.

Hermione mistook his silence.

“No matter what, we’re going to stick together,” she said. “No matter house rivalry or whatnot.”

“The Slytherins will eat me alive,” Harry said, with a cold chuckle. “It’s a den of snakes.”

“Good thing you’re a Parselmouth, then,” Hermione countered, determined to shine light on the situation.

“Yeah, I don’t plan on flaunting that though,” Harry said. “I’m going to die, you know.”

Hermione pulled a face.

“Perhaps it was only our generation of Slytherins who were horrible,” she suggested, and this time Harry did unleash a bark of laughter.

“There’s a reason for the multiple generations of Slytherin-Gryffindor hatred,” he said, and Hermione sniffed.

“Fine,” she said. “Be a pessimist.”

“Realist,” Harry parried. “I’m pretty sure I’m a realist, Hermione.”

She responded with a playful shove, just as they heard the echoing voice of who they could only assume to be the Headmaster, Armando Dippet, announce, “This year, we will be catering for two transfer students from Beauxbatons Academy of Magic.”

Harry heard a murmur of interest ripple through the Great Hall at the mention of Beauxbatons. Back in fourth-year, during the Triwizard Tournament, Harry remembered that the Academy had had a good reception – probably because they were all so fair and pretty, like elves.

Harry passed a sideways glance at Hermione. She was pretty in her own right and had a petite build, so could probably pass as the typical Beauxbatons student image. As for himself? Harry laughed internally. He was short and slender for a guy, but he didn’t think he was pretty. Hermione would be far more popular than him when he didn’t have the reputation as the Boy-Who-Lived.
This notion was strangely enticing, Harry decided, that nobody would know who he was. Nobody’s eyes would flicker to his scar, nobody would pause when his name was called or gaze at him with wonder in their eyes. He would be ordinary. He would finally be Just Harry.

“Please welcome the students,” Dippet said, just as the doors to the Great Hall creaked open. Harry hurriedly straightened, sensing that Hermione was doing the exact same by his side. With the high chances that he would end up in Slytherin, he refused for any weakness to be seen outwardly. From experience with the serpent house, they could scent blood from a mile away.

The doors clanged open fully, with an eerie, echoing effect through the hall.

All heads were turned to face Harry and Hermione as they began their walk down between the middle two house tables. Harry wiped his face clear of emotion. He had been good at that, ever since Dumbledore’s death. Which meant that his sentiments remained pent up within him until the pressure was too much and he reached exploding point. Probably not the best strategy for him, but it was effective while it lasted.

Finally, they came to the front of the hall, facing the Sorting Hat which was held in Dumbledore’s hand. Harry scanned over the faces of the professors sitting at the head table, recognizing only Slughorn and Madam Pomfrey from the quick, stolen glances that he took. No McGonagall. No Snape – what a relief, the git wasn’t even born yet, Harry thought with no small amount of glee. It would finally be his time to shine in Potions (he thought with sarcasm).

“Delacour, Harry,” Dumbledore called, drawing Harry bluntly from his thoughts. Harry blinked, and as he moved forwards, he felt Hermione giving his wrist a parting squeeze – it felt awfully like a goodbye.

With as much collectedness as he could, Harry sat down on the stool, facing the entire population of students. Every single eye was alight on him as Dumbledore lowered the hat onto his head. It was still slightly big, as it had been in first-year, and fell just over his eyes so that his vision descended into darkness.

The familiar voice of the Sorting Hat whispered in his ears, “We meet again, Harry Potter. Or rather, we meet for the first time of the two times that we have met.”

“How do you know…” Harry thought back, but never finished. It was a magical hat. Of course it knew. “Well, are you going to put me into Slytherin this time?” he asked it reluctantly.

“You would see me put you into Gryffindor,” the Hat observed.

“Please?” requested Harry meekly.

“Ah, but you have become so much more cold-hearted than last time,” said the Hat. “So much more ambitious, and cruel. The years have not treated you well, Harry Potter.”

“I am not cruel,” Harry told it curtly. “So I assume that you are declining my request.” It was not a question. It was reluctant acceptance,

“Don’t you understand, Potter?” chuckled the Sorting Hat. “I only accepted your request of Gryffindor house because you had already been in Slytherin.”

“Which is now,” Harry said.

“Indeed,” said the Hat. “Don’t lose heart, Saviour. You may well find your time in your new house to be… enlightening.”
Harry gave a sharp nod mentally.

“I’m ready,” he said.

“Then it had better be…” the Sorting Hat shouted, “SLYTHERIN!”

The Slytherin table flared up in applause as Dumbledore removed the hat from Harry’s head. Harry refused to meet the man’s eye as he stepped towards his new house table. When he glanced downwards, he saw magic lacing around his black tie, striping it with green and silver, his house emblem transforming into a serpent on his blazer.

Harry looked back up, mildly disgusted with himself, and did not dare look in the direction that Hermione stood. He did not acknowledge her at all as he joined the Slytherin table, making sure to take the seat furthest to the end to reduce contact with his mortal-enemies-made-housemates. Harry could feel that he was drawing in curious stares due to his less-than-courteous behaviour, but refused to care.

Instead, he focused on his ‘cousin’ as Dumbledore called, “Delacour, Hermione!”

Harry felt more probing glances as everybody noted the shared surname. He didn’t address any of them, opting to simply watch his companion move up to have the Hat placed on her head. Her eyes vanished beneath the brim of the Hat, and the hall sat in muted quiet for half a minute, before the Hat screamed, “RAVENCLAW!”

Dumbledore picked it up from Hermione’s head, and she came down towards the blue and bronze table, which was directly next to the Slytherin one. Harry watched as she purposefully sat down at the end of her new table, so that she and Harry were back-to-back, a mere couple of metres apart.

Harry, feeling that it was safe to observe Dumbledore from afar at this point, did so immediately. His expression was impossible to read, but Harry was certain that beneath the carefully constructed mask, the deputy headmaster was quite dissatisfied with the outcome of the sorting.

It doesn’t matter. Harry’s heart hardened. I’ll always be a Gryffindor. My tie may be green-silver, but the rest of me is not.

As Dumbledore moved away to replace the Hat, Dippet stood up to address everybody.

“Please be hospitable to all our new students,” the elderly man said, “and welcome back for the year!”

The Slytherins at the table clapped mildly to this as the man sat down and the empty platters on the table bloomed with roasts and vegetables and stews right before their eyes.

Harry did not help himself to the food, weary as a rabbit would be in a fox’s burrow. He observed the others around him, all suited up in the same grey blazer as himself, each with a green emblem of a snake on their breast pocket, and he wished nothing more than to stand up and sit down next to Hermione. The few metres separating them seemed to stretch out for an eternity.

He really was a Slytherin now, Harry realised, with no sense of relish whatsoever. He glanced around and met the dark eyes of a somewhat rabbit-y looking boy standing diagonal to him behind a few seated Slytherins. As if stung, Harry’s eyes quickly shot back to his empty plate, and he found himself examining it as if it held all of life’s answers.

“Delacour, was it,” the Slytherin across from him said. Harry reluctantly looked up at him again
– that is to say, stared at the boy’s shoulder stolidly.

“That’s right,” he said, keeping his voice blank, and the other boy’s mouth twitched into a smile.

“Definitely French,” he said. “Good thing the French are considered sexy. You’ll make a nice addition to the house – you could act as our mascot.”

Harry couldn’t help but stare at the boy who reminded him so much of a rabbit. It was the mouth, he decided. The mouth was what was rabbit-like about him. Other than that, the boy had a thin face, dark brown hair and a pointy nose. Further, Harry believed that he had just been called ‘sexy’, however that worked.

He wondered whether he should respond, but having nothing to say but something incredibly awkward, he chose the safe option of not opening his mouth at all, and went on to coolly ignore the boy’s existence as he delicately selected a single roast potato from the dish in front of him. It was tempting to sniff it in order to settle his concerns that it was poisoned, but he retained his dignity and did no such thing.

“I’m Nott,” Rabbit Boy said, and Harry immediately stiffened. “Francis Nott.”

“Nott,” Harry repeated. Nott had been in the graveyard the day that Cedric had…

“Say, are you pure-blood?” another boy asked, this one standing directly behind Harry. This one had appeared out of nowhere, and Harry uneasily noted that the whole situation was rather as if he was being surrounded – herded like a sheep by wolves. When he chose to glance up behind him, he saw that this Slytherin had wavy russet hair and eyes as black as sin. Harry levelled him with his coldest stare.

“I don’t see why that is your concern,” he said quietly, and the boy sneered in a manner that would have made Lucius Malfoy proud.

“Mudblood, are you?” he asked, and Harry didn’t deign to reply.

“Lestrange!” Nott hissed from across from them. “Don’t insult Riddle. Obviously Delacour is not a mudblood if he is being asked after.”

Harry dropped his fork with a metallic clang which, to his ears, echoed through the whole hall.

“Riddle?” Harry whispered, the name suddenly outweighing the heaviness of the knowledge that future Death Eaters was standing right at his back. Dread turned his heart cold as stone.

“Tom Riddle,” said Nott, nodding in the direction of somebody further down the table, obvious admiration in his voice. “Genius, mastermind, also Head Boy.”

“Has an interest in you, Riddle has,” remarked Lestrange, also looking down the table in Riddle’s direction, a smirk on his lips as he towered over Harry from behind.

Slowly, carefully, Harry pivoted his head to look in the direction that the two future Death Eaters were, and immediately, his eyes were drawn into the dark blue of another pair. Dark blue eyes drawn into a face so breathtakingly handsome that he couldn’t possibly be human.

No. Not human at all.

He was the devil.
And his name was Tom Riddle.

Harry rose to his feet.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a delight to write. I hope you enjoyed it!

XblackcatwidowX
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

“Delacour, Harry,” Dumbledore called.

Harry. A common enough name, though definitely not French, Tom thought as he watched the black-haired boy make his way up to the hat, before shaking his head slightly in annoyance. There was no point in pondering a boy who he would no doubt never speak to in his life.

Chapter Notes

Again, thank you for any attention that you gave this fic, it means a lot to me. Apologies for typos, and let’s enjoy Tom Riddle’s perspective here as well. :3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“New Beauxbatons students, huh?” Tom heard Avery whisper into Nott’s ear as Dippet, the old codger, made his announcement. “Do you think that any will make Slytherin?”

“Hopefully,” Nott returned in an undertone. “Everybody knows that the Beauxbatons crowd can be pretty foxy.”

Across the table from them, Lestrange let out a little, “Rrrow,” drawing muffled sniggers from the rest of Tom’s inner circle, all of whom sat around him. Tom opted to ignore their juvenile behaviour, instead considering what he knew about the other school, which happened to be very little.

Beauxbatons Academy of Magic was rumoured to be located in the Pyrenees in the south of France, accepting students from across France, Luxembourg, Spain, Portugal, Belgium and the Netherlands. Until the Triwizard Tournament had been discontinued, it had been one of the three competitors, Hogwarts included – and that was where Tom’s knowledge stopped. A disappointing amount of information, he thought, watching with absolutely zero interest as the doors to the Great Hall began to open to allow the new transfer students in.

“Even if neither of them have the cunning for Slytherin,” added Mulciber, wearing a sly smile, “some of them might make Ravenclaw. Ravenclaws are alright.”

“Better than the dorks and puffs, anyway,” said Avery.

“Oi, Lestrange,” Rosier called softly across the table to the other Slytherin, “Ten galleons that you won’t be able to get any of them to sleep with you before the Christmas holidays.”

Lestrange smirked back, clearly accepting the challenge, and flashed a set of sharp canines as he responded, “Twenty galleons that I can.”
Tom rested his chin in his palm, narrowing his eyes as he gazed out the window.

Ah, yes, he thought to himself. Lestrange’s wolfishness coming out to play again.

Tom’s inner circle consisted of selected few, only six other Slytherin students who had proven themselves to be loyal to him – and only him – without a doubt. Yes, he now had in his possession a collection of pure-blood students who both feared and revered him, worshipping the ground that he walked on due to his being Salazar Slytherin’s descendant. That they were pure-bloods was very important to him, though nobody needed to know that he himself was merely a half-blood with a dirty Muggle father. Of course, it was not only these six who respected him – everybody else in Slytherin house accepted him as their leader (especially now that he had made Head Boy), but it was Avery, Nott, Lestrange, Rosier, Mulciber and Dolohov who were the elite of his disciples. And what a privilege that was for them. Tom made sure that they knew it.

The Head Boy wanted Peregrine Lestrange because of his undeniable ruthlessness. He wanted Gideon Avery for his creativity, Francis Nott for his brains, Caspian Rosier for his face and Antonin Dolohov for his inhumanity. And then there was Cassius Mulciber – bold beyond belief. Mulciber, of them all, had always been Tom’s right-hand man, if Tom even had a right-hand man, simply because his boldness, his naked ambition, would one day make him stronger than any of the others. Tom knew that he himself possessed all these qualities that he favoured in his circle, and more, which was what put him at the top of the hierarchy. But these six weren’t enough. For all the years since he had first formed the Knights of Walpurgis, he had been searching for a seventh member. A seventh to prove himself worthier than the rest. Seven for the seven days of the week, for the seven continents, for the seven notes on a musical scale. For the seven deadly sins. Seven to complete the heptagon which he would stand in the centre of. Tom already had six of the virtues that he prided himself of. The final figure would be gifted with the most important – power. Tom had already waited over his whole life for this person. He would wait another century if he had to.

“Would you look at that,” Avery murmured, the others around him all uttering murmurs of agreement.

“Check them out, Riddle,” Dolohov hissed to Tom, and Tom blinked slowly, like a waking panther, and turned to watch the new students. Ah, only two. He had been expecting a small gathering.

The pair walked side-by-side, shoulders almost brushing. Sixth or seventh-years, Tom decided as he watched them, his interest peaking now as he observed them.

The girl wasn’t pretty in the typical sense, though she wasn’t bad looking, with a small frame and thick brown hair plaited back from her face. What made her noticeable was the stern intellect drawn into the set of her shoulders, the raw gift of perception in her eyes.

The boy was taller than her by about half a head, but in no world could ever be considered tall. He was very lean, but walked with the grace of a man who was practised in coordination – probably a Quidditch player. He had a head of rumpled black hair, which Tom guessed had been done on purpose, and from the distance, looked to be wearing wire-rimmed glasses.

Tom laughed to himself sardonically. Too bad he already had a pretty face among his six. Besides, the two looked to be Gryffindors in the making. Tom was practised in the judging of people by their walk. These Beauxbatons students walked similarly to the rest of the Gryffindorks (as his inner circle enjoyed calling the members of the lion house), using that confident stride of a person too chivalrous for their own good.
“They were all too predictable.”

“Gryffindors,” Tom murmured to Nott. “Looks like you won’t be getting those Slytherins you were hoping for.”

Nott immediately deflated at this news – after all, there was no arguing with Tom Riddle. The descendant of Slytherin immediately lost any interest that the two had originally gained and watched in pure boredom as they stopped before Dumbledore (how Tom loathed Dumbledore. Honestly, that man made him want to light somebody on fire and watch them running around, screaming in agony).

“Delacour, Harry,” Dumbledore called.

Harry. A common enough name, though definitely not French, Tom thought as he watched the black-haired boy make his way up to the hat, before shaking his head slightly in annoyance. There was no point in pondering a boy who he would no doubt never speak to in his life.

The silence dragged out. It seemed that Delacour and the Sorting Hat were having some sort of deep conversation, which was now infringing upon everybody else’s dinnertime. Tom didn’t bother suppressing a yawn, rolling his eyes. What was to discuss? The boy was so obviously a–

“SLYtherIN!” the Hat shouted, and Tom stiffened, shocked that his prediction had been… inaccurate.

“Yes!” Nott whooped, throwing himself to his feet to applaud as the rest of the table did. “We got Romeo!”

“Romeo?” Tom snapped, glaring at Rosier as he clapped hands with Lestrange, their previous bet apparently certified now. Nott shrugged, refusing to look ashamed as they continued to clap (Tom included – he would greet any new student with the courtesy that any Head Boy should).

“Pretty boy,” was the only explanation he was given, and Tom directed his mild glare onto the new Slytherin as he made his way to the table.

If anything, Delacour looked somewhat disgusted in himself, Tom noted, as if he had been forced to swallow a particularly nasty Flobberworm. It was as though he knew about the four houses already, which was highly unlikely.

It was obvious to anybody watching that Delacour chose the seat at the end of the table on purpose, avoiding contact with Tom’s snakes. Tom himself, along with his inner circle, sat less than ten people away from him, and therefore from such a short distance, could see the newcomer’s face properly. He had the features of a pure-blood – sharp, aristocratic planes to his face, a defined jawline, and – Salazar! – eyes as green as the killing curse. But he looked thin – too thin, and his skin was wan. He looked like a man in mourning. Or perhaps even more so a man walking the death row. Tom abruptly found himself, of all things, intrigued, and watched Harry Delacour monitor “Delacour, Hermione” (his sister, perhaps?) being sorted. She was a little faster, the hat shouting, “RAVENClAW!” though Tom was less surprised this time.

So he had pegged them differently than they really were. What was the big deal? The big deal was that Tom Marvolo Riddle was never wrong.

“Slytherin and Ravenclaw,” Avery said. “Must be pretty decent people, then.”

They all exchanged laughs while Dippet said a few words, and then the feast appeared before him. While the rest of the hall came to life with talk and the clatter of cutlery, Tom didn’t touch
his. He and one other alone.

Harry Delacour.

The boy was doing an excellent job of remaining coolly detached from the rest of the student population, his face expressionless as he gazed at nothing in particular. Tom watched Hermione Delacour as well, trying to get a feel for the dynamics between them – every few seconds she would glance over her shoulder at the new Slytherin, a hint of concern in her eyes while she maintained civil conversation with the others around her. Unlike her brother, she actually had a sense of decorum, and was not studiously ignoring everybody around her.

Tom tutted aloud.

“This will not do,” he said, successfully capturing the attention of the other six.

“What is it, Riddle?” Dolohov asked, a trace of wariness crossing his – and everybody else’s – faces. Tom was silent for a moment, considering his approach, and allowed the faintest of smirks to lift the corner of his mouth.

“Look at the poor boy,” he said. “We can’t allow foreigners to believe that Slytherin is anything but welcoming, the Head Boy least of all. Francis, Peregrine.”

Nott and Lestrange immediately shot to attention, understanding what was required of them and standing swiftly to make their way down the table. Tom watched them go, considering how Delacour would take the advance.

“Are you interested in him?” Mulciber asked, after a pause.

“I was wrong about him,” was Tom’s simple reply, “and I am never wrong about anything.”

He went on to see how Nott and Lestrange were handling the situation. Lestrange appeared to have said something to incense Delacour, if the stoniness shining out from behind his eyes was any indication, and now Nott was saying something else, and Delacour’s striking face froze, his already pale face losing any colour it had previously possessed, and he dropped the fork which he had just picked up. Tom could hear the clatter from where he sat, and watched with an inquisitive tilt of his head as Delacour turned to face him, the shadows beneath his eyes casting them into an otherworldly shade of green. Tom met his gaze, heeding that beneath his mask of stone, there was a layer of pure loathing.

Tom was familiar was the expression. He knew he looked that way whenever his eyes found Dumbledore when the professor was paying him no mind. There was something disarming about seeing it somewhere other than through a reflection.

“Oh dear,” Mulciber said to Tom, sounding amused. The others had seen the expression as well. “When did you step on the cat’s tail?”

“Apparently whilst I was sleepwalking,” Tom said, seeing absolutely no humour in the situation as Delacour stood, looking as though he was planning on coming over to Tom to throttle him with his bare hands. Ludicrous.

Tom was liberated from Delacour causing an embarrassing scene when the other Delacour appeared behind him, right next to Lestrange, and pressed a hand against his shoulder blade. Immediately, the green-eyed boy relaxed into her touch, but didn’t sit down again. Tom watched his mouth moving slightly as he murmured something to Lestrange, before he stepped away from the bench and moved away with his sister, head wilted in submission. As they walked back
towards the entrance, the girl’s head suddenly snapped around to stare at Tom. Her eyes were a
clear, dark brown, and they were sharp and intelligent as they skimmed over his face. The new
Slytherin must have told her something, then.

By then, the news that the Beauxbatons students were making themselves scarce quickly spread
and soon everybody was watching their rapid exit, the girl holding her brother’s arm as if he
needed the support. They both vanished beyond the doorway.

Lestrange and Nott were reclaiming their seats when Tom whipped back around to snarl at them.

“What in Salazar’s name did you do?” he barked, and both Nott and Lestrange shrunk away into
their seats in the face of his fury.

“Nothing, I swear—” Lestrange began, but Tom cut across him.

“That certainly doesn’t explain why he was cutting me into pieces with his eyes!” he spat. “Never
in my life…”

“All Peregrine did was question his blood status,” Nott said, successfully earning a death stare
from the accused. They all froze – the whole table froze, as a matter of fact. Tom drew in a deep
breath.

“You what?” he asked in a low rumble, and if it was possible, Lestrange shrunk back even more
than he had before.

“I asked him if he was pure-blood, and Delacour said it was none of my business,” he babbled,
“so I asked if he was a mudblood, but he didn’t reply, and then Francis said something and then he
stood up, then the other one came over and they left. I… I don’t know why—”

“What did you say, Francis?” Tom asked, his voice so sweet that it was deadly, and Nott
blanched.

“I… I can’t remember,” he mumbled. “Something about Peregrine insulting you by assuming that
Delacour was a mudblood, because you would never even consider affiliating yourself with a
mudblood…”

“I… um, Tom, er, Riddle,” Rosier said hesitantly, and Tom directed his heated stare onto him,
causing the pure-blood to look away as he muttered, “Perhaps Delacour is a Muggle lover.”

Tom relaxed, and as he relaxed, so did the rest of the Slytherins, believing that they were out of
the danger zone.

“It would certainly explain why he looked at me in such a manner after Peregrine and Francis
here told him what they did,” he relented. “Though I am far from happy. We do not know
Delacour’s skill level. We cannot afford to lose him yet, not until I know that he is worthless to us.
Until that time comes, I forbid any of you from frightening him away with talk of mudbloods or
Muggles, if he is so sensitive about the issue.”

“If you don’t mind, Riddle,” Lestrange said, his face still half hidden under the table, “why
bother with Delacour if he has already proven to be supportive of them?”

“There is nothing that a bit of skilful manipulation cannot do,” said Tom coolly, finally picking
up his fork and primly choosing a slice of roast beef from the platter in front of him.

“Hear, hear,” his inner circle said in unison, returning to their meals.
“Do not think that you will go unpunished, Peregrine, Francis,” Tom murmured, not bothering to grace either of them with a glance. “You have caused me trouble, after all.”

“Yes, Riddle,” Nott mumbled into his plate, followed by a sound of acknowledgement from Lestrange.

The rest of dinner was quite subdued.

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Harry splashed more cold water onto his face, before bracing his arms against the sink.

“What are we going to do, ‘Mione?” he asked blankly, staring down the drain.

“There’s nothing we can do,” said the new Ravenclaw, folding her arms and leaning back against the wall. Currently in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom, the ghost had yet to turn up – she must have died recently, Harry supposed, and had not yet settled.

“He’s Head Boy,” added Harry.

“I know!” responded Hermione indignantly. “First Malfoy, then him?”

“I don’t mean that,” said Harry. “I mean, if he’s Head Boy, he must be in seventh-year as well. And from the memories Dumbledore showed me last year, he was – is – a complete over-achiever. And a real teacher’s pet. Or, at least he pretends to be.”

“So he’ll probably be in all of your classes,” Hermione predicted, and gave him a drab smile. “If it makes you feel any better, I do more N.E.W.Ts subjects than you, so I’ll have to put up with him more.”

“But you’re not in his house,” Harry complained, pressing a hand against his scar. “And he looked really pissed off at me a couple of minutes ago – I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s killed somebody by now in a fit of anger.”

“Even You-Know-Who wouldn’t kill a person within the school while he’s a student,” said Hermione. Harry pointed to one of the sinks.

“What’s Myrtle?” he asked. “A toilet brush?”

Hermione blushed.

“Oh yes,” she said. “Well, that was with the help of a Basilisk.”

“Holy bloody shit,” Harry mumbled. “As if going back fifty-three years isn’t enough. Now we’re stuck with a young Voldemort.”

“I’ll be with you in all of your classes,” Hermione offered meekly. “Neither of us will even need to look at him.”

“I’m doing to be sharing a dormitory with him,” Harry said flatly, then scoffed. “It’s going to be difficult to avoid him, especially if he’s already got his Death Eaters on my tail. What a promotion. In one night, I go from sharing dorms with my best mate to a mass murderer.”

“I’m sorry.” Hermione came up behind Harry, and in the mirror, he saw her stretch out her arms with a quirk to her eyebrows. Harry sighed, turning and accepting the hug, wrapping his arms around her like firmly.
“I’m more comfortable duelling Voldemort,” he said, “than sleeping in the same room as him.”

“Perhaps it would be better if you stopped referring to him as Voldemort,” Hermione offered into his shoulder. “Voldemort doesn’t exist yet. Only Tom Riddle does.”

“Tom Riddle,” Harry repeated, testing the name out. It was so ordinary, so normal. Not what one would expect of a Dark Lord. “Tom. Riddle.”

“See?” said Hermione, right before Harry exploded, releasing her.

“Tom Riddle is the exact same as Lord bloody Voldemort!” he shouted. “Don’t you understand, Hermione?”

“I think it’s you who doesn’t understand,” she said. “Tom Riddle may not be an innocent student, but he is not yet responsible for the crimes that you are holding him accountable for. I’m not saying that like this. I really don’t, Harry, but you never know, you could try to turn him into a kinder person.”

“Time meddling, remember,” was Harry’s bitter response.

“Just don’t tell him what he’s doing back in our time,” Hermione said, then groaned, slapping a palm to her forehead. “I don’t know, this is just so complicated! We’re here, so we should be trying to prevent him from becoming a monster a destroying so many lives!”

“It would be the right thing to do,” Harry agreed. “Anybody with any sense of good morals would try to prevent his uprising. All that’s stopping us is the idea that we must go back to the way the world was before we left. Back to a crumbling society.”

“But what if we didn’t,” said Hermione, a crease forming between her eyebrows. “We’re in a time where we don’t yet exist. So maybe the same rules as if we had gone back a couple of hours don’t apply. What if we can stop V-V…” she inhaled a deep breath, “Voldemort from ever existing?”

“Then that’s our duty!” Harry stepped towards her, eyes blazing. Hermione looked terrified. “Then it’s our duty to try to steer him down a different path. And if we do, when we go home, we could find ourselves in a better place.”

Hermione’s face hardened.

“We may not have long,” she said. “Or rather, you may not have long.”

“Me?” Harry immediately backpedalled. “Aren’t we doing this together?”

“You’ll find it easier to get close to him,” Hermione reasoned. “Same house, same year? Of course he’ll be more open to your advances.”

“But I don’t have the slightest idea of how to befriend a Dark Lord,” Harry argued. “Besides, I’m the opposite of a socialite, it’d be impossible for me to strike up a normal conversation with him. Just imagine what I’d probably say in the heat of the moment – hi, I’m Harry, in the future you kill my parents. Fun way to begin our blossoming friendship.”

“You’re not that bad,” said Hermione. Harry immediately called her bluff and continued.

“He’s also going to be surrounded by those cronies of his… Oh, Merlin! I’m going to have to share a dormitory with not only Voldemort, but also a bunch of the first Death Eaters!”
“Tom Riddle,” Hermione corrected sharply.

“Yeah, him.”

“At least,” said Hermione, “you don’t have Trelawney in your house.”

“Trelawney,” Harry repeated. “As in, Trelawney who you went berserk at that one time. Trelawney who was always predicting my most tragic deaths. Trelawney who—”

“How many Trelawneys do you know, Harry?” Hermione snapped. “Yes, Sybill Trelawney the nutcase. She’s in second-year.”

“If I’m trying to steer Riddle away from the dark arts,” Harry said, “then can you please do us all a favour and tell her that she would make a horrible professor and a horrible seer?”

“The latter there would be impossible,” Hermione sniffed. “In the first ten seconds that we spoke, she successfully managed to shove down my throat that her great-great-grandmother was the celebrated seer Cassandra and that she herself is equally as gifted… load of codswallop, if you ask me.”

“If she never embraces her... inner eye,” Harry implored, biting back a grin at the term that his old professor was so fond of using, “then she’ll never come up with that prophecy about me and Voldemort, and then my parents and Neville’s parents never would have been touched.”

“I think that it would be wiser to dig up the root of the problem,” Hermione said. “V-Vol… V-Voldemort himself.”

Which brought them back to square one.

“You’ll probably be in all of his classes, though!” Harry exclaimed. “You can try to bond over books or something…”

“That is the most ridiculous thing that I have ever heard,” Hermione said coldly. Harry sighed.

“I know,” he admitted. “I’m beginning to sound like Ron…”

“That’s an insult to him,” said Hermione stiffly.

“Well,” said Harry, equally as rigid, “he needs never know that I said it.”

They stood in a pool of silence for a heartbeat, before both burst out into fits of laughter. And how good it felt to really laugh after such a long time.

“I’m sorry, Ron,” Harry managed to squeeze out between chuckles. “It’s just that you don’t exist yet, mate, so…”

“I really don’t know what to do with you,” said Hermione after sobering, swiping a few tears from the corner of her eyes. “Either this plan is going to be the biggest triumph in wizarding history, or the worst fiasco ever.”

“Ah,” Harry said, “but you never fail, do you, ‘Mione?”

“You’re just trying to guilt trip me,” Hermione muttered, “and make me feel worse if we change absolutely nothing.”

“I’d never do that,” Harry disagreed as his friend began to herd him out of the bathroom.
“Just go to your dormitory, and I’ll see you at breakfast tomorrow morning,” she ordered. “Good luck with Tom Riddle, and whatever you do, don’t forget to refresh your voice charm when you wake up.”

“Alright, Mother,” Harry said as they separated in the corridor, heading down two different routes, Hermione to Ravenclaw Tower and Harry to the dungeons. He abruptly paused in his steps.

“Um, Hermione?” he said. “I don’t know the password.”

“Harry!”

Chapter End Notes

So, Harry and Hermione have been seduced by the idea of a “better world”. The question is, will they succeed in creating such a thing? I hope you liked the Tom POV, I had a lot of fun writing that, and you can look forward to more (at least, I hope you look forward to it, and don’t dread it. Argh. By the way, on a completely random note, would any of you happen to have stumbled upon a good Draco-Goes-To-Durmstrang Drarry fic? Because I would KILL... to read one...

XblackcatwidowX
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The argument ceased and Lestrange’s eyes finally found the source of the problem. His mouth dropped open, as though his jaw was unhinged.

“Fucking shit,” he said. “What the fuck is Delacour doing in your bed, Riddle?”

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for bothering to follow "When in Rome", it really makes me happy when I open my inbox and see a new notification for one of these… also, thank you for continuing to read up to this point, and here, *throws confetti around the place* have a few handfuls of my apologies for typos. I’m not sure if I’ve told you before that I’m a lazy person?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry stood, staring at the stone wall which was the sole protective barrier between the den of snakes and the rest of Hogwarts. It was the last place that he wanted to enter, but after his discussion with Hermione, he knew that he had to. If they wanted any shot whatsoever at sheltering the rest of the wizarding world from the future wrath of Voldemort…

Harry couldn’t afford to be unsuccessful. Voldemort’s Achilles heel was Tom Riddle. Never in Harry’s life would he have dreamed that he would get the chance to exploit that weakness. Never in his life would he have expected to actually come face-to-face with the man. Boy. Man-boy. Harry no longer knew what to think.

And then there was that other miniscule problem. What in the name of Merlin was the Slytherin password? Last time he had come here had been five years ago. Or rather, forty-eight years later. This whole time-travel rubbish was doing Harry’s head in. He shook his head roughly, scowling.

“Pure-blood,” he said – the password from his second-year. It was a long shot, and it was not astonishing that the stone wall didn’t move. “Ah, shit.”

His first night at Hogwarts (in 1944, that is), and Harry was resigned that it would be spent dozing against a wall in the corridor of the cold dungeons, praying that Peeves wouldn’t turn up and drop a bag filled with water on his head – wouldn’t be the first time. He highly doubted that Hermione would be suffering the same woes. She had it lucky – all she had to do was solve a bloody riddle to get into Ravenclaw Tower!

Harry paused.

Okay, perhaps she didn’t have it lucky.

Now, for the matter at hand. It all came down to whether he wanted to lose his dignity by
hammering on the entrance door his first night, or if he wanted to be assaulted by a mischievous poltergeist and… still lose his dignity.

Harry sighed deeply, running a hand down his face.

*I don’t really have any other option…*

This was how he found himself pounding on a stone wall for entrance to the Slytherin Common Room at eleven o’clock in the evening. Harry scowled inwardly. One week ago, if somebody had told him that this was what he would be doing in the near future, a true laugh would have been drawn from him. And how hard he would have laughed – right in that person’s face. Then he would have sent them off to meet the Giant Squid in the Black Lake.

But then again, he would have had the same reaction if somebody had told him that he would fall through the coils of time, fifty-three years into the past. So what the hell.

“Fucking Slytherins,” Harry snarled, louder than was probably necessary. Because without a doubt, there was probably a student in the common room, listening with malicious delight to the poor stranded person outside, prolonging his period of mortification. “This is fucking degrading!”

As the last word fell from Harry’s mouth, the stone wall slid open, and Harry’s head wilted in relief.

“Thank Merlin,” he said tiredly, walking in through the entranceway, barely sparing his supposed ‘saviour’ a glance. Now to figure out where his dormitory was… Merlin’s fucking left ball sack, it was one puzzle after another.

“Or you could thank me,” a velvety smooth voice suggested. “Now, your dormitory depends entirely on year group, so what might that be?”

Harry had not realised that he had spoken aloud, and turned in alarm to face the student.

If it was possible, every hair on his body stood on end when he realised exactly who he was dealing with.

Because of *course* his first interaction with Tom Marvolo Riddle had to be when he was half asleep and had absolutely no edge of wit left in his mind.

“I, um,” Harry stammered, and found himself to be subconsciously backing away from the future Dark Lord whose eyes now had a predatory glint in them. He cleared his throat. “You are, I mean, I am… what?”

Excellent. He had officially transformed into a blithering idiot in the face of a young Voldemort. The icing on a perfect day.

“Your year group,” Riddle said, and there was no trace of amusement in his expression at Harry’s antics. If anything, he looked rather concerned for his mentality.

“Ah, of course,” Harry said, finally able to reign in a few unclouded thoughts. “That would be, erm, seventh-year, I believe.”

*Seventh-year, I believe,* Harry repeated inside his head, scoffing at himself. *You absolute dunderhead.*

“You shall be sharing my own dormitory, then,” Riddle said, “along with three others who I am
“Brilliant,” Harry said, though he really couldn’t think of anything worse.

“It’s up that way,” said Riddle, pointing up towards a staircase, half veiled by a curtain of silvery silk. There was a tinge of amusement in his voice now, almost as if he could read Harry’s thoughts…

Wait a moment. A jolt of panic shivered down Harry’s spine. That would be because he could. Voldemort was a Legilimens, so who was to say that Tom Riddle wasn’t, as well? Which would explain how it was that he knew that Harry had been wondering about the location of his dormitory…

But perhaps Harry was just overthinking everything, it was impossible to know… he had to get out of there.

“I am going to retire now,” Harry heard himself saying in a raised voice as he rushed towards the staircase, half tripping over his own feet, “so good day, evening, um, night, is what I mean!” As he did so, he clumsily yanked up a shield over his mind, as he had learned to poorly do in fifth-year with Severus Snape, and vanished up the stairwell.

In doing so, he missed the way that the humour leeched out of Riddle’s eyes to be replaced by stone.

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There were five four-poster beds.

Harry blinked stupidly at their shapes. It was pitch-black, so Harry couldn’t quite make out the colourings or the set-up of the room, but briefly noted that three out of the five beds had the hangings drawn, and so were therefore preoccupied – that left two beds at Harry’s disposal.

“Eenie meenie miney mo,” Harry murmured to himself, only half functioning properly after the day’s crimes. He was not cut out for a feud with Malfoy, the return of Dumbledore and an encounter with Tom Riddle all in one day. Not even to mention boarding with his mortal nemeses…

“Ah, whatever,” Harry said aloud, scrambling over to the nearest unoccupied bed and tripping onto the mattress. He shed his blazer, tie, jumper and shoes in a pile at the end of the bed and pulled the hangings around it to shield himself from prying eyes, before stripping off his school shirt, wishing that he had his pyjamas on him. Anything other than this mouse costume…

‘Mouse costume’ was the last thing he thought before he conked out, sprawled on his stomach with his face buried in the pillow.

He dreamed of the graveyard again. Not that that was an uncommon occurrence. Of late, he always experienced both nightmares and night terrors. It was by dark that Harry heard the long-ago voices of his mother and father, and remembered the starkness of the colour of viridescence. It was by dark that he once again witnessed Cedric’s body being swathed in green light, and gazed down into glazed, blank eyes. It was by dark that he watched, the world around him frozen in time, as Sirius slumped backwards into a misty veil, never again to reappear. And it was also by dark that he revisited the moment that Dumbledore fell, little more than a limp rag doll, cloaked in death.

Tonight was different, though. Perhaps it was because ‘mouse costume’ had been his final thought.
He saw Lord Voldemort rising from the ashes of his and Wormtail’s blood, though this time he had a pair of round, fluffy grey ears.

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“What an idiot,” Mulciber said, sidling up to stand next to Tom. Both mirrored one another’s stance, with their shoulders squared and their arms folded across their chests. Twin terrors. “How long has he been like that?”

“All night,” Tom responded, his tone bordering on dry. “As one might expect.”

Both stared at the snoozing body a few moments longer.

Delacour was a real mess, Tom thought. Upon throwing upon the bed hangings, it became evident that the newcomer had shed most of his uniform and left it in a wrinkled pile at the end of the bed, and slept on top of the sheets, sprawled on his belly – the lazy, effortless position paralleled that of a leopard, lazing on a branch with not a care in the world.

Tom abruptly drew his wand, flicking them at the curtains around the dormitory. The sheets drew back, allowing light to flow inwards, turned slightly green by its being filtered through the water of the Black Lake. Immediately, the colouring of Delacour’s slightly tan skin came into far more prominence, as did the lean muscle on his rather diminutive frame.

Definitely a Quidditch player, Tom supposed. A Chaser or Seeker. For such a slender build, he doubted that Delacour was a Beater or even a Keeper (though, just from simply looking at Delacour’s naked back, Tom thought that he was a keeper in his own right. Not that he would admit that fact aloud).

Tearing his eyes away from the young Frenchman, he watched as the splashing light began to rouse Nott and Lestrange from their sleep.

Nott was the first to stumble from bed, scrubbing his eyes sleepily and yawning widely.

“Oh, the joys of the first day of the last year,” he muttered. “You actually kept me awake most of the night, Riddle, what with all that whining and whimpering…”

Tom stared coolly at his dorm mate.

“How interesting, as I didn’t even sleep in this room last night,” he said. “I was distracted elsewhere, and when I finally came up here, I found that my bed had already been occupied in my absence.”

Nott’s eyes lit on Tom’s bed, and widened when they absorbed that Delacour was asleep there.

“It would be more prudent,” Tom continued, “if you gathered your facts first, before making accusations, or you may find yourself in deep trouble someday.”

Nott looked concerned by what was seemingly a threat, but Tom couldn’t help it if the wording which fell from his mouth naturally sounded like a threat. As a matter of fact, he couldn’t care less if it sounded like a threat or not, because he was too busy pondering the fact that Delacour had been “whining and whimpering” the night before. Was the transfer student plagued by nightmares, perhaps? And if he was, what exactly was the content of those nightmares?

“Seems that our new friend may be suffering from bad dreams,” Tom said aloud. Mulciber gave a laugh of derision.
“Or maybe he was just wanking off,” he said.

The thought of Delacour wanking off in Tom’s bed didn’t disturb Tom as much as it should have. In fact, a very graphic image of the scene was beginning to form in his head… but now was not the time for thinking of that. Though it was very difficult to not while staring at Delacour’s half-naked form.

Tom cleared his throat, tearing his eyes away to direct them on Mulciber.

“Nonsense,” he said briskly.

“What’s nonsense?” Lestrange groaned, heaving himself out of bed, his usually tidy russet waves of hair forming a bird’s nest around his head. He continued sleepily, “And while I’m at it, why are you all so loud? For Salazar’s sake, let me have my beauty sleep… this face doesn’t come naturally, you know…”

“What comes naturally is your hideousness, though, right?” Mulciber snapped at Lestrange, who rapidly became lucid in half a second flat, straightening his back, pulling his lips back from his teeth and hissing like a wild cat at the offender.

“Just shut up, would you lot?” Tom told them. “We have a problem to deal with, remember?”

It worked like a charm. The argument ceased and Lestrange’s eyes finally found the source of the problem. His mouth dropped open, as though his jaw was unhinged.

“Fucking shit,” he said. “What the fuck is Delacour doing in your bed, Riddle?” He paused, apparently noting Delacour’s bare skin, and then unleashed a strangled laugh.

“Here we go,” Nott mumbled.

“Tom. Marvolo. Riddle,” said Lestrange, choking on a giggle. “You realise that that bet from last night was between Caspian and I, and had nothing to do with you?”

By Tom’s side, Mulciber sounded as if he was being smothered by a Niffler.

“Merlin, now you’ve ruined my chances,” Lestrange continued, suddenly sounding far soberer and a fair bit more concerned as he began talking to himself. “It would have been easier for me to sleep with the Slytherin Delacour, not the Ravenclaw one… But what’s the likelihood that he’ll sleep with two dorm mates on a whim? I refuse to hand over twenty galleons to Caspian Rosier without a fight, so I suppose that I’ll just have to make myself more irresistible than usual…”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Tom snarled. “I did not sleep with Harry Delacour.”

“Oh, didn’t you?” Lestrange’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline. “Well, my chances are ripe again, then.” He let out a cheerful hum.

“Just stop talking, Peregrine,” Nott sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Internally, Tom also sighed. Slytherins were always two-sided. On the outside, when forming a united force against the other three houses who held such a grudge against them, they were cool, collected and poised. Within the privacy of their dormitories, they were as shamelessly boisterous as the stereotypical Gryffindor. Tom, in no world, would ever prefer the latter of the two sides.

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Harry’s consciousness began surfacing when voices started invading his sleep.

“Ugh, shut up, Ron,” he mumbled, pushing himself up onto his elbows and flailing around for his glasses as he cautiously peeked his eyes open against the morning light.

“Who the bloody hell is Ron?” somebody whispered, and immediately Harry remembered exactly where he was.

Slowly and carefully, as if afraid of someone lunging and attacking him if he moved too quickly, Harry pivoted to face the voice.

Voices. More than one. As a matter of fact, there were four of them, staring at him. The one who he recalled as introducing himself as Francis Nott looked exceptionally nervous, the one who Nott had addressed as Lestrange at dinner last night appeared to be bottling up a strong wave of glee. Harry didn’t recognize the third, whose skin was the colour of caramel, contrasting starkly against eyes as silvery as the scales on a fish.

And of course there had to be Tom Riddle, watching Harry as if he could see his very soul. His face still and deadly and so damn handsome that it wasn’t fair.

It was then that Harry realised that he was half-naked, which did nothing to improve his overly alarmed mind set. What was said next only succeeded in setting his anxiety into overdrive.

“That’s Riddle’s bed your sleeping in,” said Lestrange, eyes shining like blackberries.

“Shit,” Harry said, then remembered that he still had to refresh his voice charm. He repeated, in a louder voice, “Shit!” before grabbing his clothing from the foot of the bed, jumping to his feet and plunging past the lot of them out the door.

“Was it something that I said?” he heard Lestrange saying as he took the stairs three at a time before landing in the common room and unleashed a deep breath of relieved air.

“Put some clothes on, mate,” said a boy who had the same pug-nose as Pansy Parkinson. “I don’t know how things at Beauxbatons work, but here, some of us like to preserve our modesty.”

“Oh, hush, Edwin,” piped up another voice. Harry whipped around to see a rather pretty girl with long, blonde tresses approaching him. Edwin rolled his eyes at Harry, who was currently self-consciously freeing his shirt from his uniform bundle. He caught sight of the girl shooting a glare at Edwin, before batting her eyelashes at Harry. “Some of us rather enjoy the male anatomy. I’m Margot Greengrass, and you must be the transfer student.”

“Er, yes,” Harry said, and could have fainted for the relief that he felt when he noticed that his voice charm had not yet faded. He cleared his voice. “Harry Delacour. Just call me Harry.”

Margot Greengrass beamed at him, her eyes finally finding his face after raking over his body.

“You can call me Margot, then,” said the Slytherin girl.

“But before you do that,” snapped Edwin, “put a bloody shirt on.”

“Yes, thank you for that,” Harry snapped back, managing to pull the shirt on one-handedly, pretending not to notice Margot’s disappointment. Her disposition quickly became sunny again.

“I’m sorry about him,” she said as Edwin finally moved away. “He’s the heir of the Parkinson family. Very stuck up about it, too.”
He couldn’t really care less about pure-blood family politics, nor was he keen to maintain conversation, but he decided that he might as well, lest the whole house begin to hate him.

“And are you the heir to your own family?” he asked absently.

“No, my older brother is,” said Margot. “He graduated from Hogwarts two years ago. Say, you wouldn’t happen to be in sixth-year, would you?”

“Seventh, actually,” Harry said.

“Oh,” said Margot. She then quirked her eyebrows at him. “That girl who came with you… is she your sister? You share the same surname, don’t you?”

“Cousin, actually,” Harry said, then added, “but we’re close enough to be siblings.”

“Well, it must be difficult for you two to have been separated by the sorting,” Margot said, practically simpering. “If you want, I could keep you company in Slytherin…”

She reached out and took Harry’s hand. Harry’s gaze zeroed in on her fingers wrapped around his wrist, and stared at it blankly for a moment, when another hand suddenly landed on his shoulder, making him jump sky-high.

“Excuse me, Miss Greengrass,” a silky voice said from behind Harry’s shoulder, causing him to stiffen, “but I really must be taking Mr Delacour away from you at this moment.”

Margot’s face transformed from coquettish to cold immediately.

“Hello, Riddle,” she said, her voice like stone and her bright hazel eyes like chips of ice. Up to that point, Harry had been wondering if he had somehow wandered out of the Slytherin common room to another, as this girl had seemed as un-Slytherin-like as you could get, but suddenly he had no doubts about where he was standing.

“Move away, Greengrass,” said the voice which Harry now recognized to be Lestrange’s. “Don’t fiddle with the seventh-years’ possessions, alright?”

“Possessions?” the word burst out of Harry’s mouth before he could stop it. He wrenched himself out of the grip on his shoulder and whirled around to face Tom Riddle and his other dorm mates, all of whom stood shoulder to shoulder. “Where the hell did you get the idea that I’m your possession?”

“Sit down before you hurt yourself, Peregrine,” said Margot primly. “Come now, Harry. Shall we go to breakfast?”

“Harry,” said Tom Riddle, his face like a mask, “will not be escorting you to breakfast.”

“You seem so sure of yourself,” countered Margot. “But I highly doubt that Harry wishes to group up with you lot.”

The other Slytherins, who were passing through the common room on their way to the Great Hall, were beginning to pause in their tracks to watch the scene.

Why me? Harry lamented inwardly. It seemed that he was stuck in a rut between two very territorial people.

“Come, Harry,” said Tom, and his dark eyes were alight with warning. Nott, Lestrange, and the
one with the silvery eyes all watched him expectantly. But Harry did not like being summoned. He was nobody’s pet. There was a reason that his Patronus was a stag, not a puppy.

He did what was quite possibly the stupidest thing that Harry Potter had ever done, which was really saying something, as Harry Potter had done a great many stupid things in his time. He turned his back on Tom Marvolo Riddle and smiled at Margot Greengrass.

“Shall we go?” he asked, and the two shared a smirk as if they were both in on some hilarious joke. And they were. They had both just won something over the Heir of Slytherin.

“Let’s,” said Margot, and the two walked away, the students around them parting to clear a pathway in absolute silence. Because nobody dared walk away from the future Dark Lord.

For a split second, Harry thought of what Hermione would say when she learned of what he had just done. Perhaps he had just blown his chance at ever helping Tom Riddle to find peace with the world so that Lord Voldemort would never come to be. But for maybe the first time in his life, Harry pushed what others referred to as his ‘hero complex’ to the back of his mind and squared his shoulders against the tidings.

Margot added, “You should at least put your tie on, though.”

“Well,” Harry said loudly, “any self-respecting Slytherin would, so I might as well, since I am.”

Chapter End Notes

I can tell I’m gonna have a lot of fun with Margot Greengrass… And I’m sorry that an exhausted, irritable Harry swears a lot. He is just so angsty… it’s so fun to write! Also, To Kill a Mockingbird quote incorporated!! Did anybody manage to spot it? Harper Lee may take full credit for the phrase.

XblackcatwidowX
“What did you do?” she asked, then, “No wait, let me guess. Did you make enemies with a first year Slytherin?”

“No,” said Harry, his voice meek in his own ears, and he glanced sideways at a wall which he suddenly found very interesting to examine. “But perhaps with Tom Riddle.”

It became apparent within the first five minutes of having a proper, civil conversation with Margot Greengrass (‘proper, civil conversation’ meaning that there was absolutely zero ogling on Margot’s part) that she and Harry both shared a strong dislike for the Slytherin Head Boy. This did not necessarily mean that Harry became her biggest fan instantly, but he could say easily enough that she had just become his first ally.

After exiting the common room, Harry had ducked down by a stone gargoyle to pull his shoes on and lace them up all the while Margot nattered in his ear.

“You cannot imagine the relief that I felt when I saw that you didn’t plan on licking Riddle’s boots,” she said. “Sadly, I cannot say the same about many of our housemates. One would think that they had ever seen an incredibly intelligent, handsome, talented, debonair young man before.”

Harry had sputtered and stood from lacing his shoes, opening his mouth to point at that they probably hadn’t, but the other had started up again already.

“He isn’t even that brilliant,” Margot ranted. “He may try to appear gentlemanly to outsiders, but I personally believe that he has the manners of a troll.”

“Well,” said Harry, struggling to curb his tongue before he could launch into a full-blown diatribe about exactly ‘what he thought’ about Tom Marvolo Riddle. “He is very manipulative…”

Margot had immediately hushed Harry, looking at him adoringly as if he were some naïve child.

“Of course he’s manipulative,” she sighed, “and I do wish that he wasn’t, because with him being so, I can’t help but feel admiration for him. Not that I would tell him this, but to match his level of cunning is my holy grail. But let us keep that little fact a secret between us.”

Harry, who had been gaping at her as they rounded a corner in the corridor, very nearly face-planted into a suit of armour.

*Why am I not surprised to hear that,* he asked himself darkly.
“Better you than me,” he had managed to say weakly, before asking, “Exactly why do you dislike Riddle so much, might I ask?”

“I may be one year his junior,” said Margot, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial level, “but that doesn’t mean that I didn’t know him when he was still at the bottom of the food chain.”

“The bottom of the food chain?” Harry thought that to be improbable. Through the memories in the Pensieve that Dumbledore had shown Harry back in sixth-year, it had been evident that even back at Wool’s Orphanage, Tom Riddle had been anything but at the bottom. He seemed to have a natural talent of migrating to the top effortlessly with his silver tongue.

“Yes,” Margot said, and smiled widely then, displaying rows of immaculately straight white teeth. She sighed contentedly. “Those were the good days, back when nobody adored him. Back when I was reigning Slytherin Queen, and he was just some unknown Muggle-born student who happened to be rather gifted at everything that he did. Of course, after a few years, we all discovered that he isn’t even Muggle-born – he’s Salazar Slytherin’s own descendent, and a brilliant one at that.”

“Of course he is,” Harry muttered, running a hand down his face. How was it that he and Hermione had figured that they could get inside Tom Riddle’s head exactly? Being a magical prodigy and all, the concept was sounding more and more unlikely to Harry by the second.

Margot suddenly giggled, though it came out sounding less like a child than a scheming evil mastermind.

“Well, he isn’t brilliant at everything he does,” she drawled as they entered the Great Hall. The four house tables were still set up, though this morning they were laden with dishes of eggs, toast, sausages and kippers for breakfast. It seemed that Harry and Margot were among roughly the first half of the Hogwarts population to have left their dormitories.

“Obviously he isn’t,” Harry responded shortly, very nearly walking to the Gryffindor table before he remembered himself and headed for the half-empty Slytherin one. He tried to inconspicuously steer Margot to the very end of the table where they could sit in a bubble of isolation. He sat down.

“Riddle isn’t very brilliant at being a decent person, now is he?”

“Other than that,” Margot agreed, sitting down also, seemingly content with their position at the house table. She began putting together a plate of food. “He is also atrocious at Quidditch. Walburga Black told me that when Riddle was in first-year, she had been walking past their first broomstick-riding lesson and witnessed Riddle’s own broomstick crack him across the face and break his nose!”

Harry dropped the sausage which he had been picking out from the platter.

“It what now?”

“It must have been first-class entertainment,” sighed Margot, gazing wistfully into her goblet as she took a sip. “If only I had been there…”

Harry suddenly wondered if this was the reason that Voldemort didn’t have a nose.

No, he told himself fiercely, shaking his head. *He doesn’t have a nose because snakes don’t have noses, and Voldemort is nothing if not a snake.*

He instead focused on another aspect of what he had just been told.
“Did you say that Walburga Black told you?” he asked. Hadn’t Walburga Black been Sirius’s mother?

“Yes,” Margot asserted. “She was in the same year as my brother, you won’t be seeing her at Hogwarts this year. She is also betrothed to her second-cousin, Orion Black. He’s in fourth-year right now.” Her voice dropped to a dead whisper. “You’re from France, so you probably wouldn’t know, but the Blacks are all dotty. Brilliant, but completely off their rocker. There’s a lot of incest in their family, they’re so desperate to keep their bloodline pure.”

“Inbreeding is probably the reason they’re all like that, then,” said Harry, unable to keep the pure loathing from his voice as memories swamped his mind. The glimpse of deeply hooded eyes, alight with feral wildness. A shadowy figure cackling in mad glee as Sirius slumped backwards into the veil. The looming darkness which was a tidal wave, threatening to overwhelm Harry at the sight. The sensation of his entire heart shattering. And then his own voice. Screaming the Crucius Curse at Sirius’s killer, because when you are in such close proximity to a person who radiates that much corruption and sin, how could it not begin to stain your own soul?

A shiver ran up Harry’s spine, completely unwelcome.

Margot paused in her eating, looking slightly surprised by the depth of animosity in Harry’s voice. A depth which sang that there were old scars there.

“Well, the Blacks must be doing something right,” she said, “as they have perhaps the cleanest bloodline of all the Sacred Twenty-Eight.”

_Cleanest_, Harry thought. Why should he have expected a Greengrass to be any different from the rest of the ‘pure-blood nobility’?

“Right,” he heard himself saying bitterly, glancing over his shoulders towards the Great Hall entrance doors, and then saw Hermione walking through them a few Ravenclaws with her, engrossed in a conversation about some academic subject or other, probably (Merlin help them all, now that she was going to be living among Ravenclaws). Harry stood up abruptly. “Sorry, but I need to speak to my… cousin.”

“Of course,” Margot said mildly, tapping the stem of her goblet, having caught no whiff of his change in mood. “Slughorn – Head of Slytherin, mind you – will be handing out our timetables soon, so don’t run away just yet.”

“Fine,” Harry said, beginning to approach Hermione, when his steps faltered halfway down the path. Riddle and his crew of seventh-years had just entered the hall as well, not five metres behind Hermione.

Refusing to back down now, not after he had so openly opposed the King of Slytherin, Harry lifted his chin higher and opted to refuse to look at his new housemates. Probably a wise decision, because he almost definitely would have cowered if he met Riddle’s eye and saw the unadulterated fury overflowing in them.

Completely aware that he was nearing the Slytherins – closer, closer, closer – he stopped suddenly in his tracks and said loudly to catch her attention, “I need to speak with you, Hermione.”

Hermione, who had been mid-chatter with a Ravenclaw boy, paused, having just noticed Harry’s advances. She caught Harry’s eye flicking over her shoulder and surreptitiously glanced over it herself. Upon catching sight of Riddle, her eyes widened slightly and she said to the boy who she had previously been speaking to, “Could we finish this conversation later? I’m sorry, it’s awfully
rude of me, but…”

“No,” the boy said quickly, tossing Harry a suspicious look. “It’s not rude at all… I’ll see you later, Hermione.”

His manner was bordering on reluctant as he moved on with the rest of the Ravenclaws, though Harry didn’t miss the yearning glance he threw over his shoulder at Hermione as he left. Hermione immediately grabbed Harry’s arm and steered him out of the pathway which students were walking down, both still avoiding looking in Riddle’s direction as he and his cronies settled down at the Slytherin table. Harry was certain that he could feel a sweltering gaze on the back of his neck.

“Your new friend couldn’t be any more obvious,” Harry informed his companion, doing his best to ignore the sensation of Riddle’s gaze on him, “than if his eyes began pulsing love hearts.”

“Oh, shush,” Hermione said, “that’s just Rowan Poole.”

Just. Harry immediately felt pity for the boy who had absolutely no chance.

Hermione, meanwhile, looked not in the least bit embarrassed (as Harry had hoped that she would), but instead slightly exasperated. It took a lot more than that to fluster Hermione Granger.

“He’s also Muggle-born,” she continued, “and we were having a most enlightening conversation about the North American wizarding community. Rowan spent last year as a scholarship transfer student at Ilvermorny in Massachusetts, rather like ourselves here at Hogwarts.” Here, she and Harry exchanged private smiles. “Anyway, I’ve read all about Ilvermorny, it would be simply fascinating to be given the opportunity to spend an entire year there. I heard that they offer Xylomancy as an extra-curricular subject…”

“What’s Xylomancy?” asked Harry.

“A form of divination, using twigs.” Hermione paused, her face slightly abashed as if her mouth had gotten away from her. “Not that I would ever consider taking that class, we both know that Divination is a load of tripe.”

“Sure, ‘Mione,” Harry said. He then went to manoeuvre the conversation down the track that he thought was slightly more consequential than Xylomancy, but that girl was always quicker to talk than he was.

“Then Rowan was telling me about how America’s equivalent of Ollivander as a wandmaker is a witch named Violetta Beauvais, who is notorious for producing wands with a core of rougarou hair. All her wands also have a natural affinity for Dark magic, which I find interesting. I mean, where does that affinity stem from? From the core? Does the rougarou’s characteristics somehow transfer into the wand with its fur or–”

“Look,” Harry interrupted. “This is all very interesting and all, but I have something quite important to tell you.” As he spoke, he flapped his tie, jumper and blazer about, which successfully drew Hermione out of her prattling when she finally realised his state of attire.

“Harry,” she said crossly. “What on earth are you doing, waving those around? That’s a blazer, not a handbag, you do realise.”

“I do realise, yes,” Harry replied sharply, then blushed. “Not that I carry handbags around or anything–”

“Oh, don’t lose your head about it,” Hermione said, her tone half-amused and half-annoyed as
she snatched the green-and-silver tie from Harry’s the pile and straightened it out under Harry’s collar, beginning to loop the ends together. Her expression was only slightly irked when she added, “Was last night that bad that you’re now a complete mess this morning?”

“I’m not a complete mess,” Harry grumbled, though allowed her to straighten his tie out before she stepped away, evaluating him from his shoes to his hair.

“Let’s see,” she said sarcastically, eyes settling on his wrinkled shirt. “You really are.”

Harry glanced down at his shirt himself, then back up to Hermione as she whipped out her wand, directing it at his shirt and recited, “Tersus.”

The wrinkles immediately cleared, giving the impression that it had just been freshly ironed.

“Um, thank you,” Harry said, tugging on his jumper and blazer and suddenly refusing to meet Hermione’s eye. “Anyway, what I’ve got to tell you, ahem, you might not be entirely happy about.”

Hermione expelled a loud sigh, pressed her hand to her forehead as if to prepare herself.

“What did you do?” she asked, then, “No wait, let me guess. Did you make enemies with a first-year Slytherin?”

“No,” said Harry, his voice meek in his own ears, and he glanced sideways at a wall which he suddenly found very interesting to examine. “But perhaps with Tom Riddle.”

There was a stretch of silence so long that Harry thought for a moment that Hermione had turned her back and walked away, infinitely done with him (which he probably would have been, had he been in her shoes), but when he risked a glance at her, he was astonished to see that she was positively beaming.

“Um,” he said, breaking the silence. “Did I say something funny?”

“Yes,” replied Hermione bluntly, still glowing with what looked to be barely concealed pride.

“That wasn’t a joke, you realise,” said Harry.

“Oh, I know,” said his apparently muddled friend. “It’s just… that may be the smartest thing that you have ever done.”

“Smart,” Harry mouthed, then dropped his voice to a whisper and hissed, “I thought that you would be screaming your head off at me by now!”

“I’m not a banshee, Harry,” Hermione hissed back, “and I want you to tell me exactly what you did, right now!”

“Could you possibly please refresh my voice charm first,” Harry said, “because I was woken up under unexpected conditions and didn’t get a chance to.”

Hermione thankfully refrained from rolling her eyes, and shot a few glances around to ensure that nobody with watching closely, before flicking her wand and whispering, “Francorum Vox,” at Harry, who felt his throat constricting for a moment.

“Alright,” Harry said, lifting his voice to a normal volume again, “You may feel the need to cringe during this story, but if you could withhold from doing so, it would be greatly appreciated. The memory of it has made me cringe enough myself.”
“Excellent,” said Hermione, then dragged him over to the Ravenclaw table. “While you tell me, I’m going to eat.” She gave Harry a look. “I’m taking a note out of Ron’s book, as you can tell.”

Harry grimaced.

“I get the feeling that you may need lots and lots of porridge for this, Hermione. Lots and lots.”

***

The fork bent in Tom’s fist.

He dropped his eyes away from Delacour and his sister, and down onto the piece of cutlery, blinking at it in mild surprise when he noted that it now resembled more a ‘V’ than a lowercase ‘L’ as it had before.

Gently, as if he were lowering a sleeping babe into its cradle, he placed the fork onto the table, ignoring the way that Mulciber, Nott and Lestrange’s eyes all followed the descent of the mangled object, before snapping back to his face again.

They were waiting for the storm to hit.

Tom, too, was waiting for the storm to hit, because he had not been angered like this in such a long time. He would not stand for being humiliated by little girls and specky French students who did not know their rightful places.

But Tom would not do anything brash, he would not do anything brazen. He would not be the vindictive roll of thunder on the horizon, the howl of the hurricane or the strike of lightning as swift as a serpent. No, he would instead be found within the aftermath – within the toppled trees, the ravelled roots, the shards of broken homes and the cracked picture frames, buried beneath the rubble.

He would make Harry Delacour crawl to him on his hands and knees and beg for forgiveness. Greengrass he couldn’t care less about, Tom did not bother himself with insignificant pawns on the chessboard. But Delacour…

A tiny smirk lifted the corner of his mouth, and each in turn, he met first Nott’s eye, then Lestrange’s, and finally Mulciber’s. Both Nott and Lestrange dropped their gaze on cue, but Mulciber held Tom’s for a little longer, before those strange silver eyes looked away.

Pleased, Tom steepled his fingers together and lightly rested his chin on them, glancing around at the three conquered souls before him.

“Come now, friends,” he said, his voice like a creeping shadow. “None of you have had a bite of food since we sat down.” He refrained from adding that they had apparently been too busy staring at him as if he were a ghost.

“Ah, yes,” said Lestrange quickly, lying through his teeth as he reached for the toast. “Mighty good point you make there, Riddle. Don’t know what got into my head just then.”

“That is a complete red herring, Peregrine,” observed Nott dryly, “as there is absolutely nothing within that head of yours at all.”

Lestrange retaliated sharply, but Mulciber was not lured back into a false sense of normality so easily.
“What are you planning, Riddle?” he asked, a frown set deep within the lines of his face, when Avery, Dolohov and Rosier chose that moment to join the cheerful gathering.

“That comment would have usually set Tom’s circle off, but only Avery and Dolohov gave sniggers, which were abruptly stifled when they registered that the mood was not quite right.

Tom saw the exact moment that the three sixth-years noticed the bent fork on the table. He recognized that bruised look in their eyes.

“Not yet,” he said, allowing a small smile to curve the corners of his lips. “Not Dumbledore’s. But perhaps the assassination of Harry Delacour would be more fitting.”

Dolohov dropped into a seat quicker than a snitch could zip past your face, delirium shining out from his face.

“Let’s hear it, then,” he said.

Tom allowed his eyes to wander over to the offender, now having his tie done up by his sister, for a split second. A person did not simply challenge the Heir of Slytherin when they were incapable of knotting their own tie, he thought. Delacour would be easier to finish off than he had first assumed.

“Well,” said Tom, and he told them.

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“Am I doomed?” asked Harry miserably, eyebrows crinkled together as he confided in Hermione. She merely smiled in a most un-Hermione-like way.

“Yes,” she said. “You’re doomed. But luckily for you, I have always been good at handling crises.”

Chapter End Notes

Whoa, okay. This somehow just became a proxy war between Tom and Hermione. Meh. `_/\`

Hope you’re enjoying! My updates will probably become less regular as my homework load becomes heavy, so sorry about that.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

“I know,” Prewett finally said. “And we all wonder how it is that you and your sister ended up in the houses which you did.”

“What do you mean?” Harry was immediately on the defensive.

“There’s something about you both,” Prewett remarked. “Something about you which is distinctly Gryffindor.”

Chapter Notes

Rightio, off we go again. Thank you all so much for everything, you guys are the real powerhouse behind this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was most strange, Harry thought, to have Horace Slughorn not give too much of a damn about who Harry was (word of significance here: ‘too’).

He barely paid any attention to the professor after Margot had beckoned him back over to the Slytherin table furiously for his timetable (“Brown-nose Slughorn as much as possible, Harry!”) because his mind was too busy turning over why in Merlin’s name Hermione believed that it had been ‘smart’ of him to enrage Tom Riddle.

“Mr. Delacour,” Slughorn boomed as soon as Harry plopped back down into his seat by Margot, his voice signalling the attention of all students within a five-metre radius.

Harry passed a look over towards the professors’ table up at the front of the Great Hall, and, to his greatest dismay, saw the Potions professor waddling down towards him. He looked exactly as he had in the memory which Dumbledore had shown Harry. Straw-blonde hair, with a great walrus-like moustache covering half of his face.

Harry resisted the urge to sink down lower into his seat.

“Uh, hello, sir,” he mumbled, earning a puzzled glance from Margot as she sat up so straight that Harry was sure that she must have had a stick shoved up her backside.

“It is lovely to see you again, Professor Slughorn,” she said, and if her voice was visible, Harry was certain that it would have been glimmering with moonbeams and threaded with twinkling stars. “Did you have a restful holiday?”

“Ahh, Miss Greengrass,” said Slughorn, beaming at her. “Why yes, it was most restful. In fact, I received some crystallised pineapple from our good friend Tom over there.” With his hand, he gestured towards Riddle who Harry could see was busy looking innocent (which he was anything
but), and immediately Margot’s disposition became mutinous.

“How kind of him,” she said sweetly, though Harry could hear the grating of gritted teeth. Slughorn didn’t notice.

Slughorn never noticed.

“On other matters, how is your dear father?” he asked, and Margot immediately perked up.

“Yes, well, as Head of the Department of Mysteries,” Margot said, putting extra emphasis on the title (it seemed to Harry that she was set on pitting herself against Riddle, if not by her own achievements), “things have been very busy for him, but I’m afraid that I can’t inform you of any of the happenings, as such affairs are highly confidential.”

“Yes, of course,” concurred Slughorn jovially, then took out his wand and gave it a little wave. A sheet of parchment came soaring over to Margot from a stack which had been hovering behind him. “I see that you will be taking Potions as a N.E.W.Ts subject, I’m looking very much forward to teaching you. I saw that you achieved an O in your Potions O.W.L., very well done indeed…”

“Thank you, sir,” Margot preened, taking the sheet which had her timetable scrawled down on it. “Though credit must go to the incredible teacher.”

“Oh, you do so make this old man blush,” said Slughorn, chuckling. Harry, by Margot’s side, struggled to swallow his laughter and jigged his leg as if that would help speed time up.

“Now, Mr. Delacour!” Slughorn turned away from Margot and back to his original target. “My dear boy… may I call you Harry? Excellent. Firstly, congratulations on making Slytherin! This house is, in my most humble opinion, the most noble of the four.”

“Well, we’re all entitled to our own opinion,” Harry murmured, quietly enough that nobody else could hear him.

“I’m looking forward to seeing what skills you have brought into the house,” Slughorn waffled on. He winked and tapped the side of his nose. “Any talents hidden up that sleeve of yours?”

“I’m an open book,” said Harry mildly. “What you see is what you get.”

Margot snorted into the timetable which she had been carefully scrutinising. Slughorn, on the other hand, took Harry’s words to heart and methodically evaluated him, from the tip of his shoes to the scar on his forehead.

Finally, the professor said, “Yes, well, I hope you’re correct, Harry, m’boy,” which came as much of a surprise to Harry.

“Now, your timetable is here,” Slughorn went on as another slip of parchment flew over his shoulder and began its descent in landing in front of Harry. Harry quickly snatched it up before it could settle down in a porridge dish and scanned over his classes.

Transfiguration with Dumbledore, Charms with Flitwick (Harry had failed to notice Flitwick at the table the night before, though the appearance of the name came as a pleasant surprise), Potions with Slughorn, Defence Against the Dark Arts with Merrythought, and Herbology with Beery. Harry wasn’t entirely sure how he had ended up with the exact subjects that he had been studying at future Hogwarts for N.E.W.Ts, so he just supposed that the magic behind the timetables knew somehow – it was magic, after all.
Upon checking the day (Thursday), he saw that he would be taking Potions first.

“Oh, lucky you!” said Slughorn in Harry’s ear, and Harry jumped – the professor had been reading the timetable over Harry’s shoulder. “You have Potions class with me! Must be quite talented in that area if you managed it as a N.E.W.Ts class, eh?”

“Not really, sir,” Harry said honestly, recalling every disaster which had taken place in the Dungeons classroom.

“No need to be modest,” Slughorn chuckled, beginning to waddle on to the next Slytherin students.

“Oh no,” said Harry, turning to Margot. “He thinks I’m being modest, and I most certainly am not.”

Brilliant. Already one professor with high expectations.

Margot took no notice of Harry’s woes, however. Upon looking at her face, Harry saw that she was staring furiously at her timetable, blind to the words printed on it.

“Tom Riddle is always going to come out on top, isn’t he?” she snarled, crushing the parchment in her fist. “Even when it’s me, a Greengrass, who Slughorn is speaking to, Riddle is always in the back of his mind! Will the humiliation never end? I am so sick of being overlooked all the time, of always being in somebody else’s shadow! At home it’s Rafferty, at school it’s Riddle…”

Harry could do little more than assume that Rafferty was this brother that she had spoken of several times. Unsure of what to say, he weakly joked, “And here I was, thinking that you just liked Slughorn for being… so… amazing…”

“Me,” barked Margot, “like Slughorn? Don’t be ridiculous! I don’t believe that there’s a single person here who likes that toddling walrus! All I’m trying to do is get invited into Slug Club to prove that I’m capable of it!”

“Ah,” said Harry, and thought, ouch. It was probably the first time that he had felt sorry for Horace Slughorn. He was saved from having to awkwardly attempt to initiate conversation again when Margot stood up abruptly, dropping the remainder of her timetable (now in a crinkled heap) on the table.

“I’m going to class,” she said stonily.

“Your, um–” Harry began, gesturing to the mess of parchment that she had left behind.

“I’ve memorised it,” was the short response, and right before she stormed out of the Great Hall, she wandlessly set the parchment ball on fire. Harry watched it smoulder, collapsing into shards of ash, before blinking after the sixth-year, wondering what the hell he should do now. It felt an awful lot like he stood alone.

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“That,” announced Dolohov, “is not an assassination attempt, Riddle.”

There were murmurs of agreement from the other five, but none of their hearts were truly into it. Tom doubted that any of them yet had it in them to commit a proper murder. Naturally, they had heard of what had occurred with Myrtle Warren and the Basilisk the previous year, but the girl’s death had truly been an accident. Tom had not admitted to this, though. Rather than squandering
the Muggle-born’s death, he had instead used it as his first step in his master plan for gaining immortality. Myrtle Warren had been the victim of Tom’s very first Horcrux – his old diary. None but Mulciber knew of this step which Tom had taken, but Tom knew that Mulciber would not share, not if he cared about keeping his manhood attached to his person.

No, the lesson on killing was a matter to be attended to another day. For the time being, Tom’s priorities were preoccupied elsewhere.

“I admit to our task not truly being an assassination,” he said, his tone as slow and measured as person dancing over hot coals. “I know how much you hunger for such things, but a lesson learnt well is that death is too quick and painless a fate for some people. Despite all that you may have been told,” Tom smiled sharply here, “sometimes it is best to play with your food.”

There was a small silence as everybody considered Tom’s words, turning them over in their heads as if each letter spoken aloud was a small jewel to be savoured.

Tom enjoyed this. The reverence. Unfortunately, he had to cut it short.

“You had all best be going to class, now,” he said in dismissal, rising to his feet. “We wouldn’t want any of you to be late and mar Slytherin’s image, would you?”

“We would never,” Avery drawled, saluting Tom as he and the other sixth-years meandered out of the Great Hall, whose numbers were rapidly dwindling. Tom watched as immediately the three ducked their heads together, already in discussion of Tom’s plan to make Delacour’s life miserable.

Let them talk.

“I thought,” said Nott, “that you wanted none of us to offend Delacour, until you had decided that he was of no use to you. How could you have possibly come to a decision in less than a day?”

“Oh, I haven’t yet come to a decision,” Tom replied coolly as they all made their way towards the dungeons for Potions. “But Delacour has offended me, and I can’t leave that alone.”

“Obviously,” Lestrange said, nodding his head fervently and shooting a glare over at Nott as if it were a crime to question Tom in any way. Which it would be, if Tom had his way in the end.

There would be no more talk of Harry Delacour, though Tom found himself curious as to where the newcomer would situate himself now. Would he attempt to cuddle up to the other houses when Slytherin rejected him (which would go appallingly, Tom thought, with great amusement), or would he immediately try to curry favour with Tom once he realised what a mistake it was to challenge the reigning king? Either way, it would be terribly funny.

Pausing outside the Potions classroom, Tom pulled his three companions aside, ignoring the curious glances from other students flowing into the classroom.

“Now, I need not remind you all to be on best behaviour,” he said. “I expect for you all to take up residence in our dear professor’s elite club again. It wouldn’t do for anybody to believe us to be anything less than perfect, now would it?”

“Do you doubt us, Riddle?” asked Lestrange, a faint sneer on his mouth. “Never fear, Old Sluggy will be under our spell again in no time...”

Tom suppressed the urge to roll his eyes and strode through the doorway, the other three scrambling to follow suit, jockeying for position. Or rather, attempted to, as Tom swiftly came to a complete standstill in the middle of the doorframe, causing Lestrange, Mulciber and Nott to
stumble into his back.

“What—” began Nott, peering around Tom’s shoulder to see what had drawn such a reaction from Tom, and then his voice cut off when he saw the source.

Harry bloody Delacour, sitting at a desk beside his Ravenclaw companion, his chair balanced on the two back legs as he reclined lazily without a care in the world. The nerve of it! Though it was a relief to Tom’s eyes to see that he did not have that blonde bimbo on his arm.

“Delacour,” said Lestrange quietly from behind Tom, and there was a tone in his voice which Tom did not appreciate. “The hunt for him will be sweet, will it not?”

“Just shut up,” Tom snarled. “It’s not a hunt, you idiot, it’s a plan of isolation.”

Even Mulciber – face of stone, that one – looked surprised at the sudden outburst. Tom almost blushed – almost – and stormed forward to claim the desk which was as far from Delacour as possible. He pulled out the seat with a loud scraping noise, unsure of where his sudden agitation had come from. As routine, Mulciber took the seat next to him, with Lestrange and Nott directly behind them. The two had begun nattering away already, doing absolutely nothing for the headache which was beginning to develop within Tom’s left temple.

“Are you alright, Riddle?” Mulciber’s voice was barely audible. Through his peripheral vision, Tom saw that his lips barely moved when he spoke, his silvery eyes never straying from directly ahead. It was a skill which he and Tom had adopted over the past six years – the ability to communicate without anybody from the outside noticing.

“Yes,” was Tom’s short response, but his eyes flickered towards Delacour of their own accord, taking in the leisurely stance, the easy way he conversed with The Other Delacour, as Tom had taken to calling her (he could scarcely recall her name – Holly? Hazel? It started with ‘h’, he was sure). Perhaps they grew up soft in France, because there was absolutely nothing about Delacour which spoke of Slytherin. He was too innocent, too vulnerable. From their few brief encounters, Tom had come to the decision that he was rather like a mouse who had accidentally wandered into the midst of a group of snakes. And a foolish mouse he was, too, because he did not seem to realise what danger he was in. It would be all too easy to eradicate that boy’s pride. Tom had cracked harder rocks.

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“I don’t understand how you plan on juggling seven N.E.W.Ts subjects,” Harry muttered to Hermione as the class settled down, waiting for the appearance of Slughorn. “Five is enough to drown me.”

“Drown you in what?” asked Hermione, her eyebrows raised sardonically as she prepared herself for note-taking.

“I dunno,” said Harry after consideration, vaguely stumped. “Self-doubt and… and exhaustion?”

“Hardly,” responded Hermione. “Have you or Ron ever considered extending yourselves academically? Charms and Herbology are rarely ever difficult if you keep up with the content being covered in class. Arithmancy and Study of Ancient Runes are fine as long as you’re solid on the theory. DADA sometimes catches me out when it comes to the practicals, but I have time to work on that… and Potions and Transfiguration won’t be a challenge with a bit of supplementary reading.”
Harry knew that ‘a bit’ in Hermione’s dictionary could probably be defined as ‘a lot’ in anybody else’s, but didn’t comment on it.

“Better you than me,” was all he had to say as Slughorn came through the classroom door, toddling down the middle aisle between the rows of desks. His manner suggested that he believed that he was striding down a red carpet. In any case, the zealous entry was still an improvement on any of Snape’s imitations of an overgrown bat.

“Hello, hello,” said the Potions professor once he arrived at the front of the classroom. His gooseberry-coloured eyes considered the students in the class, and he looked momentarily disappointed as he added, “I see that we have lost a few numbers from our ranks since last year.”

Passing a sideways glance over his shoulder, Harry did a quick head count. Excluding himself and Hermione, he counted two Gryffindors, three Hufflepuffs, five Ravenclaws and four Slytherins. Harry ignored the urge to shrink down beneath his desk when he saw it to be all his new roommates.

It was then that Slughorn’s eyes lit upon Harry and Hermione and he added, immediately brightening, “But we have gained two new faces!”

Harry attempted to smile, but feared that it came out more as a grimace. He would, after all, have rather not been doing Potions at all.

“Yes, sir,” said Hermione, responding for both herself and Harry when she spoke. Perhaps she hoped that Slughorn would turn away from them if he received a quick and colourless answer. Slughorn, however, was characteristically chatty.

“I’ve never seen either of you work,” he said, “so I wonder if you have it in you to dislodge our defending champion of Potions this year?”

“And who might that be, sir?” asked Harry, and the rest of the students in the class went dead silent, as if they had all been hoping that that question could be avoided.

“That would be me, Delacour,” said that deceptively charming voice from somewhere near the back of the classroom, a voice which Harry was only vaguely acquainted with. He felt his shoulders rise to his ears defensively. Why had he thought that the Potions champion would be anyone else?

Slughorn did not appear to mind Riddle’s intervention.

“Yes, has quite a knack for Potions, our Tom has,” he chuckled. Then he wagged his finger condescendingly at the rest of the class. “You should all strive to be as skilful as Mr. Riddle, pupils.”

Even without looking behind him, Harry could predict each house’s reaction. The Gryffindors would be snarling, the Hufflepuffs would be scowling, the Ravenclaws would be straightening their backs and the Slytherins would be looking at Riddle adoringly. All the while Riddle would sit there, pretending that he wasn’t smug and had a drop of humility in his veins when he really didn’t.

Harry would have given anything to be able to challenge him in this classroom, but knew that it would be as good as suicide. He had no ‘knack for Potions’, as Slughorn had put it. This was a battleground where Harry held no advantages, and it was humiliating to acknowledge it. He would have to bide his time before arriving in a place where he would have a chance.

Pressing his lips together, Harry did not answer Slughorn’s earlier question. But Hermione had
other ideas.

“Yes,” she said confidently, as clear as a bell. “I believe that I have it in me to dislodge your ‘defending champion’.”

Harry could hear the apostrophes that she had put around the term ‘defending champion’, and knew that everybody else had as well. It was obvious that she was making a mockery of Riddle’s title, and Harry would have very much liked to kiss her then. For going where he could not.

Somebody whistled appreciatively to break the silence. Harry could feel Riddle’s death glare searing through his skull to drill into Hermione, leaving a gaping hole in the side of his head. Slughorn was oblivious to this and looked positively delighted at the sudden drama.

“A challenger,” he chortled. “Oh, this is going to be interesting. Well, I’d best stop talking and set your first task, if it is a competition that we want!”

As much as he loved her for it, Harry knew that he had to question Hermione’s most un-Hermione-like actions.

“What are you doing?” he whispered under his breath, to which she replied, “Defending your honour, you… you honourable prat!”

Upon shooting a sideways glance at her, Harry could see that she was blushing. So she had realised how wounded Harry’s ‘honour’ would be when he couldn’t challenge Riddle at Potions, and had taken it upon herself to do so in his place. Harry smiled. Hermione Granger was turning out to be a better cousin that Dudley Dursley.

“As this is your final N.E.W.Ts year,” Slughorn announced, “your year will be divided into two major halves. The first half, which is the only half you need worry yourself about for now, is based entirely around the brewing of one deviously tricky little potion – Felix Felicis.”

Harry, having only had experience in drinking Felix Felicis and not brewing it, immediately felt a spark of worry over this task. It took the most advanced to create such a concoction perfectly. And as far as he remembered, the time it took to brew was a long time indeed…

“Five months will be allocated to you,” Slughorn continued, “beginning today, the second of September, and the final being the seventh of February. You are each expected to individually brew a single vial of Felix Felicis each, and write a ten-foot thesis to be submitted at the same time as the complete potion.”

The N.E.W.Ts students immediately exploded into a hubbub, as Harry had predicted they would as soon as Slughorn had uttered the words ‘ten’ followed by ‘foot’. The only reason he was not a part of the protesters was because he believed that he would not still be here in five months’ time.

“But sir,” one of the Gryffindors protested, his voice heard above all the others due to the sheer depth of it. Harry found it to be a very pleasant voice. “Surely five months isn’t long enough. Felix Felicis takes an average of six months to brew…”

“Precisely, Mr. Prewett,” said Slughorn. “An average of six months, meaning that there are witches and wizards who take more and less than six months. All of you must count yourself into the latter group, of course…” he chuckled as if he found it all terribly amusing.

“But Potions Masters were the ones who took less, obviously,” said Prewett, sounding bitter.

“Professor!” That was a Hufflepuff, waving her hand in the air furiously. Harry passed his gaze
to her next. He was beginning to feel vaguely amused by the fuss that was being made, knowing that had they been back in the time which he belonged in, he would have been in their shoes.

“Yes, Miss Ghannam?” said Slughorn, and the Hufflepuff put down her hand, looking flustered.

“Surely a ten-foot thesis is a bit… excessive,” she offered, earning murmurs of agreement. “Could it not be shortened? Just a smidgeon?”

“Ten-feet is not that long,” Hermione said, irritated, and Ghannam (among others) swung around to stare.

“Ah, yes,” said Harry sagely, nodding along. He continued, “Did you know that at Beauxbatons, we’re expected to write ten-foot essays from first-year?” Which was probably not true, but nobody needed to know that.

“Oh,” said Ghannam. The two Gryffindors, Prewett and the other, were looking at Harry and Hermione appraisingly. Perhaps lions had noses to sniff out their own kind, even if they were wearing the feathers of an eagle and the skin of a snake.

“See there,” said Slughorn, sighing. “You have it easier than you might have originally thought. Besides, you’ll find that once you have some guidelines and begin writing, you won’t be able to stop! Such guidelines will come around on pieces of parchment shortly.”

There was a pregnant pause, perhaps a pause which was meant to induce a sense of thrill, and then he cried, “Instructions can be found on page two-hundred in your textbook! Let the brewing commence!”

As everybody shuffled through their bags for their textbooks, Hermione said, “Professor, Harry and I haven’t got our textbooks yet. We moved here on last-minute notice and weren’t fully prepared, so…”

“Of course, of course,” said Slughorn, and there was something akin to pity in his eyes. “I’m not surprised that your parents sent you here, what with Grindelwald on the move… there’s no place safer than Hogwarts, after all!”

“Oh, yes, I agree,” said Hermione, while meanwhile Harry thought, Ah. I’d completely forgotten that Grindelwald was at large in the ’40s.

“Well, I’m afraid I haven’t got any spare textbooks on hand right now,” Slughorn went on, “but I’m sure that someone would be willing to share with you. Miss Delacour, would you please swap seats with…”

Coincidence, and ugly coincidence at that, often had a tendency of rearing its head at times like this, so Harry prayed and prayed to whoever was listening that he not be paired with Riddle…

“Prewett,” said Slughorn. “Swap seats with Miss Delacour, wouldn’t you? We might as well encourage some inter-house relations, mightn’t we?”

Harry could have wept for the relief he felt for Slughorn and his encouragement of inter-house relations.

“Yes, sir,” said Prewett, gathering his things and moving towards Harry. Hermione exchanged a glance with Harry, before she went to sit beside Prewett’s companion. Prewett, meanwhile, was setting up at Harry’s table and making considerably less fuss than Harry had expected a Gryffindor to make when being paired with a Slytherin.
“Hello,” Harry said, when it became obvious that the other would not be extending an introduction first. “I’m Harry Delacour.”

Prewett paused in setting up his cauldron and looked at Harry, his gaze assessing once again. There was something quite familiar about him, Harry thought. He had thick, rich red hair, and those deep brown eyes which were etched into his face… Harry knew that he was already acquainted with those eyes.

“I know,” Prewett finally said. “And we all wonder how it is that you and your sister ended up in the houses which you did.”

“What do you mean?” Harry was immediately on the defensive.

“There’s something about you both,” Prewett remarked. “Something about you which is distinctly Gryffindor.”

Harry opened his mouth, closed it again, then looked down at the table, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. He was glad. He was glad that others could see that, no matter the Sorting Hat’s decision.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, so quietly that Prewett may or may not have heard it. Noting that the rest of the class had already done so, he went about arranging his own cauldron on the tabletop (cauldrons had been easy enough to source within the walls of Hogwarts), and, expecting no more from Prewett, bent to read the ingredients list for Felix Felicis.

_Ashwinder egg, he read. Tincture of thyme…_

“My name is Ignatius Prewett,” said Prewett. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Delacour.”

Harry felt his eyebrows rise, probably high enough to shadow his hairline. A Gryffindor pleased to meet a Slytherin? Unheard of. Almost as if reading his thoughts, Prewett said, “Anybody who displeases Riddle is a friend. What did you do, poke him with your quill?”

“It’s that obvious?” Harry asked. “I mean, that I’ve displeased him, not that I poked him with quill.”

“Are you kidding me?” Prewett’s voice dropped to a whisper. “He absolutely _hates_ you. Have you seen his face when he looks at you? Like he would quite like tearing your head off, then setting it alight.”

“Brilliant,” Harry said, staring. “That’s exactly what I like hearing. Well, I’m sure that you’d be glad to hear that I wouldn’t mind doing the same to him.”

“Oh, wouldn’t we all?” said Prewett. “You’re alright, you know, Delacour.”

“You can call me Harry,” said Harry. Prewett looked astonished, and then he started laughing. Deep, genial laughter which danced in those eyes of his – and then the breath was snatched from Harry’s lungs as he realised why it was that Prewett looked so familiar. Molly Weasley, and… and Ginny. Ginny Weasley. The first love of Harry’s life. They all had the exact same eyes. As deep and dark as a depthless ocean. The most beautiful eyes he had ever seen.

“Call me Ignatius, then,” said Prewett, “seeing as we’re both allies in Operation: Tear Riddle’s Head Off.”

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Delacour had befriended Prewett, and The Other Delacour had very openly challenged Tom. It was proving to be a very interesting day.

"Preservare," Tom uttered, twirling his wand over his cauldron. The spell would keep his potion sitting in a little bubble, preventing it from ageing over the next twenty-four hours until he could return and continue his progress. So far, it was perfect as Tom had anticipated. Nott had accidentally stirred his potion clockwise one too many times towards the beginning of the lesson, but had managed to rectify it, whereas Lestrange had not been so lucky in adding horseradish which had not been diced finely enough, and his potion had turned to the consistency of Muggle tar. Mulciber had heated the Ashwinder egg five degrees too warm, and so it had been singed.

No invitations from Slughorn into his prestigious Slug Club had been extended to any of them, but Tom was confident that that would be righted within the next lesson. He was the only one to have been granted such an invite, which he had accepted graciously, gratified that neither of the Delacours had lived up to Slughorn’s expectations to also be invited.

The Other Delacour would be crushed under the sole of his shoe as easily as a cockroach.

“I’m starving,” Nott muttered as he threw his textbook into his bag and cracked his neck. “For Salazar’s sake, why must we be attempting Felix Felicis? I can’t think of anything more complicated.”

“Nothing like a bit of luck potion to start the year,” Mulciber offered as they all moved for the door.

“To start the year?” Lestrange snarled. “It may as well end it as well. By the end of these five months, I’ll have had enough of luck for a lifetime!”

“Gentlemen,” said Tom. “It is impolite to raise your voices in public.”

And it was because they all immediately lowered their voices that they heard Slughorn inform The Other Delacour that her potion was “absolutely perfect” thus far, and that she must “most certainly join Slug Club”. Tom’s good mood was immediately eradicated, and he turned slowly to his inner circle.

“How is it,” he asked in a sickeningly sweet voice, “that that pompous shrew could brew a perfect potion, but none of you were able to?”

Apparently nobody had an adequate answer to that, and Tom resisted the urge to shriek at the top of his voice.

“When will this routine end?” he asked softly. “This routine where you all keep on disappointing me?” He didn’t wait for an answer, and stormed out of the classroom, too disgusted to look at their faces.

The beginning of a perfect year.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, Tom’s getting mad. Real harsh to his ‘friends’, that one is. Well, Hermione has just thrown herself in Tom’s path for Harry, what do you all make of that? XD Yes,
she will defend Harry’s honour with her life…
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

“Expecto,” Harry murmured, motioning with his wand, his mind alight with the memory of Ron and Hermione’s beaming smiles, “Patronum!”

Chapter Notes

I have right here a nice long chapter to keep you all satisfied. OwO

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Teach us,” Margot said, her eyes like stone.

“No!” Harry snapped back.

“Why not?” The sixth-year was flanked by an assortment of other Slytherins, most of whom Harry did not recognize other than those who bore slight resemblances to the people that he knew from school in his own time.

“Because I’m too…” He planned on saying ‘busy’, but then paused as he imagined Hermione saying ‘honourable’. Too ‘honourable’ to ever consider teaching Slytherins his signature spell. Or anything else. This thought only succeeded in fuelling his temper.

“Because you’re too stubborn?” Margot guessed.

“Because I don’t have time for this,” countered Harry, turning to enter the common room through the entrance hole and hopefully retire to bed for an undisturbed sleep. Unfortunately, he found himself blocked by a barrier of various younger students, mainly fifth and sixth-years. There was Edwin Parkinson with a sneer upon his face, who Harry had been half-acquainted to that morning; there was a girl who looked like she might have been related to one Michael Corner in Ravenclaw; and then there were the others. All smirking. It seemed that if you were sorted into Slytherin, it was compulsory to know how to smirk.

“We shall not release you until you name a proper reason,” said Margot, apparently assigned spokesperson for the small gathering of Slytherins. “It is obvious that you are completely brilliant at Defence Against the Dark Arts, even more brilliant than Riddle, so what why not help us to be better than him now?”

*If it was anybody else, Harry thought, then it would be ‘yes’ in a heartbeat, but these people are all potential future Death Eaters. I would be an idiot to tutor them all, only for them to use their newfound knowledge against the Light side.*

“I thought you lot all worshipped Tom Riddle,” Harry remarked aloud, turning back to face Margot with a scowl upon his face. “Why in Merlin’s name do you want to be better than him now?”
Margot blushed in a demure manner while averting her eyes, which did not have Harry fooled, whereas the other students merely looked affronted.

“I do not worship Riddle,” said Margot. “I told you that, Harry. None of us here do.”

“Yes,” tacked on Parkinson loudly. “Unlike the rest of the house, we still have a little dignity, see.”

Still suspicious, Harry’s eyes flickered over the numbers. There were less than ten in all. None of the ones he saw here looked as if they came from the Death Eater families he knew from the future. Daphne Greengrass, in his year, had never been a bother, and it had never reached his ears that Pansy Parkinson’s parents were Dark. Then there was Michael Corner, Ginny’s ex-boyfriend, who was definitely on the Light side.

Harry felt his resolve waver for a moment.

“I just think of it as helping your fellow students with a bit of homework,” Margot said, latching onto Harry’s brief lapse in judgment. Eyes as sharp as a hawk, that one.

*C’mon, Harry,* said a voice which sounded suspiciously like Ron’s in Harry’s head. *Set Riddle’s snakes on him. He’ll never see it coming!*

“Just do it, Delacour,” commanded Parkinson, and then a cunning light crept across his face. “Unless everything that people have said that you did were all lies…”

That did it. Harry blamed his Gryffindor side for never being able to back away from a challenge.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered, then said louder, “Fine! But you’d better all leave me alone now, or I’ll change my mind.”

Smugly, Parkinson swung through the entry hole, bumping shoulders with a few of the others as if to say, *I told you I could get him to do it.*

There was a very gleeful air about the group as they all echoed things like, “We owe you, Delacour,” and, “Good on you…”

Margot was the last to leave. The façade in which she had appeared rather flustered had been pushed away to be replaced by dangerous sugariness, and her mask was as bright as starlight.

“Looking forward to our time together, Professor Delacour,” she purred, flittering her fingers in farewell as she made her way into the common room. “I wonder if my Patronus shall be a doe?”

The entrance hole slid closed behind her. Harry unleashed a low growl, deep in the back of his throat. These people made it so easy for him to hate them.

Deciding that he was too tightly strung to go to bed now, Harry opted to go for a stroll down the corridors to reflect on all the mistakes that he had made that day. Merlin knew that it had been wrong for him to step into the spotlight the way that he had. He had just been so desperate to prove himself against Riddle.

Lost in his thoughts, he didn’t notice that somebody was stalking him in the shadows.

***
Earlier that day…

By the time Defence Against the Dark Arts rolled in after lunch, Harry had successfully avoided the Slytherin table in favour of joining Ignatius among the Gryffindors, where he was introduced to some of the other seventh-years.

There was a Muggle-born witch named Phyllis Colbert, who seemed very happy to retain a conversation with Harry about what was currently occurring in the Muggle world at that very moment (they were in the midst of World War II); there was Finlay Bell, who Harry figured was related to Katie Bell, one of the original Gryffindor Chasers that he had known; and then there was Bridget Bones, and Harry came to the assumption that she was a part of the family which Susan Bones in his year at school had come from. Harry recognised her as the girl who had sat in Potions with Ignatius.

Ignatius seemed to be something of a leader to the three, so perhaps it was his acceptance of Harry which urged them to behave on friendly terms to the Slytherin. Or maybe it was because they had also seen what Ignatius had during the sorting last night – Harry’s apparent Gryffindorish qualities. Either way, Harry found himself to be very comfortable seated there. If anything, it felt normal.

When Hermione, who had hung back during Potions class to further discuss Felix Felicis with Slughorn, finally entered the Great Hall to grab a bite between classes, her gaze had zeroed in on Harry, the blot of green among the red, and her eyes had narrowed, if only slightly. Not in annoyance, but in contemplation, probably turning everything over in her head. She joined one Rowan Poole – the poor, besotted kid – at the Ravenclaw table, and Harry watched her graciously accepting compliments from him – probably regarding her perfect progress in Felix Felicis thus far (Harry’s, of course, had been far from perfect).

Hermione was not the only one who noticed the new Slytherin’s variation from conventional seating plans. Though Harry had at first received suspicious glances from the rest of Gryffindor table, they had quickly diminished due to the seventh-years’ apparent confidence in him. But then there was the case of Slytherin table. The faces of the students over there were quietly watchful, dubious, displeased… and one which was even betrayed, that one being Margot Greengrass.

Harry only paid special attention to a particular person, though. The one person who merited special attention.

Tom Marvolo Riddle, sitting there with an expression of leisurely boredom scrawled across his features, as if he was so above everybody surrounding him. Harry watched him, observing his conduct around the others, and the others’ conduct around him. The same people as the night before sat around Riddle, as if forming a protective wall to prevent the lesser beings from having contact with him. They all radiated that sense of awe and adoring for the future Dark Lord. But said future Dark Lord was just as cold, just as dismissive as Harry would have expected.

Unbidden, their eyes met, and Harry felt the blood in his veins suddenly run as cold as winter. The blasé veil in Riddle’s eyes drifted away, and they became as bright as the night sky, boring into Harry’s own as if Riddle could see his very soul. It was instinctual to look away, to lower his gaze and submit to the other’s clear dominance, but Harry had initiated a challenge that morning, and he would not back down.

Wiping his face of emotion, Harry raised his chin, just a little, and stared right back at Riddle. The confrontation was cut short when Ignatius grabbed Harry’s shoulder, asking what was going
on, and Harry looked away with a muttered, “Nothing.” He didn’t dare look in Riddle’s direction again, and within another thirty seconds excused himself, his tone curter than was necessary, and left the Great Hall.

He was glad that Hermione did not follow him out.

***

Because of his abrupt flight from the Great Hall, Harry found himself to be the first student in the DADA class, arriving even before Professor Merrythought.

Harry recalled, from the memory that Dumbledore had had him view the previous year, that Riddle had been questioning Slughorn about Merrythought’s retirement. This must be the professor’s final year of teaching, Harry assumed.

His assumptions were proven correct when the elderly professor shuffled into the classroom, five minutes before class was due to start. She certainly looked elderly, and, quite frankly, weary of her time here.

“Somebody is early,” Merrythought said aloud as her gaze landed on Harry.

“Yes, Professor,” said Harry.

“I don’t recognize you.” The witch leaned heavily against her cane and flicked her wand at the blackboard at the front of the classroom. Harry watched silently as the words Defence Against the Dark Arts, N.E.W.Ts Final Year scrawled themselves across the board, the piece of chalk rasping through his eardrums. It suddenly occurred to him that Merrythought had been asking a question, and said quickly, “I’m new. Harry Delacour. I transferred from Beauxbatons.”

“Hm,” Merrythought said, finding a chair opposite Harry and dropping into it like a stone. Harry could hear her joints creaking painfully from where he sat, but Merrythought seemed accustomed to it and made no noise of complaint. Instead, she looked at Harry beadily, pale eyes sharp even with her old age. “You undertook Defence class whilst there?”

“Yes, professor,” Harry replied smoothly.

“Now, I met the Beauxbatons Defence professor in previous years,” said Merrythought, scratching her eyebrow. “I found him to be a most disagreeable man. What was his name again?”

Harry’s heart leapt in his throat. What the fuck was the Beauxbaton’s DADA professor called?

“Um–” he began, unsure of what he would have said if Merrythought hadn’t cut him off.

“Oh, I remember,” she said. “Aubinet, wasn’t it? Mathis Aubinet.”

“Yes, that’s it.” Harry expelled a breath. “Professor, um, Aubinet.”

“My mind is not the sharpest needle you might find nowadays,” Merrythought muttered, then smiled. “But it still hasn’t turned completely senile yet.”

Harry tried to also smile out of politeness, but the tilt of his mouth felt wooden. Thankfully, this little detail passed Merrythought’s notice.

“Do you enjoy Defence much?” she asked, seemingly content to have a casual conversation with Harry. Harry latched onto that in hopes of avoiding an interrogation about anything else related to
“I’ve always enjoyed it more than any of my other subjects,” he said, shrugging slightly. “In the other subjects, there’s always something extra that you have to do to get it right, always some sort of twist, but I find that I get DADA. It comes naturally to me, most of the time.” Harry didn’t bother adding that this was probably because since first-year, he had always found himself in situations which determined that he had to be best at DADA, because if he wasn’t, he would almost certainly die. It was a requisite to being Harry Potter.

“I see,” Merrythought murmured. “We shall see how you handle yourself in my class, then.” The volume of the of footsteps approaching in the corridor heightened, indicating that the rest of the class would be entering soon.

With a slight grimace, Merrythought pushed herself to her feet, bracing herself on her cane.

“Well, best prepare for the tidal wave converging on us,” she pronounced, hobbling to the front of the room.

True to her word, the class filled within a minute, a far greater number in this class than in Potions.

Somebody plonked down into the seat by Harry. Hermione to shoot him down with questions. Harry folded his arms against the tabletop and leaned forwards to rest his chin on them.

“Not now, Hermione,” he mumbled, closing his eyes. “Can’t deal with this right now.”

“Good thing I’m not dearest sister, then,” said a voice which most definitely did not belong to Hermione.

Harry bolted up, his spine ramrod straight, and whipped around to face Lestrange. Bastard.

“Lestrange.” He heard the snarl in his voice, sensed that he was bristling. It was impossible not to. Up close, those black eyes, as cold and flat as a shark’s, could have been the exact same as Bellatrix’s. He could have been staring straight into the face of Sirius’s murderer.

“I am so privileged to hear that you remember my name,” Lestrange remarked, a sneer curling the corner of his mouth.

“What might that ‘wrong path’ be?” Harry asked, sneering right back at Lestrange’s face. “Ignatius Prewett? Phyllis Colbert? They’re both the ‘righter’ path than you could ever be.”

“You compare us to a blood-traitor and a mudblood?” Lestrange smiled sharply. “So you’re one of those?”

“Those’ meaning a person who strives for equality? Yes, I am.” Harry turned his face away.
“Now, I would rather you stopped trying to speak to me.”

Lestrange hissed loudly, just as Merrythought began speaking.

“Welcome to your final year of N.E.W.T’s Defence Against the Dark Arts,” she announced, the room falling into silence to listen. Gone was the weariness which had been pressed all over her before, and here was the professor with life experience. “This year will no doubt challenge you to the point that I expect a vast number of you to drop out throughout our time here. This class is not, after all, intended for the faint-hearted. But first, the roll call. Lucan Abbott?”

“It’s dangerous to hold such views in a time like this,” Lestrange told Harry from the corner of his mouth. “You wouldn’t want the wrong people hearing you say such things.”

“I can handle myself,” Harry countered. “Perhaps it’s dangerous, but sometimes you have to choose between what is right, and what is easy.”

Lestrange almost looked impressed. Harry doubted that he would have if he heard that it was Dumbledore who had taught Harry that lesson.

“Harry Delacour,” said Merrythought, and Harry raised his hand to indicate his presence.

“Hermione Delacour,” Merrythought continued, and Lestrange started speaking again.

“Does your sister share your views?” he asked.

“She’s my cousin,” Harry snapped back.

“That explains why you two don’t look very much alike.” Lestrange was unfazed.

“We do,” said Harry defensively, even though he, too, was certain that they didn’t. “A little bit.”

“Peregrine Lestrange,” called Merrythought.

“Is present,” said Lestrange, before picking up the quiet conversation again. “Only if you count the fact that you’re as feminine as she is.” He sniggered.

“That’s a lie,” Harry barked, louder than necessary. All heads turned in his direction, including Merrythought’s, but he quickly faked a coughing fit, and Merrythought proceeded with her list of names. Lestrange laughed quietly in obvious delight.

“Why else do you think Greengrass likes you so much?” he asked. “Because she likes pretty things.”

“I am not pretty,” Harry growled.

“Delicate as an elf,” Lestrange mocked.

“Elves can be manly,” Harry defended himself. He recalled hoping that he could pull off the Beauxbatons image of being ‘fair’ and ‘pretty’, but no longer wished that he could, what with listening to Lestrange’s side of the conversation.

“Liar.” The black-eyed boy managed to slip in the last word before Merrythought put away the roll call and began the lesson. Harry seethed silently, doing his best to focus back in on the lesson.

“The final year of N.E.W.T’s covers less new content than many might expect,” she said. “You are, however, expected to remember everything that you have ever covered in this subject since
first-year, as we will be delving deeper into already known topics. Which is why I have set up a practical course for this lesson.” At her word, the stone wall at the front of the class flickered and then fell away to reveal what looked to be the Forbidden Forest.

Most people in the class gasped and flinched backwards when the wall supposedly fell. Merrythought gave a hoot of laughter, as if her students’ reactions really made her day.

“Don’t worry, it’s just an illusion,” she said, “but a complicated one at that. By stepping into it, you will be transported to a false, three-dimensional world where you will face a range of Dark creatures and spells. All apparitions, of course, but life-like none-the-less. I’ll have you take turns stepping into this illusionary world, where you will each be confronted with three trials. Some of you will face off the same creature or spell as others before you, and if you are smart, will learn from the mistakes that others previously made. When it is not your turn, you will observe and take notes on your classmate’s successes and errors, which I will have you share at the end. Do we have any volunteers to go first?”

No. Harry doubted that anybody would volunteer to step up to this task before anybody else. It was not a fanciful thought, the idea of slipping into an ‘illusionary world’ to face three Dark challenges whilst having an audience observe your handiwork. Judging from the faces that he could see, most people shared this sentiment.

“Come now, it’s not that scary,” assured Merrythought, but the menacing manner in which she smiled at them did little to ease anyone’s nerves. When still nobody volunteered, she sighed. “If you all must behave like children, then so be it… Prewett, you can go up first.”

Ignatius Prewett stood reluctantly, wand in hand.

“Go on, mate,” encouraged Finlay Bell, prodding him forwards amidst some cheers and catcalls from the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs.

Harry leaned forwards, interested, and watched as Ignatius took a deep breath before stepping into the illusion of the Forbidden Forest. Judging from the way he whipped around again and stared at the class blankly, it seemed that by stepping into the illusion, he could no longer see the classroom. Total immersion in the illusionary world.

“Observe,” Merrythought whispered, caught in the mood as they all watched Ignatius swinging around in this direction and that, waiting for something to jump out at him.

Harry saw the Acromantula before Ignatius did, scurrying in the shadows silently, closing in on him, nearer, nearer… somebody made a choking noise when the giant spider reared up at Prewett from behind, exposing its waving pincers, and Ignatius whirled around at the last second, pointing his wand and shouting, “Confringo!”

The Acromantula caught the spell on a leg, and seemed to have merely been infuriated further as it charged at Ignatius again.

“Quickly, are you taking notes?” asked Merrythought in clear excitement. There was a great noise of rummaging as everybody hurriedly pulled out their parchment and quills, nobody feeling inclined to miss any of the action by taking too long.

“Confundo!” Ignatius was busy bellowing, followed by, “Stupefy!”

The Acromantula, already reeling, went flying into a tree and fell unconscious.

The sound of scribbling on parchment filled the silence alongside Ignatius’s quick breathing as he
awaited the next trial.

It was a Banshee next, which Ignatius handled fine, though it took him a little while to block out her screeches, and finally went on to incapacitate a zombie after a couple of attempts.

Having faced off three different Dark creatures, Ignatius was allowed out of the illusion, and he stepped through the wall, exhausted. Everybody – excluding the Slytherins who were not Harry – broke into applause for him, and plastering on a winning grin, Ignatius took his seat again.

“Yes, very well done indeed,” said Merrythought. “Now, hush up, everybody. Does anybody wish to share with Prewett anything that they have written in their notes?”

“I do, Professor Merrythought,” Tom Riddle said, then turned to Prewett. Anybody who wasn’t paying close attention would have thought that he was being utterly serious, but the nasty gleam in his eyes told Harry otherwise. “Surely it’s counterproductive to holler spells at the top of your voice. Wouldn’t it be alerting your enemies to your position on the battleground?”

Lestrange laughed under his breath when Ignatius glared at Riddle. Harry sighed loudly before he could stop himself.

“I don’t think that it would occur to somebody in a life-or-death situation to use non-verbal spells if they haven’t been properly trained to do so,” he parried. “I think that you would have a much better chance of surviving if you performed the spell properly aloud, as opposed to mucking it up whilst trying to perform it silently. Sure, non-verbal spells are showier, but I’d rather live than go down in style.”

Riddle opened his mouth to retaliate, but Merrythought cut him off.

“That’s enough,” she said. “If nobody has anything else to say, then we’ll move on. Riddle, your turn.” She indicated for him to step into the illusion.

“Of course,” agreed Riddle suavely, stepping forwards to take his place in the Forbidden Forest illusion.

At Harry’s side, Lestrange sat up a little straighter.

The first creature to come out was a dragon, silhouetted overhead, its wingspan massive, its hide metallic grey, its eyes glowing like a fire in the night.

“Ukrainian Ironbelly,” Lestrange whispered in pure awe, his voice breathless and his dark eyes reflecting the lights ablaze in the beast’s own eyes. “It’s the largest dragon known to wizards.”

“But is it more dangerous than the Hungarian Horntail?” asked Harry grimly, ignoring the sideways glance that he received.

Without hesitating, Riddle deflected the Ironbelly’s flames and non-verbally cast a spell which radiated the colour of ice, so bright and white that it seared Harry’s eyes. Whatever the spell was, it was powerful, because once Harry’s sight had recovered, he saw that the Ironbelly had been paralysed, sending its immense girth toppling into a tree, which toppled into another, then another. The aftermath of the domino effect was a row of trunks, splintered into millions of woody shards.

Even though Harry was certain that he couldn’t see the classroom, Riddle looked over his shoulder, and it seemed that he was staring directly at Harry when he smirked. As if he thought that he had proven a point by performing a spell non-verbally. How it was that he looked more handsome than ever with wind-tousled hair and flushed cheeks, Harry did not know.
A Chimaera came thundering into the scene without warning, its roar as loud as a thunderclap, but Riddle, once again, was completely unfazed and unfairly fluid in the grace that he exhibited when slaying the Chimaera in its advance before it could wreak any damage. Riddle made it look as easy as sliding a hot knife through butter.

It occurred to Harry then that he had dropped his quill and was simply watching open-mouthed as Riddle took out the dragon and the Chimaera so elegantly, but came back to himself when he realised that Lestrange had noticed his suddenly wonderstruck disposition.

“Don’t you wish that you were as good as him?” asked Lestrange with quirked eyebrows, to which Harry grimaced.

“Like I said before,” he replied, “I can handle myself fine.”

What appeared next surprised Harry.

Riddle’s corpse.

That is, the real Riddle found himself staring at a corpse of himself on the ground, and glanced about the illusionary field with sudden fear in his eyes.

“What is this?” he asked piercingly. “Is this some trick?”

“It’s a Boggart,” Harry murmured aloud. “He fears his own mortality.”

Lestrange shot him a sharp look, but said nothing.

Moments after Harry spoke, understanding came to Riddle’s eyes as he registered that it was a Boggart that he was faced with. Narrowing his eyes, he said, in a voice which was woefully unsteady, “Riddikulus.”

If anything, the corpse of Riddle became even whiter.

“Riddikulus,” Riddle tried again, and his voice was thick, as if he had something lodged in his throat.

The corpse became gory in detail, the eyes a filmy grey, the cheekbones protruding through paper-thin skin.

“Riddikulus!” Riddle shouted now. “Riddikulus, Riddikulus, Riddikulus!”

It was on his sixth attempt that the Boggart exploded into what looked like lots of white feathers, and with a wave of his wand, the feathers were banished.

Riddle stepped back into the classroom, his face pale and his movements stiff. It appeared that the Boggart had really taken something out of him.

“Very good, Riddle,” said Merrythought briskly, before addressing the class. “Does anybody have anything worth sharing with him regarding any of his trials?”

The glare that Riddle sent about the room said very clearly that they had better not, but Ignatius spoke anyway, having his shot at vengeance, no doubt.

“Boggarts are part of the third-year curriculum, Riddle,” he said sweetly. “You seemed to have a little trouble there, so I would recommend asking a third-year for some assistance in the topic.”
Riddle looked like he would have very much liked to curse the living daylights out of Ignatius, but instead chose to smile poisonously at the Gryffindor.

“I’ll take that into account,” he said, his voice dripping with false niceties. “Perhaps I’ll approach your little sister about the matter – she’s in third year, is she not?”

Ignatius leapt to his feet. The other Gryffindors formed a supportive barrier behind him.

“Stay away from my sister, you bastard!” he snapped.

The Slytherins all rounded on him, while Tom merely looked pleased with himself, having successfully turned the tables.

“Sit down, Prewett,” Merrythought barked. “Five points from Gryffindor for inappropriate language, and five points from Slytherin for intentional provocation!”

“Riddle was only taking Prewett’s advice into consideration, Professor,” offered Lestrange innocently.

“Enough, Lestrange,” Merrythought said. “Now, who shall we have next… Delacour, how about you?”

Harry and Hermione both stood at the same time, but Merrythought beckoned for Hermione to sit down again.

“If you’re so eager to go up,” she told Hermione, “then you can go up after your brother.”

“Cousin,” Harry corrected, growing tired of the assumption that the two of them were siblings. Maybe it would have been easier to go with that story.

Taking his wand in hand, he stepped towards the illusionary world and threw a quick glance over his shoulder.

Ignatius was nodding him on encouragingly; Hermione was looking worried; Lestrange was smiling, as if this would be the most entertaining thing that he could have ever wished to see; and Riddle was just as expressionless as ever, his fingers steepled beneath his chin.

“Time waits for no man, Delacour,” Merrythought said, and so, shaking any stray thoughts from his head, Harry stepped through the wall, and into the crowding dark.

It was a rather disorienting experience, stepping from the real world into a fake one. Sort of like entering a dream. The distant chatter of his classmates immediately faded, as did the sunlight, streaming through the windows. Here, the only light was from the half-crescent moon, shining overhead.

Harry turned around to face the way that he had come, and to no surprise saw that there was no doorway to the classroom. It was as if he was really here.

A twig broke underfoot, and Harry whirled around. What he saw set a grim smile into his face. He was already quite familiar with these creatures.

There were no less than twenty Inferi, dragging themselves towards Harry from between the trees, naked and skeletal, their skins the colour of the pale underbelly of a fish. Harry recalled that Dumbledore had conjured a firestorm to fend off Inferi, but was not familiar was a spell as powerful as such. Besides, such a vast number of flames surely wasn’t required for so few of them.
Incendio! Harry said, loud and clear in his head, directing his wand at the ground in front of him. The fallen leaves, perfect kindling for fire, burst in flames, flickering high up into the night air, driving the Inferi away, back into the shadows where they would vanish from existence. Calmly, Harry parted the fire around him with a wave of his hand and stepped through the burning barrier, only to come face-to-face with another Acromantula.

Serpensortia, Harry enunciated carefully, still non-verbal, and a long, heavy snake came flying from the tip of his wand, landing in an inelegant heap before the Acromantula. It did nothing to rival the immense size of a Basilisk, but its size was no laughing matter. The serpent reared back its great head, prepared to strike as it hissed in great agitation, *Who dares awaken me from my slumber?*

The Acromantula was quick to flee the scene of the crime in the face of an irate, gigantic serpent.

Out of common courtesy, Harry normally would have answered the creature, but being aware that he had an audience, did not, and feigned ignorance to the snake’s words. With a flick of his wand, it was banished back to whichever chasm it had come from.

One final test, now. One more. Harry waited in quiet anticipation, circling the clearing. The heat of the fire was still searing his skin when it came.

The air became frigid; the flames melted down like soupy wax before becoming no more; and Harry breathed out slowly, his breath condensing in the air as his frame was suddenly racked by the cold. Ice crystals were forming on the broken leaves underfoot, snapping into crisp slivers of ice when he took a step back, knowing what to expect, waiting for it to arrive…

There.

A black, hooded figure, drifting through the air towards him with its scaly, malformed hands outstretched… Harry knew that it wasn’t real, but facing it today was worse than any of the previous times he had faced one. Since then, he had lost Dumbledore, Sirius… the world had descended into a chasm of chaos.

But this wasn’t even real.

*Expecto,* Harry murmured, motioning with his wand, his mind alight with the memory of Ron and Hermione’s beaming smiles, *Patronum!*

Immediately, a great silver stag burst forth, breaking into a canter as it radiated such brilliance, driving the Dementor back into the shelter of darkness, before turning and lifting its head proudly to acknowledge Harry. It seemed almost as if it were smiling at him.

*Prongs,* Harry breathed, because no matter how many times he saw it, he was always in awe of the stag who was such a bright representation of his dead father. Harry reached out a hand hesitantly, as if to touch the corporeal Patronus. If he could fall, if only for a heartbeat, into a sense of security that he had not felt in such a long time, then he would take the chance. But before his fingers could connect with the stag, the area behind him opened back up into the wall leading into the classroom, and his Patronus collapsed like smoke.

Reluctantly, Harry turned and moved back into the classroom, refusing to meet any eye that was turned in his direction, and he sat down heavily into his chair.

Nobody applauded him. Nobody spoke a word, until Merrythought cleared her throat and said, “I think that we can all agree that those were three flawless trials, Delacour, unless anybody has
“Was that a corporeal Patronus?” somebody asked.

“Of course it was,” Hermione answered for Harry. “Anybody with half a brain could see that.”

“It’s just that…” the same person said. “Those are really quite advanced, aren’t they?”

“Indeed,” said Merrythought, her tone musing, before shaking it off. “Now, Miss Delacour, I believe that your presence is required in our illusionary world.”

“Yes, Professor Merrythought,” said Hermione, making her way to the front of the room.

“You most certainly can handle yourself, Delacour,” Lestrange told Harry in a low voice. “My apologies for doubting you – that was a very impressive display.”

Harry did not reply, and spent the rest of the lesson with only half a mind on the occurrences within the pretend Forbidden Forest. He was far too preoccupied with avoiding Lestrange’s probing questions and the curious gazes of everybody else, as well as wondering if it had been right for him to draw such attention to himself. His skills in Defence Against the Dark Arts would surely bring unwanted questions to his doorstep, and he wasn’t sure that he was prepared to answer them.

It didn’t even make him feel better to think that he had trounced Riddle in something.

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Harry paused by a window overlooking the Black Lake, watching the ripples in the water that were illuminated by the new moon. It wasn’t unexpected that word had spread from the class that he was able to summon a corporeal Patronus, that the instinct to survive came naturally to him. It wasn’t unexpected that the group of Slytherins had coerced him into tutoring them. No, Harry just hadn’t kept his wits about his as he should have. It was so easy to forget that Slytherin House was the house of cunning and ambition, and if he didn’t keep an eye on himself, he could very well lose himself during his time here.

It was at that moment that somebody clapped a hand over Harry’s mouth and wrestled him away.

Chapter End Notes

Firstly, I acknowledge that I made out Merrythought to be older than she really would have been. Whoops. And secondly, not all the creatures in the trials are classified as dark, I know, but OH. WELL. I don’t care.

Also, Mitsuki90 pointed out to be that Peregrine Lestrange and Bellatrix are not related and therefore their eyes would not resemble one another’s. I’m aware that Bellatrix is a Black and married into the Lestrange family, I was merely making a comparison between them both having black eyes, which have an almost insane light to them.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

But what really took the cake was watching Delacour take to Defence as a fish took to water. As if he fought Dark creatures on a regular basis, as if setting Inferi alight was his calling. And then had come the corporeal Patronus – so strong and beautiful and immense in power. Tom had almost been able to taste it in the air, and it made him hungry for more. He had thought to himself, could Harry Delacour possibly be the seventh member that I have been searching for all these years?

Chapter Notes

*Moans like a zombie as I crawl out of my hermit hole and drop this chapter at your feet* My duty here is done. *Retreats into the darkness of hermit hole again*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Delacour let out a muffled shout of surprise when Tom’s hand came down over his mouth. He struggled, of course, when Tom dragged him towards the classroom opposite them in the corridor, but being so demure in size ensured that his thrashing was of little consequence.

Tom ordered the classroom door open using wandless magic, and it complied swiftly, the hinges shrieking as it flew open to allow them entrance. With a quiet grunt of exertion, Tom threw Delacour into the room, following in after, and the door slammed shut behind them.

Delacour, who had hit a chair and toppled it over (achieving a domino effect on the rest of the line of chairs), scrambled to his feet and whirled around.

“What the fuck!” he yelled, eye glowing an unearthly green in the dim lighting, and in that moment he did not sound French at all. Tom frowned inwardly at this revelation, but did not speak of it.

“Who,” he growled, stalking forwards, “are you?”

Delacour opened his mouth, but no words came out. He looked almost like a fish floundering on land. When Tom continued to advance, his manner probably quite menacing, Delacour began to retreat.

“You know who I am,” he said, and though his voice was shaky, he sounded like himself again. “The Beauxbatons transfer student. That’s all. Nothing special.”

Tom had the senses of a bloodhound when it came to detecting weaknesses, and he was definitely detecting a hint of fear in the other’s eyes now. As if there was something he was hiding. Something deeper and darker than anybody might have believed.

Tom allowed the slightest quirk to tilt his eyebrows, bringing a sinister side to the image of
playfulness, and smiled very quietly.

“Is that it?” he asked, tracking each and every one of Delacour’s movements. The way that his fingers twitched very few seconds, instinctually readying himself to grab his wand; the movement which braced his lean frame against the wall, prepared to launch himself forward at a moment’s notice; the delicate tightening of his lips as they pressed into a hard line.

“Yes,” said Delacour through his tense jaw. Tom leaned forwards, taking full advantage of the height difference, getting right in Delacour’s face.

“Then perhaps a better question,” he hissed, “is what do you want?”

Delacour unexpectedly let out a bark of strained laughter – it did not sound quite right. Unnatural, as if he hadn’t done so in a long time. Tom swiftly recoiled to avoid spittle on his face.

“What do I want?” snapped Delacour. “You’re the one who as good as kidnapped me, so shouldn’t I be the one asking you that?”

“This is hardly a kidnapping,” countered Tom tersely. “I can’t be blamed if your skills of observation are so poor that you didn’t notice somebody walking down the same corridor as you. Now answer me – what do you want?”

“Nothing!” Delacour spluttered, then, “Wait, I do want something!”

Tom straightened, folding his arms triumphantly. He knew it. No doubt it would be Tom’s place as kingpin of Slytherin. Just like that Greengrass girl. They were all the same.

“I want you to stop being such a complete tosser,” declared Delacour, and Tom straightened in astonishment.

*How dare that brat—*

“Or more specifically, I want you to stop behaving as if I’m your rightful possession,” continued Delacour, seemingly oblivious to the pain which Tom was inflicting upon him with his eyes alone.

“How dare you,” spat Tom, finally working his mouth around the words, then added out of pure spite, “You moron,” but Delacour just couldn’t keep his mouth closed.

“You can’t deny it,” he said. “You keep on staring at me as if I committed the ultimate crime by denying you… possession of me, or whatever, and next thing you do is send Lestrange to play keeper in your place.”

Tom refrained from correcting the blathering idiot standing in front of him – he hadn’t sent Lestrange to sit by his side during DADA class purely for the purpose of playing ‘keeper’. In complete honesty, Tom had not anticipated that Delacour would be able to so easily create ties within the other houses. It had been a mistake on his behalf to assume that nobody would welcome a Slytherin. Or maybe it was just that Delacour was unusually charismatic (though Tom really could not see that). Whatever it was, Tom didn’t like it. He didn’t enjoy seeing outsiders intrude on his game, especially when it was Ignatius Prewett, the golden boy of Gryffindor, who seemed to have taken an immediate liking to Delacour. The point of Tom’s game was to isolate Delacour, not provide him with connections to other people.

It had become evident during Potions that morning that Delacour and his cousin (not sister, but cousin, apparently) were too approachable for their own good, and at lunchtime, the former had
even gone so far as to sit with the Gryffindors. Who the bloody ruddy even did that? Tom didn’t
know what it was about Delacour, but he really knew how to rub Tom up the wrong way. Tom had
come to the decision to send Lestrange to keep Delacour company during DADA, for the sole
reason of scaring off anybody who might attempt to befriend him. Lestrange was very good at
scaring off people. Everybody in Tom’s inner circle was, but of the lot, Lestrange was the one
whose face reflected the madness within the most. Also, by seating Lestrange with Delacour, it
gave off the message that Delacour had become somewhat more tight-knit with the Slytherins –
which would offend the Gryffindors who he had previously been friendly with.

It had all been the perfect arrangement, until Delacour had decided to open his mouth and argue
against Tom’s challenging of Prewett, ruining everything. It was infuriating.

But what really took the cake was watching Delacour take to Defence as a fish took to water. As if
he fought Dark creatures on a regular basis, as if setting Inferi alight was his calling. And then had
come the corporeal Patronus – so strong and beautiful and immense in power. Tom had almost
been able to taste it in the air, and it made him hungry for more. He had thought to himself, could
Harry Delacour possibly be the seventh member that I have been searching for all these years? He
had almost been convinced. Until he had stumbled upon Delacour, banding together the renegade
Slytherins outside the common room, promising to teach them how to be better than Tom! As if
any of those miscreants possessed a drop of talent which could challenge Tom’s own. He had
concluded that Delacour was against him, set on wielding his power in opposition of Tom.

Harry Delacour was proving to be far greater a problem than Tom had originally anticipated.

He then decided that he must learn the intentions behind this supposed insurgence, and fast,
which was how he had come to the decision to force Delacour into the classroom for a nice, private
conversation.

“You are being absolutely ridiculous,” Tom now told Delacour stiffly. “I saw you outside the
Slytherin common room just then. Planning on trying to help all of those miscreants surpass me,
are you?”

Delacour, whose eyes had been glittering with barely contained malice just moments ago, looked
away abruptly, seeming to be vaguely embarrassed.

“No,” he said. “It’s more like… helping them with homework.”

“Ah, yes,” Tom sneered. “I heard Greengrass use that line. I’ve noticed that you seem very
chummy with her now. What did she do, spread her legs for you?”

Delacour’s moment of quiet bashfulness vanished in a heartbeat, and suddenly his wand was in
his hand, and it was pointed steadily at Tom’s face.

“Don’t talk about her like that,” he said. His voice was like thunder. It cloaked the air around
him, rising and spreading like a giant pair of wings.

Tom felt himself smile. It was the shadow of a smile. A smile which fed off fear and fury.
Because he realised exactly how much he had underestimated this boy.

“My apologies,” he said, not apologetic at all. He did not bother to raise his own wand, because he
knew that Delacour would not cast a spell unless further provoked. It was obvious – if he and the
Gryffindors were on such good terms, then chivalry must run as thick as blood through his veins.

Chivalry. It would one day be his downfall.
As predicted, the hardness is Delacour’s eyes dissipated after a moment, and he blinked slowly, remembering himself.

“You… don’t try to kidnap me again,” he muttered, lowering his wand. “If you want to speak to me, do it like a normal person.”

Oh, Delacour, I am far from a normal person. If only you knew.

“I would still like to request you tell me why you plan on teaching my Slytherins Defence in private,” said Tom. As far as he was concerned, this conversation was far from over.

“Like I already told you,” said Delacour. “I’m just helping them with homework.”

Tom narrowed his eyes. Delacour stared back, unflinching. There were almost certainly secrets that this boy was keeping.

“I’m tired,” Delacour finally said, but he couldn’t have sounded less tired. “I’ll leave you to whatever you were doing before you…” he never bothered to finish the sentence, and he brushed past Tom, making out the classroom without another word.

Tom remained as he was for another minute, still and contemplative as he turned everything over in his head. He was no longer quite so sure of what to do with this little nightmare who had wandered in from France. He was no longer quite so sure of why he had snatched him from the corridor in the first place, and then gone on to demand answers. It was most out of character. It was most un-Slytherin. But there was just something about Delacour which unsettled him, made him irrational. Tom could not understand it.

He allowed himself a sigh from within the safety of seclusion.

He had Head Boy duties to carry out, and then a private meeting with his inner circle which would have to be arranged for a later day. There was a new subject to discuss.

***

It was strange how a week could fly by so fast, especially whilst stranded in an era to which you didn’t belong. It was strange how comfortable you could become amongst people that you weren’t meant to have ever met. At least, Hermione found this to be the case, and she was beginning to wonder why she hadn’t wanted to be sorted into Ravenclaw over Gryffindor back in first-year. Here in Ravenclaw, she found that she just fit.

There were actual people who were willing to discuss – not just half-listen to, but discuss – things that caught her attention in books and in classes, and nobody mocked her for her compulsive need to constantly study, but instead they joined her. It was the strangest thing.

A routine had finally begun to pick up. She woke at six o’clock; she refreshed her voice charm; she went to breakfast, where she was always among the early birds; she discussed politics with Rowan Poole at the Ravenclaw table; she observed Tom Riddle from afar, speculating over what he could possibly be plotting now; she surveyed Harry’s banter with the same blonde Slytherin girl, and a boy with a pug-nose; she watched his budding friendship with the Gryffindors grow; she walked with and sat next to Harry in the classes that they shared, or else remained with her Ravenclaw companions for Arithmancy and Study of Ancient Runes; between classes was spent in the library or the Great Hall; the end of the day heralded puzzling over a riddle to gain entrance into Ravenclaw Tower, and then remaining there for the rest of the night. Repeat.

It was a routine that she was comfortable with. She was even comfortable with the competition.
against Riddle in every single class (which he did not appear to be too pleased about), and never in her life did Hermione expect to say that she was comfortable with competing against Lord Voldemort to be top of the class. Other than Defence Against the Dark Arts, naturally. Ever since that first lesson, Harry had easily claimed the top rung of the ladder with his faultless performance – Hermione’s own conduct had been nothing special compared to his.

“Good evening, Hermione,” a wispy voice murmured into her ear. Hermione jumped. Almost. She was considerably less alarmed when she saw who it was.

It was a Friday night, and she had set up camp in a quiet corner of her common room with the company of Rowan, who had become a constant presence by her side, and Quincy Lovegood, who was hardly less scatterbrained than his descendent, Luna.

Sybill Trelawney, it seemed, had decided to join their party.

“Hello, Sybill,” Hermione returned, and ordered herself not to roll her eyes as she spoke. In her youth, Sybill Trelawney was no less irritating to Hermione – if anything, she had become worse. With huge round spectacles which magnified her eyes to almost twice their normal size, frazzled brown hair which gave the appearance of her having been electrocuted, and a plethora of sparkling rings adorning her knobbly fingers, the future Divination professor had not changed one bit.

“What troubling enigmas are you meditating on tonight?” Sybill asked tranquilly, fluttering around the table that the three were sitting at.

“What colour socks I should wear tomorrow,” repeated Rowan, looking befuddled. He, unlike Hermione, was unaccustomed to Sybill’s needlessly dramatic way of phrasing sentences.

“What colour socks I should wear tomorrow,” Quincy replied to Sybill’s original question, gazing down into his Divination textbook and tapping his quill against his chin. “Following the most noble and wise method of ichthyomancy, I have been advised that if I were to wear ivory socks tomorrow, then there will be no kippers to eat for breakfast in the morning, but if I were to wear maroon socks, Professor Flitwick will purchase a pet toad. I would rather like for Professor Flitwick to get a pet toad, but unfortunately I don’t own maroon socks. Therefore, I am inclined to believe that there will be no kippers for breakfast. Also unfortunately, I am craving kippers right now, so it would be most pragmatic of me to go to the kitchens at this moment and request a dish of them.”


“Oh, here we go,” muttered Rowan, who had by now managed to distinguish a Divination nutcase from the rest.

“Yes,” said Quincy, abruptly far less misty-eyed than he had been moments ago. “Do you have an issue with that?”

“I do,” responded Sybill, now also distinctly less breezy in her tone of voice. “Quite frankly, I am astonished that a Divination N.E.W.Ts student does not know that tea leaf reading, or crystal ball gazing, are both far more reliable practices. My great-grandmother, Cassandra–”

Hermione, who had returned to her Transfiguration homework as soon as Quincy uttered the word ‘ichthyomancy’, absently turned her face towards him without removing her eyes from the book in front of her and cut Sybill short.

“I’m sure you could charm a pair of socks to be maroon,” she said.
“They must be naturally maroon,” said Quincy, slamming his Divination book closed and standing stiffly. He turned and directed a cool gaze on Sybill. “I’ll have you know that my great-great-great-great-grandmother was the first known practitioner of ichthyomancy.”

“Quincy,” Rowan called after Quincy pleadingly as he breezed out of the common room, no doubt to follow through on his decision to find himself a platter of kippers in the kitchens.

“I’m sure he’ll be alright,” Hermione told Rowan, resting her hand on his arm lightly, and his gaze zeroed in on her hand, a dusting of colour immediately rising to his face.

Oops. Hermione moved her hand away quickly. After six years of her two best friends both being of the opposite gender, she had grown used to being able to move around them as comfortably as if they were her siblings, Harry especially. She always considered Harry to be the brother that she had never had. Rowan, however, paid attention to all of Hermione’s movements and always seemed to be reading in between the lines, even when there was nothing to read. But he was such a genuinely nice guy, Hermione couldn’t find it within herself to tell him that she wasn’t interested in him in that way.

Sybill seemed completely oblivious to the sudden tension at the table in front of her – but what could be expected of a second-year, much less Sybill Trelawney, of all people.

“Oh, he’s just being a Lovegood,” the twelve-year-old said, as ethereal as ever once again, brushing aside the whole matter. She added in a low tone, “Besides, all that about kippers is nonsense. I’m fairly certain that if he wears ivory socks, his closest friend will fall to their death from the top of the North Tower.”

“Sybill!” snapped Hermione, deciding to make a stand. “That is completely inappropriate!” Perhaps Hermione teaching Sybill this would take its toll against the future Divination professor, who very much enjoyed revealing fortunes of doom.

“Yes,” agreed Rowan quickly. “Completely.” He did look a little paler of face, however, most likely convinced that he was the one Sybill’s prediction referred to.

“Oh, hush,” said Sybill, and grabbed Hermione’s hand without her consent, examining the lines. “I see in your future that… oh, look at that, it’s all very hazy… someone that you trust will betray you, before the school year is out… and you will learn of some bad news soon–”

Hermione snatched her hand back before Sybill could continue.

“I’ll keep all of that in mind,” she snapped, unwilling to listen to any more of the nonsense that was being spouted into her ears. Sybill took no apparent offence to Hermione’s tone and smiled mysteriously, drifting on to bother the next set of Ravenclaws.

“I can’t stand that woman,” Hermione grumbled under her breath, suddenly feeling too annoyed to concentrate on her work.

“Hardly a woman,” said Rowan, chewing on the tip of his quill. “And she doesn’t seem quite right in the head, does she?”

“Delacour!” One of the fourth-years came rushing up to Hermione, bringing a halt to the fascinating conversation regarding Sybill. “I was meant to deliver this to you.”

She held out a slip of parchment, and Hermione took it from her with thanks, and unrolled it.
Miss Delacour,

If I could request your presence in my office immediately. You will find that the entrance will open for you the same way that you open any locked door.

Headmaster Dippet

Hermione read the note over, then folded it neatly and tucked it into her pocket.

“I’m sorry, Rowan,” she said, standing and taking her wand. “I have to go meet with the Headmaster.”

“Right now?” Rowan asked, sounding vaguely dismayed. “But we haven’t even begun Conjuration…”

“I’ll do it when I get back.” Hermione flicked her wand at her study items, and they promptly stacked themselves up neatly and zipped up to the seventh-year girls’ dorm, where they would place themselves in her trunk as they had been ordered. “But I really have to go now.”

She was almost certain that Dumbledore or Dippet had found a way to send herself and Harry back to their own time, and nothing could hold her back if this really was the case.

***

As Hermione was walking down the corridor towards Dippet’s office, Harry came bolting around the corner and after her, coming to a halt as he crashed into her. For a single alarming moment, Hermione thought that he was being chased, but it became apparent that he was alone when nobody followed after.

“Thank Merlin!” he gasped, clutching at Hermione’s shoulder as he pressed his hand against a stitch in his side. “I… ran… all the way from the dungeons… so I wouldn’t miss you.”

“You could have just met me inside Dippet’s office,” Hermione replied, bewildered. “I’m sure Dippet would have waited for you before telling me anything.”

Harry waved this away, finally releasing her shoulder and dragged a hand through his ruffled hair while straightening his glasses.

“Wouldn’t have been able to get into the office in the first place,” he declared.

“But Dippet wrote down what the password is–”

“I don’t understand what it is, it’s in riddle form,” spat Harry, then paused, considering his words. “Oh, what the hell! Why does everything have to relate back to Riddle these days?”

“Bad night with the Slytherins again?” Hermione sympathised. From what she had been told, ever since Riddle had confronted Harry almost a week ago, everybody in Slytherin had taken to ignoring Harry – no doubt the work of Riddle.

“Why ever would I be having a bad night with the Slytherins?” asked Harry sarcastically. “I just
love my only company being Margot Greengrass and Edwin Parkinson – the slippery snakes.”

“They can’t be that bad,” said Hermione, trying her best to reassure him.

“Are you kidding me?” he said. “Parkinson is a self-entitled prat, and Margot is just another pure-blood supremacist.”

“Of course,” murmured Hermione, but she wasn’t fooled. She had heard of the way that Harry had defended Margot against Tom when he had accused her of ‘spreading her legs’ for Harry. Besides, Harry wouldn’t have agreed to teach just anyone how to conjure a Patronus.

“If you say so,” said Hermione, raising her eyebrows. “Anyway, if you hated their company that much, you could just go off and find your Gryffindors.”

She now referred to Ignatius Prewett, Finlay Bell, Phyllis Colbert and Bridget Bones as ‘Harry’s’ Gryffindors, rather than both of theirs, because Hermione, unlike Harry, had not been clinging to her old house the same way that he was, and rarely even spoke to any members of the lion house. She truly was content in Ravenclaw, keeping the company of Rowan and Quincy and, unfortunately, Sybill.

“Yeah, well,” Harry said, “I’ve got to maintain some connections in Slytherin, especially with Riddle so set against me. If I distanced myself from absolutely everyone in there, it would be so much easier for the floor to swallow me up. And I’d rather stay on my feet.”

“Right.” Hermione could hear how dry her tone as.

“You just changed the subject, anyway,” he snapped. “We were talking about the password being a riddle, not discussing who I spend my time with.”

“You were the one who changed the subject,” Hermione pointed out, but Harry couldn’t have looked less abashed.

“Anyway,” he said as they came to a stop in front of Dippet’s office, facing the gargoyle which blocked the way. “What’s the password? Something about opening locked doors? You open locked doors with a key, so is there a key hidden somewhere? Is it an anagram of ‘key’?”

“Harry,” said Hermione seriously. “This is a magic school, not a Muggle school. How do witches and wizards unlock doors?”

“They use the spell Alohomora,” Harry said slowly, as if it were a trick question, but the gargoyle bowed out of the way when he spoke the word, and he sent Hermione a look which suggested that he thought that ‘Alohomora’ was the silliest password that he had ever heard, before they stepped into the headmaster’s office.

Dippet was sitting at his desk when they emerged in the large, circular room, warm and homey in both colour and décor. Hermione nor Harry had spoken to Dippet personally at all, but he looked genial enough, with only a few wisps of white hair left on his head and very warm brown eyes.

“Ah, Mr. and Miss Delacour,” he said pleasantly, and then passed them a sly glance. “Or would it be more appropriate to call you Mr. Potter and Miss Granger?”
“If you insist on the latter,” Hermione said, “then we would rather that remained only in private, sir.”

“Of course,” Dippet said, smiling and lacing his fingers together. “Please, take a seat, both of you.”

Upon a glance, Hermione saw that two new seats, laid with crimson pillows, had appeared in front of his desk, and so she went and took one. It was spongy and comfortable beyond belief.

“How are you both finding classes?” asked Dippet, as serene as always. Hermione fought the urge to ask him the real reason as to why he had summoned them both.

“Familiar enough,” Harry responded.

“I hear from Professor Merrythought that you have done very well in her class this week,” the headmaster told him, and turned to Hermione. “As for you, young lady, every single one of your teachers have spoken of what an exceptional student you are turning out to be.”

“Thank you, sir,” Hermione said, unable to keep from beaming. It got her every time.

“Even in our own time,” Harry said loyally, “Hermione’s always been the brightest witch of our year.”

“Harry,” Hermione whispered, embarrassed. She recalled him saying the exact same thing to Slughorn the previous year, and it unfailingly got her flustered.

“I’m sure she has been,” Dippet said, eyes sparkling. “Now, I have eyes and ears everywhere in this school, and I’m relieved to have learned that you have both settled in so well.”

Hermione could almost hear Harry’s muffled snort. He was of the opposite belief.

“We’ve settled in,” said Hermione, steering the conversation in the direction that she wanted it to go, “but I don’t believe that either of us wish to remain here long term.”

“That happens to be exactly why I called you here,” Dippet said, after a pregnant pause. He sighed. “Professor Dumbledore has been researching into the whole matter of extended time travel, specifically by time-turner. Anything which may point us in the direction as to why you two have been sent so far back into the past, when only five hours should be possible.”

“And?” Hermione urged, leaning forward in her chair slightly. Could they possibly be going home? But Dippet sighed heavily, and Hermione’s heart sank. No, she would not be seeing Ron again tonight. Ron, who she missed perhaps above all else. Not that she would care to admit that fact aloud.

“There has been no progress over the past week,” the headmaster told them. “As far as the records are concerned, your case is the only one like it which is known. Sending you back will be far more difficult than both Albus and I had anticipated.”

“Oh,” Hermione said. “So… we might be stuck here.”

“For a little while,” Dippet said gently. Harry had been awfully quiet this whole time, and he still did not speak.

“Well.” There was a lump in Hermione’s throat which she couldn’t seem to get around. She swallowed, and there was an audible click. “Well,” she repeated, standing, and her voice seemed to
be excessively formal in her ears suddenly. “Thank you, Professor Dippet. Harry and I won’t keep you any longer.”

She saw Harry nodding silently along with this from the corner of her eye, and as they both exited, she was certain that she heard Dippet whisper after them, “Hold on, children.”

As soon as they were free in the corridor, Hermione paused, turning to face Harry. He seemed to be refusing to meet her eye, looking off into the distance deliberately, tilting his head so that his hair shielded a fraction of his face.

“Are you okay, Harry?” she asked softly, almost certain that he was about to start crying, but after a short moment, he turned and scowled at her playfully. His eyes were completely dry.

“Of course I’m not, ‘Mione!” he said. “If Dippet’s right, and we’re going to be stuck here for a while, then that means I have to start taking classes more seriously. Especially that dratted Felix Felicis.”

“Oh.” Hermione felt mildly confused for a moment, then shrugged it off. “Well, I could help you out…”

“No,” said Harry. “In Potions, you need to stay preoccupied with challenging Riddle on the front lines. I’ll have to rely on my own immense talent in potion-brewing for this task. Oh, and did I ever tell you that I met a most delightful first-year Slytherin right before I came here for Dippet’s meeting?”

“A ‘delightful first-year’?” Hermione repeated. “Have you come around to the fact that not all Slytherins are evil, then?”

“Umbridge, Hermione,” Harry said, ignoring her comment completely. “Dolores Umbridge.”

“No way,” said Hermione.

“Yes way,” Harry countered, and grinned bitterly. “The up-side of us being stuck here for longer means that I’ll have more time to make her life completely miserable.”

“Please don’t do anything regrettable, Harry,” said Hermione, concerned, and grabbed his arm. “Most of Slytherin house already hates you because of Riddle. If you do something to harm one of their own, they’d tear you apart.”

“Nobody likes Umbridge anyway, though,” said Harry casually, as cool as a cucumber as he shook Hermione’s hand off. “I’m sure that they wouldn’t object if I set Lady Munchkin’s tail on fire or something innocent like that.”

“Who in Merlin’s name is Lady Munchkin?” Hermione groaned, pressing a hand to her face.

“Only her pet cat,” said Harry.

“Don’t you dare set a cat on fire, Harry Potter!”

“Keep your voice down, Hermione, I was only joking…”

Chapter End Notes
That opening author’s note was very rude of me. I didn’t even thank anybody for the kudos and comments that you all left! :3 Thank you all, for powering the much-needed engine which keeps this story alive. Sorry that this chapter was pretty uneventful. It was a bit of a filler chapter, really, and a chance to let you see more of Hermione and her dear admirer, Rowan Poole. Poor boy. And poor Hermione. Has absolutely no experience in handling romantic matters.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Tom smirked.

“Yet, there is still a person missing,” he said. “One person to complete the seven who will stand around me. One more to formulate the most powerful number of all.” All eyes land on the empty chair to Tom’s left. Nobody ever spoke of the vacant space. Not until now.

“You have found him, my lord?” Rosier prompted, golden-brown eyes glinting in the dim lighting. Once again, a ripple passed through them all. Quiet titters of excitement, of anticipation.

“I have indeed,” Tom said softly.

Chapter Notes

G’day, I hope that you all find that a little more happens this chapter. :) Of course, have the standard apology for any potential typos...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Addressing all knights –

Gather in the place of hidden things at moon high tonight. Bring nobody else.

***

Harry rapped at thin air with his wand, calling forth a flock of doves with the incantation, Avis, silently ringing in his head.

There was a pink explosion, and as the smoke cleared, a lonely little brown feather spiralled down to land in front of him.

Harry looked at it sadly. It wasn’t even the white of a dove. He caught Hermione looking at him pityingly, and scowled at her.

“I’m sure that I could do it if it wasn’t non-verbal,” he defended himself.

“You know perfectly well that N.E.W.T. level Transfiguration requires non-verbal spell casting,” Hermione reminded him, summoning her third flock of doves of the lesson in a blast of blue smoke, and then vanishing them immediately afterwards.

Harry groaned, slapping his wand down on the table and turning in his chair to watch how everybody else with progressing.
Harry caught sight of the Slytherins first, as he had a tendency of doing nowadays. Riddle was first (he was always first), pretending to be a role model student as per usual, demonstrating to Victoria Farley, one of the Slytherin girls in their year, how to perfect the wrist movement of the Avis spell; behind Riddle was Nott, studying his textbook with a frown set on his rabbit-like mouth, as if there was a fact or figure that wasn’t adding up; at Nott’s side, ignoring Nott completely, was Lestrange, flirting with Lucienne Carrow, another Slytherin girl; last but not least, there was Mulciber, leaning his head on his hand as he twiddled with his wand, pale eyes glittering in stark contrast to his darker tone of skin, staring directly back at Harry. Harry jerked backwards, then looked away, almost guiltily. He tilted back onto the two back legs of his chair and leaned back to speak to Ignatius, who sat behind him with Phyllis Colbert.

“Have you managed to do it, yet?” Harry asked the two, and was extremely relieved when they both shook their heads. Sitting with Hermione in every class was really having its toll on his confidence in his intelligence. Normally, he and Ron would be in the same boat together.

“I think I heard a bird whistle once,” Phyllis offered.

“Don’t be silly,” said Ignatius. “That was just me.”

Harry prodded his brown feather with his wand.

“Yeah, no luck either,” he agreed glumly.

“It’s the non-verbal bit which is throwing me off,” Ignatius said. “I can’t get the hang of it.” Harry was opening his mouth to throw in his own opinion of how nasty he was finding Conjuration, when Dumbledore came flitting past.

“How are you managing the Bird-Conjuring Charm, Miss Delacour?” he asked Hermione, and Harry turned to watch as she replied, “I think that I’m managing it alright, professor. But I’ve been trying to conjure release doves, and I’m almost certain that they’re turning out to be white homing pigeons, which is a bit troubling…”

Harry muffled a snort in his hand. Valiantly, Dumbledore’s amusement only showed in his brilliant blue eyes – it was obvious that during the week that he had taken a class with Hermione in it, he had gathered that she was a perfectionist.

“Is that so?” he asked Hermione seriously. “You’d best show me, then.”

Hermione gave a grave nod, whisked her wand out, and conjured a flawless flock of doves. Harry cupped his chin in his hand and gave her one of his special looks which told her that he thought she was being ridiculous.

“Well, Miss Delacour,” said Dumbledore, allowing a dove to land on his shoulder, “these appear to be perfect release doves.”

“Oh,” said Hermione, sturdily ignoring Harry, and vanished the doves.

“Also a very well performed Vanishing Spell,” Dumbledore added. “Take ten points for Ravenclaw.”

“Thank you, sir,” Hermione said, beaming, turning to say something to Rowan Poole, sitting at the table opposite, and Harry smiled. The smile fell away as soon as Dumbledore turned to him.

“And are you three producing results as fruitful as Miss Delacour?” he asked Harry, Ignatius and Phyllis, sounding more cheerful than was necessary.
“Sort of,” they all said at the same time. Hermione, who had the rare skill of listening in to other people’s conversations whilst still maintaining her own talk with somebody else, threw Harry an incredulous look.

*Liar*, her face read. It was Harry’s turn to ignore her.

“Very good then,” Dumbledore said. “Why don’t you show me?”

“Um,” said Harry, picturing his lonely brown feather, and said charmingly, “Ignatius is very keen for your feedback, sir.”

“Yes, very keen,” Phyllis said quickly. “*He* would very much like to show you.”

“I would?” said Ignatius, his face blank, and then he laughed in an embarrassed sort of way and said, “Right, I would.” He not-so-secretly threw Harry and Phyllis a dirty look as he cleared his throat, held up his wand, and conjured a miniature feather duster amidst a turquoise cloud.

“Ah,” said Dumbledore, picking up the duster and examining it. “Well, a little bit more work is required, Mr Prewett. As you can see, this is not a flock of doves, and the smoke should be sky-blue, as opposed to turquoise. I would say that some improvement on the hand movement would help.”

“Yes, sir,” said Ignatius, looking miserable, and when Dumbledore moved on, he hissed to Harry and Phyllis, “Brilliant, he thinks I’m a right idiot now.”

“To be fair,” said Phyllis, “It’s not as bad as I thought it would be.”

“Yes,” agreed Harry, glancing at the feather duster. “It’s a very nice feather duster.”

By the end of the Transfiguration lesson, Harry had progressed to the point that he was able to conjure one white duck, which he was very pleased about.

“Class dismissed,” Dumbledore informed them all as he was the first to exit the classroom, and Harry piled his books into his bag, teasing Hermione over her concern of whether she had conjured white homing pigeons instead of release doves.

“Nobody knows the difference anyway,” he told her as they wandered into the corridor.

“One is a pigeon,” sniffed Hermione, “and one is a dove. There’s a difference. Anyway, what if this spell pops up in our final exam?”

“Then I’m sure that you’d ace it,” Harry responded, annoyed, and Hermione immediately burst into a fit of giggles.

“There is something very wrong with you, Harry,” she said. “You suffer from the most horrendous mood swings sometimes.”

“I do not,” said Harry, miffed.

“You somehow go from laughing at me to complementing me in the space of two seconds,” Hermione said, starting to walk in the opposite direction down the corridor. “I’ve got Ancient Runes now, so I suppose I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Yeah, see you,” Harry said, turning to head to the library, already planning out his free study period. Except that there was a prickling sensation on his scalp, warning him that something was
“Protego.” Harry said in a low voice, bringing his wand down in front of him, and a silvery veil appeared in front of him, a split second before a spell ricocheted off of it, striking the ceiling and pelting back down to hit Hermione, who was halfway down the corridor. She let out a most uncharacteristic shriek, dropping her book bag and attempting to cover her face with her hands as massive bats started sprouting out of her nostrils.

“Hermione!” Harry yelled, dropping his shield and running after her. Most of the Transfiguration students in their class had stopped in their tracks from various positions in the corridor to watch the drama.

“What’s going on?” That was Ignatius with Phyllis in tow, running over to meet Harry, who was cradling Hermione as she hysterically tried to prevent the development of more bats.

“It’s the Bat-Bogey Hex,” Harry told him grimly, who had witnessed it a great number of times, what with his ex-girlfriend, Ginny Weasley, being infamous for her casting of it. “Do you know the counter spell?”

“No,” said Ignatius wildly.

“She should go to the hospital wing,” Phyllis advised, staring in morbid fascination as the bats continued to leave Hermione’s nose. Harry deeply agreed with her as he grabbed Hermione’s book bag and started pulling Hermione in the direction of the hospital wing under the watchful eyes of the other Transfiguration students.

“What happened?” Here came Rowan Poole, his eyes wide as he took in Hermione’s predicament.

Harry, having never spoken to Poole before now, quickly evaluated Hermione’s apparent suitor. He was a picture of neatness in his uniform, was very lanky, very blonde, and wore round tortoiseshell glasses which Harry was sure were probably quite fashionable in this time. Pleasant enough of face, Harry supposed.

“Bat-Bogey Hex,” was all Harry said, flanked by Ignatius and Phyllis.

“Targeting Hermione?” said Poole, hurriedly following along as they all made their way towards the hospital wing. Harry didn’t respond to this question, recalling how it had come in his direction first.

“You’ve got Ancient Runes with Hermione, don’t you?” he said. “Could you tell the professor where Hermione is?”

“I’m coming with you lot,” Poole said, sounding offended.

“Hermione doesn’t need a whole security group, Poole,” Harry snapped.

“I’m just trying to be helpful…” said Poole, and he continued on with them.

“The hex is quite nasty, isn’t it?” said Phyllis. “Somebody must really not like your cousin, Harry.”

Hermione made a scoffing noise.

“What is this quaint little company that I see?” somebody drawled, and Harry fought the urge to
snarl, opting to ignore the most recent additions to the ‘company’.

“What do you want, Riddle?” barked Ignatius, having no such qualms about snarling.

“Shut up, Prewett.” That was Lestrange – Harry could see him through his peripherals.

“Bet you were the one who fired the hex, Lestrange, huh?” said Ignatius.

“Ignatius, not now,” Phyllis was murmuring.

“You better listen to the mudblood–”

“Piss off, Lestrange–”

“Guys, shouldn’t we be concentrating on getting Hermione to Madam Pomfrey…?”

“As you can see, Poole, there’s a tangle of poisonous vipers standing in the way–”

“I think we should all calm down–”

“How dare you talk to me–”

“You have got to be shitting me!” Harry bellowed. “Get out of the fucking way, you lot!”

Silently, a pathway was cleared, and Harry and Hermione passed through, Harry attempting to shield her from unfriendly eyes the whole way.

“I should take points from you for such language, Delacour,” said Riddle in his charming manner of voice.

“I frankly don’t care,” Harry responded coolly, leaving the rest of the troupe behind in a cloud of shock.

“See,” Hermione said between bats. “Mood swings.”

Harry chose to ignore this comment.

“Let’s just get you to Madam Pomfrey,” he muttered. “I’m sure that Poole will inform your professor that you have been the victim of one of Riddle’s crony’s hexes.”

“How do you know it was Riddle?” Hermione asked, her voice still muffled. She seemed to have grown slightly more accustomed to having bats fly out of her nose – at least, as accustomed as one can get.

“Just a gut-feeling,” was all Harry said, because he was sure, without a doubt, that it had been a Slytherin who had fired the Bat-Bogey Hex at him.

***

It was when Hogwarts castle went to sleep, drifting into oblivion beneath the chilly blanket of autumn, that there was movement from within the sixth and seventh year Slytherin boys’ dormitories.

It began when one shadow whispered out into the night, followed by a second, a third, a forth, a fifth, a sixth, and a seventh, each separate boy stealing away at precise two minute intervals. Each flying for the seventh floor, breathing softly as he stood before a blank wall and wished with all his
heart for a secret place of privacy, before entering the room which appeared in response to his desire.

After all, there was no place more secure than The Room of Requirement.

It was with the seventh and final entry that the first conference of the year between the Knights of Walpurgis commenced.

Tom stood at the head of the rectangular table, looking over his select gathering. To his right sat Mulciber, then Nott, then Dolohov, followed by Lestrange, who sat at the foot of the table. Continuing around the table, there was Avery, and then finally Rosier. This left one seat empty – the one directly to Tom’s left. None of them knew who would be taking up that seat eventually – not even Tom had, until a week ago. Tonight was the night to introduce them all to the final member of the Inner Circle.

Tom continued to watch them in silence for a few more moments, allowing them to begin to squirm beneath his sharp gaze, before he finally spoke.

“Knights of Walpurgis,” Tom drawled, “before I begin, let us not forget that I am a lord who treats his disciples exactly as they deserve to be treated. For example, I give credit where credit is due. Do you agree, Cassius?” He directed his eyes on Mulciber.

Mulciber met his gaze evenly and said, “I do agree, my lord.”

It was during such meetings that it had become customary to address Tom with the respect that he demanded.

“Hm,” said Tom, satisfied. “And do you all agree that I also punish… where punishment is deserved? Francis? Peregrine?”

Nott and Lestrange both went rigid, as expected, and neither answered. Tom smiled, and it probably was not a very reassuring smile at all.

“On the first night, the day the we arrived here, the two of you… displeased me, greatly,” he said, toying with his pale yew wand. “I believe that I informed you that you would not go unpunished, did I not?”

In a rather resigned manner, Lestrange and Nott removed themselves from their chairs and came to kneel in front of Tom. They all knew the drill. It would not be the first – or last – time that they tasted the Cruciatus Curse.

Tom Marvolo Riddle derived great pleasure from the use of the Cruciatus Curse. He loved the exhilaration as adrenaline flooded through his bloodstream when he took control of those who had wronged him; he relished the scent of pain which trilled through the air, knowing that it was his distaste for the weak which had everybody set him up high on a pedestal – the highest pedestal of them all.

Nott and Lestrange were writhing on the ground, barely bothering to swallow their shrieks of pain as they were tortured almost senseless – and Tom laughed, unable to retain his delight that they had finally been dished out what they deserved, before abruptly cutting short the Cruciatus Curse. He would not Crucio them into oblivion – he needed them intact if he wanted his Inner Circle finally complete, and it would be such a bother if he was forced to stake out yet another two members.

“That should do,” Tom said, completely unruffled, and allowed Lestrange and Nott to scramble
back into their seats, trying desperately to conceal their heavy breathing, their dilated eyes and shaky limbs. A thin stream of blood trickled out of Nott’s nostril and down his chin – he did not bother to wipe it away. Perhaps he was too lost for the moment to have even noticed it.

Tom took in a deep breath of air, cleansing his head of any more vindictive thoughts. Now for the important news.

“My prized and deeply valued followers,” he began, “we all know of the movement of Grindelwald beyond the walls of Hogwarts. We all see his attempts to reign over the whole world, to bring muggles down to bow at his feet. And we know that his methods are crass. He is going to lose. Which is why we are here. We will carry out Grindelwald’s legacy once he is gone, and we shall be smarter and more unified than he had ever been. What sets us up above him is that we will succeed in purifying the wizarding world of muggle scum. It all begins here, within this room, within my Inner Circle – the Knights of Walpurgis. We will bring around the beginning of a true revolution.”

Murmurs of agreement and approval ripple through those seated at the table. Tom smirked.

“Yet, there is still a person missing,” he said. “One person to complete the seven who will stand around me. One more to formulate the most powerful number of all.” All eyes land of the empty chair to Tom’s left. Nobody ever spoke of the vacant space. Not until now.

“You have found him, my lord?” Rosier prompted, golden-brown eyes glinting in the dim lighting. Once again, a ripple passed through them all. Quiet titters of excitement, of anticipation.

“I have indeed,” Tom said softly. “But he will resist our advances. He needs convincing. We cannot be lenient on him.”

“But what is his name?” Dolohov demanded, pressing his palms down onto the tabletop, before lowering his eyes and adding, “My lord,” when Tom sent him a smouldering glare.

“He goes by the name,” said Tom, “of Harry Delacour.”

Another silence. This one stretched for eons.

“You say that he ‘goes by the name of’,” Nott ventured finally, his face still pallid as a result of the Cruciatus Curse. “Do you not believe that that is his true name, my lord?”

“Interesting that you should ask that, Francis,” Tom said, a sneer tugging at his mouth. He drummed his fingers against the tabletop and said, “One week ago, I had the pleasure of speaking to Mr Delacour, face-to-face in private. I was feeling… out of sorts that day, and demanded to know who Delacour was. He reacted very suspiciously to that question, which has raised some scepticism on my behalf regarding our fellow Slytherin’s true identity.”

“So… his name isn’t Harry Delacour?” asked Dolohov, his heavy eyebrows reaching up to his hairline.

“I don’t know, Antonin,” Tom snapped, causing the other to flinch. “As a matter-of-fact, Delacour has evaded us all so well that none of us know anything about him, despite sleeping in the same dormitory as four of us. This is going to end now.”

“Why do you want him so badly, anyway?” That was Lestrange, trying his hardest not to sound sulky. “I thought we were trying to isolate him.”

“Yes,” said Tom, relaxing into his chair and narrowing his eyes, “but that was before. Now, I see
that I could put him to great use. Delacour is very powerful, see, and with the right guidance, he would be a great asset to our team.”

“If I might be so bold, my lord,” Mulciber interjected, his voice silky smooth. “Haven’t we already seen that Delacour’s allegiances lie with blood-traitors like Prewett, and mudbloods like Colbert? For all that we know, Delacour might be a mudblood himself, or even a filthy half-blood. We simply don’t know enough about him.”

Tom almost stiffened when Mulciber said ‘half-blood’, almost. No, it would not do for any of them to realise that he himself was the result of a love affair between a pureblood and a Muggle, fuelled by a flimsy love potion. It would not do at all.

“I will be the one to make that call, Cassius,” Tom hissed, irritation burning in his veins. “You would do well to remember that I am the one who calls the shots around here.” He then proceeded to paste his best death stare across his face, and Mulciber bowed his head, exposing the nape of his neck in submission.

“My apologies, my lord,” he murmured. “I overstepped boundaries.”

“You did indeed,” said Tom, returning his gaze to the rest of the occupants of the table. “Regarding Delacour, we must take quick action. It would be a great loss if we allow him to be claimed by the…” he paused.

“The Gryffindorks,” Avery offered.

“Yes,” Tom agreed. “I fear that they are already beginning to view Delacour as Prewett’s pet Slytherin.”

“Pet Slytherin?” Lestrange repeated, speaking for the first time since his punishment, his indignation yanking him out of his brood. “Pet Slytherin? Oh, next time I see him, I’ll show that Prewett…” Tom did not disagree.

“We will persuade Delacour to our side, though,” he said. “We will stir distrust between him and his Gryffindors, and then he will see that he only has us to return to.”

“What about his cousin?” Nott asked, ever vigilant. “Those two are connected at the hip, haven’t you noticed? It’s almost unnatural for family to be that close. Shouldn’t they find each other annoying?”

“I’m sure the mudblood will keep her preoccupied,” Avery scoffed.

“Which mudblood are we talking about right now?” asked Rosier.

“Poole, of course,” said Avery, sounding disgusted. “Surely you’ve noticed the way he pants after her, like a little lapdog. Anybody from within a ten metre radius can smell his testosterone in the air. He’s like a bitch on heat.”

“Ew,” said Lestrange. “I did not need that image in my head, thank you very much.”

“This is getting beside the point,” Nott interjected. “What are we going to do about The Other Delacour?” Over time, Tom’s Inner Circle had apparently adopted his sobriquet for Hermione Delacour, to his great amusement.

“Gideon proves a very good point,” Tom said, acknowledging Avery with a nod. Avery looked beyond pleased with himself. “Poole would prove to be the perfect distraction. It would be simple
The following morning, Harry arose early as he normally did in order to avoid communication with the other Slytherins in his dormitory, and rushed to meet Hermione in the hospital wing, where she had stayed overnight. Madam Pomfrey told Harry, to his great disappointment, that Hermione would not back on her feet that day, as the Bat-Bogey Hex had been exceptionally strong, resulting in stray bats flying out of Hermione’s nose right through the night and into the morning, even despite the performance of the counter spell. Consequentially, Harry was resigned to a morning of suffering through Potions without her, which he found to be a real bummer. She was, after all, the sole reason that he had not yet blown up the classroom.

In low spirits, Harry went to the Great Hall for breakfast, where he found himself to be the first person to arrive. He proceeded to make himself feel better by stealing all the sugar cubes from the Slytherin table and sending them over to the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables, where the confectionary would be out of bounds to the sugar-loving eleven-year-old Dolores Umbridge. At least, out of bounds in her eyes – Umbridge had proven herself to loathe both the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs, as was typical for most Slytherins. Last night, Harry had come to the decision to torment her in the most innocent ways possible – such as parting her from her favourite cups of sweet tea for a pick-me-up in the mornings.

In a somewhat brighter mood, Harry helped himself to the platter of untouched sausages and bacon, and wondered not for the first time why he had never woken up early in previous years – it was excellent, not having to compete with the hordes of hungry students for first pickings. As the saying went, the early bird catches the worm. As well as vengeance against former evil professors.

“You seem awfully cheerful,” said Margot when she arrived twenty minutes later. “What did you do, poison the coffee?”

“I did not poison the coffee,” said Harry, flipping through his new Potions textbook. “Though that is an excellent idea, Margot. I might just use it.”

“Um, okay?” Margot seemed unsure of what to do around an upbeat Harry (which had Harry wondering if it really was that rare for him to be in a good mood), and she proceeded to eye the...
carafe of coffee suspiciously. She asked, “Is your cousin out of the hospital wing?”

“No,” Harry responded, a little of his cheer evaporating. Not even getting one over Umbridge would prevent the disastrous Potions lesson which was sure to be coming up next.

“People are talking,” Margot said, after a short pause. “They say that you’re the one who hexed her.” Harry had not been expecting that.


“No really,” said Margot, unfazed. “You need to get used to people seeing the worst of you, having been sorted into Slytherin and all. You’ll learn to put up with it.”

“Put up with it?” Harry repeated.

“Goodness knows the rest of us Slytherins do,” Margot said. Harry scowled.

“Well, I didn’t hex Hermione!” he said. “That is the last thing that I would do.”

“Perhaps,” said Margot, “but it would make for a good story if you did, which is probably how the rumour started. Listen – two transfer students arrive at Hogwarts, as thick as thieves, but, alas, are split between two houses – the beautiful young woman is taken under the wing of wise Ravenclaw, and the mysterious young man is sent into sly Slytherin… as they grow further apart, the Slytherin becomes jealous of his cousin’s growing closeness to her fellow Ravenclaws, and in a fit of rage, he curses her…”

“That’s stupid,” said Harry. Then, “Do you think that Hermione’s beautiful?”

“Is that all that you picked out from that?” Margot asked, sighing. “Yes, I think that she’s beautiful… in her own unique way. You must see the way that all the boys look at her.”

“Huh,” Harry said. He had, naturally, observed the manner in which a great number of the male specimen watched her, but he had always thought that the allure was merely that she was a Frenchwoman (or posing as one), trained in the language of romance. Perhaps he should be a bit more concerned. He asked Margot, “Should I be playing the role of protective big brother?”

Margot laughed, but when she saw that he wasn’t joking, her expression went flat.

“Oh, you’re being serious,” she said, then gave him a quick once-over. “You know, you can try, but it would be much more effective if you were a bit broader of shoulder… and a bit taller.”

“Hmph,” said Harry. He was all too aware that being both five foot four and slim in build labelled him as petite, the exact opposite of intimidating. He didn’t need Margot reminding him of this little fact.

“Why the long face, Delacour?” Edwin Parkinson came plonking into the seat opposite them.

“There is no long face to ask about,” Harry said bitingly, at the exact moment that Margot said, “He’s considering playing protective big brother for his cousin.”

“Ah,” said Parkinson, his dark eyes gleaming. He apparently had only caught Margot’s words. “I don’t think it would be very convincing. Exceptional DADA skills aside, you couldn’t cow a fly. The truth is, Delacour, you’re puny.”
“You’re not a gem yourself, Parkinson,” Harry snapped, and proceeded to defend himself with, “And it’s ideal for Seekers to not be bulky.”

“You’re a Seeker?” said Parkinson, a grin creeping across his face. “Crockett’s going on about how try-outs are coming up soon. You should go for Seeker position.”

“Crockett?” asked Harry suspiciously.

“Winky Crockett,” Margot put in. “He’s a sixth year, and holds the position of both Captain and Chaser. Plans on quitting next year, though, so that he can focus on his studies, so he wants to win the Quidditch Cup this year. Are you any good at playing?”

“I’m alright,” Harry said, brushing off the question. “He wants to win the Cup this year? Hasn’t managed yet?” He tried not to sound pleased.

“Gryffindor won last year,” Parkinson said. “And the year before, and the year before that. Dumbledore’s been awful smug. Slughorn’s getting quite annoyed about it, and really wants a brilliant team to take out Gryffindor this year.”

“Right,” said Harry. He very much would have loved to play Seeker again, but wasn’t so sure about playing for Slytherin. It would be like betraying Gryffindor – he didn’t even want to consider what Oliver Wood’s face would look like if he knew that Harry was considering joining Slytherin’s team.

“I would play myself,” said Parkinson, “except that I haven’t a droplet of coordination on a broomstick.”

“Sweet Morgana,” said Margot, “did you just admit to not being good at something? You never cease to amaze me, Edwin.”

“Oh, get off your high horse, Greengrass,” Parkinson parried, though he looked somewhat pleased with himself. Harry could see a strong case of the Ron-Hermione Syndrome in them. Secretly yearning for each other, but concealing it behind insults. What a hell-ride these two were in for, if they kept it up.

Harry glanced over at the Gryffindor table, and saw that Ignatius had arrived. He stood.

“I’ll see you later,” he told the two Slytherins.

“Oh, and Delacour,” Parkinson called after him, “we haven’t forgotten about your offer to help us out in DADA. When do we begin?”

Harry gritted his teeth, stalking away without replying. As if he had ‘offered’ willingly. This was precisely the reason why he needed down time among the Gryffindors. These Slytherins knew all too well how to press his buttons. Maybe he really did need Quidditch, if only to allow him an allocated amount of time each week to just let it all go. All his concerns, his stresses – every tension which came with being the famous Harry Potter.

“Say, Ignatius,” Harry said, sitting down at the Gryffindor table. “What do you know about this year’s Quidditch?”

Chapter End Notes
I just couldn’t resist from throwing Quidditch into the lot. I mean, what’s Harry Potter with Quidditch? Also, as you could probably tell from the passage in Tom’s POV, the Tomarry part of this fic may finally start coming to play in the near future. ;)
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

“It’s in times like this that people show their true colours,” Riddle went on loudly.
“For example, in this case, we can see that Ignatius Prewett is a prejudiced, egotistical—”

“What do you want from me, Riddle?” Harry asked quietly, and Riddle paused in his diatribe.

“Why, I just want to be your friend, Harry,” he said.

Chapter Notes

[PLEASE READ AUTHOR’S NOTE] I am most sorry to inform you that from this point on, my updates will become irregular again, as my break has drawn to an end, and the work will be flooding back in. So hang in there, guys! This isn’t to say that I won’t update until 2018 or anything, I’m just letting you know this so that you’ll have an explanation for all the gaping holes in the space between updates. If by the time I start focusing on this fic again I have a completely new audience and you current readers have moved on, I just want to let you all know that I have appreciated your time here with Harry, Tom, Hermione and the rest of the crew!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry flipped to the Felix Felicis recipe in his Potions book and hunted for the line which he was up to.

*Juice a squill bulb,* he read, and then doubled back over it, frowning, tapping against the name absently with the tip of his quill. A squill bulb. Whatever that was…

“Have you never heard of a squill bulb?”

*Oh, you have got to be kidding me,* Harry thought, turning to glare at Riddle as he sat himself down in Hermione’s customary spot, bringing all of his belongings with him.

“Well, I’ve never heard of people sitting in somebody else’s seat,” Harry shot back, which sounded much stupider aloud than it had in his head. Riddle merely hummed, turning to look at Harry with half-lidded eyes.

“I hope you don’t mind my being here, Delacour,” he purred, “because I certainly don’t mind.”

Harry stared at him incredulously, almost offended. What was up with Riddle today? Just couldn’t help himself from trying to make Harry’s life miserable.

“I do happen to mind,” he said, “because that is Hermione’s seat that you’re sitting in.”
“Hermione?” Tom repeated, as if he didn’t know who Harry was talking about, then, “Oh! You’re darling cousin. Well, she seemed quite ill-disposed last I saw her in the hospital wing.”

“You were with her in the hospital wing?” Harry’s suspicions reared upwards in his chest, and he suddenly remembered what Margot had said at breakfast. Something about Hermione being beautiful, and the way that all the boys looked at her. It occurred to Harry then that perhaps Riddle was interested in her… in that way. Which was not allowed, not at all – Harry refused to have Voldemort chase after Hermione, it was wrong on so many levels. Perhaps it was time to pull out the protective big brother façade…

“I saw her this morning,” Riddle said, as if it were no big deal. He stood, summoning two brownish-purple tuber-like articles from the ingredients cupboards. Harry stood, too, noting that the top of his head only reached up to Riddle’s jawline.

*Height won’t matter if he’s doubled up on the ground in pain,* Harry thought viciously.

“This is a squill bulb,” Riddle said, holding up one of the things which he had summoned. “During the dormant state of the plant, it serves as–”

“I don’t care what a bloody squill bulb serves as!” Harry hissed. “I want to know what you were doing with Hermione!”

“Possessive much, hm?” said Riddle, lifting an eyebrow and allowing a smirk to quirk his pale lips. He didn’t seem at all bothered by Harry’s rude interruption. Harry, on the other hand, was having none of it. How dare Riddle accuse him of possessiveness! Because it most certainly was not possessiveness, it was protectiveness!

“The pot calls the kettle black,” Harry snapped back, “except that the kettle isn’t black at all!”

“One might get the impression that you’re upset, Harry.” Riddle sounded exceptionally pleased, like the cat who got the cream.

“Don’t call me ‘Harry’,” said Harry, refusing to acknowledge that he quite liked the way that his name rolled off of Riddle’s tongue. He squared his shoulders. “And answer the question.”

“If you must know,” said Riddle, looking down at Harry as if Harry was merely a little stray cat, “I was in the hospital wing because Francis was not feeling too well after last night.”

“What happened last night?” Harry asked, glancing over at Nott, who sat in his usual place, sweating over his steaming cauldron. Sensing eyes on him, Nott looked up, and Harry looked away quickly.

“Oh, nothing special,” Riddle said with a shrug, though there was a gleam in his eyes. “Francis was merely feeling… out of sorts. I accompanied him to the hospital wing, and whilst there, stumbled upon your cousin.”

“Of course you did,” Harry said, though he felt far calmer. So it wasn’t as though Riddle had sought Hermione out especially.

“So am I welcome to sit here, yet?” Riddle asked, and there was an almost playful tone to his voice. Harry frowned. As if Riddle hadn’t already set up camp here.

“Won’t Mulciber miss you?” he asked, jerking his head over to the other Slytherin boy, who was idly stirring the contents of his cauldron at a table by himself.
“Cassius knows how to handle himself,” said Riddle, taking Harry’s answer as a ‘yes’, proceeding to remove his blazer and roll his sleeves up. Harry stared at his forearms, for a reason unbeknownst to him. They were pale and lean, like that of a spirit who had wandered into the world of the living by accident. And his fingers were long and thin, perhaps a pianist’s hands?

“Do you play piano?” Harry asked abruptly.

“Excuse me?” Riddle responded.

“Nothing,” Harry said quickly, turning back to his cauldron, blushing for some odd reason. Why the hell had he asked Riddle that again?

“Yes, I do,” said Riddle. “Why do you ask?” Harry looked at him from the corner of his eye, expecting to see something mocking upon Riddle’s face, and was astonished to find only a teasing smile.

“No reason,” he murmured, and for some odd reason he felt bashful. Why. The. Fuck. Was. He. Feeling. Bashful? He cleared his throat loudly, and glared down at the Potions recipe, pretending to read it, even if he wasn’t seeing any of the words.

“I believe you need one of these?” Riddle said, proffering one of the tubers that he had summoned earlier.

“Um,” said Harry, then, “Oh, squill bulbs.”

“Yes,” said Riddle, sounding amused. “Squill bulbs.”

Harry carefully took it from him, placing it down on the chopping board and slicing it in half. It was surprisingly juicy on the inside.

“How are you finding Hogwarts?” Riddle asked conversationally, and Harry wondered, not for the first time, why it was that Riddle was being friendly to him.

“I’m finding it okay,” he said vaguely.

“Compared to Beauxbatons?”

“What?”

“You’re finding it ‘okay’ compared to Beauxbatons?”

“I suppose,” Harry said, praying that this would not lead to an interrogation about his supposed former school.

“Your English is very good,” Riddle continued. “British English seems to come naturally to you. You barely even have an accent.”

“Actually,” Harry replied, “French was the language which came less naturally to me.” Which wasn’t a lie, since French hadn’t come to him at all.

“Despite you living in France and attending a French school?” Riddle sounded sceptical.

“Yes,” said Harry, concentrating on juicing the squill bulb. “Which was partially why Hermione and I moved schools. Because my French wasn’t tip-top.”

“But you have a French accent,” Riddle observed.
“My parents died when I was eight,” Harry said, improvising the small details. “I lived in England up until that point, but when they died, I was sent to live with my aunt and uncle in France. I picked up the French accent from them, obviously.”

“Your parents died,” Riddle mused aloud, eyeing Harry as he did so. “Say, were they… our kind?”

“Our kind?” Harry repeated, then said stubbornly, “Yes, they were human.”

“No, no,” Riddle said, as if Harry was being purposefully stupid, “were they of the wizarding world?”

“My mum,” said Harry, now angry, “was a muggleborn, and my dad was a pureblood. Not that it matters whatsoever.”

“Of course not,” said Riddle thoughtfully.

“Then why did you ask?” Harry snapped, throwing down his knife with a clatter.

“What’s going on, Harry–” Ignatius asked, twisting to face Harry from his seat up ahead – he had been completely oblivious to Riddle’s arrival, and he cut off as soon as he saw who Harry’s companion was, face going cold.

“Good day, Prewett,” said Riddle mockingly, a sneer gracing his face. “Harry was just telling me all about life before Hogwarts.”

“I–” began Harry, ready to defend himself, when Slughorn came waddling past.

“Inter-house competition, eh, boys?” he chuckled, when he saw Harry and Riddle facing Ignatius. “Nothing like it, I’ve found. Say, Tom, have you decided to team up with Harry? Good man, good man…” he continued on his way.

Harry stood frozen, his mouth hanging open. Riddle, team up with him? What a load of codswallop! Riddle laughed coldly, and as if he had read Harry’s thoughts, threw his arm around Harry’s shoulders, whispering in his ear, “Yes, team up.”

Before Harry could come to his senses and shove Riddle away, Ignatius gave a snort of disgust and turned back away.

Shit. Harry ducked out from under Riddle’s arm.

“Igna–” he started, but Riddle tutted softly, cutting him short.

“Gryffindors,” he said. “So very temperamental, and so quick to turn on you. It’s very difficult to be a Slytherin, Harry. It’s very, very lonely.”

Harry didn’t bother to correct Riddle. He stared after Ignatius, now whispering something to Phyllis, and didn’t miss the way that she threw a doubtful glance over her shoulder at him. He couldn’t deny that it hurt. And he knew that it was Riddle who had initiated this.

“It’s in times like this that people show their true colours,” Riddle went on loudly. “For example, in this case, we can see that Ignatius Prewett is a prejudiced, egotistical–”

“What do you want from me, Riddle?” Harry asked quietly, and Riddle paused in his diatribe.

“Why, I just want to be your friend, Harry,” he said.
“Not good enough.” Suddenly the classroom seemed stifling, and Harry felt a rush of claustrophobia. Clumsily, he froze his Felix Felicis potion in time, chucked his books into his bag and stormed out of the classroom.

***

Delacour’s flighty exit drew the attention of every single person in the classroom.

“Tom,” said Slughorn from his place over by the Hufflepuffs, and the Hufflepuff who he was helping, Ghannam, stood frozen mid-stir. “Where in Merlin’s name did Harry just run off to?”

“The hospital wing, I believe, sir,” Tom said smoothly. “He hasn’t been feeling himself this morning.”

“Hm,” said Slughorn as the classroom slowly came back to life again. “That would explain why he looked so very austere when I was speaking to you earlier.”

“Certainly,” Tom responded, “Professor.”

Their conversation came to an end when Ghannam’s potion exploded, emitting toxic fumes in clouds of poisonous green.

“Out, out, out!” Slughorn bellowed, chasing everybody out of the classroom before the gas could flood their lungs. Tom clutched his sleeve over his nose and mouth as he pushed out of the door, joining his Slytherin classmates outside.

“Stupid idiot,” Lestrange snarled in Ghannam’s direction as they all waited outside in the corridor while Slughorn battled the fumes inside.

“Good timing Delacour has,” Nott said. “Ran out barely a minute before we were gassed. I should have followed him out.”

“‘He hasn’t been feeling himself’,” Mulciber mimicked Tom’s words. “That isn’t really true, is it, Riddle?”

“Of course it isn’t,” Tom returned. “I managed to get the Gryffindorks to doubt him, and in return, he decided to doubt me.”

“Touché,” said Nott. “He’s a hard nut to crack.”

“It requires teamwork to get through that skull of his,” Tom acknowledged. “If anything, today’s lesson proved that he is as stubborn as a mule.”

“Huh,” said Lestrange. “So somebody is going to have to move in on Poole after all?”

“I’m afraid so,” said Tom. “Francis, we have Arithmancy with him this afternoon. While The Other Delacour is occupied in the hospital wing, I would like you to speak to him.”

“Me?” Nott couldn’t have looked less pleased with the arrangement. He took note of the hard looks that Tom, Lestrange and Mulciber were passing him, because he swallowed with an audible click in his throat and sighed. “Oh, alright. I suppose I could slip in a word or two. Not that I’ll enjoy associating myself with the mudblood.”

Tom was reminded of the information that he had managed to pry out of Delacour, his thoughts lingering on the little fact that he was a half-blood, the orphaned child of a pureblood and a
muggleborn. It reminded Tom very much of his own predicament. Perhaps it was more than coincidence. Perhaps it was a sign that Delacour truly was meant to be a part of the Knights of Walpurgis.

“All clear!” Slughorn cried, bursting out of the classroom. “You’ll have to start your potion from scratch, Miss Ghannam. It couldn’t be salvaged, I’m sorry to say.”

“But, Professor!” Ghannam wailed, ignoring the comforting pats on her back from some of the other students.

“Perhaps this will be a lesson for you to not neglect the correct stirring direction of Felix Felicis,” replied Slughorn mock-sternly, wagging his finger at her. “Now everybody, back in the classroom. This little classroom catastrophe does not warrant an early break.”

A good thing too, because Tom needed as much time to think everything over as possible.

***

By the time Harry emerged from the library three hours later, he felt like a man seeing the world for the first time as he walked down the sun-splashed corridors. After his perhaps unreasonably dramatic departure from Potions, he had realised that he couldn’t disregard that he would be losing a number of important hours of Potions, and went straight to the library to continue working on his thesis in peace. A very rare few hours of peace, but that didn’t mean that his eyes and brain didn’t ache once he emerged from the dim-lit room of books.

His thinking-time had allowed him to come to the decision that he couldn’t keep this up, and wouldn’t deny himself Quidditch for however long he would be trapped here in the past.

Harry proceeded to march into the Great Hall, and the first person that his eyes found was Ignatius with the other Gryffindors. Harry would have liked nothing more than to sit himself down amongst them, but knew that he couldn’t do that anymore, not until he made peace with them somehow. Explaining that Riddle was being a twat again seemed like a good place to begin, but first, Harry had something else to do. He found Margot and Parkinson arguing about something else stupid at the Slytherin table, and strode over to them.

“Introduce me to Crockett,” he interrupted.

“What?” said Parkinson.

“Crock-ett,” Harry repeated, putting extra emphasis on the syllables.

“What about him?” Parkinson’s tone was sly.

“I want to go for Seeker,” Harry told him impatiently, not wanting anything to do with Parkinson’s mind games and deciding to come clean.

“Really?” Margot squealed, leaping up and throwing her arms around him, as if he had just announced that he had found a cure for cancer. Harry made this observation out loud.

“What’s cancer?” Margot asked blankly, and Harry rolled his eyes.

“Never mind,” he said, trying to pry her arms off him, but she clung tight.

“Don’t you like me hugging you?” she asked, pouting.
“No,” Harry said flatly.


“Hugging me should remain exclusive to Hermione and Ginny.”

_Why does Riddle have to show up at the worst possible moments?_ Harry demanded of himself angrily. It was like he was cursed to have Riddle turn up when it was most awkward.

“Are you following me?” he asked Riddle brusquely, refusing to look up at the other boy.

“No,” said Riddle, and his voice was eerily quiet. “I came to check on how you were faring after your flight from Potions, and instead came across this most interesting conversation. Oh, and get off Harry, Greengrass. Nobody needs to see your risqué ways in public.”

Margot, with a devil of a sneer on her face, released Harry.

“Is there something you need, Riddle?” asked Parkinson cordially.

“What I need,” said Riddle, and it sounded to Harry as if he was grinding his teeth, “is to know who Ginny is. Long-lost sister, I suppose? Perhaps your aunt?”

“Not that it’s your concern,” said Harry coldly, turning to face him, “but she’s my girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend?” Riddle’s voice was darker than even Harry’s worst memory, his deep blue eyes piercing into Harry’s own. For a moment, he had the strangest sensation that he and Riddle were alone in a bubble, and the rest of the world revolved around just the two of them, frozen in time as the temperature suddenly plummeted to an unimaginable negative degree.

The moment was broken when Margot grabbed Harry’s arm again.

“You have a girlfriend?” she asked, sounding as if he had personally offended her. “And why haven’t you told me this? Here I was, thinking that I was the only suitor lined up for you, or else your heart’s dearest.”

“Oh, yuck,” piped up Parkinson. “Shut your gullet already, Greengrass.”

“Is she still in France?” Margot continued, fluttering around Harry, completely ignoring Parkinson and seemingly oblivious to Harry and Riddle’s stare-off. “Are you trying to maintain a long-distance relationship? That is absolutely adorable, Harry. How long have you two been together? Oh! Are you betrothed to be married as soon as you have left school? Goodness knows that that’s what awaits me…”

“No,” said Harry, finally breaking Riddle’s glare and glancing at Margot. “It’s nothing like that. I… I had to break it off when I moved here.”

“Awww,” cooed Margot, right on cue. “But she was your first love, right? They say that your first love is always the one that you remember the most.”

“Um,” said Harry, his thoughts immediately going to Cho Chang. So, technically _she_ was his
'first love’, despite it being so brief… he highly doubted that she would be the one that he remembered the most, though.


“Ginny wasn’t you first love?” she accused.

“I didn’t say that,” Harry argued weakly.

“Trust me, I’m a lady,” Margot countered. “I know how to read between the lines, and your face spells ‘guilt’.”

It was true, and Harry abruptly wondered why he should feel guilty.

“Nobody here wants to discuss Delacour’s love life, Greengrass,” Parkinson interjected, “other than you. Wasn’t I meant to be taking him to speak to—”

Margot shushed him.

“You have been getting around, haven’t you, Harry?” she asked, winking slyly at him. “I don’t know why I suspected any differently of a Frenchman. Who is the lucky girl, then?”

“You are stereotyping the French horribly,” Harry told her, and he could feel his face burning hot. “And it doesn’t matter who she was, that’s nobody’s concern but mine.”

“I think that that is enough, Greengrass,” Riddle said coldly. Harry hadn’t forgotten that he was standing there in the foreground, with an expression on his face which suggested that he would have liked to tear Margot from limb to limb. Harry couldn’t tell why – if anybody should have liked to do that, it was the person who was being humiliated here.

“Crockett!” Parkinson coughed from behind his fist.

“Yes!” Harry leapt on the chance to escape. “That’s a very good idea, Parkinson, let’s go.” He didn’t bother farewelling Margot, simply rushed off blindly in a random direction.

“You’re going the wrong way, Delacour,” Parkinson called after him, hooking his thumb the opposite direction. Exceptionally embarrassed, Harry was forced to take the walk of shame back past Margot, who looked positively delighted by his mortification, and Riddle, who still looked downright furious.

That’s right, Harry thought resentfully. Because he thinks that I’m his rightful possession, and therefore can’t have my own friends or… or girlfriends, or whatever.

“Run along now, Riddle,” he heard Margot telling Riddle as he followed Parkinson down the Great Hall, but did not listen in long enough to hear Riddle’s response, which would surely be a biting one.

“What changed your mind, eh, Delacour?” Parkinson asked, and Harry started.

“What?”

“About Quidditch try-outs.”

“Oh!” Harry laughed in obvious relief at the change in subject. “Quidditch. Right. I just thought that I could do with a bit of down-time.”
“Quidditch,” Parkinson said disbelievingly, “is your idea of down-time?”

Harry puffed up like an indignant peacock, opening his mouth for a stinging retort, but then Parkinson said, “Oi! Crockett!”

Winky Crockett turned out to be quite a tall, broad-shouldered sixth year, brown-skinned and freckled, his dark hair long enough to tie at the nape of his neck. With a heavy brow, an exceptionally square jaw and deep-set eyes, intimidation seemed to come naturally to Crockett.

“What do you want?” he growled, pausing in his tracks. He had been on his way out of the Great Hall, and did not seem very pleased by the interruption. Also, judging from the naked animosity on his face, Harry took it that he and Parkinson were not on the friendliest of terms, despite being in the same house and year group. Quite possibly because Parkinson was not part of the majority who followed Riddle around blindly like headless chickens.

“Don’t bare your teeth at me like that,” Parkinson ordered, straightening his tie and clearing his throat primly. “It’s most unbecoming. And besides, I wouldn’t be associating myself with you like this if it wasn’t for a good reason.”

“Associating?” Crockett looked to be working up a bluster. Parkinson plunged onwards hurriedly.

“Let’s put all of our not-so-secret hatred for one another aside for just one moment,” he said, “because when it comes down to it, the two of us do share a common interest.”

“What are you on about, you nutter?” snapped Crockett.

“We both would very much like to see Slytherin win the Quidditch Cup this year,” said Parkinson, ignore Crockett’s jibe, “and unseat those barbaric lions off of our rightful throne. But to do so, a top-notch team would have to be put together, and to achieve said top-notch team, you need as many candidates for the different team positions as possible. So here I bring a valid candidate, Harry Delacour, who also happens to share this common interest.”

Crockett seemed to notice Harry for the first time, and his eyes immediately swept over the older, albeit shorter boy in strict evaluation. Harry, meanwhile, preoccupied himself with glaring at Parkinson.

“I do not recall,” he said through gritted teeth, “saying that I shared that common interest with you.”

Parkinson merely winked in return.

“Delacour!” Crockett barked, drawing the attention of anybody within hearing-range.

“Uh, yes?” Harry muttered in return, embarrassed by all of the watching eyes.

“You want to take down Gryffindor this year?” the Slytherin Captain demanded of him. Harry laughed weakly.

“I mean,” he said, “the point of playing is to try to win the game, but I’m not irrationally biased against the Gryffindors…”

Crockett didn’t appear to hear the end of the sentence, and his face split into a wide grin, which worked wonders on his approachableness.
“Never would have taken the Beauxbatons pretty boy as a Quidditch fanatic,” he said slyly, leaning forward so that he was face-to-face with Harry. “Which position do you play, hm?”

Harry, who was beyond tired of being called ‘pretty’, because he most certainly was not ‘pretty’ and if anything was ‘manly’, fired a glare straight back in Crockett’s face.

“I play Seeker, Crockett,” he snapped.

“Should have known,” Crockett said in a satisfied tone of voice, straightening up so he could smirk down at Harry. “You’ve got the build of a Seeker.”

“Puny?” Parkinson offered, and Harry smacked him over the back of the head instinctively, to Parkinson’s many protests.

“Wiry and spry,” Crockett corrected, not once looking in Parkinson’s direction. He continued to stare down at Harry attentively. “Ideal for Seekers, but that doesn’t mean that a person of that build should be limited to the one position. Say, Delacour, have you ever considered playing Chaser before?”

“Chaser?” Harry repeated, eyebrows dipping into a frown. “I’ve never–”

“Because I’m a Chaser,” Crockett said, a wolfish grin appearing on his face, “and I think that you and I could work pretty well together.”

Was that an innuendo? Harry stared at Crockett in complete disbelief. Judging from the way that his expression did not change in the slightest and Parkinson allowed himself a quiet laugh, Harry took it that it most certainly was. What was with people today? Harry should have known that a day without Hermione would be a difficult one.

“I am a Seeker,” he said stonily, “and only a Seeker. And I am also very straight. So I would appreciate it if we could leave it at that.”

“Are you completely sure?” pressed Crockett, arching an eyebrow as if Harry’s heterosexuality was something questionable.

“Crockett,” Parkinson said slowly, casually using Harry’s shoulder as an armrest, “if you had come further down the Slytherin table just five minutes ago, you would have heard a very animated discussion between Delacour, Greengrass and Riddle, concerning Delacour’s previous flings. All of which were with the female species, I believe.”

“Parkinson,” said Harry, aggravated, “Shut up. And Crockett, all I want to know is when try-outs will be held.”

“Upcoming Friday,” Crockett said lazily. He didn’t seem too bothered by Parkinson’s announcement, instead disinterested in Harry all over again. “Come down to the pitch at four in the afternoon.”

“Thank you, Crockett,” Harry said formally. “I’ll see you then.” He thought about turning around and joining Margot again, but decided against it after considering the fact that she would probably just bug him for details about Ginny and Cho. He knocked Parkinson’s arm off his shoulder and marched out the Great Hall doors, making sure to keep a minimum of five meters between himself and Crockett.

“I swear, that’s just blatant sexual harassment,” Harry muttered to himself as he walked, tempted to hex the back of Crockett’s head as he walked. “When I was Captain, I never would have done
“You were Captain?” Harry had failed to notice that Parkinson had hurried after him.

“No,” Harry said promptly, without even thinking, then, “Yes. At Beauxbatons.”

“If you made Captain,” observed Parkinson gleefully, “then you have to be a decent player.”

“Like I told you before,” said Harry, “I’m alright.”

“Modesty does not become you, Delacour.”

“Why are you following me, Parkinson?” Harry veered sharply at the first left.

“I’m not,” said Parkinson. “Though I might, depending on where you’re going. Where’re you going?”

“I’m visiting Hermione in the hospital wing,” said Harry tiredly. He really wished that Parkinson was less of a pain in the arse.

“Good, because it’s about time that you introduced us.” Parkinson sounded pleased with the arrangement. “One would think that you didn’t want me consorting with your family.”

“That’s because I don’t want you consorting with my family!” Harry retaliated. “And you’re not coming along! Now piss off, Parkinson, before I make you.”

“You’re a tetchy one, aren’t you?” Parkinson grumbled, though he held his hands up in surrender when Harry threatened him with his wand. “Alright, I’m going. But you can’t avoid the introduction forever. Your cousin and I are destined to be together… sometimes I wonder how it is that her lovely face is even related to your ugly mug.”

“Parkinson!” Harry roared, and went thundering after the other Slytherin, who had finally decided that it might be a good time to run.

Smart boy.

***

Francis Nott didn’t know why, but Tom was in the filthiest mood of all when they arrived in Arithmancy that afternoon. Normally, Professor Gwin would spend the first part of the lesson running through complicated explanations of a new numerical chart, which would have allowed Francis time to prepare himself to face the irate Tom Riddle, but as it was, Gwin set them straight into individual work from their textbooks.

Five minutes into the lesson, Francis thought that he had been very successful in avoiding Tom’s mood (predominantly because of his lack of speech), until finally Tom snarled under his breath, “Well?”

Francis jumped, and then flicked a quick look up at Tom’s face – his eyes were broiling pits of dark blue fire, his handsome, aristocratic face as cold as death.

“Um–” Francis began, a very literate start to his sentence, but Tom cut him off.

“The Other Delacour is not here,” he ground out, and Francis wondered yet again what had thrust such a black mood upon Tom, when normally he was so level-headed.
“Ah, yes,” said Francis, gathering up his work and standing. “I’ll be back as soon as I have planted an… idea in Poole’s head.”

“See that you do,” said Tom, no less vexed than before, and Francis hurriedly scanned the classroom for the mudblood, Rowan Poole.

Poole was, predictably, sitting at a table of two by himself, his usual partner stranded in the hospital wing. His hand was buried in his hair as he leaned over his textbook, a scowl of deep concentration set on his face as he appraised what the future read through the study of numbers.

“Good afternoon, Poole,” Francis said, mastering his facial features into a carefully friendly expression. Poole immediately bolted ramrod straight, assessing Francis suspiciously.

“Nott,” he finally acknowledged, and Francis gritted his teeth. It was demoralising, having to wait to be acknowledged by a mudblood, much less attempt to be nice to one.

“Might I sit here?” he asked, nodding his head towards the empty seat.

“Uh,” said Poole.

“Excellent.” Francis sat down. He sincerely hoped that it wasn’t too obvious that he was uncomfortable, perched awkwardly on the edge of the chair. “I hope I’m not intruding, it’s just that Riddle is…” he paused when he saw that Poole was exchanging confused glances with another Ravenclaw. He cleared his throat noisily, annoyed.

“What?” said Poole.

“I said,” Francis repeated, combatting the irritation out of his voice, “that Riddle is in one of his moods again. I’m sure that you know the ones.” It was an attempt to bond over something with Poole, and to Francis’s massive relief, it worked.

“Ah, yes, Riddle’s infamous moods,” said Poole, and his tone was bordering on dry. “We all know about them, if not been the victim of one at some point.”

“Hmm,” said Francis. “Well, I myself came over here to avoid one.” He glanced over his shoulder at Tom, and Tom met his eye, inclining his head as if to say “go on”.

“You can take the seat for this lesson, I suppose,” Poole said. “But Hermione normally sits here, so…”

“About The Other– I mean, Hermione,” said Francis, gleeful that he hadn’t even had to be the one to steer the conversation down this track, “we’ve all noticed you two, and I just wanted to say that I think that you’re a very lucky guy.”

“How so?” Poole looked back at Francis blankly, and Francis sighed inwardly. What a slow numbskull.

“You’re a very handsome couple,” he said, spelling it out slowly and patiently. Of course, it was all a lie – quite frankly, he thought that The Other Delacour could do much better than Poole, but oh well.

“Oh!” Poole went red, and pushed his glasses up his nose clumsily. Francis thought that perhaps Poole should wear contact lenses instead – it would work a miracle on the outward appearance of his facial structure. Francis zoned back in to Poole, who was still rambling.
“I mean, we’re by no means a couple,” he stammered, “not that I wouldn’t like to be – Hermione’s very smart and beautiful and–”

*Puh-lease. What an idiot,* Francis inwardly gagged, cutting Poole off.

“Sorry,” he said, feigning surprise. “I was so sure that you two were… an *item.* Very presumptuous of me, I apologise. It’s just that the way she *looks* at you, like a woman seeing the sun for the first time…” Perhaps he was laying it on a little thick, but Poole drank it all in.

“Really?” he asked, perking up like an over-eager puppy. “I didn’t realise… do you think that I could ask her…?”

“No!” Francis said quickly, and Poole flinched. “What I mean is…” he paused. He couldn’t have Poole outright declaring his feelings for The Other Delacour immediately, lest she reject him straightaway, and then Poole would retreat into a little black hole, and gone would be the diversion.

“What I mean is,” Francis continued, “if you’re that *forward* with her straight away, you might scare her off. Trust me, I know women.”

*You* know women?” Poole could have at least looked a little less disbelieving. Francis felt vaguely insulted, though not entirely surprised that people typically saw him as a person lacking in social skills. *Just* because he enjoyed burying his nose in a good book now and then… raised as a pureblood, Francis had most certainly learned the pureblood ways and etiquette, and could definitely be leaps and bounds more charming than Rowan Poole.

“Yes,” said Francis, “I do. So trust me. Get close to her first, but do *not* rush into the… romantic aspect of your relationship. She’ll panic, and you’ll ruin *all* of your chances if you do.”

Francis Nott was giving Rowan Poole advice about romance. What had the world come to?

“I suppose that it makes sense,” said Poole slowly, evaluating Francis’s words.

His work here was done. Francis pretended to look over his shoulder and startle, before gathering his work up again.

“I’m sorry, but Riddle wants to speak to me,” he said. “Maybe he needs help with something…” Poole seemed somewhat incredulous that Tom Riddle, Head Boy and overall genius, could possible need help, but he didn’t say so aloud.

“Well, thanks for the advice,” he muttered, returning to his textbook, though he looked a lot more cheerful than before.

“My pleasure,” Francis said, biting back a chuckle, before moving back to the seat next to Tom.

“Well?” the Head Boy asked darkly.

“The seed has been planted,” Francis murmured back, barely moving his lips. “It cannot be long before the flower blooms.”

And when it did, Francis knew that Tom would be ready.

Chapter End Notes
Cheers to Margot for unknowingly getting poor, dear old Tom jealous. XD And also, we just passed the 100 page mark, guys! WHOO. This is the perfect place to slow down the production of this story… again, I apologise for the updates returning to irregular, but… education calls. I’ll be back at this at full pelt when the next break comes.

See you all then (should you choose to hang around),
XblackcatwidowX
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Another two Seekers ended up falling behind, unable to withstand the trials of the wind, leaving only Harry and one other, who was ahead of him and gaining on the Snitch fast. It was hopeless. Harry had no chances of catching up, not when he was still so inexperienced on this broomstick and the wind was his enemy.

Chapter Notes

I LIIIIIVE. As you may have noticed, I have decided for this story to be thirty chapters. Of course, it will probably change, but as of the moment, thirty will be my ultimate goal. We shall see. And I also noticed that we’ve moved into the 11,000s for view count! Whaat?! Thank you guys so much! :D This chapter, Harry finally begins making a little progress, because… my, is that a little house pride I see you wearing there, Potter?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“That will do us for the day,” squeaked Flitwick, gesturing for the students to cease their activities. “Don’t forget to practise between now and next lesson, especially you, Dodd! I’ll know if you haven’t!”

As the flow of general chatter began its path around the class, Harry threw his books into his bag so carelessly that he dog-eared several pages, proceeding to stand up in such a hurry that he banged his knees on the desk, resulting in him dropping his wand beneath the desk and swearing colourfully.

“What’s your rush?” asked Hermione, packing up in a far more leisurely manner while Harry scrambled for his wand on his hands and knees. “You have ages until your Quidditch try-outs.”

Harry, who had made to bolt from the room once back on two feet, was prevented from doing so when a gaggle of Hufflepuffs blocked up the walkway.

“I just—” He cut off as he craned his neck, scanning the emptying classroom.

“You just…?” Hermione repeated, and it was almost a drawl. The time that she had been spending in Ravenclaw, Harry noticed, was really beginning to show.

“I…” Just over a Hufflepuff’s shoulder, he spied Ignatius, Phyllis, Finlay and Bridget all fleeing the scene. For the love of Merlin, why were they doing this to him?

“Excuse me!” Harry less-than-politely shoved through the blockade of students, earning glares and mutters of “bloody Slytherin” as he did so.

“Oh, goodness, excuse us,” he heard Hermione saying from behind him, ever the peace-maker.
“He’s just in a mood, sorry about that… Harry! Where are you going? And please don’t give me another half-finished sentence, it’s getting rather annoying!”

“Today’s the day, Hermione,” Harry called back over his shoulder, seemingly oblivious to the looks that he was receiving as he made it out of the classroom and threw searching glances to the left and the right, seeking out the members of the lion house.

“The day for what?” Hermione caught up with him, grabbing his arm. “You’re talking like a mad person! What’s gotten into you?”

“The Gryffindors – Ignatius especially – have all been avoiding me, and that ends today,” Harry declared. “They won’t get away so easily this time.”

It was impossible to miss the pitying glance that Hermione cast him – she had been wearing that expression whenever she looked at him for the past few days, ever since he had told her of what had occurred during that fateful Potions lesson. Upon making recovery from the Bat Bogey Hex, Hermione had chosen to stick by his side as if they had been born joined by the hip, convinced that Riddle was set on sabotaging Harry. Consequently, the Head Boy had been given no new opening to move in on Harry. The only issue that he had with Hermione’s new attachment to him was–

“Hermione!” Rowan Poole puffed, running out of the classroom to join them. “Why did you leave without me? You knew I had to have a quick word with Flitwick.”

“Oh, sorry,” Hermione said, not sounding very sorry at all. “Harry was very eager to leave.”

Rowan Poole was the issue. Harry had not invited Poole along for the ride, and was not aware of Hermione doing so either, so why on earth that boy had made it his task to dog their every step, Harry did not know. Ever since the first encounter between Harry and Poole the time of Hermione’s hexing, they had not been on the friendliest of terms. Harry supposed that Poole was miffed by his rejection.

“Oh,” said Poole now. “He was eager, was he?”

There it was again – Poole always made a point of never addressing Harry by name, instead by ‘he’. It was almost amusing, how inexperienced Poole was in the field of schoolyard nemeses. Not that Poole was Harry’s schoolyard nemesis – that role was very securely filled by Draco Malfoy. All that Harry held against the Ravenclaw was that he seemed to possess an unhealthy interest in Hermione. Why Hermione seemed to be friends with him, Harry did not know. But back to other matters on hand…

“I would love to stay and chat,” Harry said, doing his best to nip the sarcasm from his voice, “but I really need to go speak to Ignatius…”

“What makes today any different to any other day?” Hermione asked, having still not released Harry’s arm. “You seem to always be chasing him, and he always gets away. Not that I don’t approve of you trying to make up with him,” she added hurriedly when faced by Harry’s scathing glare.

Poole set himself up to hover behind Hermione’s left shoulder protectively, as if Harry was the bad guy here. Harry spared him a cursory glance, as if to say “back off”. Poole didn’t get the message.

Harry sighed inwardly. Things were so much easier without this pretentious wanker tailing them around.
“What’s different this time,” he told Hermione, opting to ignore Poole entirely, “is that I know where Ignatius is heading. All it took was a little coercion of a little first-year Gryffindor who happened to know the seventh-years’ timetable…”

Hermione’s grip had loosened considerably on his arm, and Harry took the chance to slip away and start down the corridor. If he couldn’t intercept Ignatius leaving the class that they shared, then they would meet at Ignatius’s final destination – Care of Magical Creatures.

“Coercion?” Hermione’s voice was shrill as she followed after him.

“Don’t you have Ancient Runes now?” asked Harry, somewhat annoyed by her nagging at this point.

“Honestly, you shouldn’t go around threatening first-years, it’s absolutely uncalled for,” Hermione persisted.

“I didn’t threaten anyone! Thanks a lot for your faith in me, ‘Mione.”

“Then why did you use the word ‘coerce’?” The panic in Hermione’s voice had boiled down, and she now sounded flustered.

“Because, Hermione,” said Poole haughtily, “some people believe themselves to be above reading the English dictionary and don’t fully understand the implication of words that they use.”

“And I suppose you read the dictionary, Poole?” Harry snapped, his temper now fraying.

“Why wouldn’t I?” countered Poole. “Unlike you, I’m actually a cultured–”

“Please, Rowan,” Hermione begged, successfully cutting him short, earning herself the most sloppy, simpering expression (which clearly read “whatever you say, honey dearest”) that Harry had ever had the misfortune of seeing.

“Prat,” he muttered, but this apparently went unheard. He said in a louder voice, “Have fun in Ancient Runes, I’m heading off lion-hunting now.”

“Oh, Harry, you know I hate leaving you,” said Hermione, “especially after what happened with... you know. So just steer clear of…” her voice trailed off when Harry gave an exasperated sigh.

“I know,” he said, unable to stay annoyed with her – growing up motherless kept him immune to feeling irritation towards mother hens. “You know perfectly well that I can handle myself.”

_Do I?_ Hermione’s expression said it all as she turned on heel. Harry gave Poole the scariest look that he could fathom in that moment, to which Poole looked less than impressed as he, too, turned his back on Harry and headed on his way. Good riddance. What Harry found troubling, though, was how nobody seemed to take his role as Protective Big Brother very seriously. It wasn’t _his_ fault that he never grew to his full potential – blame the Dursleys, who had ensured that he never eat his fill as a growing child. Perhaps, Harry pondered, he ought to do some extended research into Potions to find a concoction which would allow him to grow another twenty centimetres. See if they all took him seriously then.

He did not stop stewing for a little while.

***
It was a very bland sort of day outside. The sky was a runny grey, promising a downpour later on, the air cooler and crisper than even the chilled apple Harry had eaten at breakfast. He immediately wished that scarves had been made a part of the uniform selection, longing for his own worn scarlet-and-gold one back home. It was the perfect sort of day to bury your nose in such a thing.

But now was not a time for worrying over such trivial matters. Not when there was a certain redhead further up the path, completely unaware of his presence, and completely defenceless to his advances. At last.

Harry hurried his pace, half-tripping on a rock which was loose in the damp soil. He wanted to reach Ignatius before they could get to where the rest of the Care of Magical Creatures N.E.W.Ts students were gathered. This conversation was best to have away from prying eyes and overly large ears. Odds were, Harry wouldn’t reach him before then, though. This called for drastic measurements – raising his voice.

“Ignatius!” hollered Harry, praying that the other boy would not run (again). Just as Ignatius’s head began to swivel around, Harry’s footing found a slimy patch of grass, and, being on a slope, couldn’t do much to prevent his head-first tumble into the mud.

“Bollocks!” Harry groaned, pulling himself into a sitting position, shaking wet dirt from his sleeve unsuccessfully. Just excellent. He had let Ignatius get away again, and he couldn’t even remember what a simple cleaning charm was either.

“You alright?”

Shocked, Harry’s eyes shot to the source of the voice. It was Ignatius, approaching Harry – and he didn’t even look too reluctant to be doing so. Still wary, though, evident from the stiff set of his shoulders.

“Yeah,” Harry said dumbly, blinking, then, “What are you doing?”

“Um,” said Ignatius, not meeting Harry’s eye and scratching his head uncomfortably. “Walking to class?”

“No,” said Harry, “I mean, why are you talking to me? I wasn’t even the one to start the conversation!”

“I distinctly remember you shouting ‘Ignatius’,,” said Ignatius dryly, then proffered his hand. “You should get out of the mud.”

Harry accepted the hand of help, then swiped at a blot of dirt on his cheek, succeeding only in smearing it even more. There was a moment of awkward silence, then he said, “You’re a difficult man to find, Ignatius.”

“Yeah.” Ignatius coughed into his fist, gazing skyward so that Harry could see every stray cloud reflected in his dark irises. “About that–”

“Riddle was just being Riddle!” Harry interrupted, suddenly angry, not waiting to be brushed aside yet again. “I’m quite offended that you trusted Riddle over me, because honestly, I didn’t even want to speak to him, he just came over, took Hermione’s seat and made himself right at home. And then he started asking me some halfway-civil questions about France, so I gave him so halfway-civil answers, but I didn’t know he was going to turn those answers on me! So you and the others can stop ignoring me, because I didn’t turn into Riddle’s wingman overnight, you know.”

There was a moment of silence. Harry glared at Ignatius the entire time, waiting to either be
laughed or scoffed at. Perhaps even ignored. Finally, the Gryffindor said softly, “I didn’t realise.”

“Realise that Riddle is an absolute bastard?” Harry shook his head. “This is your seventh year with him, and I’ve only known him for, what, a month? So how is it that I seem to understand him better than you?”

“That’s the point!” Ignatius burst out, rounding on Harry. “You don’t understand him better than me! I have known him seven years, so I know his ways, and if my seven years of watching Riddle have taught me anything, it’s that he’s got a silver tongue! He somehow manages to bring every single one of the Slytherins to his side – not even just Slytherins! He’s the smoothest, most charming sociopath out there, Harry. I just thought that he’d finally gotten to you – I’m surprised you’ve lasted this long as it is. And you’re right – you’ve only been around for a month or so. I won’t lie and say I know you particularly well. I don’t know your levels of… of resilience. Besides, you’re in Slytherin. As I said before, Riddle always, always, gets the Slytherins first.”

“You’re less right about that than you might have thought,” said Harry, recovering quickly, images of Margot and Parkinson and the rest of the Slytherin insurgents drifting into his head.

“Really?” Ignatius snarled back – Harry had never seen him so riled up, with such a feral light in his eyes. “Just look at Lestrange, Mulciber, the lot of them! They seem pretty chummy with our treasured Head Boy, don’t they?”

“Yes, well, they are,” Harry conceded, keeping his cool, “but it only looks like the rest of the house is from the outside. When you’re on the inside, you can see that things aren’t quite as they may appear. Slytherin is the house with the most prejudice against it. Of course we want to maintain the impression of a united front when the world is our enemy.”

“It’s not your enemy—”

“Oh, come off it! ‘There’s not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn’t in Slytherin’,” Harry recited, fighting to keep a sneer from crawling across his face, because no matter the circumstances, Harry Potter did not sneer. “Sound familiar to you?”

Ignatius’s lips pressed into a thin line.

“I hadn’t realised that Beauxbatons had such extensive knowledge of the Hogwarts houses,” he said coldly.

“Whatever.” Harry waved it off. “It’s called a book. And overhearing discussions between other students when they don’t think you’re listening. How quickly people forget that it was us who produced the great fucking Merlin himself!”

So much for keeping his cool.

“I’m sorry,” said Ignatius quietly, and Harry started.

“Excuse me?”

“I said I’m sorry!” Ignatius shoved his hands into his pockets and scowled at the ground. “I jumped to the wrong conclusion about you, but I’m not going to take back what I said about Riddle. He likes having his way with people.”

“I know.” Harry’s eyes followed the skyline, then jumped upwards towards Ignatius’s face timidly. “So… are we okay?”
Ignatius gave a deep sigh, then said, “’Course we are. We’re friends, aren’t we? But next time you decide to get matey with Riddle, give me a warning beforehand.”

“I wasn’t—” Harry halted when he saw the good-humoured twinkle in the Gryffindor’s eye, and finally smiled softly. “As long as you give me a warning before you decide to start avoiding me like the plague again.”

“What’s the plague?”

Before Harry could answer, a voice came booming up the muddy slope towards them.

“Shouldn’ yeh be in class, Ignatius?”

A grin lit up Ignatius’s face as he turned to face the speaker, and Harry’s eyes followed suit in astonishment.

“And hadn’t you,” parried Ignatius, “best be with Ogg, eh, Rubeus?”

The man – no, the boy approaching them looked to have well and truly cleared nine feet in height, but despite his mammoth size, was youthful of face, his face round and beardless, his beetle-black eyes bright and lively.

Harry opened his mouth to say, “Hagrid?”, but managed to stop himself just in time.

“I’m tendin’ ter the Thestrals,” said… Hagrid, sounding very pleased with himself.

“Well, I was just heading to Care of Magical Creatures when I got distracted,” said Ignatius, and immediately a wistful light washed over Hagrid’s face at the mention of the class. “Say, have you met Harry yet?”

Hagrid’s eyes lit upon Harry, as if just noticing his presence, and immediately his energy dimmed.

“That’s right,” Harry said quickly, trying not to stare. “I’m Harry, Harry P– Delacour. I just moved here from Beauxbatons, with Hermione. That’s my cousin. I’m finding Hogwarts to be very nice, what year are you in?” He snapped his mouth closed when he realised that he was babbling.

To Harry’s dismay, Hagrid lowered his head and blushed at the question.

“I, er…” he mumbled, twiddling his thumbs, and Ignatius jumped in.

“Rubeus is continuing on a different path of education,” he said, very defensively. Harry stared at him stupidly, and then returned his gaze to Hagrid when the boy offered, “I jus’ did third year, las’ year.”

“Oh,” said Harry, then, “Oh!”

He immediately felt horrible for broaching the subject. Of course – Hagrid had been expelled for his pet Acromantula, Aragog, and a big misconception around the matter.

“He’s studying under Ogg, our Groundskeeper,” said Ignatius, and Harry nodded rapidly.

“That’s great,” he said lamely. “It must be fascinating.” As soon as the words passed his lips, he prayed that he had not sounded sarcastic.

“I… I got ter go,” Hagrid said, still looking extremely uncomfortable. He scratched his head and
said, “Thestrals an’ all…”

“It’s good to see you, Rubeus,” Ignatius called after the half-giant’s retreating back, then passed a sideways glance to Harry. “Poor bloke. His heart’s in the right place, it’s quite unfortunate that he was, you know…”

Harry made a noise of agreement, still feeling horribly guilty.

“Well, he’s right,” Ignatius continued, rooting around for his pocket watch. “I really do need to get to class, or I’ll be la– sweet Morgana, is that the time? Sorry, Harry, but now I really am late, got to run, Kettleburn doesn’t appreciate tardiness!” He was already slipping and sliding down the hill at full pelt before he had even finished speaking.

Harry watched Ignatius leave, before turning and trooping back up towards Hogwarts castle, the damp, bleak air following him all the way into the safety of the stone walls. He recalled, with delight, the incantation to the cleaning charm to be *Tergeo*, and thought that perhaps the day was looking up after all. It was always a good omen when he remembered spells that he had not bothered with in years.

It was only later that Harry would realise what a landmark that day was, as he had finally begun referring to Slytherin house as ‘we’.

***

The downpour that the sky had been promising all day finally arrived at 4 p.m. sharp, just in time for the Quidditch try-outs.

Minutes earlier, Harry and the rest of the candidates for the team had been supplied with Slytherin Quidditch uniform to wear for the trials, and other than several minor differences, Harry discovered the design to have been barely altered since he had started on the Gryffindor team in 1991 – fitted white trousers, a green-and-silver sweater, a green outer robe, thick fingerless gloves, and the standard sturdy shin and arm guards. Harry felt far more in his league now that he was free of the unfamiliar grey blazer and clad in a uniform that he was accustomed to.

It seemed that the rule had yet to be developed that students could bring their own broomsticks to the school, which Harry was mildly relieved to learn, as his own Firebolt was stranded back in 1997, and besides, even if it was in his possession, how was he to explain how advanced the model was? The newly released Cleansweep Fours were the models to be used by all four houses, and Harry very nearly choked on his own spittle when he watched everybody handling them and mooning over the “finesse of the handle” and the “turning ability, sharp as a blade”. *Cleansweep Fours*. Poor guys.

Once everybody was gathered beneath the eaves of the stands while the rain thundered just beyond the shelter, Crockett positioned himself at the front of the flock and cast a Sonorous Charm on himself and bellowed, “ATTENTION!”

Over half of the congregation flinched, instinctively turning their heads away from the source of offence to their eardrums, which Crockett obviously noted, as he next roared, “PANSIES ARE NOT ADMITTED INTO THE TEAM. IF YOUR DELICATE HEADS CAN’T HANDLE THIS, THEN YOU SURE AS HELL CAN’T HANDLE A QUIDDITCH MATCH. ANYBODY WANT TO LEAVE?”

A small boy burst into tears and fled the scene. The crowd sniggered, and Harry took the opportunity to cast a quick eye over the gathering. There had to be over twenty people, though he
noted that there were no girls in the mix.

“First years,” somebody scoffed. Lestrange. Harry grimaced. Excellent, Lestrange was here. And, it seemed, so were first years. Another rule which was soon to be established, then.

“GOOD,” said Crockett. “I DIDN’T LIKE HIM ANYWAY. NOW, CHASERS WILL FLY FIRST, THEN BEATERS, SEEKERS, AND KEEPERS TO FINISH OFF. YOU’RE PERMITTED TO TRY OUT FOR MULTIPLE POSITIONS, BUT ONLY YOUR BEST PERFORMANCE WILL BE NOTED. I DON’T CARE IF YOU MADE THE TEAM LAST YEAR, LAST YEAR’S TEAM WAS ABSOLUTE RUBBISH BECAUSE WE DIDN’T WIN THE CUP, AND THIS YEAR, WE’RE RECLAIMING THE TITLE FROM THOSE GRYFFINDOR TWATS.”

“Heard, heard,” a voice offered.


“Didn’t know you’d be here, Delacour,” Lestrange said, approaching Harry with a dark gleam in his eyes, and Harry scowled.

“Don’t know why I’m here anymore,” he returned, “now that I see that you are, too.”

“Which position?” asked Lestrange, completely ignoring Harry’s response.

“Seeker,” said Harry.

“I’m a Chaser, myself.”

“Then shouldn’t you be–”

“OI, LESTRANGE!” Here came Crockett. “DON’T TELL ME YOU’VE CONVERTED TO BEATERING OR SOMETHING, I NEED YOU AS A CHASER.”

“I wouldn’t convert for your life,” Lestrange drawled, turning to face the Captain. “I was just giving this new addition a pep-talk.”

“Pep-talk–” Harry spluttered. Crockett cancelled the Sonorous Charm on his voice and grinned sharply, his teeth bright and white against his dark tan skin.

“Delacour doesn’t need a pep-talk,” he said, then winked and added, “You look good in that uniform.”

Not again, thought Harry, and sneered as way of response. Oops. He wasn’t supposed to sneer. He blamed it on spending too much time with Margot and Parkinson.

“Uh-uh,” Lestrange said, waggling a condescending finger in Crockett’s face. “Itsy-bitsy sixth years don’t get to play with Tom Riddle’s belongings.”

There were two things which were very ridiculous about that entire sentence, in Harry’s most humble opinion. Firstly, Crockett was anything but itsy-bitsy. He was at least one head taller than Lestrange, and two taller than Harry. Secondly (Harry was certain he had spelt this one out already), he was not one of Tom Riddle’s belongings. He was quite certain that Riddle absolutely loathed him by now.
Before Harry could make either pieces of logic known to the world, Lestrange and Crockett were both trudging into the downpour, broomsticks settled on their shoulders. Harry swore after Lestrange loudly, unsure if he was even heard, before retreating away from the waiting contenders. He had no plans of socialising with any of them while he waited. Too bad one of them had other plans.

“We’ve never met,” said a boy with downy, strawberry-blond hair and a heavy brow. Harry had seen him amongst Riddle’s usual group of minions, and he felt his lip curl slightly.

“We haven’t,” he agreed, after a pause.

“Gideon Avery,” said Gideon Avery, holding out a hand. Harry eyed it suspiciously. Deceptive, or genuine?

“Harry,” Harry said, accepting the hand and looking directly up into Avery’s shrewd, golden-brown eyes, trying to get a feel for this newcomer, but came up blank. “Harry Delacour.”

The brief handshake was firmer than necessary, and once released, Harry surreptitiously flexed his fingers out.

“I look forward to seeing you on the team,” Avery said, and he opened his mouth to continue, but Harry interrupted.

“I may not make it,” he said, and Avery tilted his head to the side in a predatory manner, evaluating Harry from head to toe.

“But I was so certain you would,” he cooed. “Parkinson has been broadcasting to the entire world that you were a Captain at Beauxbatons, so you must be half-decent.”

“What?” Harry should not have been surprised that Parkinson would blab.

“Parkinson,” repeated Avery. “Edwin Parkinson. Silly old poof in my year, you know? Very upturned nose, a bit squashed? Oh my, I’m going to have a blast telling him that you don’t even remember him, what with him sitting across from you all the time…”

“I remember who he is!” Harry snapped, then took a deep breath to soothe his nerves. “Sorry, but I’m not in the mood for talking. I like to… clear my mind, before flying.”

It sounded more imbecilic aloud than it had in his head. Avery clearly shared this sentiment, judging from his raised eyebrows.

“Fine,” he said, turning on heel to stride off and keep the company of more respectable Slytherins.

Harry shook his head and started to wheel around, when a heavy weight shot into his side and clung onto him, like a gigantic Flobberworm which had fastened itself to its next meal.

“I would have come sooner, Harry,” the pretty blonde Flobberworm announced, “but Merrythought only just let us out of class, and it’s pouring out here so I had to prepare the right charms so that my hair wouldn’t be ruined! Goodness, isn’t this rain absolutely ghastly?”

“Margot,” Harry said, awkwardly patting her on the shoulder in the hopes that she would release him, knowing full well that her hurtling into him was garnering much attention from everybody. “What are you doing here?”
“I’ve come to show my support, obviously!” Margot replied, tossing her hair. “Don’t worry, Edwin’s on his way, too.”

“Yes, I’d like a word with Parkinson…” said Harry glacially, and Margot laughed.

“Surely you two are on first name basis by now,” she said. “You’re friends, aren’t you? It’s Edwin, Harry. Ed-win.”

“But ‘Parkinson’ is a term of endearment,” Harry offered innocently, earning another giggle. He then realised how unaccustomed he was to have giggly females keep him company. Hermione was grounded, Luna was mystical, and Ginny was anything but giggly. Margot, on the other hand, was a strange combination. Girly one second, then dangerous the next.

“Harry!” called another voice from further ahead. “You haven’t gone yet, have you?”

“Hermione!” Harry carefully separated himself from Margot and grinned at his supposed cousin.

“Got caught up in the crowd,” Hermione explained, barely sparing Margot a glance as she rifled through her bag. She looked considerably less put together than Margot, what with her thick hair standing on end in the humidity, resembling something of a lion’s mane. Margot looked over her curiously.

“Crowd?” Harry asked, watching Hermione dig through her bag.

“Yes,” she said. “Final period just finished, so a lot of people are coming down to watch the try-outs. I presume the Slytherins out of support, and the rest just to see the year’s competition.”

“Huh,” Harry said, then upon noticing that she was alone, added, “Where’s your suitor?”

“Who?” asked Hermione vaguely, before unleashed a loud “ha!” as she pulled out a pair of goggles. “I transfigured a shoe into a pair of Quidditch goggles for you, and charmed it to repel the rain so you could see in this weather.”

Harry took the goggles from her, surprised.

“Oh,” he said, then smiled lightly. “Thanks.”

“I knew that you’d forget your own pair,” Hermione said, sighing. “It’s a wonder you get anything done without me.”

“Um,” said Harry, “I don’t think you two have met. Hermione, this is Margot, and Margot, this is Hermione.”

“Hmm,” said Margot, her giggles dispersed and her cold Slytherin mask on. “So you’re the cousin.”

Hermione stiffened, levelling Margot with an equally judgmental gaze.

“And you’re Harry’s guardian in the snake pit,” she countered. Harry winced. There was a considerable pause, and then Margot’s face softened.

“That’s one way to put it,” she said. “I’m surprised we haven’t met yet! Harry’s always talking about you, after all.”

“I am not!” Harry retorted, and Hermione shook her head, then looked towards the other Slytherin candidates, finally noticing their slightly hostile stares.
“I don’t think that Margot and I are supposed to be down here,” she said. “Or maybe it’s just me. Outsider and all. I’ll go wait in the stands with everyone else.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Margot. “We have so much to discuss.”

We do? read Hermione’s face, but she shrugged and said, “Of course. Good luck, Harry.”

“Yes, good luck, my dear!” Margot fluttered her fingers in farewell and cavorted away. Before heading after her, Hermione whispered to Harry, “Be careful, Riddle’s here,” then she was gone.

Harry stood stock still. Why had Riddle come? To sabotage the trials? Curse him? Or maybe he was overthinking it. Half the school had come, according to Hermione. And besides, Lestrange and Avery were part of the try-outs, so maybe the Dark Lord was here for moral support towards his Death Eaters. But Harry’s mind remained a whirlwind of doubt for the rest of the wait.

***

By the time Crockett called for the Seekers, Harry had begun to lose his nerve, imagining every possible scenario that might play out with Riddle watching from the stands. He reminded himself that Hermione would be keeping an eye on him, though, which soothed him somewhat.

Snapping his goggles in place and trying not to think about the fact that he was actually wearing a shoe on his face, he accepted a Cleansweep from one of the potential Beaters, all of whom had just trudged in from the rain, Harry headed out, shivering as water immediately began beating down on his head, some trickling from his hair, down his neck and along his back.

There were five students, including Harry, who went out to meet Crockett. He knew none of them by face, and it was hard to tell their ages in the storm. What they all had in common, however, were slighter builds, so Crockett towered over the lot of them.

“For you five,” Crockett shouted over the shrieking wind and rain, after having them fly a lap around the pitch, “the job is simple! I release the Snitch, give it ten seconds to get away, then up you go, and the first person to catch the Snitch is in! Easy as earning the respect of a Hippogriff!”

“That’s not easy!” Harry shouted back, having first-hand experience in the matter.

“Exactly!” Without further ado, Crockett popped the Golden Snitch from its spot in the Quidditch ball case, and held it up in the air. Despite the grey, misty air enwreathing them, the sharp, metallic gold of the Snitch was easily visible behind the cover of rain, and Harry watched as it flicked out its wings and shot off. In a streak of colour, it was gone.

Harry mounted the Cleansweep as Crockett counted ten, and at his signal, kicked off from the ground and was airborne. The wind roared in his ears, urging him to the left, so Harry shifted his weight, manoeuvring in a manner which held him stationary against the raging storm as he hunted for any sign of gold. Nothing. It was expected. The Snitch rarely made its presence known within the first ten minutes of being released.

Harry circled the pitch, noticing the dark shapes of students watching from the stands critically, growing accustomed to the mannerisms of the Cleansweep Four. The handle was slightly heavier than the Firebolt’s, so to move downwards, he barely had to tip forwards. It was weighty, so it favoured moving with the external elements, and yet could hold its ground against the wind. But it was slow. Harry didn’t like its chances against the speed of the Snitch, which was just as quick in this time as it was in his own.

After ten minutes, there was still no sighting of the Snitch, and at the fourteen minute mark, there
was a kerfuffle down at the far south of the pitch between two of the contestants who thought that they had seen it, but it turned out to be a false alarm. When twenty minutes had passed, the audience in the stands began to get restless, as did the Seekers, Harry included, and he noticed that Crockett had begun checking the time at regular intervals.

Finally, after twenty-five minutes, a gold shape zipped across the centre of the pitch, and the five of them were on its tail like bloodhounds after a rabbit. What posed as a major issue was that the Snitch was heading into the wind, forcing them all to move with it. One of the Seekers attempted going up and around by riding a different air current, executing an overly ostentatious move in which he released his broom with his hands and performed a sort of spin in mid-air, attached to his ride by only his legs, but he wound up plummeting down to the ground, no longer competition.

Another two Seekers ended up falling behind, unable to withstand the trials of the wind, leaving only Harry and one other, who was ahead of him and gaining on the Snitch fast. It was hopeless. Harry had no chances of catching up, not when he was still so inexperienced on this broomstick and the wind was his enemy.

That was when he noticed the tell-tale angling of the Snitch’s wings as it prepared to abruptly change direction, and Harry grinned against the frigid rain beating into his face. He leaned away from the wind, allowing it to sweep him up in its current, at the precise same moment that the Snitch darted in the opposite direction, straight past the other Seeker and into Harry’s outstretched fingers.

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“The Gryffindorks are angry,” Mulciber noted as he helped himself to steak-and-kidney pie, watching the scarlet-and-gold table on the opposite side of the hall.

“Of course they are,” Tom said, steepling his fingers and smiling. Their opposition house was positively steaming, and it was delightful. Ever since Slytherin had earned itself such a competent Quidditch team the other day, the lions had become more and more cantankerous than ever. Especially since, rumour had it, the new Gryffindor Beaters were rubbish.

“You’re awfully cheerful,” said Rosier loftily, to which Avery threw in, “Is it about Delacour? I met him at the try-outs, he seems…” his voice faded when he met Tom’s dangerous gaze, “… nice.”

“Hm,” said Tom, and looked down the Slytherin table towards the object of his interest. “I have every right to be cheerful. You’ll see, soon.”

Unbidden, Tom met Delacour’s eye, greener than green, and the other boy looked way almost immediately, lips tightening.

Soon, Tom thought. Soon he will be mine.

Because when it came to angry lions… who knew what they would do, and they had themselves a little French scapegoat now.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the absence of Tom for the majority of this chapter. He’ll be back,
bigger and badder than ever, next chapter. >:D I just realised too, I never mentioned who Ignatius Prewett actually is. He’s Molly Weasley’s uncle, if you didn’t know. Also, some people may complain about the Quidditch team being all male, but honestly, it’s the ’40s, what can we expect?
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Harry braced himself for excruciating pain as he saw the incantation “Crucio” pass the boy’s lips.

Chapter Notes

Blugh. Let’s get our teeth into the next chapter of this story. Um. There’s a lot of swearing this chapter. Like a lot. So just a warning. Now, have some Hermione and Margot, have some Umbridge, have some [surprise appearance], have some crazy lil shits and have some Tom. TOM. MARVOLO, RIDDLE. IT’S ABOUT TIME WE GOT SOMEWHERE WITH YOU, AMIRITE, READERS? (Erm, there are also probably typos, but I’m tired, I don’t care. I cry.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hem, hem,” said a breathless voice by way of introduction. “Might I grab your attention for a moment, Harry?”

Seated at a study table in the library, Hermione heard the rustle of clothing as Harry whirled around in his seat to face the speaker, before spinning back to face her again.

“It’s the toad!” he hissed to her, not very subtly, though arguably, subtly had never been his strong point.

“Excuse me?” simpered little Dolores Umbridge as Hermione glanced up from behind a heavy, crimson-coloured book called A Stimulating Study of Renowned Potioneers. It was impossible to mistake the girl. She was a stout eleven-year-old, whose mousy-brown hair was carefully arranged into a halo of curls, a pink bowtie nestled in amongst them. Whilst her face was had not yet transitioned to its future uncanny likeness to a toad, the pudgy facial structure hinted at what was to come.

“What I mean,” hedged Harry, “is that I wonder what role toad mucus play in Felix Felicis.”

“Harry, you know perfectly well that toad mucus would cause an imbalance between the delicacy of the combination of the Occamy eggshell and the Murtlap,” said Hermione, barely sparing Harry a glance as she continued to look over Umbridge. How ridiculous that boy’s cover stories were. “You’d think he wasn’t a N.E.W.Ts Potions student. I don’t believe I’ve made your acquaintance, er…”

“Dolores Umbridge,” said Umbridge promptly, straightening her pink bowtie and gazing at Hermione with criticalness far beyond her age. “And you are…?”

“Harry’s cousin,” Hermione returned, still scrutinising her future least-favourite-professor. “You may call me Hermione, if you wish.”
“Hm,” said Umbridge. “I would redo my hair, if I were you. It’s sloppy.”

Hermione leisurely raised her eyebrows, tempted to snap back at the girl, but decided there was little point in doing so, and passed a sideways glance to Harry.

“Why haven’t you introduced me to this delight before, Harry?” she asked. “I’ve always wanted to have somebody tell me that my hair is sloppy.”

Harry choked, and Umbridge preened.

“Yes, quite right,” she said. “Father says I am very perceptive and intelligent. I suppose everybody could do with having my advice.”

Hermione did not deign to reply.

“Anyway,” Umbridge continued, returning to her original train of thought, “I was hoping I could have some of your help, Harry.”

Harry straightened in his chair, putting the book that he had mindlessly been flicking through to the side.

“Help?” he asked, the ‘h’ noticeably absent with his accent. “Me?”

He must have been internally pissing himself with laughter. Their time in 1944, from Hermione’s perspective, had brought him only two things – fretting over Tom Riddle’s schemes, and harassing Umbridge secretly from the sidelines. Every time there was an Umbridge Harassment update, Harry would always come running to Hermione, his sides splitting with laughter, and recount how he had charmed the first year’s bowtie to flash Gryffindor and Hufflepuff colours and screech “I WISH I WERE A GRYFFINPUFF”, or how he had transfigured Lady Munchkin into a slug. Hermione always made sure to chastise him, but as soon as a suitably scorned Harry had left, she would smile. And so it would continue.

Now, with Umbridge openly asking for Harry’s help… it could only signal trouble.

“Yes,” said Umbridge. “With Defence homework. I am to research the Smokescreen Spell before next lesson, and I’m not sure which book to look to.”

“Why ask me?” Harry drummed his fingers against the table. “Riddle is Head Boy for a reason, isn’t he? I’m sure he’d be willing to help you.”

“Yes, well,” Umbridge said, sounding impatient, “he’s a bit intimidating. And he’s also very handsome, surely I would be distracted if I were to speak with him.”

Hermione smothered a smile when Harry said indignantly, “And I’m not?”

Umbridge glared at him, as if he were being purposefully difficult.

“Besides, it’s common knowledge now that ever since your first Defence lesson this year, you’re top of the class, and since you’re in the seventh year N.E.W.Ts class, that means that you’re top of the school. And therefore–” she slammed herself down into the chair opposite Harry “–I require your assistance. I only allow the best to help me.”

Arrogant little toerag. Hermione rolled her eyes as she listened to Harry begin rambling off complete codswallop about the Smokescreen Spell, all the while Umbridge fumbled for parchment and a quill to record his words.
Her mind immediately cast back to the Slytherin Quidditch try-outs the other day, when she had first met Margot Greengrass. Heading up to the stands in the rain, they had both cast Umbrella Charms, producing identical, semi-transparent covers from the rain as they awaited the Seeker trials.

“So,” Hermione had said bluntly, “what are your intentions with Harry?”

“I’ve been so looking forward to this Meet the Family conversation,” Greengrass had drawled back, a smirk lifting the corner of her mouth, her hazel eyes bright and sly. “I respect Harry, and by extension I respect you as well, somewhat. What I am about to tell you isn’t common knowledge, so it would appease me greatly if you swore to not share this information with anyone.”

“I swear to not share it,” Hermione had countered, “so long as it cannot compromise Harry in any way.”

She recalled how Greengrass had gazed at her coolly, as if she had changed her mind given the response, before she finally said, “Fine. Now, the very first witches and wizards who lived were magic sensitive. They could sense others’ magic. I believe that this was hardwired into them for means of survival – survival of the fittest, you know. This way, the magically-strong could identify each other from the rest, and they mated, if I may use such a crude term. The weaker were eliminated from the gene pool, and began having children with Muggles and whatnot. That was the birth of half-bloods. But as the witches’ and wizards’ blood became more diluted, their magic sensitivity weakened also, which is why half-bloods and Muggle-borns are no longer magic sensitive. Meanwhile, the magically-strong continued having children with one another, maintaining thick blood, and they are the pure-bloods. As time wore on, magic sensitivity also weakened for them, but today, some of them still have the ability to sense others’ magic.”

It was no wonder, Hermione thought, that pure-bloods thought themselves to be so magnificent, given this little piece of history, if they believed themselves to come from the strong bloodlines. It was fascinating, and a privilege to learn of it, if Greengrass was telling the truth and it was not common knowledge. But…

“What does this have to do with anything?” Hermione asked, suspicious. “Neither Harry or I are pure-bloods. We haven’t retained this magic sensitivity. Unless…”

Perhaps the point of this conversation was not to claim that either of them were magic sensitive. Maybe the point was–

“I’m magic sensitive,” Greengrass said, twirling her hair around a finger as she faced the Quidditch pitch, where the Chasers were finally landing and the next group – Beaters? – were taking off. “And, as I discovered a few years back, so is Tom Riddle, which is one of the reasons he became so popular among the pure-bloods and overthrew me from the throne. Apparently it’s better to be magic sensitive and a man.”

She sniffed, incredibly displeased. Hermione would have been sympathetic, but she was already piecing together where the conversation was headed.

“And I suppose that you are both expressing so much interest in Harry because…” her eyebrows dipped into a frown. “Because you sense that he’s powerful?”

“Harry may not realise his potential,” said Greengrass, “but it’s definitely there. Just needs the right guidance. And I’ll be damned if Riddle gets his hands on a weapon like that.”

“That’s all you see Harry as?” Hermione asked shrilly, before remembering to keep her voice...
down. “A weapon? Well, I have news for you – if you think that I’ll allow you to use him like that–”

“Oh, please!” Greengrass scoffed. “Riddle would use him as a weapon, I wholly disagree with his sentiments. If I was him, I would take Harry as a husband. Merlin knows that the Gaunt line could do with a face like Harry’s in it…”

“Unbelievable!” Hermione threw her hands in the air, nearly losing her grip on her wand in the process, though was somewhat appeased.

“Well, Harry is good-looking and powerful,” Greengrass continued, “and fresh meat. He’s still something of an enigma. I believe that if he put his mind to it, he could bring about the fall of Riddle’s reign.”

“And place you back on the pedestal?” Hermione sighed. “Well, at least we have a common goal of keeping Harry away from Riddle. If for different reasons.”

“Of course. Now, let me stand under your Umbrella Charm for a moment.” Greengrass sidled right up to Hermione, cancelled the spell on her own wand, and with a wave of her wand, dried a space for them to sit in the stands, before seating herself neatly, brushing out her skirt primly as she did so.

“Come sit with me,” she said, patting the spot next to her. “I want you to tell me everything you know about a Miss Ginny, and the nameless lady who came before her.”

Hermione came back to herself, seated at the table in the library, and realised that she had been staring thoughtlessly as Harry planted rubbish about the Smokescreen Spell into Umbridge’s head. If what Greengrass said was true, and Harry really did have a chance of… of overthrowing Riddle, then perhaps it would be best if he stopped meddling with his fellow Slytherins. If word got back that Harry was purposefully meddling with members of his own house, then perhaps they would never manage to prevent the rise of Voldemort, as they had agreed to do all those nights ago…

“Harry,” Hermione interrupted his ramblings. Harry shut his mouth, sending Hermione a vaguely sheepish glance. Umbridge glared at her.

“I am trying to learn,” she snapped. “I would have expected a Ravenclaw to understand that, but perhaps I was wrong. I actually have ambitions which require good grades. Did you know that I am going to become the Minister of Magic one day.”

“There’s really no need to fool around anymore,” Hermione told Harry with a pointed glance. “Your… bet with your friend ended this morning.”

Harry stared back at her blankly.

“What bet?” Umbridge looked between the two of them. “Fooling around? What is going on?”

“The bet in which the two of you play practical jokes on whoever you encounter,” Hermione reminded Harry, hardening her gaze as surreptitiously as possible. “Do you recall?”

“Oh, oh yes,” Harry said, catching on quickly and blushing. “I completely forgot. I’m so sorry, Umb– I mean, Dolores…”

“Do you mean to tell me,” Umbridge squawked, puffing up like a balloon and throwing her quill down, “that you have been feeding me lies here? That you wished me to look like a fool in front of
“No!” Harry squirmed in his seat, fiddling with his papers, glasses and the cuffs of his sleeves. “I would have told you before then… um.”

With a resigned sigh, he prodded the sheet of parchment that Umbridge had been writing on with his wand, and it burst into flames, shrivelling and collapsing into a mountain of black crisps.

“Quentin Trimble’s *The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection,*” he recited, bowing under Hermione’s close gaze. “You’ll find everything in there.”

Harrumphing, Umbridge flounced away, her pink bowtie lopsided on her head.

Phew. Crisis diverted.

Harry let out an uncertain little laugh as soon as she was out of earshot. Hermione immediately rounded on him with a scowl, slamming her book down on the table.

“It’s not funny,” she said. “No more mucking around with her, understand?”

“Well,” said Harry, “the bright side is, she’s going to leave me alone from now on.”

***

Ever since Delacour had made the Slytherin team as Seeker, Slughorn had warmed up to him considerably. That day’s Potions class was no exception, even despite his lack of talent in Potions, Tom was pleased to see. All the more reason for the further build-up of spite towards the French student from the Gryffindors.

It seemed that he and Prewett had made up, and Tom had a sneaking suspicion that Delacour had used him as an excuse to do so. If that was the way the spectacled boy thought, Tom decided, then until the Gryffindors reached exploding point, he would not be seen near Delacour at all. It eliminated the possibility of Delacour hiding behind him again.

“Harry, my boy!” Slughorn boomed as soon as Delacour and his sister– no, cousin – walked into the dungeons classroom. “A little bird just told me that you were a Quidditch Captain at Beauxbatons!”

Delacour immediately glared around the room, as if he could find the offender with his eyes alone. Tom smirked quietly. It had been he, after all, to stimulate such a conversation before the new Seeker’s arrival. Parkinson had taken such joy in sharing this little piece of knowledge around, it was to be expected that it would arrive at Slughorn’s ears eventually.

“I was,” Delacour finally said through gritted teeth. The Other Delacour rolled her eyes, pulled out his chair and told him to sit down. Delacour did as instructed without complaint, to Tom’s amusement. He could almost come to like The Other Delacour. But not quite. She was his competition with Felix Felicis, and Tom had a point to prove.

With half an ear on the conversation, eager on Slughorn’s half and reluctant on Delacour’s, he summoned his potion, unfroze it in time, then read the next line of the instructions in his textbook. A dash of a tincture of thyme.

Tom removed his blazer, slinging it over the back of his chair, then rolled his sleeves up as he wandered over to the ingredient’s cupboard. Thyme could be found there.
“Tell me more about Quidditch at Beauxbatons,” he heard Slughorn saying. “I was never much of a Quidditch follower, but I’ll be sure to keep an eye out for your fresh talent on the field! But first – Beauxbatons.”

“Uhm.” Tom heard Delacour make a nervous, muffled noise which was strangely enough adorable. “I can’t tell you that.”

‘That’ came out as ‘zat’, and this Tom also found to be quite endearing. Of late, many of Delacour’s normally irritating habits had become so. The way he cleared his throat whenever he spoke. Pulled the cuffs of his sleeve over his hands as if his fingers were constantly cold. Pushed his wire-framed glasses to sit on top of his head while he scrubbed his eyes when he was tired. Patted Greengrass awkwardly on the shoulder whenever she welcomed him with a hug. All these little details that Tom shouldn’t have noticed. But then again, he told himself, he may as well have just been evaluating his future seventh member of his inner circle. He had done the same with the rest of them.

Selecting a tincture, Tom continued back to his table.

“Oh, Aristide is a sly old bat,” Slughorn chuckled, with just a hint of petulance, before tacking on hastily, “Please don’t tell him I said that, of course.”

Tom put his tincture down on the table and glanced over in time to see Delacour cupping the back of his neck nervously, and The Other Delacour tensing. Interesting.

“Yes, Aristide,” he said slowly.

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten who your last headmaster was!” Slughorn boomed, laughing, and Delacour shouted, “Of course not! Aristide was an old fart! I mean!”

“Harry!” The Other Delacour slammed her thyme tincture down on the table (it appeared that she and Tom were neck-and-neck in the brewing).

“Do you happen to be bearing witness to the Delacour entertainment?” Mulciber murmured to Tom from his seat, all the while scrutinising his failing potion, which was turning opaque instead of transparent.

“Of course I am,” replied Tom. “Stir clockwise twice, then anti-clockwise once. That should correct the colouring. Next time, be more mindful of how you’re handling Felix. It’s a very delicate concoction.”

“Sorry.” Mulciber merely looked bored as he followed Tom’s instruction.

“At least we know that there’ll never be a dull moment once Delacour joins us,” Tom heard Lestrange offer from behind. “I must admit, I’m looking forward to the year of Quidditch with him…”

How could Tom forget? Lestrange had easily bagged one of the three Chaser positions for the fifth year in a row, just as Avery was one of the Beaters for the fourth… It would be so easy to give the order for the two of them to close in on Delacour, render him defenceless. And yet Tom hesitated to allow them to touch the strangely innocent French boy…

“Of course you are,” Nott retorted. “You’ve got a bet to uphold, don’t you?”

“Bet?” Tom pricked his ears and turned on the two.
“Peregrine and Caspian, you may recall,” Nott said, giving Lestrange a nasty look as he prodded his potion which was incorrectly as thick as slime, “were being immature the first dinner of the school year.”

“Twenty galleons that I can sleep with one of the Delacours before Christmas,” Lestrange said, and leered towards the Slytherin and Ravenclaw on the opposite side of the classroom as they nattered to each other. “Time is ticking, and I’m thinking that my best shot is getting one of them drunk some night, then just go for it.”

Tom slammed his hands down on Lestrange and Nott’s shared table, leaning in so that he was face-to-face with Lestrange. Something ugly was roiling in his stomach (though wasn’t there always?), telling him to curse Lestrange stupid.

“I forbid you,” he whispered, no longer sure if he were speaking in parseltongue or English, “from raping Harry Delacour.”

“I wouldn’t rape anybody!” Lestrange said indignantly, though he was shrinking away from Tom, his black eyes wide and his skin paling drastically. “Why in Salazar’s name would I do that, it would be a disgrace to the family name! Alcohol is only to loosen them up a little!”

Still breathing heavily, Tom straightened up, eyes dark with promise as he gazed down at Lestrange.

“Tom,” Mulciber murmured, then, “Riddle. Bad time.”

Yes, yes, bad time, he couldn’t well Crucio the living daylights out of Lestrange in the middle of Potions class. Smoothing his face into a cool mask of indifference, Tom turned back to his potion, but not before running an agitated hand through his hair. Why the hell did he feel so temperamental these days? It didn’t make any sense.

Adjusting the temperature of the flame beneath the cauldron, Tom approved of the potion’s maturity before checking that Slughorn was nowhere near them. The professor was maintaining a steady, jovial discussion with Prewett and Bones. Seizing the opportunity, Tom turned to Nott and said, “How is our friend Poole faring?”

Lestrange looked as though he could have died with relief to have Tom’s attention diverted from him (Tom privately wished that he would), and Nott grimaced.

“Poole has latched onto The Other Delacour’s side like a bloodthirsty leech,” he reported. “The issue lies in that she, on the other hand, has latched onto Delacour’s side like a bloodthirsty leech. Some sort of chain reaction, I dunno how it works…”

“Fuck,” Tom hissed, and Nott, Mulciber and Lestrange flinched in their seats. Tom seldom swore, and when he did, it was the equivalent of a knell. Why must the Delacours make everything so difficult for him? Why couldn’t he just cast the Imperius Curse on the lot of them and be done with it? Because he had to consider things long-term, he reminded himself.

“Tom,” called Slughorn, waddling over, and Tom whirled around to face him. His three companions went up in a flurry of movement to start brewing again.

“Are you having better luck with Felix then the lot of them?” Slughorn waved his hand vaguely in the general direction of the rest of the class.

“I hope so, sir,” Tom replied, allowing a genial smile to ghost over his mouth, because he potion was perfect thus far. So he was doing better than The Other Delacour, was he? Slughorn peered
into his cauldron before clapping his hands together in delight.

“Absolutely exquisite, as expected of you, Mr. Riddle!” he exclaimed, drawing the attention of the other N.E.W.Ts students. Tom smirked, glancing to the side so as to meet The Other Delacour’s critical, dark eyes.

(Point for me, you little twat, he thought to himself. Ah, the taste of success…

“Yours and Miss Delacour’s liquid luck potions are identical!” Slughorn declared.

“Excuse me?” The smirk slide off Tom’s face abruptly.

“It’s about time you had a little competition around here,” the professor said cheerfully, patting Tom’s shoulder as he passed by, completely oblivious to the murder in Tom’s eyes (and the murder in everybody else’s). “What good fun this is. May the best man, or woman, win!”

“I plan to.” Furiously, Tom flicked to the next page of the textbook, tearing the page in the process, and was in such a filthy mood for the rest of the lesson that nobody dared speak to him again.

***

Ignatius approached the Slytherin table for the first time at dinner that night. While Harry was helping himself to potatoes, doing his best to hide behind Margot from Umbridge without making it too obvious, he heard somebody clear their throat behind him.

“Harry,” the timid voice said, and Harry looked over his shoulder, grinning when he saw who it was.

“Ignatius!” he welcomed. “Whatever brings you into hostile territory?”

It was true – further down the table, Harry spied Riddle’s inner circle passing Ignatius dirty looks.

“I’ve got somebody who wants to meet you,” Ignatius said, valiantly ignoring his surroundings. Harry started to stand, and was slammed back down into his seat by a hand on his shoulder.

“But Prewett,” Margot drawled, “Edwin and I were rather enjoying Harry’s company…”

“Quite right,” Parkinson agreed, smiling sharply at Ignatius. “Perhaps you should leave now.”

“Seriously?” Ignatius looked nothing but annoyed. “You two sit with Harry at next to every meal. I don’t know what he sees in you, either.”

“Time to go!” Harry swung around and out of his seat, marching his taller friend away before anymore words could be exchanged. “Please stop antagonizing those two, I’m the one who has to deal with it later.”

“But why sixth years?” Ignatius whined back.

“Because all the seventh years are, you know.” In unison, they glanced over their shoulders and towards Riddle and his circle of followers.

“Fair point.” Ignatius shrugged. “But you could always sit with your cousin.”

“Trust me, Hermione would love me to join her,” Harry scoffed, “but one, all that scholarly talk
would do my brain in, and two, her boyfriend makes me want to tear my hair out, so I’m going to have to pass.”

“She has a boyfriend already?”

“Well, he wishes he was, anyway,” Harry amended, and they laughed.

“Fine,” Ignatius said, after calming himself. “Then you could always sit with me.”

“That’s unlikely.” Harry smiled sadly. “You must have noticed by now that the Gryffindors have begun to shun our friendship.”

“Not all of them,” said Ignatius, tapping the side of his nose knowingly. “Hence this meeting. There’s a certain first year who wishes to speak Quidditch with you.”

“Um,” said Harry. “Aren’t there plenty of Quidditch players in your house? An entire team, even? I mean, aren’t you Keeper?”

“Good point, good point.” Ignatius grinned. “But you can ask Minerva ‘why’ yourself.”

“What,” said Harry.

“Minerva McGonagall. That’s her name.” Ignatius lowered his voice. “She’s mighty sharp for an eleven-year-old, I’ll warn you. Reminds me of my grandmother.”

“What,” said Harry again.

“Do you know her?” Ignatius was beginning to look a little concerned.

“What,” Harry said for a third time, before snapping out of his mind blank and saying, “I mean, no! Hurry, I want to meet her!”

If Ignatius thought that Harry’s sudden enthusiasm was strange, he didn’t remark on it. Either way, Harry didn’t care. The idea of meeting his stern Head of House as a fresh-faced Hogwarts student excited him to no end. He half considered skipping back to drag Hermione along for the ride, but decided against it – he would push Ignatius only so far when it came to questioning his sanity.

“Minerva,” Ignatius said, pushing Harry down into a seat at the end of the Gryffindor table. “One Mr. Delacour, as requested.”

Harry gaped at the little Gryffindor, before remembering to keep his mouth closed.

There was no doubt that this girl would grow up to be the Minerva McGonagall that Harry had grown to know and respect.

With black hair drawn back into a firm bun and her grey blazer impeccably lint-rolled, Harry suddenly felt very self-conscious of his appearance before her, even despite being her senior by six years, technically. Was his tie straight? Was his hair its usual rumpled disgrace? Was that a stain on his sleeve?

Shit. Maybe it would have been best if they hadn’t met.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Delacour,” McGonagall said primly, evaluating Harry with an eyebrow cocked upwards. “I’m glad to be able to speak to you.”
“Please,” Harry said weakly, resisting the urge to shrink down in his seat. “You can call me Harry.”

Another moment of silence, in which McGonagall observed him sternly, before she said, “Then you may call me Minerva.”

Ignatius plonked himself down next to Harry.

“Well, isn’t this fun?” he remarked. McGonagall, or rather, Minerva, ignored him, which was so very Professor-McGonagall-ish of her that Harry nearly laughed.

“I want ask you about Quidditch,” she said.

“I, uh, Ignatius told me,” said Harry, fully aware that she was to grow to be a serious Quidditch enthusiast. “But… me?”

“You look to be a capable Seeker,” said Minerva promptly. “To be so experienced in catching the Snitch that you can predict which way it is going to turn next? Rather brilliant, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“It wasn’t quite like that,” Harry murmured, embarrassed. “It was just windy at the time, and there are a few tell-tale motions of the Snitch that every Seeker knows, so piece one and one together, and…”

“Either way,” Minerva interrupted, “I’m interested in becoming a Seeker in later years, so I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions regarding the required skillset.”

“Ask away,” said Harry, feeling rather as though he were in a dream. “But couldn’t you just ask the Gryffindor Seeker?”

“He’s nowhere near as polished as you. So anyway, I was wondering…”

As Minerva continued speaking, Harry felt his eyes drawn further down the Gryffindor table, and met the cold blue eyes of a lanky blonde student, who diverted his gaze almost immediately. With a frown, Harry zoned back in to Minerva, and made no mention of the blonde boy to anybody. He had bigger fish to fry.

***

N.E.W.Ts was honestly trying to kill him, Harry thought. He was so damn sick of the homework loads, especially since he shouldn’t have had to bother. But with Dumbledore making zero progress in puzzling out how to send Harry and Hermione forwards in time, it was impossible to tell how long they’d be stranded in 1944. Harry did not plan on failing the school year if it came down to it.

The silver clock on the mantelpiece of the common room chimed eleven o’clock – time to retire for the night. Margot and Parkinson had both headed off to bed an hour ago, insisting that they, unlike Harry, had to arise early for a class during first period, whereas Harry had a free.

There were only a few stragglers left, all N.E.W.Ts students with bloodshot eyes, tousled hair and crazed looks on their faces as they struggled to cram the final words into essays due the following day – Harry felt that he probably resembled them to a great extent. He spotted Nott in the corner, who had earlier announced to the world that he was resigned to pull an all-nighter in order to finish an Ancient Runes assignment.
Stacking his textbooks and sending them up to his bed in the dormitory with a flick of his wand, Harry proceeded to pack his inkpot and quills into his bag when a piece of parchment fell on the table in front of him.

“Hm?” He looked up to face a stoic fifth year prefect standing over him.

“I was just finishing my rounds in the Slytherin corridors,” she said, “when a Gryffindor came up to me and asked me to give this to you. Ugh.”

The girl stormed away, as if it was such an offense to have a Gryffindor deign to speak to her.

“Sorry.” Harry called after her sarcastically, attracting the attention of Nott and the few others, before bending over the piece of parchment, which turned out to be a note.

"Could you meet me at the bottom of Gryffindor Tower? It’s urgent. – Ignatius"

Harry dropped the note on top of the table, dumped his bag on the chair and rushed out of the common room.

He knew his way to Gryffindor Tower easily – it came as second nature to him, but what on earth was so urgent that Ignatius would summon him after curfew? It had better be important, it was infringing on his precious bedtime… but of course it was urgent, Ignatius wouldn’t ask for him if it wasn’t. But Harry couldn’t, for the life of him, fathom what the reason could possibly be.

Reaching the bottom of Gryffindor Tower, Harry found nobody waiting for him, and glanced around nervously. Perhaps he had arrived sooner than Ignatius had expected. As long as a professor didn’t stumble upon Harry waiting, he wasn’t in the mood for a month’s worth of detentions or losing fifty house points. He’d never hear the end of it from Margot if he did…

The stone floor and walls were freezing at that time of night, leeching the warmth out of Harry’s bones, and he wondered, not for the first time, why he had neglected to bring his jumper or blazer. Accepting that he may have a little while to wait, he walked over to the corridor window, gazing out at the clouded sky. Not a star could be seen, and the moon was veiled behind a thin film of mist. It was as if a cover had been thrown over the entire world, and it was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen. And it was silent. Too silent.

Almost as if–

“Expelliarmus!”

Harry’s wand flew out of his pocket as he belated grasped for it, sensing foul play.

“Fuck!” he swore, defenceless, spinning around to face the offender. Incorrect. Offenders, plural.

The blonde boy, the one with the cold blue eyes who Harry had seen at the Gryffindor table at dinner that night, stepped out from the shadows of the tower’s staircase, followed by a massive, broad-shouldered bruiser.

Harry’s precious phoenix feather wand was twirled shamelessly between the former’s fingers.

“Please,” Harry said, trying his patience, “may you return my wand to me?”
The blonde boy merely *tsked* softly, before stepping closer to Harry.

“I’ve been hoping to meet you face-to-face, Delacour,” he said, and has voice was overly nasally. “Everybody is always swooning over what fresh, new talent you are. A great Seeker, a *brilliant* Defence student… how amusing it is that you were disarmed so easily. Now, you may wish to call for help from your precious Gryffindor friends—” he spat the word as if it tasted foul “—who are all asleep just at the top of this tower, but I placed a charm on the portrait hole so that nobody behind it can hear anything happening outside.”

“Who the fuck even are you?” Harry snapped, but stilled when the boy pressed the phoenix wand into Harry’s jawline, tracing the sharp line almost lovingly.

“Jenkins,” he cooed. “Elijah Jenkins. And that over there is Axel Renshaw. Not that there is any importance in me telling you.”

“I see a lot of importance in you telling me,” Harry retorted.

“I plan on Obliviating you once we’ve finished with you, if your brain is even still intact by then,” Jenkins said with a careless shrug, leaning in so that their noses were nearly touching (Harry noted that finally – *finally* - there was somebody who was the same height as him).

“Like hell,” Harry snarled.

“Like *definitely*,” said Jenkins, then, “Obliviate.”

Harry’s head went woozy, his vision flaring white for a moment, and he stumbled backwards, tripping into the wall behind him as he clutched at his head, everything that he had ever known momentarily drifting up into the atmosphere above him, and he was weightless for a single, breathtaking moment… before it all came back to him, that he was Harry Potter and this was his troubled life, every little bit of it.

And he was currently cornered by two fuckwits.

“Who exactly are you?” Harry snapped at the blonde boy with as much bravado as he could muster. The blonde boy merely cackled at a joke Harry didn’t understand, sending an amused glance back at his muscular companion.

“Absolutely pathetic,” he sneered. “I am Elijah Jenkins, and this is Axel Renshaw. We are the two people who are about to ruin you, little garden snake. Axel, should we muddle him up even more for our further amusement?”

“I love that idea,” said Renshaw, and his voice would have been deep and soothing if it weren’t for the less than savoury circumstances. He pointed his wand at Harry and said, “*Confundo.*”

Harry’s already hazy mind, which had been struggling to straighten itself out, was rendered hopeless again.

“Fuck off, you lil shit,” Harry slurred, barely able to stand straight as he put his hand against the wall to prevent himself from falling over, his mind a useless jumble of strings and knots in his head. It occurred to him that if Hermione was here, she would scold him for speaking like a plebeian, and he found himself giggling at the thought. *Plebeian.* It was such a Hermione word…

“Oh, he’s long lost,” the nasally little snot standing in front of Harry said. “This won’t be any fun with him behaving like a mindless moron. Should probably sober him up again.”
An unintelligible spell was murmured, and Harry felt saner all of a sudden. The stupid smile fell from his face and he clutched at the stones of the wall behind him, the full implications of the situation finally striking him harshly in the stomach.

“Use the Cruciatius on him while I speak,” Jenkins ordered Renshaw, drumming Harry’s wand against his leg.


“Don’t be a bloody pansy, Axel!” Jenkins whirled on the taller of the two, Harry momentarily forgotten. “Slytherins are sneaky pieces of shit, they’re a curse on us! Look at your mother, tortured by a Slytherin graduate. Look at my father, killed by a Slytherin graduate! This one is no different. You’ve seen him, siphoning off Ignatius like a bloody vampire, and cosying up with the likes of Parkinson and Greengrass. Now he thinks that he’s Merlin himself, since everybody thinks he’s the best Seeker ever. Well, I’m a better Seeker! And then I see him fraternizing with the piece-of-trash Umbridge in the library!”

“Yes, but…”

“F… fraternizing with Um… Umbridge?” Harry murmured, still searching for the use of his tongue again. “Yeah right…”

“Shut the fuck up, you shithead,” Jenkins roared, jabbing a wand at him viciously. “These are blights on this earth, Axel, now cast the bloody fucking Cruciatius Curse or I will!”

Terrified by his small and angry companion, Renshaw immediately lifted his wand, directed it at Harry, and Harry braced himself for excruciating pain as he saw the incantation “Crucio” pass the boy’s lips.

A twinge in his naval, then nothing. Jenkins, who had been watching with feral-eyed anticipation, stared expectantly for five more seconds, and when nothing happened, turned to face his companion with an almost innocent, questioning tilt of his head.

Harry grimaced slightly.

“You forget, Jenkins,” he whispered, almost teasing. “The practitioner has got to mean it.”

Harry saw the exact moment that something inside Jenkin snapped. A light went out in his eyes, his heart fractured.

Renshaw turned and fled.

“Crucio!” Jenkins snarled through his teeth, wielding Harry’s own wand as the offender, and Harry dropped to the ground like a stone, pain erupting in every cell of his body, screaming at the tops of their lungs that they hurt, they all hurt, but perhaps that was only him screaming after all. Bright red light burst in his eyes and he wondered if it was because they were bleeding and he wouldn’t have been surprised if they were and now he was certain that his ribs were arching cracking breaking out from within his body tearing open the flesh that lay over them it hurt it hurt was this what it was like in Hell why was it still going his heart ruptured in his chest this Gryffindor knew hate never had Harry felt hate like this not in such a long time blood tears pain scream no wonder Neville’s parents had been driven to insanity if this was it if this was it if this was it

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“Harry?” A deep voice enveloped his entire body. Then again. “Harry?”

Harry? Was that his name?

He shivered against the cold ground beneath him, tongue plastered to the roof of his mouth, his body aching beyond belief, something sharp digging into the cheekbone which lay pressed against the floor. His glasses. The glass in them, they had smashed.

Why had they smashed?

His brain was so slow, as if it were rebooting from a time that it had been shut down. Had it been shut down? So many questions… what had happened?

A spasm wracked his body, again, again. A warm liquid trickled from a nostril, then his eyes. Were they tears, or blood? Could a nostril even weep tears? Could eyes even weep blood?

Arms drew him into a warm, broad chest, and even though he was sure his eyes were open, he was sightless. Was he blind? Why was he sightless? Again, what had happened?

“I’ll get you to the Hospital Wing,” the disembodied voice continued, though he supposed it belonged to this warm body that was holding him so protectively, “and everything will work out, Harry. Can you hear me, Harry?”

Why did the voice keep saying his name, he wasn’t daft. But then again, was it his name?

Everything around him started moving, except for those arms which made him feel as though nothing could touch him in the world.

“You can thank Nott for me finding you before you were tortured beyond hope,” the voice continued, as if it knew that he was listening. “You may recall that he was sitting in the corner of the common room, scratching his head over his Ancient Runes assignment due tomorrow. Silly boy, should have completed it earlier. Though perhaps it’s a lucky thing he hadn’t, otherwise you’d be brain-dead. He saw Morticia bring you the note, and then you running off like a man on a mission. He checked the note, thought it was suspicious, then brought it to me.”

Keep talking, he thought. Keep talking. It was like he was a buoy, bobbing, lost, in the middle of an endless ocean, and this body, this voice was his only tether, keeping him from floating away to a place that he could never return from.

“I came searching for you, ran into the coward Renshaw on the way, who told me what was happening. Always knew Jenkins was a piece of work, not quite right in the head. Though then again, who is?” A dry laugh. “The professors can deal with them, though. Surely an expulsion is in order.”

Expulsion? He was still loose on the details…

“But first, Harry, rest.”

The voice dogged Harry into the dark.

Chapter End Notes
Um that was intense. I LOVED IT, MY FIRST INTENSE SCENE/S OF THE STORY. So this is the first major turning point of the story as well, YAY. I’m sorry I hurt our poor baby Harry, buuuut whatever, I’m sure you’ll all forgive me because TOMARRY!

As for McGonagall wouldn’t be in first year until next year, BUT I WANTED HER HERE. And I loved the idea of her and Umbridge being in the same year, brings a whole new level to the animosity between the two of them in The Order of the Phoenix, right? XP
“We have to get away,” she said, more to herself than anyone else. “This time isn’t good for us. Look what has already happened to Harry. We don’t belong here.”

The thundering of a pair of feet could be heard, darting with purpose from the base of Ravenclaw Tower, only one destination in mind for the owner of that pair of feet.

Hermione nearly tripped over twice in her hurry, and it didn’t help at all that the corridors were almost pitch black. Finally it occurred to her to light her way. It would at least minimise the likelihood of her disabling herself before she could reach the Hospital Wing.

Never slowing her pace, she pulled her wand out and whispered, “Lumos,” the bright light guiding her along a surer path than before.

Minutes earlier, Professor Flitwick had found Hermione pacing in the Ravenclaw common room, trying not to tear her hair out over a piece of nonsensical logic that had sprouted up in Arithmancy. It was closer to midnight than eleven o’clock when the tiny professor had rushed up to Hermione in a great kerfuffle.

She had never before seen Flitwick in such an anxious state.

“Your cousin, Miss Delacour,” he had said breathlessly, successfully bringing Hermione to a halt. “There has been a troubling incident in the castle tonight, Mr Delacour has been compromised terribly, I’m afraid to say. He is currently taking up residence in the Hospital Wing, but– Miss Delacour!”

Hermione was out and running before Flitwick could even finish his sentence.

It was so unconventional for her to act before thinking (she was known to be a woman of contemplation before a woman of action), and she was no stranger to meeting Harry in the Hospital Wing, but this particular affair frightened her more than usual. Perhaps it was because they were lost in another timeline. Perhaps it was because she knew that she was the only one there for Harry, really there for Harry, as he was the only one there for her. And she couldn’t bear the thought of losing him.
Don’t be ridiculous, Hermione told herself as she neared the Hospital Wing, but a tear welled in the corner of her eye, beading into a droplet, before being caught up in the air currents and flying away, lost in a sea of emptiness. Because surely she wasn’t being ridiculous. Flitwick’s troubling disquiet was no laughing matter – it brought to mind only one other event. The end of the Third Task of the Triwizard Tournament a few years back. The return of Voldemort.

What had happened to Harry?

The Hospital Wing doors were thrown wide open, soft light spilling into the corridor. The long silhouettes of a small gathering of professors stretched out with it. Murmuring “Nox,” Hermione cancelled the glow on the tip of her wand and paused just beyond the doorway to listen.

“It comes as a shock to us all, Galatea,” the voice of Dumbledore said. “I never would have seen that Mr. Jenkins was capable of such ill intent.”

“Of course you wouldn’t!” interrupted an upset-sounding Slughorn. “He was one of your Gryffindors, after all, and according to you, they can never do any wrong! I think that this case proves something else altogether–”

“Horace,” rasped an elderly voice – Dippet, “please calm yourself, my old friend. Now, I wonder whether Filius has successfully arisen Miss Delacour…”

Hermione took this as her queue to enter. Blinking back the moisture in her eyes, she stepped gingerly into the Hospital Wing. A small number of professors stood together, all for individual reasons, Hermione guessed as she studied the assembly.

Dippet, for being Headmaster; Slughorn, for being Harry’s Head of House; Dumbledore, for being something of the Delacours’ guardian; Madam Pomfrey, for being matron; and Merrythought, who was an expert on the Dark Arts, but why her presence was required, Hermione didn’t understand. Unless it was because Harry had fallen victim to…

Hermione cleared her throat to signify her arrival. The many heads turned around to face her.

“I’m here, sir,” she said to Dippet, and her voice sounded small to her own ears. “What… what happened?”

“Poor dear, you’re shaking like a leaf!” Madam Pomfrey interjected, before anybody could answer the question. She bustled forward, parting the professors as she did so, and guided Hermione to sit in a chair by… oh.

Harry looked so small and lifeless in bed, heavy blankets pulled right up to his chin, his face burrowed in the pillow. His face was a worrying shade of white, and there were half-healed cuts across his profile. Through his translucent skin, his bones stood sharp and fragile, unlike anything she had seen before. And his eyes – they were wide open, an uncanny, luminescent green. He appeared to be watching her, though he seemed empty, vacant.

“Harry?” Hermione whispered, shaking her shoulder free from Madam Pomfrey’s gentle grip. She lowered herself into the chair and leaned closer to her friend, peering intently into his eyes.

“Harry,” she repeated, hating the vulnerability in her voice. “Can… can you hear me?”

“Who knows,” said a mellow voice from the other side of the bed, and Hermione’s eyes snapped up to the speaker. Immediately, her defensive walls snicked into place, her back unconsciously straightening and her face hardening.
“What are you doing here?” she hissed, uncharacteristically aggressive. But she had every right to be – this was Riddle, who had tortured and murdered and torn countless lives apart. And he had finally gotten to Harry, which was impossible, because Harry was the boy-who-lived, and that was what he did, he lived, he didn’t… he didn’t…

“Enough of that,” Madam Pomfrey chided. “Riddle was the one who intercepted Jenkins and brought Delacour here.”

“He… what?” All hostile thoughts fled Hermione’s head immediately, like wisps of smoke being blown away, and she recalled that this was Tom Riddle, not yet Voldemort. But Madam Pomfrey had said what now? Nothing was quite registering in her sleep-deprived brain, and how slow-witted she was beginning to feel.

“There are you are, Miss Delacour!” squeaked Flitwick, and every pair of eyes chased over to him as he stumbled into the Hospital Wing, breathless. “Please refrain from taking off like that again!”

“There you are, Filius!” Dippet said. “I was wondering where you had gotten to.”

“These legs don’t carry me very fast, you must understand,” replied the Head of Ravenclaw with a frown.

Hermione, still bewildered beyond belief, stood up swiftly (nearly keeling back over in the process) and said loudly, “Can somebody please tell me what is going on? I’ve been summoned to the Hospital Wing in the middle of the night, only to find my cousin looking like death warmed over, and I still have not had a single explanation other than… something I have not quite registered yet!”

Her voice rung like a bell through the rafters of the ceiling, before her knees gave way and she fell back into the chair, light-headed. Madam Pomfrey, Slughorn, Flitwick and Merrythought gazed at her with pity in their eyes, all the while Riddle remained silent, watching Harry’s still face quietly. Hermione wanted nothing more than to grab Harry and hide him, protect him from that fathomless expression on the future Dark Lord’s face.

Dippet sighed wearily then, massaging his temple and nodding to Dumbledore to explain. Madam Pomfrey jumped in first.

“Can’t you see that the girl is going into shock?” she snapped, ever protective of her patients. “Surely the explanations can wait until tomorrow, I say give Delacour a Calming Draught and let her sleep it off.”

“No!” Hermione said, then recalling that Riddle was witnessing the entire scene, she repeated in a slightly more even voice, “No. Please. I need to know.”

Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey made eye contact, a silent battle of wills, before Madam Pomfrey finally gave in.

“Fine!” she cried, throwing her hands up in defeat and storming over to her medicinal cupboards. “Fine! If you all think you know better than a trained Healer, then what am I to do?”

She shuffled through the numerous potions, finding a purple-tinted glass bottle, and in a huff shoved the bottle into Hermione’s hands.

“I still insist upon you taking a Calming Draught before you go back to your dormitory room tonight,” the matron pressed.
“I would rather keep watch over Harry,” said Hermione quietly, “if that’s alright with you.”

Madam Pomfrey made an audible “tch” noise, though there was something of approval in her eyes as she moved away to sweep her wand over Harry’s head. A small blue orb appeared above his forehead, dancing slightly as it emitted tiny, pale veins of light.

“An improvement,” Merrythought remarked from where she stood, leaning heavily against her cane.

“Thank Merlin,” added Slughorn, mopping at his brow with a handkerchief. “He needn’t be taken to St Mungo’s, then?”

“Poppy?” prodded Dippet.

“That Mr. Delacour has improved to such extent in only half an hour suggests that full mind recovery is possible within the next couple of weeks,” said Madam Pomfrey. “Only the most severe cases are admitted into St Mungo’s.”

“Did this not appear to be a severe case from first glance, though?” asked Slughorn.

“It did,” said Madam Pomfrey, “but Mr. Delacour here appears to be a fighter.”

Harry had been fighting his entire life, Hermione knew, and now was no exception to that rule. If only they all knew…

She stared, transfixed, at the hovering blue orb, at the spidery light pirouetting around it, when something clicked.

“Is that…?” she whispered.

“His brain activity,” Dumbledore said gently from behind her shoulder. “Yes.”

Tears welled up in Hermione’s eyes unexpectedly, and she gripped the bottle in her hands tightly enough that her knuckles whitened. That little light hovering above Harry’s head was the essence of Harry himself, it was what made him the person that Hermione loved as dearly as a brother. It was like a single ray of sunlight, piercing through the dark of night. Watching as it danced around leisurely, that precious little globe, Hermione knew that Harry would be alright.

Madam Pomfrey lowered her wand, and the light melted into thin air. Hermione was once again left cold.

“I’ll be in my office if you notice any changes,” the matron announced, pocketing her wand. “Miss Delacour, even if you plan on remaining here the night, which I will allow as you are family, I still wish for you to take that draught in your hands. Mr. Riddle, are you feeling light-headed whatsoever, confused? Any breathing difficulties?”

“I am absolutely perfect, Madam Pomfrey,” Riddle said soothingly. “I have a tough stomach.”

It somehow felt like a jab at Hermione, and she bristled slightly.

“Then I ask that you return to your dormitory now,” said Madam Pomfrey, “and refrain from spreading any rumours—”

“Come now, Poppy,” chided Dippet. “Mr. Riddle wasn’t made Head Boy for his love of gossip.”

“Yes, I too can personally vouch for Tom’s trustworthiness.” Slughorn appeared to be unable to
keep himself from voicing his opinion when it came to his favourite student. If Hermione had not been preoccupied with worrying over Harry, she might have rolled her eyes.

“Thank you, Headmaster, Professor,” said Riddle quietly. “Know that I have never taken part in pointless rumour-passing, Madam.”

If Hermione hadn’t known that he was a complete sociopath, she might have been fooled – he had a skill which somehow allowed him to make himself sound like a decent, humble human being.

“I believe that it’s time you went back to your dormitory, Tom,” Dumbledore said, and there was a stern note to his voice as he looked over his half-moon glasses at the Slytherin boy.

“Yes, it’s long past curfew,” said Dippet. “If it weren’t for the… current circumstances, I would have been forced to dock house points from yourself, and Mistres Delacour, Jenkins and Renshaw, but like I said, given the circumstances…”

There it was again – the name Jenkins, and now Renshaw as well. There seemed to be quite a story that Hermione had yet to learn.

“Given the circumstances, you saved a fellow student from great peril,” Merrythought provided, “Jenkins and Renshaw are to face dire consequences, and Delacour… he has surely paid the price, many times over.”

Riddle gave a curt nod of his head, and as he stood, Hermione observed him rake his eyes over Harry one last time, as though memorising all the details, and there was something possessive about his gaze which Hermione did not like one bit… then he was moving away towards the door, as if nothing had happened at all.

“Straight to bed, Tom,” directed Dumbledore, his expression sombre in the dim lighting, drawing out all the lines in his face. “Take no detours.”

Riddle’s eyes looked pitch-black when set in his shadowed face, and he held Dumbledore’s stare for a few moments, before once again dipping his head in acknowledgement, gaze flickering over to meet Hermione’s for a split second. She could have sworn that they flared scarlet-red in that moment, but it may have just been a trick of the light as he turned on heel and strode away.

Hermione watched his exit for several more seconds, before releasing a breath of air and turning back to the professors, waiting expectantly. With Riddle gone, the atmosphere seemed as though a weight had been lifted off of it.

“We have several students involved in this case, a Harry Delacour, Tom Riddle, Elijah Jenkins, Francis Nott, Axel Renshaw and Morticia Byrd,” Dumbledore began, summoning a chair and sitting himself down opposite Hermione, while the professors still present listened in. “Mr. Delacour is, of course, unable to speak at this moment, and Mr. Jenkins is incapacitated, so we have yet to hear their sides of the story. Mr. Riddle, Mr. Nott, Mr. Renshaw and Miss Byrd all spoke before your arrival, however, and from them, we have gained sufficient enough information to understand what occurred.

“At eleven o’clock tonight, Miss Byrd was finishing her prefect rounds in the dungeons, and was approached by Mr. Renshaw, who, under the orders of Mr. Jenkins, was to ask her to deliver Mr. Delacour a note. Miss Byrd removed ten points from Gryffindor house for wandering the corridors at such an hour, but delivered the note either way.” Here, Dumbledore removed a slip of parchment from his robes and passed it to Hermione, who read over it briefly.
Could you meet me at the bottom of Gryffindor Tower? It’s urgent. – Ignatius

Dread already balling in the pit of her stomach, she listened on.

“Mr. Nott, who claims to have been completing homework in the Slytherin common room at the time, reports that Mr. Delacour fled the room, leaving this note behind, and he alerted Mr. Riddle of the matter, who traced Mr. Delacour’s footsteps to Gryffindor Tower. By the time Mr. Riddle arrived, Mr. Renshaw had left and only Mr. Jenkins was present. Mr. Riddle disarmed the offender and Stunned him, before alerting us professors of the situation.

“We have spoken with Mr. Renshaw, who, quite frankly, was not in a fit state at the time, and he has affirmed that upon Mr. Delacour’s arrival at the scene, Mr. Jenkins disarmed him—”

Dumbledore nodded his head in Harry’s direction “—and then proceeded to perform the Memory Charm and Confundus Charm on him. The Crucius Curse was also performed, multiple times.”

Dumbledore reached past Hermione for the bedside table, where three wands lay, and took up an unfamiliar long, black one.

“This is Mr. Renshaw’s own wand,” he said, “and using the Reverse Spell, we were able to confirm that it was used first for a Confundus Charm, and then the Crucius Curse.

“This wand,” here Dumbledore replaced Renshaw’s and took up another, “was used for the Disarming Spell, and that is all.

“And finally, this wand,” the final of the three was picked up, “was used for the Memory Charm, a Sobering Charm, and finally, the Crucius. Twice.”

Hermione’s stomach turned, and bile crept up her throat, begging her to vomit, but she swallowed it down, her hands shaking. That Calming Draught was beginning to sound like a good idea. She balled her hands into fists and pressed them down against her thighs to stop the shaking, before finally noticing something.

“That’s Harry’s wand,” she said blankly, and then, with a gasp of horror, “That’s Harry’s wand! Do you mean to tell me, that these… these vile people used Harry’s own wand to torture him?”

As if torture wasn’t enough, it was the ultimate offence to turn a wand on their own master. What sick, twisted humans…

“I’m afraid so—” Dumbledore cut off, turning to face the Hospital Wing entrance as if he sensed something, and there was not a twinkle in his eye. Hermione craned her neck to see what it was that the Transfiguration professor saw, but noticed nothing out of the ordinary.

“What is it, Albus?” Filius asked.

“Ah, nothing at all,” replied Dumbledore, waving it away. “I’m afraid that in my senior years, my imagination has become more active than ever…”

Hermione knew it to be a lie if ever there had been one, but did not remark on it. It was not her business to pry into what Dumbledore thought best remained concealed. She returned back to what was important here.
“What was the motive?” she whispered. “Why Harry? We’re new here, there are no grudges or old wounds that I know of. So why...?”

“Mr. Renshaw claims that it was no personal offence, and that a former Slytherin student had tortured his mother once, and that another had killed Mr. Jenkins’s father. Since then, they have harboured animosity towards Slytherin house in general. Mr. Delacour’s excellent reception as the new Slytherin Seeker appears to have been the straw to break the Hippogriff’s back. See, Mr. Jenkins has been the Gryffindor Seeker for several years, and so there was great spite—”

“That is a ridiculous reason to hurt somebody!” Hermione cried. “For being in Slytherin, and for being noticed for his talents? People don’t do that, it’s not—”

“Mr. Jenkins has not been in a stable mindset,” interrupted Dumbledore calmly. Hermione fell quiet, before saying in a small voice, “What will happen to him?”

“That is up to the Headmaster and the Board of Governors.”

“I thought that the performance of any one of the Unforgivable Curses earned a one-way ticket to Azkaban,” said Hermione, quoting the Mad-Eye Moody imposter from fourth year. But if Jenkins and Renshaw were not yet of age, then how did the law work...? Surfacing from her thoughts, Hermione realised that she was garnering some interesting looks from her professors.

“Where might you have heard that, Miss Delacour?” Merrythought asked. “I never heard such a thing.”

“Oh,” said Hermione, turning bright red. How careless of her – to presume that the laws regarding the Unforgivable Curses had not changed at all over the half-century difference between times.

“I presume that Miss Delacour is not yet familiar with the British Ministry of Magic’s legal code,” intercepted Dumbledore, giving her a pointed look.

“Yes, that must be it,” Hermione mumbled, looking down at the Calming Draught lying in her lap.

“Well, I think it’s about time to get some rest before the sun rises in a few hours,” Dippet announced, clapping his liver-spotted hands together. “Mr. Delacour is in competent hands, after all...”

“For this one occasion,” Flitwick said, fluttering over to Hermione, “I would be willing to grant you leave from your classes tomorrow. I’m sure you wish to watch over your cousin and meet with his parents when they arrive...”

“Parents?” Hermione asked, alarmed, and Dumbledore patted her on the shoulder to calm her, before turning to Flitwick.

“Mr. Delacour is an orphan,” he said, “and has been living with Miss Delacour and her parents since the unfortunate occurrence.”

“Oh dear,” said Flitwick.

“Mm,” agreed Dippet. “His aunt and uncle have been informed of the situation, but are unable to come over from France – they’re Muggles, you see. We are to keep them fully updated on Mr. Delacour’s recovery, however, and I’m sure Miss Delacour will as well.”
“Certainly!” squeaked Hermione. “And Professor Flitwick, I really should go to classes tomorrow, or I’ll fall behind… I’ll gather notes for Harry when he wakes up, and besides, if I’m absent, it’ll only add oxygen to the rumour fire…”

“Quite right,” said Dippet, and began to bustle the professors out of the Hospital Wing. “Have a restful sleep, Miss Delacour.”

“Might I snatch a quick word before I leave?” Dumbledore added as Dippet, Flitwick, Merrythought and Slughorn left, the echoing of their footsteps fading down the corridor. He flicked his wand before tracing a circular shape around himself and Hermione – a bubble which allowed no one to hear the conversation except themselves.

Hermione straightened expectantly. There could only be one matter to be discussed here, then – time travel.

“Have you made any progress, sir?” she asked. It had been too long since she and Harry had been summoned to Dippet’s office all those evenings ago. It was about time there was an update.

“I have,” said Dumbledore grimly, “but I’m afraid it may have made the task even more difficult.”

“What?” Her heart sank down, down… out of her chest and into the freezing floor below. “What did you find out?”

“I believe it to be a Tempus Charm which was cast on the time-turner that yourself and Mr. Potter discovered the night of your arrival here,” Dumbledore said, sighing heavily. “The Tempus Charm is a very rare and powerful bit of magic, you see, capable of bewitching an object and sending the persons touching it back to the chosen time – but only back in time, never forwards. It’s rather like a Portkey, except far more uncommon, and instead of manipulating place, it manipulates time.”

“But I could have sworn that it was the time-turner itself which sent us back,” Hermione said, furrowing her brow. “I mean, we only ended up here after I rotated the time-turner’s wheels a few times, and when time passed by us, it felt like a normal time-turner as well – I’m quite familiar with using them, see.”

“I believe that it was total coincidence that the Tempus Charm was activated after you spun the time-turner’s wheels,” said Dumbledore, “and it is highly possible that the physical effects of the Tempus Charm and the time-turner are the same.”

“Fine, so say this is the Tempus Charm,” Hermione proposed. “What’s so difficult about… oh.”

“Yes,” Dumbledore confirmed, reading the realisation in her eyes. “Even if the charm wasn’t one of the most advanced known to wizarding kind, it can only send people back in time. Rather useless when it comes to sending them forwards.”

Hermione took a deep breath to soothe her nerves, but to little avail. It was a weight on her shoulders, and her shoulders alone – given Harry’s condition, she would have to be strong all by herself, for a little while.

“Can we never return?” she whispered. Never return to Ron, to her parents, to her friends, to the impending war? Never return to the world that she knew? And if it were so, then what would become of Hermione Granger and Harry Potter, would they fade into the background, replaced by the Delacour cousins, or would they never have existed in the first place?
“There is a way,” the professor said. “There is one way, but I’m afraid it may do little to ease your mind.”

“Tell me anyway.” What else was there to do? Hide from the truth?

“The one who cast the Tempus Charm must kill you while you are in the time that you have been sent to.”

It was worse than she had anticipated.

“And if the one who cast the charm hasn’t even been born yet in this time?” she murmured.

“Then nothing can be done. At least until he or she is born.”

“And how is one to find the person who cast the charm?”

“There is no given spell. It is pure luck.”

“If Harry and I don’t get lucky?”

“Then there is no way out.”

There it was. Finally. The words Hermione had hoped she would never have to hear. Ashen-faced, she nodded her acceptance and glanced at Harry, at his eyes which were open but unseeing, at his face which was like a ghost. Reaching out, she slid his eyelids shut, unable to stare into the once-lively green irises, before grabbing his cold hand and squeezing tightly.

“We have to get away,” she said, more to herself than anyone else. “This time isn’t good for us. Look what has already happened to Harry. We don’t belong here.”

Dumbledore stood, lifting the invisible bubble which had enclosed them as he did.

“I’m very sorry,” he said. “But do not lose hope. Whilst in the dark, know that there are lighter times ahead.”

He left Hermione to her silence, until she finally unstoppered the bottle in her lap and downed the Calming Draught, before drifting into an uneasy sleep, all the while remaining by Harry’s bedside.

If he woke, she would be waiting.

***

Upon exiting the Hospital Wing, Tom did not immediately continue down to the dungeons. He was curious to hear what the professors had deducted from the numerous stories they had heard that night.

Standing silently just beyond sight, he listened as Dumbledore rambled off the story to The Other Delacour, but was only interested in one part.

“And finally, this wand was used for the Memory Charm, a Sobering Charm, and finally, the Cruciatus.” The old man’s voice was dark. “Twice.”

It had indeed been used twice. But only once on Harry Delacour.

Tom’s mind cast back to an hour earlier (had it only been an hour? It felt like a lifetime. Merlin, he was in dire need of a pick-me-up).
At that hour, Tom had been lazing around, scheming the night away while blocking out Mulciber’s heavy breathing and Lestrange’s snores, while two beds were noticeably empty. Nott had then burst into the dormitory in a flurry, waving around a piece of parchment like a headless chicken.

“Tom!” he shouted, then lowered his voice to a hiss. “I mean, Riddle!”

“What?” Tom snapped, throwing his Horcrux diary back into his open trunk (fine, he admitted it – he had been attempting to communicate with his slightly younger self through the diary) and slamming the lid closed. “What do you want, shouldn’t you be finishing off your essay? You better not be asking for help, because I told you not to leave it to the last minute, so you deserve a ‘T’.”

“No, I…” Nott faded out, shuffling the parchment in his hands. “It may seem a little silly, but I just have this gut feeling… I don’t know, sometimes I get them, and they tell me that something’s off… and I don’t know, this note seems a little sketchy…”

“I don’t know what the fuck you are talking about,” Tom whispered furiously, “but if you’re having your mid-life crisis already, deal with it yourself, it’s too late for this shit!”

Nott snapped his arm out straight, holding the parchment out to Tom. Tom snatched it from him.

“What is it, a love letter?” he snarled. He realised that he was behaving a little unreasonably, but he was tired, and he didn’t like being caught off guard when he was handling his Horcrux.

“No, Morticia Byrd, she gave it to Delacour just then.”

“A love letter from Morticia to Delacour?” Tom’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline. “I didn’t realise that she would be interested in somebody so short.”

He scanned over the writing, only to find it was most certainly not a love letter from Morticia to Delacour, instead from Prewett to Delacour. At this time? To meet at Gryffindor Tower?

“You’re right,” Tom finally agreed, pulling on an outer robe and pocketing the note. “This is rather fishy. I’d best go make sure that Prewett and his group of thugs aren’t trying to dispose of my precious seventh member.”

“Should I come?” asked Nott hesitantly. “Gryffindor territory isn’t safe for a Slytherin.”

“Which is exactly why I’m going to bring that idiot boy back.” Tom strode out of the dormitory and towards the common room entrance, Nott tailing him the entire way. “I, on the other hand, am not just any Slytherin. I’m sure I can handle a few Gryffindorks, as you are so fond of calling them. You, on the other hand, are to finish that Ancient Runes essay, and to top-notch quality. It will not do for any of my inner circle to fall behind the herd, hm?”

Dismissively, Tom swept out of the Slytherin common room and towards Gryffindor Tower.

He had not been expecting to run into a quivering mess along the way.

“Renshaw!” he snapped, recognizing the beefy sixth year boy. “What do you think you’re doing, running around the corridors this late at night? That thick skull of yours may not have yet registered that you do not own these hallways, but I assure you, everybody else has!”

Blubbering, Renshaw unexpectedly dropped into a fetal position at Tom’s feet, rocking back and forth, back and forth, mumbling unintelligible words.
“What?” Tom asked sharply. “Speak up!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” Renshaw shouted, rearing upright to stare at Tom with glazed, swollen eyes. “I’m sorry I couldn’t do it, I’m sorry I did do it, I couldn’t say no or he would have hurt me too—”

“Prewett?” Tom shouted back, prodding Renshaw on the shoulder with his wand when he received only a blank stare. “Goddammit, answer me! What the fuck is going on, you useless excuse of a wizard?”

“Elijah,” Renshaw whispered, his voice a harsh croak, then, “Jenkins.”

“Jenkins?” That name seemed familiar. Oh yes, the Gryffindor Seeker of the past few years… his was the face that had always been glaring after Delacour in the Great Hall during meal times and in the hallways between classes. He was the one who had convinced Tom that Gryffindor house was beginning to loathe the French student.

“He’s torturing Delacour.”

Tom’s face froze, his mind froze, everything froze up for a moment. Wasn’t he the only one capable of torture in this whole ruddy school, where the students were raised to be soft-hearted little weaklings by the likes of Albus Dumbledore and Armando Dippet and the rest of the overly lenient staff?

Wordlessly, Tom shoved past Renshaw, leaving him to sob against the stone floor again (worthless little shit), and raced away to make this Jenkins pay for touching his Harry Delacour.

He was still not entirely prepared to see Harry writhing on the floor, screaming himself hoarse, with nonsensical names like “Neville” and “Ron” and “Sirius” surfacing every now and again. It pulled Tom’s heartstrings taut, and he turned to see the offender, Jenkins, standing several metres away, unaware of Tom’s presence, his pale eyes wide and crazed with bloodlust, his entire frame wracking with excitement.

“Expelliarmus!” Tom disarmed Jenkins once, then twice for the second wand which stuck out of his pocket.

“Huh?” Jenkins seemed to snap out of his faze, his deranged, twisted face returning to the semblance of that of a human being. He looked down at his empty hand emotionlessly, then patted his pocket to find the other wand missing too.

“Axel?” he said after a moment, staring down at Harry, who had gone silent, his muscles spasming every few seconds. “What happened?”

“Axel is no longer present,” said Tom softly, stepping forwards, and Jenkins whirled around, face paling when he saw who it was.

“R-Riddle,” he stammered. “What are you doing here? I swear, it’s not what it looks like.”

“Then what it is?” Tom hummed as he circled around the defenceless Gryffindor, a dangerous lope to his footsteps. “You’re unhinged, Mr. Jenkins, and normally I would be somewhat more sympathetic, however…”

“However what?” Jenkins scrubbed a hand through his sweaty hair, and then he caught sight of the wands in Tom’s hand, and a nasty glint appeared in his eyes. “Give me back those, Riddle.”
“However, when it is my possessions that you are marring,” Tom continued, his voice a deadly whisper, “I feel a little unhinged myself.”

“You have no idea what I am capable of,” Jenkins hissed back, his white face twisting into something ugly again. “You may fancy yourself the King of Slytherin, but that title holds no power here. You’re not in the dungeons anymore.”

“Perhaps not.” Tom threw his hands in the air and laughed manically. “And perhaps I would be in trouble if that was all that I was. But I’m so much more than that.”

Taking up the wand that Jenkins had been performing the Cruciatus with, Tom smiled thinly, looking down his nose at the other boy. Jenkins did not realise that by torturing Harry, he had given Tom an opening for a little torture as well. The professors would use a Reverse Spell to find which spells had been cast, and a second Cruciatus from the offending wand would be blamed on the boy who had been wielding it up to that point.

Scenting the imminent danger, Jenkins froze, as if caught in a net, before turning and fleeing.

Oh, how Tom loved it when they ran.

“Crucio,” he cooed, almost lovingly, with a practised want to hurt boiling like Fiendfyre in his bloodstream, and ahead of him, Jenkins drops like a stone, clutching at his temples as if his brain might erupt from his skull, dragging hooked fingers down his cheeks as if he wanted to tear his face clean off. His shrieks were absolute music.

Tom’s lips thinned then, because he knew that if he damaged Jenkins too much, the professors might suspect that the second Cruciatus had indeed not been used on Harry, instead Jenkins, and that all fingers would point in Tom’s direction as a result. That would not do. With a sigh, Tom cut the Cruciatus off, as if it were all a big bother, then paced up to an immobilised Jenkins, where he crouched so that they could speak face-to-face.

“Bastard,” Jenkins whispered, his voice trembling almost too much for him to be intelligible. “Th-they’ll know you also cast an Unforgivable, you’ll be brought down to the bottom with me.”

“But they won’t.” A cruel, cutting smile curved Tom’s lips. “I’ve been playing at this game for much longer than you, Jenkins. I know every cheat and shortcut that there is. You’re just a beginner.”

“Wh-what–”

“They’ll blame you for the second Cruciatus, it came from the same wand that you used, after all... it wouldn’t be far-fetched whatsoever.” Tom straightened, brushing his robe off pleasantly. “I’ll be the hero who saved poor Harry, and you’ll be the monster who did this to him.”

“I’ll tell them...” Jenkins coughed, attempting to push himself into an upright position, but failing as his arms buckled beneath him. “I’ll tell them all.”

Tom wished he could simply Obliviate the snivelling little thing, but was resigned to the fact that if he did, he’d simply be leaving more scent trails which could lead back to him. It didn’t matter.

“Nobody would believe you,” he crooned instead. “When you tortured an innocent and got caught, you became nothing but a deranged wizard to the world, so nothing you say matters.”

Tom smirked as he plucked his own wand up and pointed it at Jenkins.
“See you in Hell,” he said. “Stupefy.”

Harry had come next. Leaving Jenkins’s body to rot for all he cared, Tom returned to the motionless boy who he now deemed under his personal protection, and said, “Harry?”

Wait, when had ‘Delacour’ become ‘Harry’? Since now, he supposed. At least it would make life easier and he could stop referring to The Other Delacour as ‘The Other Delacour’, and instead as simply ‘Delacour’.

“Harry?” Tom repeated, carefully removing Harry’s shattered glasses away, noticing that shards had already cut into his skin. There was no response. Those green eyes which Tom found so mesmerising were wide open, though blank and dull.

Exactly how long had he been held under the curse for?

Swearing quietly, Tom pulled the slight figure into his arms, positioning Harry comfortably against his chest. He was fairly sure that despite the lack of reaction, his words would be registering. Perhaps. It couldn’t hurt to keep saying Harry’s name over and over again, if that was what would keep him tethered to the earth.

“I’ll get you to the Hospital Wing,” Tom said calmly, standing and beginning to walk, “and everything will work out, Harry. Can you hear me, Harry?”

Maybe it was overboard, but Tom wasn’t taking any chances of this boy slipping away. He was too powerful to lose to something as ridiculous as insanity. And so Tom continued talking listlessly, saying anything, *everything*, before finally he decided to leave the tortured mind alone.

“But first, Harry, rest,” he murmured, shifting the body in arms, and he could have sworn that he heard a small, relieved breath of air being expelled, but perhaps it had been his imagination.

The Other Delacour – no, *Delacour’s* voice snapped Tom back to the present, and he grinned. Yes, he had fooled them all. As far as they were concerned, he was innocent.

“Do you mean to tell me,” Delacour was saying, her voice as pale as her face probably was, “that these… these *vile* people used Harry’s own wand to torture him?”

“I’m afraid so–” Dumbledore went silent abruptly, and Tom stilled. He could almost feel the old cretin’s bright blue eyes piercing through the stone walls and into his soul. He should have known that Dumbledore would sense him, his fun was always being ruined by the Transfiguration professor…

Not wishing to push his luck, Tom swiftly and silently continued on to the Slytherin common room. All in all, today had been a fruitful day, and he had Harry exactly where he wanted.

Chapter End Notes

I’m a bit uncertain about this chapter, but meh. And it might be a bit long but UGH SO WHAT I’m terrible with word limits and this story has NO word limit. Us writers all know that the struggle is real, right? :D
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Madam Pomfrey says that he has made full recovery, and could have woken up at least a week ago. But he hasn’t, it’s as though his subconscious is hiding from something. It’s as though his subconscious… doesn’t want to wake up.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the sudden break, something cropped up in my life and I wasn’t able to write. But I’m back. *phew*
Sooo, some people have had complaints about Chapter Twelve being quite unrealistic in terms of what happened to Harry (his inability to defend himself), and I throw my apologies all around for that! I just need him in a vulnerable position for his and Tom’s relationship to advance, and I swear to you that this is not a story where he becomes submissive and defenceless and changes Tom’s ways just by becoming his little boyfriend or whatnot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Word on the Hogwarts grapevine was that Harry Delacour and Elijah Jenkins had been childhood best friends, but it had ended when Jenkins had been discovered nursing an obsessive crush on Hermione Delacour. In a fit of possessiveness, Harry had cut all ties he had with Elijah, and great bitterness built up between the two as the years passed. Then, upon the Delacours’ arrival at Hogwarts, the former best friends quickly became enemies. It was said that last night, the two met and duelled to the death to gain Hermione’s affection.

At least, that was what Ignatius and Phyllis was listening to, coming from the mouths of a gaggle of third year Gryffindor girls who were nattering together in the outside courtyard.

“Elijah’s second was Axel, you know, Axel Renshaw,” one of the girls whispered to her group of friends. “And apparently Delacour’s was Tom Riddle.”

“Elijah and Axel can’t have stood a chance against those two!” another said.

“Go on, Beatrice, what happened next?”

“Well,” Beatrice said, puffing up, “I heard from Peter that Axel withdrew from the duel, so Elijah became desperate and used the Cruciatus Curse on Delacour!”

“No…”

“Most certainly. And then there was the most unexpected turn of events – Delacour broke free from the curse, and killed Elijah!”

“No!”
“Are you certain? I mean, the Killing Curse…”

“Oh, Elsie, Delacour’s a Slytherin, what would you expect? Besides, it would explain why Elijah has just vanished, Axel too… haven’t you noticed that the professors are being very tight-lipped about the whole matter?”

“Oh, that is enough,” Ignatius hissed to Phyllis, who tailed him as he stormed over to break up the gathering.

“Go forth and defend Harry’s honour,” she toasted, raising a hand in salute, dropping back to watch the show. Oh, Ignatius planned to.

“Never have I heard a more brainless theory in my life!” he shouted once he was towering over the group of third years. Intimidation was key when it came to handling a bunch of pesky little girls.

“Excuse me?” the one called Beatrice asked, twirling a lock of hair calmly around her finger.

“There are many things entirely wrong with what you’re saying,” Ignatius snapped. “Firstly, why would Harry and Elijah ‘duel to gain Hermione’s affection’? Harry and Hermione are cousins, isn’t incest illegal anyway? Secondly, Riddle would never second Harry in a duel, just as Harry would never ask him to. As a friend of the person in question, I can vouch for the fact that those two are mortal enemies. And thirdly, the most important thing of all, Harry is not capable of the Killing Curse! I know him, he wouldn’t hurt a Bowtruckle even if it begged him to!” A frown crossed his face momentarily – he hoped so, anyway.

“Listen,” said Beatrice, crossing her arms and stepping forward, flanked by her girlfriends – the obvious ringleader of the gang. “You may claim to know Delacour, but I happen to know Elijah. He wouldn’t just disappear unless some… some terrible fate befell him.”

“Perhaps some terrible fate befell Harry, and Elijah was the one to cause it. That would be a fairly good reason to disappear as well.” Ignatius mirrored Beatrice’s defensive stance, to far greater effect in his most humble opinion. “You said that you heard that Elijah used the Crucio on Harry. Have you ever considered that it ended there?”

“I thought that you said it was a brainless theory,” Beatrice countered innocently, and her group of friends tittered. Ignatius saw Phyllis gasping comically through his peripheral vision, and scowled.

“Have you ever considered it, though?” he pressed, refusing to back down. Beatrice’s expression went flat, and she looked away.

“It’s not right,” she said softly. “Elijah was so kind to me all the time. When I was in first-year, he was always helping me with homework and answering my questions about this world. I mean, I’m Muggle-born, I didn’t know anything, and other people always laughed at me when I asked things like ‘who’s the Minister of Magic’, or ‘do werewolves really exist’. I don’t even believe that he’s capable of casting the Crucio. Elijah is a good guy.”

Ignatius exchanged a glance with Phyllis, who shrugged. Finally, he let out a puff of air, gazing skyward as he dragged a hand through his hair.

“Look, you’re only what, thirteen? I’m seventeen, Elijah’s sixteen. I’ve known Elijah much longer than you– please let me finish!” Ignatius tacked on hastily when he saw Beatrice opening her mouth. “I’m not going to lie and say we were friends, but we’ve been team mates on the
Quidditch team for a while, and I know that he’s always been prone to rages. I’m not trying to say that Elijah’s an evil villain, that he deserves to disappear, or anything like that. I’m trying to say… we’ve all got alter egos, but I think that his may be darker than Harry’s, and at the end of the day…”

“Fuck you!” Beatrice wheeled around and flounced away, her girl gang hovering protectively around her, shooting Ignatius hostile stares as they did. Ignatius shook his head. He could have handled that better, he supposed.

“I didn’t know that thirteen-year-old girls exercised such vocabulary,” he murmured to Phyllis when she came to stand beside him.

“Maybe you should have left them be,” she said. “People tend to defend friends to great extent.”

“But that’s exactly why I did it.” Ignatius started across the courtyard for his next class. “Do you think that Madam Pomfrey will let us in to speak to Harry before dinner, finally?”

“I hope so,” said Phyllis. “I can’t wait to tell him that you argued with a third-year. Truly well done, Prewett.”

“Oh, shut up.” Ignatius bumped her shoulder playfully, then caught sight of a familiar trim figure with a head of unruly brown hair dashing past. “Look, there’s the cousin, I should ask her how he’s doing…”

Taking a deep breath, he called out.

***

“Hermione!”

Hermione paused in her path at the shout, feeling completely frazzled and out of it. Today was a bad day – after a terrible few hours’ worth of sleep, she had spent the entire morning in Transfiguration, where her performance had been less than exemplary when demonstrating some of the more advanced principles of Conjuration through wand-work. Dumbledore had been entirely sympathetic – when operating on a system which was both sleep-deprived and recovering from shock, he said that this was to be expected. It still didn’t hinder her frustration, especially with her peers whispering behind their hands about her, and Riddle performing up to his usual standard. It was as if he was purposefully trying to spite her.

To continue a perfect day, over the lunch hour rush she had been subject to yet more curious stares and probing questions which she did not plan on answering. Rowan and Quincy were doing their best to be supportive, but Rowan was being too clingy to alleviate any stress, and Quincy was simply too scatterbrained. As much as Hermione appreciated them, she managed to break away from them in order to run up to the Hospital Wing and check in with Madam Pomfrey for any changes in Harry. Other than a further increase in brain activity, he showed no sign of waking. He simply sat there, glassy-eyed. But the slight improvement was enough for Hermione to plough on to her next class, where she was headed now – Arithmancy. Professor Gwin was not lax when it came to punishment, and Hermione was certain that she would be tardy if she didn’t get a move on.

But she couldn’t well just ignore Harry’s Gryffindor friends, two of whom were approaching her now. Doing her best to not look impatient in her already drained state, she wracked her brain for names. The tall redhead with the sweet brown eyes was Ignatius Prewett, and the freckled brunette was… ah…
“Ignatius,” said Hermione, brushing hair out of her face and doing her best to compose herself, “and Phyllis, right? How are you?”

“Decent,” said Phyllis, at the same moment Ignatius said, “Pissed. The tales that some people are spinning about Harry and Elijah is ridiculous.”

Ah, yes. Hermione had heard many of these tales chasing her down the hallways all day. One had involved a battle in the Forbidden Forest with the centaurs, another had involved an Apparition to an art gallery in Jamaica (which wasn’t even possible in Hogwarts Castle, honestly), and another had involved the reopening of the Chamber of Secrets, with a smiling lizard involved somehow.

Surely people had better things to do than craft such stories.

“What materialised from the rumour mill this time?” asked Hermione wearily.

“That Harry killed Elijah,” Phyllis offered with a quirked eyebrow, and Hermione scowled – she should have anticipated that Harry would be villainised at some point.

“That’s what I thought!” Ignatius agreed, reading Hermione’s expression, then added hesitantly, “But… the thing is, nobody knows what really happened. Other than the people who were there, the professors, and you. Could you possibly…?”

Blowing out a heavy breath, Hermione tugged her bag strap over her shoulder more securely and met his eye flatly.

“It’s not in my place to tell you what happened,” she said, “If he wants to, Harry will be the one to.”

“So he’s awake–?”

“No.” Hermione averted her gaze and fidgeted with the cuffs of her blazer. “It could be a little while until he wakes up. His mind and body are recuperating from the trauma, and until he’s ready, he won’t be emerging from this coma. We can only hope that that will be sooner rather than later.”

“His mind and body are recuperating in a coma state?” Phyllis sounded horrified. “So what those girls were saying is true…”

“The Cruciatius was used.” Ignatius’s face was pale, and he wetted his lips. “Does that mean–”

“I have class, I should be going,” Hermione cut in firmly, turning and leaving the courtyard as swiftly as she could without running. As soon as she was out of sight, concealed beyond the first doorway that she found, she pressed her back to a wall and sucked in a deep, steadying breath.

Stay strong, she told herself. Stay strong. Making it her mantra, she stepped away from the wall, straightened the tie at her throat, and returned to the battlefield.

***

Once it became evident that Madam Pomfrey would continue to deny everybody except Hermione entrance into the Hospital Wing for visits to Harry, the number of classroom ‘accidents’ skyrocketed drastically. Soon there were queues of students waiting for admittance. It didn’t take long for the matron to suspect the deception going on behind her back, and finally had Harry moved into private quarters in the Hospital Wing, out of the sight of prying eyes.

As for Hermione, her declining condition did not improve, and she suspected that it would not
until Harry awoke. Worry and guilt gnawed at her constantly, shadowing after her wherever she walked, whether it be to class or the library or the Great Hall. When she slept, it hung over her head like a heavy cloud, raining on her restless dreams. Because she should have been there for Harry. They were meant to be each other’s pillar of support in this frail time, and she had failed to be so.

Perhaps she was being ridiculous, for believing that she could have prevented this whole incident from every happening. But her subconscious told her that either way, Ron, Ginny, Remus, and Neville and Luna and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and even Sirius (if he had been alive) would be disappointed in her. Harry had always been there for the rest of them, and she couldn’t even repay the favour.

And so the guilt continued onwards, holding her heart hostage and sucking the marrow out of her bones.

As the days merged into weeks and Harry showed no sign of waking, even despite his supposed “full brain recovery” as quoted by Madam Pomfrey, the professors began asking after him during class time.

Whenever Hermione reported the news to them (that is to say the lack of news), Flitwick would shake his head sadly, Merrythought would mumble about a “waste of talent”, Beery, the Herbology professor, would pat Hermione’s shoulder, and Dumbledore merely looked thoughtful. He was always looking thoughtful nowadays, as if he knew something that nobody else did. But then again, he probably did.

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“Still nothing?” Ignatius asked for about the fifth time that day, leaning back in his chair to address Hermione – during the time that Harry was absent, the two of them had spoken more than they had the previous month combined.

“No, Ignatius,” Hermione said through gritted teeth, concentrating on the Occamy eggshell that she was grinding up. “Please stop asking me, I’ll tell you if there is any development whatsoever.”

She understood that he and Harry were good friends, but the persistent probing of the Gryffindor was beginning to grate on her nerves after this long. Even Greengrass and Parkinson had taken to tagging along after Hermione every day, attempting to extract every droplet of information from her that they could. Then there was Rowan, acting the guard dog more than ever, and Trelawney, predicting Harry’s untimely death with more morbid creativity each day. Trying to maintain a mask of composure to the public while dealing with these people was becoming overwhelming.

Ignatius stared into Hermione’s face, as though he was seeing her for the first time, and said, “Blimey, are you feeling alright?”

“What?” Hermione snapped back in a manner most unlike herself, wiping hair off her damp brow with her forearm.

“You don’t look well,” Ignatius remarked matter-of-factly. “Are you sick?”

“Honestly, Ignatius, don’t be rude!” said Bridget Bones, his fellow Gryffindor, grabbing Ignatius’s arm and yanking him back to their table, all the while shooting Hermione an apologetic glance.

Hermione ceased work, placing her pestle on the table ruminatively. So someone had finally noticed her pale complexion, the dark shadows around her eyes, the exhaustion in the lines of her
face. She had done her best to conceal it, but apparently it was beginning to show through…

“Miss Delacour,” said Slughorn, wandering over. Gone was his booming voice when he
approached her, the jovial expression on his face, replaced by pure sobriety. “How is Felix faring?
And more importantly, how is our Harry? It has been over two weeks, surely he has woken by
now?”

“No, sir,” said Hermione grimly, and surreptitiously passed a glance over to where Riddle was
working. “He hasn’t.”

“Poppy seemed so sure when she said that he would…” Slughorn trailed off, frowning.

“He could,” Hermione said, staring down at her workbench. “Madam Pomfrey says that he has
made full recovery, and could have woken up at least a week ago. But he hasn’t, it’s as though his
subconscious is hiding from something. It’s as though his subconscious… doesn’t want to wake
up.”

“With Grindelwald on the move,” said Slughorn gravely, “not many people would.”

There was a great flurry of motion from the doorway when a little Hufflepuff, presumably a first-
year, burst in, scanning over the individuals of the classroom with wild eyes, before landing on
Hermione and scurrying over to her.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said to Slughorn, before thrusting a note out to Hermione. “Madam Pomfrey
asked that I give this to you immediately.”

Hermione stared at the note, frozen. Could it be…?

“Well, read it then, Miss Delacour!” Slughorn said.

The other students were watching curiously now – Hermione could feel a certain pair, from over
in the Slytherin section, burning into her face dangerously. Refusing to look at any of them, she
took the note and unfolded it with shaking fingers.

*Your cousin is awake. – Madam Pomfrey*

Covering her mouth with a hand, Hermione looked at Slughorn, unable to stop grinning daftly.

“Might I…?” she began, and he laughed loudly, having read the note over her shoulder, a spark
returned to his eyes.

“Well, of course you must!” he shouted. “Go now, your potion will be dealt with.”

Nodding her head, Hermione rushed out of the classroom blindly, thinking all the while, *Harry’s
awake, Harry’s awake, Harry’s awake.*

They were going to be alright.

***

The world was hazy. Bright and white and fuzzy, and he wondered if this was what it was like to
be born into the world for the first time.
“Mr. Delacour!” a woman’s voice said. “Mr. Delacour, are you with me?”

He blinked, trying to source the voice. Where was he? Who was speaking? Who was Mr. Delacour?

He wasn’t sure how long he tried to get a feel for his surroundings in this too bright world, when finally somebody whispered, “Harry?”

_Harry._ Yes, Harry… that was his name, wasn’t it? And that voice… he knew it, but it sounded different, there was a strange lilt to it. But it was her voice, nonetheless.

“‘Mione?” he mumbled, and she whispered, “Oh, thank Merlin and Morgana.”

“Huh?” Harry was still as dazed as could be, as if he had just taken a strong Confundus Charm, or else quite a beating, but everything was slowly sliding back into focus, and he could now see the blurry shape of Hermione, leaning over his prone form. He heard her make a noise which sounded suspiciously like a sniffle, before saying briskly, “Here are your glasses, I expect that you’ll be wanting them back.”

A cold, familiar weight slid onto his face, and suddenly Harry was back in touch with everything – the echoey wooden rafters overhead; the windows thrown open, welcoming in a dancing breeze; the cool, crisp sheets which were tucked around his body; Hermione, retreating to the chair by the bedside table, her hair falling across her face to form a veil.

Harry sat upright, pressing a palm to his forehead as blood rushed to his head.

“Where am I?” he croaked, and Hermione whipped out her wand, pointing it at him.

“I nearly forgot,” she said, and before Harry could dodge the oncoming spell, she had shot one at him, and Harry let out a shout of outrage as it tingled up his throat.

“What the bloody hell are you doing?” he cried, grabbing at his neck as something inside it twanged.

“Shh!” Hermione hissed, casting a glance over at the doorway as if Snape might sweep into the room like an overgrown bat. “Don’t fuss.”

Harry snapped, “Hang on, why have you got a French accent?” right before, “Why do _I_ have a French accent?” and finally, “Oh. So this wasn’t a dream.”

“No,” said Hermione, giving a pained laugh and staring down at the ground. “It most certainly isn’t.”

“Bloody hell,” Harry rasped, lying back down so that he could stare at the ceiling. He cleared his throat, and tried again with a little more success. “Bloody hell. What… what happened?”

“You don’t remember?” Hermione sat up a little straighter, but still did not look at him directly.

“Well…” he frowned, dredging through his muggy memories. “I think I was doing work in the common room, then I got a note from Ignatius… but it wasn’t Ignatius, it was these two Gryffindors… there was J-Josie? James? Argh, their names, why can’t I remember their names?”

“Jenkins and Renshaw,” Hermione offered quietly, and Harry laid a shaky forearm over his nose, letting out a muffled exhale.
“That’s right,” he murmured. “Jenkins and Renshaw. Jenkins told Renshaw to use the Cruciatus on me, and Renshaw panicked. His Cruciatus barely tickled, so Jenkins took over and Renshaw ran, I think. The details are so hazy, I hardly remember what happened. Where are they now?”

“No one but the professors know,” said Hermione, standing and gazing out the open window. A breeze kissed her face, lifting wisps of her hair so that they waved like miniature banners. “The very next day, the two of them vanished. Neither of them are of age, so Azkaban is out of the question, besides, it turns out that Unforgivables are not as unforgivable as they are in our time. But I suspect that Jenkins is visiting a mental institution, he’s quite unstable.”

“Hm.” Harry did not move his arm away from his face, and closed his eyes as if he could shutter himself from the events of the world. “Hermione, I feel so… pathetic. Useless. Weak. How can I be expected to defeat Voldemort when I can’t even defend myself against a pair of teenagers?”

Hermione had no reply ready, and so Harry continued, “I expect that you were the one who rescued me, then?”

“No.” She gave a bitter little chuckle. “It wasn’t me, or Ignatius, or even Greengrass or Parkinson. Tom Riddle rescued you, Harry.”

“Tom… Riddle?” Harry’s eyes shot back open, then narrowed thoughtfully. “The very same Tom Riddle who seems to be out for my blood?”

“Exactly,” said Hermione, and Harry could tell that her eyes were blazing, even if he couldn’t see them. “Exactly. One might have thought that Riddle would have been perfectly happy to leave you to the mercy of Jenkins, he could have easily ignored Nott’s warning.”

Warning? It appeared that Harry was currently in debt to more than one Slytherin.

“But Riddle saved you,” Hermione persisted, holding onto the window frame with whitened knuckles, “and he brought you here and watched over you. Nothing about that makes sense. He’s unpredictable, and that’s concerning.”

“He brought me here?” Harry asked. “And watched over me? Wait, where is here?”

“A private room in the infirmary,” Hermione said dismissively. “People kept trying to sneak in here to catch a glimpse of you, so Madam Pomfrey had you moved. Everybody thinks that you’re a brain-dead vegetable now.”

“Excellent, just excellent.” Harry sighed, and it was the sigh of a much older wizard than he. “I… I feel weary. Right down to my bones. When can we return home?”

Silence met this remark, and Harry’s entire being paused, before he slowly pushed himself upright and faced Hermione’s back as she continued to stare out over the Hogwarts grounds.

“Hermione.” He repeated in a ghostly whisper, “When can we return home?”

At first it seemed that she would ignore him a second time, before finally she turned her head, and he saw her face clearly for the first time. She looked like Death’s sister. Chalky-pale skin, black circles ringing her tired, bloodshot eyes, her cheekbones as sharp as knives. Delicate, sickly, frightening. The glance that she gave him was a haunted one.

“I don’t think we ever will,” she said, and Harry’s heart bypassed his stomach, dropping into his shoes.
“What,” he said eloquently.

“The night that you…” Hermione gestured to him, her voice cracking. “That was when Dumbledore told me.”

When Harry spoke next, it was in the whisper of a small child. “Never?”

“I’ve been so scared, Harry,” began Hermione softly, and started to pace the room, wringing her hands all the while. “You’ve been gone for eighteen days, eighteen, and I’ve barely been able to sleep or eat, it’s been on my mind constantly. What if Harry dies like this? Because for a while, it seemed like you weren’t planning on waking up. And I can’t blame you. Who would want to come back to a world where we’re lost in another time and can’t go back? Or worse, a world where we can go back, back to a war that you’re meant to sacrifice yourself for?”

Her mad pacing slowed, and she grabbed at her head wildly, clutching it between shaky hands. Harry had never before seen this side of her, and he reached out for her.

“But selfishly,” she continued, tears rolling down her cheeks, “I couldn’t accept that you might want to stay away from all of this, permanently. I didn’t want to be alone with all this, Harry, I don’t want to be alone… but every morning, when I ran over here, believing that you would be awake, you never were. It terrified me, how real this all was, is, and you’re like a brother to me, you’re my best friend, I… I don’t know what I would have done if—”

Harry managed to hook Hermione in weakly, cradling her in his arms and stroking her hair. She stiffened, as if she had not been expecting such a kindness.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, his voice muffled by her hair.

“Why are you sorry?” Hermione mumbled into his shoulder. “Aren’t I acting like a child, shouldn’t I be apologising, for being so selfish and then crying about it?”

“I’m sorry,” Harry repeated, as gently as a moonbeam, “for taking so long. To return back to you.” Her arms around him now, Hermione began sobbing.

“You’re not alone,” he said, rhythmically smoothing down her thick hair and welcoming the tears which were threatening to well in his own eyes. “This may be a nightmare, but it’s our nightmare, and as long as we’ve got each other, we’ll be okay. And it’s perfectly alright to cry, ‘Mione. It doesn’t mean you’re weak. It just means that you’ve been strong for too long.”

They held each other, lamenting for all that they had lost in the mellow warmth of sunshine, for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, a pretty short, mushy chapter. I’m sure you’ll forgive me one day, but I thought that I’d best get something posted before I’m slaughtered in my sleep. So just think of this as an interlude, before we knuckle down again!! So again, SORRY SORRY SORRY.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Lord Voldemort cared for Harry Potter’s wellbeing? Lord Voldemort wanted to be Harry Potter’s friend? After all those years of battling him, and then all these weeks of convincing himself that Riddle was scheming up a dastardly plan? It was as though the universe was playing a marvellous prank on Harry, and the result was stupendous.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the love, guys!! =v= Let’s flesh this out more, now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Harry,” Hermione whispered across the Hospital Wing curtains that Madam Pomfrey had pulled around his bed for privacy. “Are you up?”

“Well, I’m not dancing the Macarena,” said Harry curtly, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring as the curtains around him shifted, being bunched away by the shadow on the opposite side.

“No need to be so crotchety with me,” said Hermione, though she sounded distinctly more cheerful than she had yesterday afternoon, when Harry had woken. She looked better too, if that was even possible after less than a day. Brighter and sharper, much more like her old self.

Harry, on the other hand, had been prodded and poked by Madam Pomfrey all evening after Hermione had left, forced to answer question after question, each one more ridiculous than the last. By the end, the matron had concluded that he was not an amnesiac nor a vegetable, and she ordered him to remain in the Hospital Wing one more day. Harry had been carted back into the main sector, and, in short, been told to shut up and sleep. He had been sleeping for the past eighteen days. If there was anything he didn’t need, it was more sleep.

Who could blame Harry for being in such a filthy mood?

“What’s the Macarena?” said a new voice, a head popping up over Hermione’s shoulder, and Harry jumped violently, clutching a hand over his heart.

“Bloody hell!”

“Is it a Muggle thing?” asked the disembodied head, wearing a vague sort of smile. He had bouncy pale hair which brushed his shoulders, thick dark eyebrows which did not quite correspond with his hair, and the most startling pair of violet eyes that Harry had ever seen.

“Quincy!” Hermione snapped. “I told you two not to come in!” The Quincy-head slunk out of view again, hidden away from Harry’s view behind the curtains.
“Yes, well,” he said, “Rowan was behaving somewhat tediously. We were discussing the nature of the growth on the back of a Murtlap, and he insists that it improves one’s resistance to jinxes. But I know for a fact that it in catoptromancy, it enhances—”

“Do you want me to leave?” asked Harry sarcastically, and Hermione shushed him.

“I don’t know much about catoptromancy,” she said to Quincy, “but I do know that Rowan’s right in that aspect, and additionally, Murtlap tentacles have excellent healing attributes. I’ve used it multiple times. In fact, in Meryl Dirgedane’s *Aquatic and Marine—*”

“I really would be happy to leave,” Harry said, louder this time.

“–but I’m getting side-tracked, aren’t I?” said Hermione, giving him a sheepish glance. Harry passed one back which said, “*Ravenclaw is making you worse.*”

“Now that I’m here,” said Quincy’s voice, “may I finally meet your cousin?”

“No!"

“Why not?”

“He’s unwell and recovering.”

“Oh, please, Hermione,” sighed Harry. “Don’t go Madam Pomfrey on me.”

“Fine!” said Hermione crossly, hiking her schoolbag over her shoulder more securely and looking annoyed. “This is Quincy Lovegood, Harry, and Quincy, this is Harry Delacour.”

“How nice to meet you!” said Quincy cheerfully, coming back into view – his whole body this time. He wasn’t particularly tall and was soft-looking, but he carried himself with the reassured air of a person who knew how to protect himself against Wrackspurts. A seashell necklace hung around his neck, and in his blazer pocket were several small, white flowers.

“Lovegood, hm?” asked Harry, sharing a meaningful look with Hermione. “Well, I’m glad to finally meet one of Hermione’s decent Ravenclaw friends.”

“Can you not start on Rowan again?” Hermione begged. “I don’t understand why you two dislike each other so much.”

“It’s because you agree with me about the Murtlap, isn’t it?” said Quincy knowingly, and Hermione rolled her eyes. “You’re a wise one, Harry.”

“Um, thanks,” said Harry, and he looked at the flowers in Quincy’s pocket again. “Could I ask why you’re wearing those?”

“These are Gladioli,” said the Ravenclaw, his fingers shadowing over them lovingly. “You may know them as ‘sword lilies’. They signify remembrance.”

“Oh,” said Harry, and Hermione looked at her feet. “Did…?”

“My parents,” said Quincy serenely, as if it were nothing. “They got on the wrong side of Grindelwald during the summer, so now I live with my grandfather.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry offered uselessly.

“Don’t be.” Quincy smiled, though there was sadness in it. “They lived good lives, they stood up
for what they believed in. Now they’re in a better place, and one day I’ll see them again. Hermione has told me of your past. You of all people understand, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Harry said quietly. “I do.”

“We should go to breakfast,” Hermione said quickly. “We’ve kept Rowan waiting long enough. Um, Harry, maybe you should go through all the notes that I’ve left you… I’ll visit again tonight.”

“Right,” said Harry, watching them leave. Hermione had thoughtfully copied out all the notes from classes that he had missed, so he had a lot of catching up to do. It was going to be a fun day.

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The quill looked up at Harry mockingly, and Harry looked back down at it, brow knitted together in concentration.

_Geminio_, he thought, flicking his wand at the writing utensil, but to no avail. Again. He doubted that he would ever get the hang of nonverbal spells – they were an absolute pain in the buttocks.

Harry decided to give the spell one last try before retiring from Defence work and turning to Herbology. Glaring down at the quill with what he hoped was the heat of the sun, his brain ached from the effort of channelling such concentration.

_Geminio!_ He roared mentally, viciously flicking his wand at the blasted quill, and to his absolute astonishment, it duplicated itself – multiple times.

“Whoever knew that for once, violent thoughts are key?” he said aloud, picking up and examining one of the many perfect replicas of the feather.

“You’re learning quickly, Delacour,” said Lestrange, swaggering through the doorway of the Hospital Wing, Nott at his heel. “Replicating the feather more than once with a single incantation? Impressive.”

Harry scrambled up from where he had been sitting on the bed, purely defensive. Then he remembered that he was wearing only pyjamas and a woollen pullover, and regretted his move immediately.

“What do you want, Lestrange?” he snapped, resisting the urge to crawl under the bed and hide. Instead, he kept his wand clasped firmly in his grip. Quickly, Harry passed a glance at the sun outside. It could barely be noon – why were these two out of class?

“Absolutely nothing,” replied the Slytherin innocently, and there was a completely un-innocent gleam in his obsidian eyes. “I’m simply escorting Francis here to see Madam Pomfrey. Charms accident,” he added in a low voice, as if it were confidential information.

Nott scowled at Lestrange, then looked sheepishly at his hand which was covered in thick, mossy ginger fur. Where his fingers once had been were dancing octopus tentacles. Harry stared.

“What the bloody hell were you practising?” he asked.

“Shut up,” said Nott without conviction, just as Madam Pomfrey left her office and entered the infirmary.

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“I thought I heard voices,” she said briskly, noting Nott’s hand as she approached.
“Uh,” said Nott.

“Let me guess,” said the matron impatiently. “Filius has been allowing the N.E.W.T.s class to experiment with creating new charms?”

“My, sharp as always, Miss Pomfrey,” said Lestrange charmingly. Madam Pomfrey simply tsked, directing Nott to sit on the bed neighbouring Harry’s. She then appeared to notice Harry for the first time, standing there awkwardly.

“Stop standing there like a Grindylow out of water, Delacour!” she barked. “Unless you want me to keep you here for another day?”

Harry quickly sat down on the bed. Over his years at Hogwarts, he had come to learn that Madam Pomfrey’s austerity was a sign of her protectiveness over patients – sometimes, her tone of voice had to be taken with a grain of salt.

“You can fix my hand, can’t you?” asked Nott anxiously, perched on the edge of the bed.

“What a ridiculous question, Mr. Nott!” said Madam Pomfrey, turning to her vials cupboard and rifling through the contents of it, all the while muttering crossly, “Happens every year, always some mishap when a little wisenheimer decides to trifle with the wrong spells. Oh, they do keep me busy…”

“How has your recovery been going?” asked Lestrange, and with a start, Harry realised that the question was for him.

“Well enough,” he replied suspiciously. “That is, I’m sure that I could easily enough jinx anybody who tries anything funny with me again.”

“That’s good,” Lestrange said, and he smiled – he didn’t seem at all sarcastic, which did nothing but heighten Harry’s suspicions even more. “Defencelessness isn’t really coveted in Slytherin house, is it?”

“Not at all,” said Harry, wondering how on earth they were maintaining a halfway civil conversation.

“Ow!” shouted Nott, leaping to his feet and clutching his hand. “How dare you, that hurts!”

“I do not enjoy melodrama,” said Madam Pomfrey, frowning as she glanced at a half-full vial in her hand. “I only need pour the remainder of this over your hairy problem, so I beseech that you sit yourself down again.”

Nott muttered something under his breath. Lestrange grinned, turning to Harry again.

“You know,” he said, “these past few months haven’t been kind to our relationship. I would like to start anew. Nice to meet you, I’m Peregrine Lestrange.”

“Why?” asked Harry with a scowl.

“Because,” said Lestrange, looking perplexed, “Mother and Father chose to name me so.”

“Why do you want to start anew?” Harry pressed, doing his best to level out his tone. “I seem to recall that when we first met, you accused me of being a Muggle-born as if it were a crime.”

“Ah, yes,” said Lestrange, grimacing. “Perhaps that was a little graceless of me.”
Graceless, thought Harry, before continuing his point.

“Also, you and Riddle and the rest of your—” gang “—group haven’t exactly been kind to me or my friends.”

“We haven’t been unkind, though,” offered Lestrange winningly. “But anyway, seeing as the two of us are to work alongside each other on the Quidditch team, I thought it best that we put aside any bad blood or whatnot.”

Harry hesitated.

“Oh, please tell me that you are not withdrawing from the team!” Lestrange threw his hands in the air. “Lying in a coma for what, two weeks, is a rubbish excuse, you inconsiderate prat!”

“I disagree,” Nott helpfully provided, shaking out his newly-recovered human hand as Madam Pomfrey bustled off to her cupboards again.

“Francis,” said Lestrange, “you are not a part of this conversation, so shut up.”

“Even if Madam Pomfrey doesn’t order me to quit,” Harry said, “Hermione most likely would, and—”

“Dearest Hermione,” said Lestrange, winking at Nott over Harry’s head. “I am most looking forward to making her acquaintance soon, what a brain she is! Rivals our own Tom Riddle in brilliance, I say. Easy on the eye as well… say, I’d quite like to spend some quality time with her.”

Harry refused to rise to the bait. Lestrange sighed noisily when this fact became evident, shoving his hands into his pocket and leaning back against the wall.

“I suppose that I’ll have to send Crockett your way to talk some sense into you, then,” he said, peering down his nose at Harry. “What a shame…”

“You two are still here, are you?” said Madam Pomfrey, returning to the scene. “I would much appreciate it if you left Delacour in peace.”

“Of course, Madam,” said Lestrange, bowing with flourish, giving Harry one last glance before gliding out of the Hospital Wing with the grace of an old pure-blood heir. Nott hesitated by Harry’s bedside, fidgeting slightly and looking more rabbit-like than ever as he did so.

Harry abruptly remembered Nott’s part in saving his sanity, and found himself examining Nott in a new light. Careful evaluation was required here. He wondered if he was meant to say ‘thanks’, and if that would clear everything up.

“I’m glad you’re awake,” Nott finally said, never meeting Harry’s eye. “Tom has… really been unbearable these last few weeks.”

Before he could be questioned further, he was out the door, leaving the thought perched on the end of Harry’s bed.

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The rest of the day passed without comment. At lunchtime, Margot and Parkinson dropped in for a visit, Margot tearful and Parkinson snide. To his astonishment, Harry found himself glad to see their faces again – it seemed that he was beginning to actually view them as (dare he say it?) friends.
Ignatius and the other Gryffindors crossed paths with Margot and Parkinson soon after, to Harry’s great amusement, which brought about only the slightest of conflicts before Madam Pomfrey had them all sent away. He was somewhat relieved by this, as nobody had ever been given the chance to interrogate him about what had happened that night. To Harry, it was just another skeleton to add to the closet.

He expected to be alone for the rest of the day, at least until Hermione visited again that night, no doubt to fill him in on all the homework that he had missed out on, but that scenario did not pan out.

As Lestrange had promised, Crockett did indeed make a stop into the Hospital Wing to shout at Harry a little (“Don’t be pigheaded, Delacour!”), then smile charmingly (“It’s been too long since I last saw your cute face”), then shout a little more (“But honestly, I will slaughter everything you hold dear if you bail out on the Quidditch team!”), before sweeping away in a manner that would have made Snape proud. Harry was quite certain that he had stared at Crockett like a stunned mullet the entire time.

As afternoon classes ended, Dolores Umbridge herself made a brief appearance, sporting a wide, toad-like smile as she debriefed Harry on the great impression that she had made on Merrythought, thanks to her “exceptionally thorough” research on the Smokescreen Spell. Before leaving, Umbridge cast an eye over Harry’s bedridden form and simpered, “Ah, karma,” and toddled out.

Harry immediately made a mental note to ask Hermione if it was alright for him to start on Umbridge again.

Seconds after Umbridge waltzed out the door, completely oblivious to the murderous seventh year she had left behind, Minerva came in to take her place, questioning Umbridge’s presence with some contempt, before wishing Harry quick recovery and leaving without another word.

At dinnertime, Hermione came in as promised, alone this time, carting along a new homework load which Harry found himself fretting over. He regaled the day’s visits to Hermione, and had only just started on Umbridge when she checked the time, announced that she ought to get started on her study again, and rushed away with profuse apologies on her lips.

It was only when the lights in the castle dimmed that the person Harry had been waiting for all day stepped through the doorway.

Madam Pomfrey had already retired for the night, promising that Harry may leave his confinement the next morning. He now lay on his stomach, his chin propped up by a fist as he read through chapter thirty of *Hopper’s Exploration of Ancient Charms* for Flitwick’s class. The gaping maw of blackness, seeping in through the numerous nooks and crannies of Hogwarts Castle, was kept at bay only by the gentle pulsing of Lumos light in hand.

It was after a little while of surprisingly peaceful reading that Harry noticed that there was another presence in the Hospital Wing, and he turned his head slightly, lifting his wand higher to see none other than Tom Riddle approaching him on silent foot.

Ordinarily, Harry would have immediately jumped to the defensive at the sight of the tall figure, but now he calmly closed his book and sat up straight in bed.

“I was wondering when I would be seeing you,” he remarked aloud, and with a silent incantation of, “Nox,” put out the bright light.

His face illuminated only by the moonlight which filtered in through the window, Riddle said...
“Of course.” Harry heaved a sigh, glancing away. “I’ve been told that I owe you something akin to a life debt. And Nott as well, I suppose. So I’m interested in hearing what it is that you want from me. Eternal servitude? My first-born child?” He laughed sardonically.

“Don’t be silly,” said Riddle. His handsome face was all sharp lines and shadows, and a playful smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “I don’t want anything from you, Harry. I’m not a Muggle fairy tale witch.”

“You don’t want anything?” asked Harry, momentarily caught off guard. He frowned, tugging at a stray strand of hair. “Then why did you do it?”

“What?”

“Stop him. Jenkins, I mean.” Harry swallowed, and the click in his throat was audible to his own ears. “Save me, whatever it is that you want to call it.”

“Oh, Harry,” said Riddle, and the way Harry’s name rolled off his tongue sent a tingle down his spine – it wasn’t entirely unpleasant. “I know that you’re trying your hardest to not believe it, but I really do want us to be friends. I saved you because, well, isn’t that what friends do?”

“We’re not friends.” Harry shifted uncomfortably under the intense gaze of the future dark lord and blurted out, “It doesn’t make sense. You hate me.” Oops.

Riddle seemed nothing but slightly amused, however.

“What gave you that idea? Do enlighten me, I’m fascinated.”

“You…” Harry sifted through his memories, before recalling their first Defence lesson. “You keep sending your henchmen to make my life miserable during class time!”

“Didn’t that happen once?” Riddle sounded exasperated. “And it wasn’t to make your life miserable, I thought that you could do with some proper company.”

“Lestrange is proper company?”

“Better than Prewett.”

“Whatever. Fine.” Harry scoffed viciously. “Then you kidnapped me that one time to yell at me about helping the other Slytherins out with some homework.”

“I admit that I was having an off day,” offered Riddle stiffly. “Besides, those Slytherins are not ones you should keep as company. Speaking of which, have those… ‘study sessions’ of yours gone ahead?” The quotations were palpable.

“Yes,” muttered Harry. “They have gone very well too, thank you very much.” This was a lie. They had had one session a while ago but none since then, partly because everybody had been so busy and partly because the Slytherins made Harry want to tear his hair out.

Riddle seemed to see straight through Harry’s lie, but he did not exploit that fact, to Harry’s astonishment.

“You do not make a sufficient case here,” remarked Riddle. “That is, regarding my supposed hatred for you.”
“You tried to break up my friendship with the Gryffindors!” Harry exploded, losing his cool and jumping up wildly. “You set Ignatius and I up to sabotage us! What do you call that, then?”

“I do not approve of Ignatius Prewett, he’s a right piece of work!” Riddle shouted back, like a stick of dynamite that had been lit and finally gone off. “I admit that at the beginning, I didn’t care for you much, Harry, but against all odds, you and your idiotic ways have grown on me and I care for your wellbeing!”

Riddle’s words rung through the silence.

Harry stumbled back a few steps, then plopped back down on the bed, head bowed as he stared at his skinny, scarred fingers. Had he heard that correctly? Had Riddle just admitted to ‘caring’ for Harry’s ‘wellbeing’?

“I apologise,” said Riddle finally, albeit formally. “I shouldn’t have shouted. I don’t know what got into me.”

“You’re actually serious,” said Harry, his voice pale. “You want to be my… friend.”

“Yes,” said Riddle, softly this time. “Yes, I do.”

“And you don’t hate me.” There was something like wonder in Harry’s voice as he looked up at Riddle. “You saved me for… for that reason?”

“I protect my–” it sounded like Riddle choked on a word for a moment, then said, “I protect my own.”

Harry laughed. He started laughing, and it was a very raw, ragged and unrefined sound to his own ears, because when had he last laughed like this? But everything about this situation was laughable – Lord Voldemort cared for Harry Potter’s wellbeing? Lord Voldemort wanted to be Harry Potter’s friend? After all those years of battling him, and then all these weeks of convincing himself that Riddle was scheming up a dastardly plan? It was as though the universe was playing a marvellous prank on Harry, and the result was stupendous.

“It really isn’t that funny,” Riddle interjected, and even in the dim lighting, Harry could tell that he was blushing. It was almost endearing, given the whole situation.

His laughter finally coming to a rough halt, Harry flicked away a tear of mirth from the corner of his eye and chuckled, “Why are you even here? Isn’t it past curfew?”

“I’m Head Boy,” Riddle said, and had the audacity to wink. “And I find myself to be most active at bedtime, anyway.”

Heat crawled up Harry’s face at the obvious innuendo. Holy fuck. The world really was becoming a big joke, it seemed.

“Well, I, um.” He stumbled through his words, incredibly flustered. “I mean, this has been an eye-opening talk, and now I’m a bit, uh, tired, so you should leave. Please. Please goodnight. Please leave, is what I mean. Goodnight?”

“Of course,” Riddle murmured, dipping his head into a nod. “I’m glad that my motives are finally laid bare before you. There will be no more mind games from here on.”

“No mind games, got it,” Harry mumbled. “Not that I was ever playing mind games, you should know.”
Riddle’s smile had seemed predatory not long ago, but now there was a gentler side to it, and with a whispered farewell, he left the Hospital Wing.

Releasing a long breath, Harry collapsed face-first back into bed. That conversation had taken an unexpected turn, and he now had a lot to consider.

The next move in this game was Harry’s to make.

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Tom had not been lying when he said that it was at bedtime that he was most active. It seemed that as the rest of the Hogwarts population shut down, Tom woke up, and ever since Harry’s second night in the Hospital Wing, Tom had made good of this little quirk of his.

Tonight would be no exception.

Until Harry was safely back into the Slytherin seventh year dormitory, Tom would not sleep easily. There were too many variables in this equation, and if one tiny thing were to go haywire… everything was running so smoothly, if anything unexpected at all happened, Tom would lose any ground that he had made in enticing Harry over to his side.

What was so special about Harry, Mulciber had taken to asking every day now. Yes, he was powerful, but weren’t there so many others who were powerful?

Yes, and no, Tom thought. The question here lay in what was power, really? Tom’s magic sensitivity told him for a fact that Harry had true power, not the type that some witches and wizards thought themselves to have simply from rope-learning lots of spells from books. It was a whirling torrent of raw power that the boy probably did not yet realise that he possessed, and that power promised to make for a sweet pet once harnessed in. How Tom longed to be the master of it.

Soon, he told himself. Soon.

But there was something else which made Harry so enticing to him. Tom didn’t know what it was yet, or rather, he did not understand it. But it, too, fuelled him to stroll the Hogwarts corridors at night, guided only be the path of moonlight, and slip into the Hospital Wing through the ajar door. From there, he would simply sit and watch over Harry while he slept, at least until the rooster cry signalled the beginning of the new day, and Tom would steal away once again.

On this particular night, Tom was certain that this would be his last night-time wandering for a little while. Harry was due to be released by Madam Pomfrey the following morning, and all would be right in the world again.

_I protect my investments._

Tom had nearly said that to Harry when they had been speaking earlier on, but had managed to correct it to, “I protect my own.” It was a close call. Tom never had tongue slips, but a certain pair of deep green eyes stripped away his guards, made it easy for him to do something careless.

Deep green. As green as gemstones. As green as poison.

Tom stood up from his seat and paced around the bed so that he could look at Harry’s face clearly.

Cuddled into a fetal position beneath the blankets, his hair spilling like ink across his face and the pillow, Harry looked more innocent than he ever could while awake. He was always a peaceful sleeper, the worried lines between his eyebrows dissipating, his lips parting as he breathed gently.
Unlike Lestrange, Mulciber and Nott, Harry did not snore, and he did not breathe heavily either. This was something Tom appreciated.

Hesitantly reaching out, Tom brushed away a lock of black hair from Harry’s eyes, his fingers lingering on the sleeping boy’s cheekbone.

This was… this was indeed an investment worth protecting.

Abruptly lifting his hand away, Tom turned to leave. Tonight, Harry would fine. Tom would return to his dormitory immediately.

He had only managed two steps when Harry spoke, and his spine straightened in alarm.

He had been caught!

But when he turned around, Harry’s eyes remained closed as he shifted in his sleep, letting out a quiet sigh. Tom fixed Harry with a hard stare. He had definitely spoken.

And then it happened again.

Tom inhaled sharply, walking, then jogging, before finally running out of the Hospital Wing, distancing himself as quickly as possible.

Only once he reached the dungeons did Tom stop, pausing at the bottom of a set of stairs to press a hand to his chest and suck in a few breaths of air.

There was no way that he had imagined it. The voice, the language, was as clear as day.

But how could Harry be a Parselmouth?

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Harry Harry Harry. Your secret is out now! xP
Um, so I had trouble writing this chapter, which is why it took so long for it to come out, plus I have exam prep to do, which will continue for a while. So don’t expect a chapter to be out soon at all. Thanks for your patience, though! See y’all next time. xx
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

He just felt a cold emptiness in the pit of his stomach, the shadows within his soul whispering, “It doesn’t matter anymore, because maybe you still have Hermione, but you’re never going to see Ronald Weasley again.”

Chapter Notes

I’m back for another chapter!! Then I’ll be gone again. I am… so sorry. I mean, for a little while, I jumped ship and joined the Sherlock fandom, but I’m back again, so all is right in the world. Then I’ll head back over there in a moment… :) Yup. Anyways, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry’s breath shadowed Tom’s lips, his eyes shuttered as he gazed up at Tom from under a frame of thick, dark lashes.

“What do you desire most in this world, Tom?” he murmured, running his hands down the lapels of Tom’s blazer. Despite the layer of material between them, Harry’s touch was tantalising and it set Tom’s heart aflame.

“You,” he whispered, and Harry’s plush lips parted. Tom could taste the precious air that the boy expelled from within his lungs, and he longed for more.

“You,” he repeated, lowering his head to Harry’s. “Only you.”

“Ahh,” Harry breathed, pressing forwards so that only sparse centimetres separated their faces, and Tom’s eyelids fluttered closed. :I’ll... help you...:

Impulsively, Tom jerked back, stepping away as Harry uttered words in the language of serpents.

A sharp smile curled the corners of Harry’s mouth, and he cocked his head to the side. Innocent. Predatory.

:You have already gifted me with a shard of your soul,: he said. :Is it not appropriate that I gift you with some of mine?:

And then the green-eyed boy was screaming, shuddering against the cold stones of Hogwarts castle as his mind was raped by another wizard, and blood trickled from his nostril. Stark, red, the exact same colour as that peculiar scar on his forehead, and frigid rage was threatening to flush all sense out of Tom’s system–

With a start, Tom awoke, floundering upright to find himself submerged in the cool darkness of his dormitory.
Releasing a puff of air, he lay back again, his dream already fleeing his memory. There had been Harry, and there had been Parseltongue, the words so slippery yet seductive. Yes. Harry was a Parselmouth.

Swallowing back a groan, Tom passed a sideways glance to where Harry’s bed was, but then recalled that this was his last night in the Hospital Wing, and he would only be back in the dormitory the following night.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow, he would figure this all out.

*Tomorrow,* was Tom’s final, fleeting thought as he fell back into the gaping jaws of sleep.

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“You look rather shitty, if you don’t mind me saying,” remarked Lestrange as they all made their way to the Great Hall the next morning. “Look at your eyes… it’s like you’ve had a punch-up.”

“Oh, shut up,” groused Tom, straightening his tie as if that would amend his weary face. He was perfectly aware of the bruise-like shadows beneath his eyes – it wasn’t his fault that he had been tossing and turning through the night.

Only partially listening as Avery and Nott broke into an argument about the scoring of Ancient Runes in their final exams, while Lestrange boasted about the girl he had slept with that night, Tom caught sight of Harry. He was sitting across from Greengrass and Parkinson at the Slytherin table, his head ducked down as he scribbled furiously onto a sheet of parchment.

A smile crept across Tom’s face as he recalled the conversation they had had the night before, but he quickly wiped it off.

“Excuse me,” he said formally, brushing past his group, and ignored the way that Avery, Nott and Lestrange fell silent, all eyes trained to his back as he made his way towards his supposed enemy.

“You’ll be seeing a lot more of us now, I suppose,” Greengrass was saying, “now that your darling Prewett’s attention is diverted.”

“He should be ashamed,” sniffed Parkinson, toying with a butterknife. “After all, it was his very name which brought you to Gryffindor Tower. If it wasn’t for him, Jenkins never would have been able to lure you out in such a crude manner.”

“Indeed,” agreed Greengrass, and leaned towards Harry beseechingly. “Don’t you see now, Harry? You can’t trust them. It would all be best if you severed all ties with their lot, stayed where you belong—”

“I’m sure that Harry hardly needs your… wise words of assistance,” Tom intervened, and immediately, two pairs of hostile eyes were on him. Harry, however, had a completely different reaction. He put his hand to his mouth and turned his head sideways to look at Tom. An interesting mixture of mirth and doubt danced in his eyes.

“Tom,” he greeted through his fingers, and both Greengrass and Parkinson’s mouths dropped open in perfect unison, their gazes darting over to Harry this time.

“Harry,” Tom returned, dipping his head politely. “I trust that you’re better?”

“I…” Harry shrugged his shoulders, placing his quill down on the table top. “I’m in a better place than I was a week ago, I suppose.”
“Hm,” acknowledged Tom, pursing his lips, before noting the essay which was being messily scrawled down. “What’s this?”

“Oh,” laughed Harry, running a flustered hand through his hair. “Just a late assignment for Beery.”

“About?” Tom tilted his head, attempting to interpret the almost unintelligible handwriting.

“Bloodroot,” said Harry. “Just… general discussion, you know.”

“Oh, that one.” Tom nodded solemnly. “Have you written about its reproduction process?”


“Reproduction is the production of offsp–” he began, but Harry cut him off crossly.

“I know what reproduction is!” he snapped. “But what does it have to do with bloodroot?”

“Wizarding bloodroot is capable of asexual reproduction,” Tom explained patiently. “Note the reproductive parts up the top. Bright yellow, very appealing to passing animals. The animal eats the flower, unaware of the fact that bloodroot and its extracts are toxic to its cells. Thus, the animal dies, but not immediately – it has most likely travelled a distance from the parent plant. Note that wizarding bloodroot thrives in very acidic climates. The plant then produces seeds without fertilisation via apomixes, resulting in new growth from within the stomach of the corpse. The animal’s body will naturally decay, and once again the bloodroot will have access to the outside world. More animals will consume the flowers, die elsewhere, and the bloodroot species will flourish, spreading across the globe. Bloodroot is practically an unstoppable weed, unless animals can be hardwired to avoid consumption of it.”

“I think I got it all,” said Harry, his tongue between his teeth as he jotted down the last of Tom’s words. It was rather amusing to see Harry so rapt with him. If only it could be that way all the time…

“Have you honestly never wondered why archaeologists flock towards old bloodroots?” Tom shook his head. “It’s simple enough to work out.”

“What?” said Harry blankly. It was evident that he had never wondered that. Tom rolled his eyes.

“Skeletons, Harry!” he said. “The old skeletons of the facilitators of bloodroot growth. You never know which extinct animal you might find.”

“Aren’t you a ray of sunshine, Riddle?” interrupted Greengrass, arching an eyebrow at him. “And I’m sure Harry didn’t need your help to learn all of that. He has a cousin who may be smarter than you, after all.”

The Other bloody Delacour. She most certainly was not smarter than him.

A muscle in Tom’s jaw jumped, but only Greengrass appeared to notice.

“No, thanks for that,” intervened Harry, then blushed. “I mean, I’d rather not have to ask Hermione about it. She can get a bit… full-on. So… yeah. Sorry, I’m not really used to this yet.”

“‘This’ being our newfound truce?” asked Tom, smirking.

“Well, yes.” Harry avoided his eye.

“I’m sure I can hurry things along, then,” said Tom, and turned on his heel. “I’ll see you in class,
Harry.

“Um, okay.” Harry smiled timidly. “Bye, Tom.”

Hearing his own name coming from Harry’s mouth made Tom’s stomach perform a complicated gymnastics routine that he wasn’t sure should even be humanly possible. Praying that it didn’t show on his face, he hurried away.

At least their relationship was intact.

***

“What in Morgana’s name just happened?” asked Parkinson flatly as soon as the Head Boy was on his way.

“Since when did you call him ‘Tom’?” Margot hissed, glaring at Harry. Harry scrubbed at his eyes, exhausted.

“I don’t know,” he said, folding up his Herbology assignment and setting it aside as he reached for the porridge ladle. “Something happened last night, and I’m not really sure where that leaves me.”

“It looks to me that it leaves you best mates with Mr. Holier-Than-Thou,” remarked Parkinson, still eyeing Harry suspiciously. “I don’t like it.”

A rush of spite coursed through Harry, unbidden, and he threw the porridge ladle back into the pot with more vigour than was necessary. Margot and Parkinson looked at him in surprise.

“Oh, you two are just brilliant,” snapped Harry. “First you tell me to leave the Gryffindors and stay with the Slytherins, now you disapprove of the one person who is basically the definition of Slytherin himself. What do you want me to do?”

“You can try not jumping between the two extremes,” said Parkinson snidely. “There is a safe grey zone, you realise.”

“Let me guess, you two are that grey zone?” Harry stood, throwing his bag over his shoulder, and spoke without thinking. He said with cruel relish, “No thanks.”

Margot gasped, pressing manicured fingers to her lips, and an ugly scowl crossed Parkinson’s face. Harry clamped his mouth closed as his brain finally registered what he had said.

“So now that Riddle’s decided that you can join his team of henchmen,” Parkinson growled, “you’re too good for us?”

“It’s not like that,” Harry began, and desperately held out an olive branch. “I didn’t mean what I–”

“Don’t try to feed us that poppycock, Delacour.” Parkinson’s dark eyes glistened with malevolence, and he stood to his feet. “I’ve always seen you watching Riddle so longingly, waiting to be welcomed into his cult so that you could worship the very ground he walks on. And, oh, you’ve been biding your time, haven’t you? Making do with us lesser beings, pretending that you’re different from the rest of them.”

“Edwin,” whispered Margot. “You know that’s not true. You know that’s not true.”

“Let him speak,” said Harry, doing his best to maintain a calm façade although there was a tremor in his voice. “I’m sure Parkinson understands everything. Like how I owe Riddle something,
because despite it all, he saved my life. Like how we spoke last night, and I’ve finally realised that maybe things can be different this time round, if only I try.”

“Different from when?” demanded Parkinson. He and Harry faced each other in a furious silence for a moment.

“Oh, Merlin,” murmured Margot, slowly rising to her feet. “This isn’t the first time you and Tom Riddle have met, isn’t it?”

Harry looked away, refusing to meet her empathetic eyes. She thought she understood, but she didn’t. Nobody could know.

“I shouldn’t have spoken to you two like that,” he finally relented, speaking through a tight jaw.

“But that doesn’t change the fact,” said Parkinson, his voice like stone, “that you really believe that we aren’t good enough.”

“You’re not Ron and Hermione!” Harry exploded, and the clamour around them came to a screeching halt. With eyes from every house table burning into him, Harry turned around and stormed from the Great Hall, but his vision was no longer tinged with red. He just felt a cold emptiness in the pit of his stomach, the shadows within his soul whispering, “It doesn’t matter anymore, because maybe you still have Hermione, but you’re never going to see Ronald Weasley again.”

Shaking furiously, Harry found himself an empty corridor and stood, staring listlessly out the window for a long time. The Black Lake stood below, shimmering with tiny threads of silver, and in the distance, great hills rolled away beyond the horizon. A bird cried out, somewhere far away, and the call trailed away, lost, just another creature trying to find his way home.

Harry sighed quietly, meeting the bright green eyes that were reflected at him through the glass.

“Pull it together, Harry Potter,” he said, and he braced himself for life to continue its grim march onwards.

***

“Thank you for finally joining us, Delacour,” said Merrythought, looking at Harry critically over her spectacles.

“Sorry, Professor,” Harry said, noting that Poole had occupied his usual seat by Hermione. “I got lost.”

“You’ve been absent several weeks now,” was the witch’s only remark. “You could have at least learned how to lie better during that time. It would save us all some embarrassment.”

The class tittered, and Harry had the good graces to look suitably chastised, all the while staring at the back of Poole’s head, silently willing him to move. Hermione shot Harry an apologetic look over her shoulder, and he grimaced. So that was how it was. Over the time he had been incapacitated, he had been replaced in class.

“I trust you’re not lost again, trying to find your seat?” asked Merrythought, tapping her wand impatiently against her leg.

The only spare seat was by Tom, coincidentally (or not coincidentally, Harry thought). Fanned out in the seats behind him were his future Death Eaters, watching Harry closely as he slowly sat down
Just because he and Tom had made their stances clear didn’t mean that Harry was at all comfortable in the other boy’s presence, and he sat on the edge of his chair, hoping that today would not be a theory lesson.

“Now,” said Merrythought, after casting Harry one last look. “Today we will be beginning the part of the curriculum that I know many of you have been looking forward to – Patronuses.”

“Finally!” Harry heard Ignatius saying gleefully. He was sitting beside a pretty brunette Hufflepuff, his arm draped around the back of her chair. That must be Judith Smith, the girl Margot had been telling him that Ignatius had begun courting recently. The reason that Ignatius’s attention would be ‘diverted’.

“Already ahead of the game, aren’t you?” murmured Tom into Harry’s ear, and he jumped, nearly scuttling entirely off his chair. He shot Tom a sheepish half-smile.

“Please don’t do that,” he said.

“Do what?” asked Tom. His eyes were deep and fathomless, it was impossible to know what he was thinking.

“Sit so close to me.” Harry shifted to the end of the table. “It’s not necessary.”

“Hmm,” said Tom, propping his elbow up on the table and leaning his head into his hand. Harry could feel himself being watched as Merrythought continued speaking.

“The Patronus Charm,” she said, flicking her wand at the blackboard so that her words were transcribed as she spoke them, “produces a Patronus, less commonly known as a spirit guardian. It is among the most advanced defence spells known to this day. I’ll have you know that Patronuses were only recently introduced to the curriculum, as many consider it far beyond the N.E.W.T. level. As such, I shall do my best to teach it to you, though few of you will succeed in producing an incorporeal shield, with even fewer of you producing a corporeal Patronus. Can any of you tell me what the Patronus Charm is to be used against?”

The entire class shot their arms in the air, keen to display their intellectual prowess.

“Smith,” said Merrythought, beckoning towards the Hufflepuff girl at Ignatius’s side. “Give it a whirl.”

“The Patronus Charm is the only known defence against Dementors, Professor,” said Smith, and Merrythought made a so-so motion with her hand.

“Can anybody correct Smith’s mistake?” she asked. “It’s a common enough mistake to make. Anyone?”

Even Hermione looked stunted, and nobody raised their hand.

“Well, this is disappointing.” Merrythought squinted around the classroom, then pointed to Harry. “Delacour. You displayed skill when performing the Patronus Charm back at the beginning of the school year, so let’s see whether your theory is also in tip-top shape.”

“Patronuses are also effective against Lethifolds,” he answered promptly.

“True,” said Merrythought, “but not what I was looking for.”
Harry frowned and considered. Smith’s exact wording had been “the only known defence”. Could it be that there were more? Lupin had taught him the charm back in third year, and he had never spoken of any other method which could be undertaken to ward off Dementors. Which suggested that there were subtler, less direct ways to resist a Dementor’s draining powers.

Then he remembered Sirius, who had emerged from Azkaban sane, against all the odds.

“Animagi,” said Harry abruptly. “By transforming into Animagus form, witches and wizards will be unaffected by Dementors, since they are incapable of detecting less complex thoughts and emotions.”

“Excellent,” said Merrythought. “Ten points to–”

“But if that applies to Animagus form,” Harry continued, “it can also apply to human form, so long as you remain in the correct mindset, right? But it’s difficult to think like a, say, cat. So, if Dementors feed off happiness, you could instead focus on other sentiments which give you strength. Like… like obsessions. Obsessions don’t necessarily make you feel better, like happiness does.”

“Well, I have never considered that last one before.” Merrythought nodded her head, approving. “Fifteen points to Slytherin. I’m glad to see that you haven’t lost your touch while you’ve been away.”

“Thank you.” Harry dipped his head, ignoring the lingering looks that were cast his way.

“Now, you all must be wondering what the method to this madness is by now.” Merrythought. “And it’s very simple – or so it seems. To cast a Patronus Charm successfully, one must simply recall their happiest memory – and it must to be a strong memory, too – before saying the incantation. Repeat after me, Expecto Patronum.”

“Expecto Patronum,” chanted the class.

“Excellent.” Merrythought began drawing a circle in the air with her wand, spiralling it round and round and round, ceaseless. “This is the wand movement, and the circular shape supposedly increases the power of the charm. Though I believe that that theory is nonsense, and the strength all depends on the memory. Everybody, stand up!”

The class did, and Merrythought banished all the desks and chairs to the back of the room.

“Find yourself a space, then attempt to cast the charm,” she said.

“Don’t we need a Dementor?” called out Lestrange, smirking. “Or, at the very least, a Lethifold?”

The former was said with a sly glance in Harry’s direction.

“Oh, I’m not in the mood for taking you to the Hospital Wing today, Lestrange,” said Merrythought wryly, and the smirk on Lestrange’s face dribbled away. “We can save that for next lesson, though.”

Ignatius and the other Gryffindors laughed loudly, and Tom shook his head.

“Do try to not make a mockery of yourself, Peregrine,” he said as the class settled down, and then all Harry could hear was “Expecto Patronum” ringing around from all corners of the room, the tones varying from eager to doubtful.
“Expecto Patronum!” said Hermione, and then there was a silvery otter, swimming through the air, and the rest of the class turned to gape at her while she looked pleased with herself.

Pride reared up in Harry’s chest as he recalled that he had been the one to teach her that, and with a grin, he called forth his own stag. Prongs erupted from the tip of his wand and cantered over to meet the otter, who swum playfully around his antlers.

Hermione beamed at Harry.

Then the stag and the otter were gone.

Tom was still watching Harry, and he was beginning to feel a little unnerved by it.

“Back to practising, everyone,” commanded Merrythought, “and maybe you’ll be able to do the same as the two Delacours.”

“What’s your Patronus, Professor?” asked Poole, tearing his gaze away from Hermione.

“It’s a hare, isn’t it?” said Mulciber.

“No, a sparrow!” offered Nott.

“I say a sugar glider,” pronounced Lestrange.

“Close,” said Merrythought. “But not quite.”

She sent a proud Hippogriff galloping forward, and Mulciber, Nott and Lestrange kept quiet about the whole matter for the rest of the lesson.

***

“Was Riddle perfectly horrid today, Harry?” asked Ignatius as they headed to the Great Hall for lunch, right after introducing Harry to his newly beloved. “Sorry you had to deal with him.”

“It was fine,” Harry said, because it really had been. Besides all that staring… he wished he knew what was going through Tom’s head.

“Fine?” repeated Ignatius, staring at Harry hard. “What do you mean?”

Harry, who wasn’t in the mood for a repeat of the Margot-and-Parkinson episode, sighed heavily.

“It’s complicated,” he said, and didn’t elaborate.

“Does it involve a girl?” asked Judith Smith, peering around from Ignatius’s other side to look at Harry seriously. “Whenever anybody says that it’s complicated, it involves a girl. Or a homicidal, cross-dressing troll. Trust me, I know these things.”

“What are you on about?” asked Ignatius fondly. “Since when did you know about homicidal, cross-dressing trolls?”

“I grew up in the mountains,” said Judith. “They’re not an uncommon sight up there.”

“You know what, I’ll leave you two to it,” said Harry, vaguely disturbed. “I have things to do, anyway.”

As he stepped away from the two, his gaze immediately met Margot’s, on the opposite side of the
hall, and he looked away hurriedly. He soon found Hermione digging furiously through a book called *Development of Defence* at the end of the Ravenclaw table and joined her. Poole gave Harry a snotty look, but Quincy seemed friendly enough as he absently wove a sausage-and-corn necklace.

“What are you doing?” Harry asked Hermione as soon as he had sat down.

“Nothing,” she muttered, glaring at Harry over the top of the book before ducking her head down again.

*Did Margot speak to her,* he thought, and immediately felt troubled. It wasn’t as though he was betraying anyone, he and Tom had just established a truce. Wasn’t that a good thing?

“Doesn’t look like nothing,” Harry tried, and Hermione slammed the book down on the table top. Glasses and cutlery within a radius of three feet rattled as she did so, earning her several alarmed glances.

“I don’t understand!” she snapped. Poole patted her shoulder.

“I can explain,” said Harry.

“Then please, do!” With an agitated puff, Hermione sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. Harry fidgeted with his hands, before finally saying, “Last night, Tom… Riddle visited me, and we cleared up a few things, I suppose.”

“What are you talking about?” Hermione sat forwards again.

“Look, you wanted to know, so I’m telling you!” Harry pushed his glasses back up his nose, annoyed. “What more do you want?”

“I want to know how you could answer Professor Merrythought’s question.” Naturally. “Tell me which textbook you read that information from!”

“I should have known that that’s what was bothering you.” Harry rolled his eyes, able to breathe freely again. “I didn’t get it from any textbook, ‘Mione.”

“Then where?” Hermione demanded. Harry looked at Quincy, then at Poole. It was obvious that neither would give them privacy, so he said simply, “Sirius.”

“Oh,” said Hermione, then, “*Oh.* I should have known.”

“What is Sirius?” asked Poole, looking between Harry and Hermione. “No, *who* is Sirius?”

“He was…” Harry sighed. “He was an old friend.”

“Back in France?” Poole confirmed – probably concerned that he was an ex-boyfriend of Hermione’s, in Harry’s opinion.

“Back home,” Hermione corrected, and met Harry’s eye.

Yes. Back home.

***

Crockett held a Quidditch meet that evening, and though Harry had not yet agreed to keep his position on the team, Lestrangle and Avery frog-marched him down to the pitch.
“It’s not even a proper practice,” said Lestrange, mussing up Harry’s hair. “It’ll be good fun. You’ll get to listen to Crockett getting narky with everyone.”

“Let go of me,” Harry grouched, attempting to free himself, but to little success.

“Mr. Tom Riddle appears to have decided that you are worthy of our attention,” said Avery, “so we’re only being good friends now.”

“Friends,” scoffed Harry. He doubted either of them knew the definition of the word.

There were four people in the stands when Lestrange and Avery forced Harry to sit. There was Crockett, pacing, and three others who Harry had not yet met.

“You took your time!” barked Crockett at Lestrange.

“You have our most humble apologies,” countered Lestrange, sounding not at all humble. Crockett appeared used to it and shook his head.

“Delacour,” he said, and Harry jumped to attention. “You’ve yet to officially meet the team, so let’s introduce you. Black, Lestrange and myself are Chasers, Lament and Snowy Owl are Beaters, we’ve got Avery as Keeper, and you, Delacour, are obviously Seeker.”

Harry lost track almost immediately. He registered only the names Snowy Owl and Black, who looked too much like Sirius.

“Right,” said Harry, and raised his hand in an awkward wave. “Hello.”

Nobody returned the gesture.

“Alright,” said Crockett. “The plan is that we unseat Gryffindor this year. To do that, we need to dissect their attack and defence, but without neglecting the other teams. We saw last year that Hufflepuff is quite strong at the moment, ever since recruiting Watkins as Keeper. Too bad they realised that Billingham was a complete pushover, eh? They could be the ones to overthrow Gryffindor, except that we’ll be the ones to do that.”

“Bloody dorks and puffs,” piped up Avery.

“Yes,” said Crockett, jabbing a finger in his direction. “But shut up. The first match of Quidditch season will be Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff, so I’m going to have all of you in the stands taking notes. Yes, all of you! If we’re lucky, Hufflepuff will win. That is not a sentence I thought that I’d ever say. But this will be Slytherin’s year!”

“Sly-the-rin,” the team started chanting. “Sly-the-rin!”

Harry watched in bemusement as they stood, pummelling their fists in the air and screaming, “Sly-the-rin, Sly-the-rin,” over and over as they danced out of the stands.

“OI, I’M NOT FINISHED YET!” the captain bellowed, but the team was long gone.

Harry wondered if the Slytherin team back (or rather, forwards) in his time behaved like this. If only.

Harry excused himself, leaving Crockett to mutter to himself, “How did I end up with a group of pansies?”

***
At that time of night, Harry normally would have been sitting with Margot and Parkinson in the common room, ignoring their banter as he tried to complete the latest assignment. But not that night. Harry sat on the opposite side of the common room from them, tapping his wand listlessly against his knee, pondering when his life had gone so wrong.

“Harry,” said a deep, butter-smooth voice which was becoming more familiar with each passing minute of that day. “Might I steal you for a minute?”

Harry got the feeling that if Tom wanted to steal him but was given no consent, he would be stolen forcefully against his will.

“I guess so,” Harry conceded, but remained seated. “What is it?”

Tom gave a gesture which requested that Harry follow him from the common room. Harry looked in Margot and Parkinson’s direction for a few moments, but neither of them were paying him much mind. Besides, it wasn’t as if they were his keepers. He could follow whoever he wanted to follow out of the common room.

Nodding to himself, Harry met Tom at the stone entrance, and they both left in silence.

After a few minutes of leading Harry around the dark, empty corridors, Tom spoke.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you something all day,” he said abruptly.

“Oh?” Harry queried politely, though his heart thundered in his chest. The question could go so many places – and not all of them were savoury.

Tom paused in his path, and Harry did too. The difference in height between them seemed eons greater than it ever had before, now that they were standing side-by-side.

Tom turned so that they were facing each other, fire broiling in his dark eyes.

“What are you doing out and about at this time, Riddle?” called a voice, and Harry peered down the corridor, recognizing the yellow lining of Hufflepuff robes and the shiny prefect badge on the boy’s chest.

“Abbott,” Tom greeted coldly, rotating so that he faced the newcomer. “What can I do for you?”

Harry recognized him from Defence class – it was impossible to mistake that bright orange head of hair.

“You can tell me why you’re patrolling this corridor when it’s my allotted time slot.” Abbott puffed out his chest, his bravado surely a façade in the face of Tom Riddle. “Much less with another student.”

“You forget that I’m Head Boy,” said Tom, his voice dangerous. “I’m the one who placed you in this time slot.”

Abbott wavered for a moment, but then he was level-headed once again. Harry was impressed.

“Being Head Boy does not give you privileges over other students,” the prefect said. “I shall have to report you to Dippet for being out after curfew–”

“Has it ever occurred to you,” said Tom sharply, “you simple-minded moron, that I am here on the
“What?” spluttered Abbott. “Dippet asked you to… why didn’t you say that you had been summoned? But isn’t this a strange time of night to–”

“Harry and I had best be on our way, then,” said Tom smoothly, taking Harry’s shoulders in his hands and steering him away. When Harry looked over his shoulder, he could see Abbott standing exactly where he had been before, looking supremely confused.

“I didn’t anticipate that we would be interrupted,” Tom remarked, “but even the best of us are caught off guard sometimes.”

“Dippet didn’t summon you, did he?” Harry asked, and a smile quirked the corners of Tom’s lips.

“No at all,” he said, and excitement flickered deep in his eyes. “We’re nearly there, Harry.”

“Nearly where?” Harry asked, looking around them. He received no answer, and began to legitimately worry. “Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” said Tom, and why did he sound so enthused? It was such a contrast to the usual cool, aloof tone of voice that he adopted. This wasn’t natural, it really wasn’t natural…

“Close your eyes,” said Tom.

“I can’t.”

“Please.”

But Harry shook his head slowly.

“How do I know I can trust you?” he whispered, and Tom looked back at him with such sad eyes.

“I swear on my ancestors’ honour,” he said, laying his wand over his heart, and Harry knew that it didn’t get better than that. He closed his eyes, and allowed himself to be guided forward, forward, by Lord Voldemort, the wizard he was sworn to kill, by Tom Marvolo Riddle, the boy who had saved his life.

They entered an echoey room, and Harry could hear the drip, drip, drip of water. With dread that he could feel deep within his bones, he understood where he was.

“Open your eyes,” said Tom, and Harry did.

Together, he and Tom stood before the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets.

Chapter End Notes

I’m sorry, I’m going to be gone again for, like, over a month. (¬_¬)
Sorry about that… but I love you all, thanks for being here with me today!
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

“We all lose something to Tom Riddle,” said Greengrass, giving a sad little smile, “in the end.”

Chapter Notes

Please note that throughout the process of writing this chapter, I have also been editing the previous chapters – there are no changes to the plotline, I’m just getting rid of typos and polishing up my old writing (hopefully), but I thought that I’d best inform you either way. Also, I have completed my final exams, and I’d like to thank all your supportive comments! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_Drip. Drip. Drip._ The tap engraved with the serpent was leaking.

Harry’s gaze shuttered, and he wished himself to a place far away from here. A place where there existed no long-ago memories of a shabby diary drowning in water, of the corpse of a Basilisk, of the life of a redhead girl paling into a dream.

“I know what you are, Harry,” said Tom, and Harry smiled woodenly.

The Boy Who Lived. The Boy Who Lies. The boy who is destined to die.

“You really couldn’t possibly.”

Tom didn’t take notice of the bitterness in Harry’s words. There was a rabid excitement pulsing in his dark eyes, and he grabbed Harry’s shoulders.

“I never thought that I’d meet another,” he said. “Not here, not anywhere. I was certain that I was the last of Slytherin’s descendants.”

“What?” Harry looked back at Tom, befuddled. This close, Harry could see that the inky pools of Tom’s irises were the colour of the deepest trench in the ocean – a whirling chasm that he could easily drown in.

“Ever since I found out,” Tom murmured, drawing his face nearer to Harry’s, “I haven’t been about to stop thinking about it, and I need to know how it is possible.”

Harry shook himself free of Tom’s hands, backing up quickly now. It was evident that he was in the same room as a delusional man.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, his eyes darting over to the doorway, before back to Tom, whose face had now taken on a predatory light. “This has been a real delight, Tom, I’m ever so glad you chose to show me this lavatory, but–”
“Stop pretending!” Tom shouted, and Harry flinched, his mouth slamming shut. Tom drew in a deep breath, and his voice was softer when he spoke again. “I understand that in a society like the one we live in, you are accustomed to concealing this skill of yours. But when you’re with me, and the other Slytherins, know that you are among friends.”

Oh. Harry’s jaw dropped open, hanging from a loose hinge, before he remembered himself and snapped it closed again. The sudden understanding that lit up in his chest was like a flame. But how could Tom possibly know?

It was evident that Harry had finally caught on, and a satisfied smile crept across Tom’s mouth.

“You feel the raw power of this place, don’t you?” he said, turning and breathing in as if he could scent it. “The air is heady with it.”

Messages on the walls in red. The cry of a phoenix. The memory of the schoolboy whose living image stood before him.

“I…” Harry looked down at his feet, cradling his arms against his chest as the chill in the lavatory finally set into his bones. “I really couldn’t say.”

“You know, Harry,” said Tom, approaching the sink and tracing the engraved snake on the tap, “I never realised how awfully lonely I am until now.”

Harry watched quietly from the sidelines, examining the shadows that were set into Tom’s sharp profile, the slump in his shoulders, the reflection of light in those deep-water eyes. He really was lonely. Harry didn’t find it difficult to believe.

“Keeping loneliness as a companion can be a dangerous thing,” he said, and found himself moving forward. “I would know.”

Tom passed Harry a questioning glance, his fingers lingering on the engraving.

“I find that difficult to believe,” he said, a half-smirk curling the corner of his mouth. “You always seem to be surrounded by your adoring fans.”

Harry winced. That hit a little too close to home.

“Same could be said about you,” he retorted, swiftly diverting the conversation. “Company in numbers is pointless if they mean nothing to you.”

“Touché,” chuckled Tom, releasing the tap to brace his arms against the sink. “Well, here we are then. Two lonely souls against the world.”

It was uncanny how life-like the little engraving was, the way that the snake seemed to sway its head side-to-side as Harry stared at it. He watched the snake for a few moments longer before saying abruptly, “My parents died.”

He knew that he had already divulged this piece of information, but that was under different circumstances. Now was different.

“My condolences,” returned Tom shortly, and Harry bit back a laugh. How ironic.

“There’s no need to say that,” he said, meeting his own eyes in the mirror. They were like luminescent jewels in the shadows. “It happened a long time ago.”
“Died, you say?” asked Tom, quirking his head to the side, a lock of black hair falling into his eyes. He looked so deceivingly boyish in that moment, but the shrewd glint in his eyes reminded Harry that he was anything but boyish.

“Murdered,” Harry confessed. “By a Dark wizard.”

“Grindelwald?” asked Tom sharply, and Harry shook his head. To his horror, he felt his mouth beginning to tremble, and he set his jaw.

“You wouldn’t know of him,” he whispered.

“But you didn’t go to an orphanage,” said Tom. “That’s why you’re with your cousin. Her family took you in.”

“Yes,” said Harry, and smiled slightly at the boy who he knew to be orphaned as well. “But ever since that day, a part of me has always been isolated. A part of me has never stopped being alone.”

Harry thought that Tom was now looking at him with a new light in his eyes, and almost expected a confession of the other’s own miserable childhood, but it never came.

“I know that you’re a Parselmouth, Harry,” he said. “You don’t have to hide from me. Because I, too, am one.”

“Oh,” said Harry in a poor attempt at surprise.

“And here,” said Tom, gesturing to the snake-engraved tap, “is a haven for people like us.”

“That’s a sink.”

“It’s not a sink!” Tom grabbed Harry’s hand and tugged him backwards, several metres away from where they had been standing, gesturing to the expanse of the entire wall that the sink was built against. “This, Harry, is the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets!”

“What’s that?” asked Harry weakly, only barely managing to hold up the threadbare façade that he knew nothing of the Chamber.

Tom swung Harry around so that they were face-to-face. Normally Harry would have protested against all this manhandling, but he was too dazed by the entire situation to think much of it.

“Slytherin built it into the school in secret for Parselmouths like himself,” said Tom, and now he was grinning a genuine grin, one which showed his teeth and a small dimple at the corner of his mouth. It was so bright and real and beautiful and unlike anything that he had ever seen before that Harry found himself staring.

Yes, Tom Riddle was mad and lonely and beautiful, all three at once, and realisation clocked Harry with the force of a freight train in that moment.

He truly wanted to help Tom.

It was no longer an impossible quest that he would undertake despite himself. It was a quest that he thirsted for the thrill of.

“What’s in the Chamber?” asked Harry, when he finally came back to himself, though the epiphany left him slightly breathless.

“I don’t understand.” Harry shook his head. “Why did you bring me to a place that holds a Basilisk? Do you wish to Petrify me?”

It was only a joke, sort of, but Tom looked absolutely horrified.

“She would never harm you,” he said. “Not on my watch, and as Heir of Slytherin, she is under my control.”

“Then why are we here?” Harry glanced over his shoulder to ensure that no one was there. “I have no need for a Basilisk, and nor do you.”

_Do you?_

“I just…” Tom suddenly appeared bashful. _Bashful_, of all things. “I never dreamt of that I would find somebody of the same calibre as myself, and yet here you are, and all I need as confirmation is for you to open the Chamber.”

Harry faltered a step backwards.

“I’m not releasing the Basilisk,” he said. “No. I won’t. It’s not right.”

Tom rolled his eyes, as if Harry was the one behaving unreasonably.

“After what happened last year, that Basilisk won’t be leaving the Chamber again,” he said. “Not in my time here.”

Harry knew perfectly well what had happened last year. The death of Moaning Myrtle, the possibility of the school closing, and ultimately the framing and expulsion of Hagrid.

“I need to know that it’s not a trick,” begged Tom, taking a step closer to Harry, and how could it be that one of the most powerful wizards in existence was begging him for something? “I need to know that it’s true, that I really am not alone.”

“But we are alone,” said Harry, also stepping forward. “Every single one of us. It’s the human condition.”

He and Tom regarded each other in silence for a very long moment. There was a vulnerability in the other’s eyes which Harry had never seen before, and he finally looked away, directing his gaze to the snake engraving, observing the way it swayed in the shadows.

Knowing that Tom was watching his lips with ardent anticipation, Harry whispered, _Open._ and the sink slid away with a heavy _clunk_, revealing the gaping maw of the passageway to the Chamber of Secrets.

Cold air whistled down the black passage, so pure and crisp that it made Harry dizzy. He turned, meeting Tom’s eyes and lifting his chin in defiance.

Tom’s pupils were blown wide, his expression suggesting that he would very much like to make a meal of Harry as a midnight snack.

Instead, all he said was, _Thank you._ and whether it was directing at Harry or the Chamber, Harry didn’t know, but the sink slid back into place either way.

“It’s late,” said Tom, gesturing for Harry to leave first, as if absolutely nothing had happened. “I do hope that Abbott has moved on, I don’t fancy another conversation with him.”
Harry nodded in silent agreement, allowing Tom to guide him away. The weight of Tom’s hand on the small of his back felt like a brand, and he understood that tonight, everything between them had changed.


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“Shove him off his broomstick!” bellowed Lestrange, his pair of Omnioculars crammed against his face. When it was evident that no such thing would happen, he sighed and lowered the Omnioculars. “Bloody Hufflepuffs. This is why they’re not going to beat the Gryffindorks.”

“Because they act with decorum?” asked Harry, snorting. “What’s wrong with you, Lestrange?”

A rare day of sun had blessed the first Quidditch match of the season, Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff, one which forced even the least avid of Quidditch enthusiasts outdoors to soak up what vitamin D they could before the skies became grey again.

It turned out Crockett had been serious when he promised that the Slytherin team would all be in attendance of the match to take notes on the strengths and weaknesses of the two enemy teams. He had dished out Omnioculars, divided them into pairs and sent them off in different directions. It was such an Oliver Wood thing to do that Harry was quite astonished that Wood hadn’t ever done it.

“Whatever,” said Lestrange, sweeping his dark waves back from his forehead and smiling mischievously. “Soon you’ll see things our way.”

“Don’t count on it.” Harry directed his Omnioculars to the opposite end of the Quidditch pitch, where Ignatius, Captain of the Gryffindor team, successfully blocked an attempt at a score from a Hufflepuff Chaser.

“And Prewett thwarts Smith’s throw!” roared the commentator, whose name Harry didn’t know, above the cheers from the gold-and-crimson cloaked crowd. “Fiancé against fiancée! Yes, you all heard me correctly! There’s talk of a wedding once they graduate, and I’d better be invited!”

“Wait, what?” Harry ducked behind the Omnioculars again and pursued the flight of the Hufflepuff Chaser. How had he not noticed that it was Judith Smith, Ignatius’s new girlfriend? And what was this rubbish about a wedding? “They’re seventeen! Aren’t they a bit young to be getting married?”

“Oh, get with the program, Hardwin,” said Lestrange, who had somehow convinced himself that this was what ‘Harry’ was short for. “Everyone does it. All proper, pure-blooded families arrange for a marriage oath to be taken upon their child’s coming-of-age to an appropriate spouse. It keeps our bloodlines from dying out. And while I hate to admit it, the Prewetts and Smiths are pure-bloods.”

“That is not my name.” Harry scowled without looking around, but otherwise did not acknowledge Lestrange’s other words, watching as Finlay Bell scored ten points for Gryffindor, to the Hufflepuffs’ distress. It seemed that the Hufflepuff Keeper, Watkins, was weak at pulling sharp left turns. Harry made a note of it on his slip of parchment, which already had ten other recordings in dot-point form. “This is pointless. I have better things to be doing with my time.”

“No, you don’t,” said Lestrange, calling Harry’s bluff, and smiled callously. “Unless you mean keeping Riddle’s company, of course.”

Harry reddened at the implication, ducking his head around so that Lestrange wouldn’t see. Ever
since the entire Chamber of Secrets situation, Tom had kept Harry on something of a leash. Harry couldn’t complain. After all, it put him exactly where he wanted to be – right in the middle of the machinery of the works that he would put a spanner in. Hopefully. And when it came down to it, Tom’s company wasn’t half bad, so long as he wasn’t ranting about blood purity. Except, to be fair, it was the rest of his inner circle who did the ranting.

Hermione had reservations about the whole matter. In fact, to say that she had reservations was completely subtle compared to the full-blown disagreement that she had with Harry on the entire situation. But her reservations had no basis, and if they did, she hadn’t told Harry what it was. But hadn’t she been the one, all those nights ago, to swear that they (or rather, Harry) would take down Voldemort by targeting his one weakness – Tom Riddle? Wasn’t this the one way to go about it?

“Where is our mutual friend, anyway?” asked Lestrange, when Harry kept his mouth closed, willing the burn in his face to die down. “Surely not watching the Quidditch match?”

Harry would never forget what Margot had told him that first morning, about Tom’s face being whomped in the nose by his broomstick during first-year flying lessons. If that had happened to Harry, he would surely have a dislike for all things Quidditch, too.

“I think he’s in the library,” was all Harry offered, only half-listening as the commentator described the way that Birdwhistle and Corlis, two opposing Beaters, had gone for the Bludger at the same time, resulting in a broken finger and a blood nose respectively.

It had been a long game thus far, both teams neck-and-neck when it came to the points. With two players out of the game, the atmosphere became grim in the field, and the playing quickly became dirtier than it had been the last hour combined. They planned on finishing the game, and soon.

“Let the puffs not be completely incompetent for once and knock the Gryffindors down the scoreboard for us,” muttered Lestrange, whooping almost as loudly as the Hufflepuffs when they scored another ten points. “Come on, why are the Seekers so useless? Catch the Snitch already! You are going to murder these twits on the field, Hardwin.”

Harry made to reiterate the point that that was not his name, but as though to answer Lestrange’s words, the commentator moved on to the topic of Seekers, and Harry fell quiet to listen.

“Of course, we can’t be surprised that the Seekers are having so much trouble with the Snitch today,” said the commentator. “Snitches enjoy flying high, and this unusually brilliant Scottish sun is definitely an advantage in its game of hide-and-go-seek. I don’t suppose any of you lot fancy staring into the sun to find the Snitch?”

The crowd groaned a “no” in unison.

“Now, we have Dorian Brightly, Captain and Seeker of the Hufflepuff team,” continued the commentator. “What a disappointing match this must be turning out for him… all his years of playing, and he can’t even catch the Snitch within an hour? Tut, tut, Brightly…”

A boy in the middle of the pitch, who Harry assumed was Dorian Brightly, flipped off the commentator, to the crowd’s delight.

“The Gryffindors are at a definite disadvantage, however,” persisted the commentator. “With the unspoken withdrawal of Elijah Jenkins as Seeker, a substitute was found last-minute, who turns out to be none other than little Essie Prewett, Captain Prewett’s own little sister. Could it be favouritism that nudged him in her direction, or can she truly hold her own out on the field? Only time will tell, ladies and gentlemen, if this choice will be Prewett’s team’s downfall.”
“Who’s the commentator?” asked Harry, searching for the Gryffindor Seeker through his Omnioculars. “He really enjoys his job, doesn’t he?”

“That’s Andre Billingham,” said Lestrange with contempt, chucking his pair of Omnioculars to the side. “He was the Hufflepuff Keeper last year, before they saw sense and kicked him out. I was sorry to see him go – he was absolutely shit. Anyway, he’s a bit, a lot, biased in his commentary.”

“Biased towards who?” The team opposing his house? Or the team who had dismissed him?

“That’s up to you.” Lestrange sneered. “But at least Billingham has been around long enough to actually know everyone’s names. The podge from two years ago kept calling me Peter Leslie. I showed him.”

“Are you telling me that Peter Leslie isn’t your name?”

Lestrange sputtered in outrage while Harry finally found Essie Prewett in the sky. He had never met her, but it wasn’t difficult to miss her, what with that flaming red Prewett hair. He wondered why Ignatius had never mentioned replacing Jenkins with her. Perhaps because he didn’t want to bring up the sore subject of that entire disaster. Or maybe because he didn’t want to share Gryffindor team secrets.

At that moment, the younger Prewett dived sharply downwards, her ponytail a banner behind her.

“Prewett junior has spotted the Snitch!” announced Billingham, and there was a collective gasp of “really?” and “about bloody time!” from the onlookers.

“GET ON HER TAIL, BRIGHTLY!” bellowed Lestrange as Brightly lagged behind Essie Prewett, jumping to his feet in such a frenzy that he toppled at least three different Slytherins around him. Harry managed to leap out of the way, barely avoiding a backhand to the face. “DO YOU CALL YOURSELF THE MORE EXPERIENCED SEEKER OR NOT?”

“One would think that you were a Hufflepuff yourself,” said Harry, managing to compose himself, and Lestrange sat down again, disgruntled, ignoring all the surprised glances that he earned from the rest of the Slytherins.

“They wish, Hardwin,” said Lestrange. “They wish.”

But he and Crockett were upbeat all the same for the rest of the day after Brightly managed to catch the Snitch after a grapple with Essie Prewett, ultimately winning one over the Gryffindors. As for Ignatius? He was in such a foul mood that Harry chose to avoid him until the following day.

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Hermione watched Harry converse with the Riddle’s inner circle over at the Slytherin table, and she didn’t like it one bit.

What change had come around which put him in the good graces of them? Harry had told her that he was finally taking his role as befriender-of-Tom-Riddle seriously, but Hermione knew that he was leaving something out, or rather, everything. She wasn’t stupid. Above all, she prized herself of her ability to be not stupid. And Harry was lying to her.

“Tell me what is really going on, Harry,” she had pleaded several days ago when they had met by accident in an abandoned corridor. “I need to know how I can help you.”

“I have told you everything,” Harry had snapped back, running an exasperated hand through his
“And I swear that I’m going to help Tom. That. Is. All.”

“‘Tom,’” repeated Hermione, a frown etching itself into her brow. “Since when did you call Riddle ‘Tom’?”

“I just… argh!” Harry threw his hands into the air, spinning in a circle to slam his hands against the wall. “Why are you being so frustrating? It doesn’t matter that I call him that now, what’s wrong with you and Margot and Parkinson? It doesn’t matter! All that matters is that even if we can’t get back home, the very least we can do is make the future a better place!”

“I know,” said Hermione, and had attempted to grab his hands to soothe him like a spooked horse. “I know. But things are different now. I don’t trust Riddle with you, what if he turned you against—”

“It’s not like that.” Harry tore his hands out of Hermione’s grip, shaking his head. His eyes had been a blazing green inferno. “I think Tom’s lonely, he just needs a friend who he can trust. And that may be all! I can convince him that—”

“You are severely lacking in self-preservation!” cried Hermione, reaching the end of her tether. “Maybe you don’t see it, but everybody else does. Others always have to look out for you, and that is what I’m trying to do right now! Please stop putting yourself in Riddle’s line of fire!”

Harry had bit his lip, looked away. For a moment, Hermione thought that she had driven sense into that skull of his, but when he looked back at her, there was determination in his eyes. He was a Gryffindor at his worst.

“Somebody has to,” he said, and left. They hadn’t spoken to each other since then.

Harry was definitely hiding something from her, lying through his teeth. But wasn’t she lying to him, too? By telling him that she didn’t like this change in the relationship between him and the future Dark Lord, that it didn’t sit right in her bones, and that was all there was to it?

She thought about Margot Greengrass and her magic sensitivity. She thought about Riddle’s magic sensitivity, too, and what a rare and sought-after quality that it was. She thought about Riddle’s desire to shape Harry into a sharp weapon to wield, and she finally thought that if she couldn’t keep Harry away from him, then perhaps his silver-tongue really could sway Harry over to his side. Hermione hated to think it, but it was something that had to be acknowledged, if she was the only one who would be logical in this entire scenario now. That perhaps Harry really wasn’t as resistant to Riddle’s charm as they had both previously thought.

Just looking at Harry now, seated at Tom’s left-hand side (he had already moved up the ranks, in mere days) and locked in a heated debate with Gideon Avery across the table, he looked as if he had been sitting there his entire life.

Hermione sat up a little straighter in alarm, scrutinising Harry even more carefully. Yes, he looked happier and healthier – that wan look that he had adopted back in their time, a repercussion of the stress of the pending war, was fading away like a bad dream. His skin was returning to its warm olive tone, his eyes livelier, his too-thin frame filling out to its previous image of svelte elegance. And could it be that somebody had convinced him to comb his hair? Or had they simply wrestled him into a headlock and done it for him…?

Hermione shook her head. But perhaps these differences could be accounted for by Harry’s return to the Quidditch field. That had to be it. Right? She folded her arms on the Ravenclaw table and sank her head down between them, exhausted.
When had she and Harry begun to keep secrets from each other?

Sighing wearily, Hermione only straightened back up when she met the eyes of Riddle. They were cold and calculating, but darted away when Harry said something him. Hermione didn’t like the greed in those blue-black eyes. They threatened to swallow Harry up whole.

How could Harry be so stupid?

The next gaze that Hermione met at the Slytherin table was the hazel one of the very witch she needed to talk to. Making a split-second decision, Hermione gave a slight nod of her head in the direction of the Great Hall entrance and stood, leaving Rowan and Quincy with no explanation.

Greengrass joined her not one minute later, assessing Hermione in silence for a fraction of a second before speaking.

“If this is about Harry,” said Greengrass coolly, “then I have nothing to say to you. I’d have thought that you would know by now of his departure from my company.”

“If you have developed any feelings for Harry,” said Hermione, grappling the desperation out of her voice, “if you have ever cared for him at all, then I ask you for a favour.”

Greengrass didn’t respond immediately, simply surveyed Hermione shrewdly again, before shaking her gold ringlets loose around her shoulders and sighing. “Okay, let us hear it, then.”

Hermione allowed herself a relieved smile, then beckoned Greengrass back over to the Great Hall entrance. Together, they peered inwards, and in unspoken unison, their gazes immediately centred in on Harry, surrounded by a band of unsavoury company.

“Harry isn’t talking to me,” Hermione admitted, and sensed Greengrass switch her stare from Harry to her. “I need to hear what’s happening from an insider.”

Greengrass snorted. “I’m hardly an insider,” she said.

“You have eyes within the Slytherin common room,” countered Hermione. “I count that as an insider.”

“Fine,” said Greengrass, and they both pulled away from the entrance. Greengrass put her hands on her hips primly, quirking an eyebrow upward. “Say that I am an insider. If you want to know about what Harry has been doing, I must disappoint. I have witnessed no murders, no drug cartel movement. Though I would so like to catch Riddle in charge of one of those…”

Hermione was afraid that in the big picture, what Riddle was up to was much worse than running a drug cartel.

“Tell me about his behaviour,” she said. “Harry’s an open book. Tell me when he first started calling Riddle ‘Tom’. When they become conjoined at the hip. When he stopped hating Riddle’s cronies. Anything, Greengrass, tell me anything!”

Greengrass looked surprised by Hermione’s outburst, then said, “I know for certain that he started calling Riddle ‘Tom’ the day he was released from the Hospital Wing. I remember as clear as day that at breakfast that morning, Riddle came to speak to Harry, and they were as friendly as could be. It was that sudden.”

“So something happened before then,” mused Hermione, pacing in a circle, worrying at her bottom lip with her teeth. “He was at the Hospital Wing the day before, and he had visitors. The last time I
saw him was at dinnertime, and when I brought Riddle up, nothing was different. Something must have happened that night… after curfew, I wouldn’t be surprised. Riddle’s got privileges, being Head Boy and all…”

“Harry did mention that they talked that night,” offered Greengrass.

“But what did they discuss?” Hermione narrowed her eyes at Greengrass. “What about when they became conjoined at the hip?”

“That is a disgusting metaphor,” sniffed Greengrass, but answered anyway. “That was a more recent development. Only days ago. I don’t know what happened, that was after we stopped talking. One day Harry was alone, the next he had an evil shadow with him.”

“You say that like it happened overnight again,” said Hermione, tapping a finger against her chin, staring at Greengrass with hard eyes. “Why use those exact words?”

“Which exact words?”

“That one day Harry was alone, the next he had a shadow.”


“Yes, that. Why?”

“I don’t know!” a sneer pulled at Greengrass’s lips. “Maybe because that’s how it seemed?”

“So it’s possible that that night, Riddle pulled Harry away to have a private conversation, and again, they exchanged such meaningful words that they became best friends?”

“Now that you mention it,” said Greengrass, softening her tone. “Have you ever considered that there is no devious masterplan? No brainwashing? Harry is only human, after all.”

Hermione fought the urge to throttle Greengrass. “Why didn’t you say so to begin with? This means that those two did have a private meeting that nobody else was invited to!”

“Look, Delacour,” said Greengrass, softening her tone. There was something like actual concern in her eyes. “Have you ever considered that there is no devious masterplan? No brainwashing? Harry is only human, after all.”

“What do you mean?” Cold terror flooded Hermione’s veins.

“I mean,” said Greengrass steadily, “few people can resist Tom Riddle. I hate to admit it, but even I can see why it would be easy to just bow down before the bastard with his natural charisma. We two happen to be exceptions. And I’m sorry to say that perhaps, in the end, Harry isn’t. I tried very hard to keep him and Riddle apart, but it wasn’t enough.”

Hermione shook her head, backpedalling quickly, but there was a truth in Greengrass’s words that Hermione had known herself for a while. She whispered, “I don’t want to lose him.”

“We all lose something to Tom Riddle,” said Greengrass, giving a sad little smile, “in the end.”

Hermione remained quiet, contributing no more to the conversation, and Greengrass sighed, her features hardening again. “I’m going to bed.”

She flounced away, and Hermione was left with a leaden ball of dread in her stomach that spoke
tales of the way that the green-eyed boy was slipping away from her.

Chapter End Notes

Mhm. Harry, Hermione and Tom just keep dancing circles around each other. JUST STOP ALREADY. ;) I hope you enjoy the slow building drama.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Tom forced himself not to scream when he hissed, “Is Ignatius bloody Prewett fucking Harry Delacour?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Right before Transfiguration class began, Ignatius snaffled Harry up the first opportunity he got.

“Harry,” he said, dragging Harry outside the classroom, where Harry readjusted them so that they were no longer blocking up the doorway. “Harry. Talk to me. I know things have been busy, with schoolwork and Quidditch and… other things.”

“Other things?” inquired Harry innocently, and Ignatius waved it away.

“You know what I mean. What I’m trying to say is, I haven’t spoken to you much lately, so what’s this rubbish I’ve been hearing about you joining the Riddle cult?”

“Who told you that?” Harry attempted to laugh it off.

“Your cousin did.” Ignatius’s brown eyes were solemn. The laughter faded from Harry’s face, and at that very moment, Hermione passed by them, heading into the classroom. There were shadows under her eyes, her lips pulled downwards, and appeared to be deaf to Poole who was nattering away animatedly by her side. For a split second, her eyes met Harry’s, and then she looked away with a shake of her head, as if he were the disappointing one. Right.

The way Harry saw it, she was allowed to disapprove of the company he was keeping, even if it was for the greater good, but he wasn’t allowed to have any quarrels with that prat Rowan Poole.

Harry scowled.

“She would,” he said, returning his gaze back to Ignatius. “It’s nothing, Ignatius. I’m not part of a cult. I’m just trying to drill some better manners into Tom.”

The frown on Ignatius’s slipped away, to be replaced by a grin. “Oh, is that all? Hermione had me worried for a second, wanted me to talk sense into you as if you really had turned to the dark side. Merlin knows that Riddle could do with better manners, though, so I wish you luck in your conquest, Harry. If anyone can succeed, it’s you.”

Relieved that Ignatius would stop badgering him, Harry steered Ignatius back into the classroom and said, “Now, what’s this I hear about a wedding after graduating?”

Ignatius almost immediately took on a troubled air, and his eyes darted around the room as if to catch out eavesdroppers. “I… I’m not meant to talk about that.”

“Can Judith?” Harry tried playfully, thinking it was a game, but quickly realised that it wasn’t when Ignatius shushed him.
“Don’t talk about Judith,” he said harshly, and Harry blinked.

“Why not?” he asked, but Dumbledore chose that moment to enter the classroom, calling for all students to take a seat. Ignatius eagerly scrambled for his seat by Phyllis, leaving Harry stranded in the middle of the room, completely befuddled, before Tom reached over and pulled him down into a seat.

“Of the four branches of Transfiguration,” said Dumbledore, a piece of chalk skidding across the blackboard to keep up with his words, “Conjuration is the most complex. Fortunately for you all, we have completed that unit now, but unfortunately, we are now to complete the next most challenging branch. Vanishment.”

The class muttered amongst itself, but Harry didn’t join in – his eyes were glued to Ignatius’s profile across the room, wondering what on earth he had said that was wrong.

“You should all recall that we began Vanishment in your fifth year, and today we shall be reviewing those skills before advancing forward next lesson,” continued Dumbledore, and he stroked his beard, a sparkle in his eyes. “I expect you all to hand in a five-foot essay differentiating Vanishment from the three other branches in one week’s time. Now open your textbooks to page seventy-five and complete the exercises.”

There was another wave of muttered complaints from the class (there had been a lot of those lately, with the way that the workload was piling up), but Harry was not among them. He listlessly opened his textbook, still puzzling over what the matter with Ignatius was, an eye remaining on the Gryffindor across the room.

Ignatius showed no sign of ever being bothered at all anymore. He and Phyllis were chatting brightly as they pored over their textbooks, but Harry wouldn’t easily forget the way that he had fled, yes, fled, their conversation.

“Harry. Harry.” Harry jumped sky-high when somebody nudged him, then glanced guiltily at Tom, who was watching him with concern. “You’re miles away, what’s going on?”

“Nothing,” said Harry, far too quickly, but his eyes wandered back over to Ignatius of their own accord.

Tom followed the movement, and his face darkened momentarily. But “concentrate on your work” was all that was said, and Harry ducked his head down, chastised, but not before he caught Hermione watching him. She looked away and smartly rapped her wand against her quill, Vanishing it successfully. It seemed rather as though she was trying to make a point.

I’m right, and you’re wrong.

Harry found himself glowering in her direction as she channelled this message to him. How very like Hermione it was of her. She always thought she knew better, even though she knew nothing.

“If looks could kill,” said a voice, and Harry turned his head to meet Mulciber’s silvery gaze at the table behind him. “Why the evil stare, Delacour?”

Sometimes Harry thought that Mulciber might hate him, but at other times, like this, when he made such casual conversation, it was impossible to tell. Yet Harry had unknowingly replaced Mulciber by Tom’s side, and it didn’t go unnoticed, judging from the stares and rumours that it had garnered these past few days.

*When did Riddle and Delacour get chummy?*
I reckon they’re shagging now or something.

They say that a little hate makes the fuck more fun.

Harry heard them talk, but the best that he could do was keep his head down and ignore it. Addressing the rumours would only fuel the fire. Besides, he was accustomed to this sort of attention.

He doubted Mulciber was happy about his replacement, though.

“I don’t have an evil stare.” Harry attempted to begin reading the passage of writing, but it was impossible to focus with the thoughts whirling like a hurricane in his head.

“You do, and it’s quite a ferocious one if I do say so myself.” Mulciber leaned over his desk to whisper in Harry’s ear, “What did you dear cousin do to warrant it? Did she step on your toes with her high heels?”

“Shove off,” snarled Harry, and Tom whipped his head around to send Mulciber what could only be described as an ‘evil stare’.

“That’s enough, Cassius,” he snapped, and Mulciber backed off immediately, though not before Harry caught him looking between himself and Tom with a knowing gleam in his eyes.

“Is everything alright over here?” asked Dumbledore, having popped into existence right by their table without warning.

“Yes, sir.” Harry returned to his textbook, his shoulders hunching forwards slightly until Dumbledore moved onward. Was Dumbledore projecting a Hermione vibe on Harry right now, or was he just becoming paranoid?

“You seem rather off,” Tom murmured, once Dumbledore was out of ear-range.

What was most off in Harry’s life was something that he would never be able to speak of aloud. Not to Tom, not ever, so he simply muttered, “I’m fine.”

I’m a liar, and I lose things. I’ve lost my family, the girl that I loved, a best friend. And now I’m losing the other. I’m tired, so, so tired. I’m breaking inside. I am so many things but fine. Yet none of that matters, because I am not going to lose you, too. I am going to save you.

“I’m fine,” Harry repeated, more to himself than anything, but he felt Tom watching him for a little while longer anyway.

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Tom watched the Slytherin team march down to the Quidditch pitch from afar.

It was a chilly winter’s morning, and with Christmas rapidly approaching, energy was renewed within the student population. The promise of presents and pudding kept all these simpletons gratified, but Tom had more trying matters on mind.

It was his final year at Hogwarts, so he couldn’t afford to be lenient on his studies, not if he planned on achieving seven N.E.W.Ts. Being nearly halfway through the school year, the workload was ramping up for seventh-years, and would continue to until exams began. Not only that, but he was having his suspicions about the supposedly platonic relationship between Harry and Prewett.
Tom meandered down the muddy path towards the Quidditch pitch, his eyes glued on the field ahead. Winky Crockett, the team captain, was the first to leave the change rooms, his tall, muscular frame done up in the green-and-silver Quidditch robes, his arms and shins clunky with leather guards. The rest of the team trooped out behind him, also dressed up, broomsticks resting on their shoulders with crotchety expressions fixed upon their faces.

This was not a group of early birds, apparently.

Tom’s eyes darted from Black to Lament, from Lament to Avery, before finally finding Harry. He and Orion Black were both easily competing for the position of shortest on the team – it was almost amusing how small and wiry they were compared to the larger, and if not larger, far rangier members of the team.

But Harry looked unquestionably striking in those robes – they hugged his slender frame, accentuating the sharp lines of his body, and his messy hair had been brushed backwards, out of his face. This was undoubtedly the influence of Lestrange, who also wore his own ‘flowing tresses’ (as the others liked to say) brushed back whenever he played.

Maybe Tom should thank Lestrange later. Now, he could see Harry’s face without the disruption of hair hanging in the way – he could watch the way those dark eyebrows quirked, the way Harry’s cheeks moved when he smiled quietly, and Tom could finally study that strange little lightning bolt scar on his forehead…

Crockett gathered the group into a loose circle, speaking a few words to them, before they all kicked off from the ground. Tom would have liked to watch Harry a little while longer, but he fixed his sights on Crockett instead, who had remained on the ground to free the Quidditch balls from their heavy trunk.

Tom finally left the muddy path, sneering slightly at the stains it left on the heels of his boots.

“Where’s your form, Black?” bellowed Crockett skywards, releasing the Bludgers from their place. “You better find it fast, or I’ll shoot the first projectile I find at you! And there’s a very tempting-looking Quaffle down here!”

“Fuck off, Crockett!” was the distant response from Black, and Crockett made to roar something in response, but Tom interrupted.

“I want a word with you,” he said without greeting, maintaining a cool tone. Crockett rounded on him, before taking note of who it was and immediately backed off.

“Riddle,” he acknowledged shortly, grabbing the Quaffle and sending it upwards, where Lestrange caught it. “Can you make it quick, we have practise to do.”

“I’ll make it as long as a please.” Tom looked down his nose at Crockett, which was more difficult than he let on, since they were the same height. But being reigning king had its benefits, because Crockett ducked his head, the freckles on his dark skin disappearing as he flushed slightly.

“Of course,” he muttered, stooping to pop a little golden ball from the trunk. He released it with a shout of, “Delacour, it’s out!” before turning back to Tom expectantly.

“I want to know of Harry’s whereabouts whenever he’s not with me,” said Tom, and Crockett let out a short bark of laughter.

“You want to—” he cut off when he saw Tom’s darkened expression. “Oh. You’re being serious. Well, when is he not with you?”
The question may have seemed mocking to others, but Tom knew that Crockett knew better than to mock him.

“When he has his free line in the library. When he’s at Quidditch practice.” Tom raised an eyebrow. “But Prewett shares a class with me when Harry has his free line, so it must be happening before or after Quidditch.”

“I, uh.” Crockett smiled weakly. “What must be happening?”

“I don’t know,” snarled Tom, and Crockett flinched. “That’s why I’m asking you! Do you see Prewett around here when Harry is here also?”

“Well,” said Crockett slowly, and Tom glared at him, willing him to hurry up. “That is a difficult question to answer… Gryffindors tend to practise right after Slytherins… but the timetables change. I… I still don’t understand exactly what you are asking me…?”

“Have you seen,” Tom gritted out, “Harry and Prewett in any intimate positions?”

This was met by another blank stare, and Tom forced himself not to scream when he hissed, “Is Ignatius bloody Prewett fucking Harry Delacour?”

This Crockett understood, and a startled laugh bubbled from his mouth.

“What?” he said. “Prewett fuck Delacour? Come on, Riddle, that is a ridiculous notion. The way I see it, they’re both as straight as pipelines!”

Tom glowered, and Crockett shut up. He had heard that Harry had only ever been with women before, but Tom couldn’t rule out the possibility that… that what? That Harry might enjoy being with somebody of the same sex? That Harry might enjoy being with Tom?

And for the first time, it struck him that perhaps he didn’t just want Harry to be the seventh member of his inner circle. He didn’t just want Harry to be his most loyal follower. He wanted Harry to be his.

It was as though he had been walking up a staircase, and had thought there to be one more step than there really was. A split-second moment of the terror of stepping onto nothing, and then the ringing in his heart once the moment was over.

Tom wanted Harry to be his. He wanted to ensure that nobody would ever touch him again.

Crockett was staring at Tom as if he had sprouted an extra head. And perhaps he had. A head which held a brain which was revealing all these truths to Tom that he had never before known to be truths.

“Crockett, I got it,” came a voice from above their heads, and then Harry was there, in all his perfection, his face flushed and his hair ruffled up even more from the wind. He tossed the Snitch down into Crockett’s hands. “Give it a longer head start, maybe.”

Crockett caught the Snitch and shook his head.

“Not bad, Delacour,” he said. “But it could have been better. Catch it in under a minute next time.”

“Under a minute,” repeated Harry disbelievingly, wiping his forehead off with his arm.

“Yes,” said Crockett, grinning slyly. “And this time, Lament and Snowy Owl will be aiming the
Bludgers at you, so if you want to leave with your head on your shoulders, you’d better be quick.”

Harry’s face broadcasted to the world that he had several very nasty things to say in mind, before he finally took note of Tom standing there silently and gave a small start.

“Tom,” he said, and gave a cautious smile. Cautious, or was it shy? Tom stared at him for a moment, words lost in his mouth. Because what was there to be said?

_I want you. I want you. I want you._ There was that.

But instead Tom kept standing there like an idiot, and both Harry and Crockett were beginning to look concerned now.

Fuck. What was he doing here?

The other team members were noticing Tom’s presence now, and Avery swung down from the Keeper position to see what was going on.

“What are you doing here, Riddle?” he asked breathlessly, and Tom saw his own reflection in those gold-brown eyes. He looked badly shaken. Very carefully, he constructed a mask over his face and said curtly, “I should go.”

Harry and Crockett took this as a dismissal, both heading their own ways, but Avery lingered a moment longer, long enough for Tom to murmur, “Meeting same place, same time. Pass it on.”

Avery gave a short nod, then zoomed back to his position on the field. Tom turned and left, all the while wondering, _what now?_  

***

Once practice had finished, Harry changed back into his school robes hurriedly so that he wasn’t late to Potions, but also so that he could confront Crockett, a speedy dresser, before he left.

“Crockett,” he called out before the captain could leave, throwing his bag over his shoulder. “What was that about, earlier on?”

“Hm?” Crockett looked questioningly over his shoulder, pausing by the door. The rest of the team seemed to also pause to listen, completely unsubtle in their attempts to be subtle.

“What did Tom want earlier?” asked Harry, and almost immediately, Crockett’s face changed so that he looked to be containing a smirk.

“Ah yes,” he said. “He thinks that you’re fucking Prewett.”

Somebody behind Harry snorted, and Harry felt heat rushing up to his face.

“Accusations from Riddle always have a basis,” said Lestrange, stepping forward as he knotted his tie at his throat, his hair still damp from the showers. He winked at Harry. “What did you do, Hardwin?”

“Absolutely nothing,” retorted Harry, then recalled back to the day before, and he thought of the disagreement, if it could even be called that, between himself and Ignatius, and he remembered the dark expression on Tom’s face as he had watched them.

“Liar,” said Lestrange, grinning, and now everybody was listening, not even bothering to hide it. “I can see it on your face. Something changed.”
“We had a fight, okay?” snapped Harry, wondering why he was even taking the bait. “Me and Ignatius, I mean.”

“Lovers’ quarrel?” asked Lestrange, and sneered. “You accidentally put on the other’s tie after a shag, and somebody noticed?”

“We aren’t shagging!” shouted Harry, then noticed the light in Lestrange’s eye, a tell-tale sign that he was just playing. The tension melted out of Harry, and he sighed. “I asked him about what Billingham had said about his and Judith’s engagement, and he got defensive. That’s it.”

“Of course he would,” said Black quietly, and the spotlight immediately moved to him. Harry didn’t mind Orion Black, though he knew that Black would one day disown Sirius for not believing in blood purity. But for now, Black seemed reserved and studious, with a mean aim when it came to scoring with the Quaffle, and he wasn’t outspoken when it came to bagging out Muggle-borns, which was more than could be said about others. Besides, his resemblance to Sirius had probably softened Harry some. Black had yet to grow into his elegant features, but when he did, those two would be spitting images.

“What do you mean?” asked Lestrange, and Black shrugged, looking at Harry.

“Prewett’s real betrothal is to my sister, Lucretia,” he said. “You wouldn’t know her, she left Hogwarts two years ago. But Prewett wasn’t happy about the engagement, he said he wanted to meet girls in his own time, so our parents agreed that both Lucretia and Prewett could informally court whomever they pleased until Prewett’s graduation from Hogwarts, then they would marry. So long as Prewett doesn’t make a fuss when the time comes. Of course, nobody was very happy when the assumption was made that Smith and Prewett are betrothed, much less announced to the entire school by that idiot Billingham, so they made Prewett leave Smith. They ensured that there were other punishments, too. Naturally.”

“They?” asked Harry.

“My mother and father,” said Black. “His mother and father. Betrothals are not to be taken lightly, and Prewett just made a laughing stock of our families.”

He pulled his blazer on, straightening it at his shoulders, casting one cursory glance into the mirror before moving past Harry. “Don’t feel sorry for Prewett, Delacour. He brought it on himself.”

Once he was out the door, Lestrange gave a low whistle.

“Well, I do feel sorry for Prewett,” he said. “Poor bastard. Nobody wants to get in trouble with the Blacks.”

Harry didn’t respond. Lestrange and Avery walked with Harry back up to the castle, Avery parting ways with them to head to his class, but the entire time, all Harry could think about was Ignatius, whose face was always so happy. It had never occurred to Harry that there were others, not just himself, Hermione and Tom, who were forced to wear a mask day after day. It had never occurred to him that Ignatius Prewett, Gryffindor’s golden boy of this era, might be the most skilful one at doing so, because nobody had ever suspected what might lie beneath it.

Harry thought about Ignatius’s eyes, so warm and brown and lively. Sometimes the one who does his best to keep others happy is the loneliest of them all.

He felt a wave of guilt wash over him. How selfish he seemed in comparison, always lamenting about his losses and trials.
“So what are your plans?” asked Lestrange, startling Harry out of his thoughts.

“What?”

“Your plans,” repeated Lestrange. “For Christmas.”

“Oh.” Harry frowned slightly. “I’ll be staying here. Hermione’s parents are, um, travelling. In Canada.”

“Canada,” said Lestrange, then shrugged as they entered the Potions classroom. “Okay.”

The rest of the class had already commenced brewing Felix Felicis – Harry hadn’t realised that they were late.

Mulciber had, as had become routine, left the seat by Tom’s side clear, and Harry took it, glancing over at Hermione, who now worked at a bench by herself. Harry was no longer sure whether he should be rooting for her or Tom in their little brewing competition, or whether it had been discontinued ever since things had changed.

In front of her was Ignatius. He and Bridget were peering into his cauldron with worried looks upon their faces. Ignatius prodded something with the tip of his quill, and deep purple goo exploded onto his face, to Bridget’s amusement.

What a good actor he was. Harry wondered whether Bridget, Phyllis or Finlay, Ignatius’s closest friends, knew.

Harry looked over to Tom, who hadn’t spoken to Harry since his arrival. His expression was tense, focused entirely on the cauldron in front of him which Harry knew to contain a perfect Felix Felicis concoction in the making.

He wondered whether Tom still thought that he and Ignatius were having… certain relations.

Shaking his head, Harry flipped open his textbook to continue with his own potion. With only two months left before the final projects were due in, students were scrambling to finish – many students had yet to even begin their theses, to Tom (and Hermione’s) disapproval. Due to the rush, the number of classroom accidents was skyrocketing.

Harry looked into his cauldron, checking the instructions again. It would have been useful to have Snape’s old Potions book right about now. The potion was meant to be clear and effervescent, but instead was a worrying shade of grey. At least it was fizzing, if only slightly.

This was where he would normally turn to either Hermione or Tom for help, but Hermione was determined to keep treating him like a disappointment, and he refused to be the first to break the silence with Tom, so instead Harry decide to move on. He didn’t have the time to tinker around with the potion. Besides, even Nott, who was second only to Tom and Hermione, appeared to be having his own troubles.

Harry headed over to the storeroom to fetch common rue to mince up. As he was selecting a bunch to his standard, Slughorn decided to come over to visit.

“Oh, Professor,” said Harry, certain that he was about to be berated for his tardiness. “Sorry I was late, I was at Quidditch practice and—”

Slughorn waved it away. “Never mind that,” he said. “Do what you must to win the cup this year. I came to tell you that I was speaking to Professor Merrythought at breakfast today, and she was
regaling me with tales of some of your feats in her class. Very rarely do I hear her praise somebody with such fervour.”

“Oh.” Harry let out a little laugh, heading back to his cauldron, Slughorn tailing after him. “I’m really nothing special in Defence…”

“I beg to differ!” cried Slughorn, and his expression beneath his walrus moustache was serious. He turned to Tom, whose nose was buried in a book. “Tell me, Tom, how is Harry’s performance in Defence Against the Dark Arts?”

Tom’s dark eyes looked over his book, meeting Harry’s for a moment before he looked away. “Exceptional,” he said, and that was all.

Harry scowled. “Only because—” he began, then cut off quickly. He couldn’t well tell anybody that it was because he had grown up fighting a Dark Lord.

“Only because what?” Unfortunately, Slughorn was intrigued, and Tom’s eyes flicked back over to Harry again.

“Only because nothing,” snapped Harry, then remembered that he was speaking to a professor before adding haltingly, “sir.”

“Then you are naturally gifted!” said Slughorn happily, sneaking a look into Harry’s cauldron. What he saw did not faze him. “Perhaps not in Potions, but elsewhere… which is why, Harry, my boy, I wish to extend you an invitation into the Slug Club.”

If Harry had been drinking something in that moment, he would have spewed into across the table. “The Slug Club? he said loudly. Did it exist in this time? Slughorn was already collecting, it seemed, and somehow, Harry had ended up in his net, yet again.

“Yes,” said Slughorn, lacing his fingers together and resting them against his belly while looking exceptionally pleased with himself. “The Slug Club is a circle of elite students, and I count you among them! Just in time, too, because now you can attend my annual Christmas party on the twentieth of December!”

“But—”

“Don’t forget to come. I’ll be sending out the details very soon.” Slughorn turned and waddled off the way he had come, leaving Harry to stand there with his mouth open.

“Now you really are one of us,” said Lestrange, sidling up to Harry and leaving his cauldron steaming in the background.

“You’re in it too?”

Lestrange scoffed. “I most certainly am. All of us are, you just have to earn your place back into it every year.”

“Oh, good,” said Harry. “Then you should know how I can get out of it.”

“Why would you want to get out of it?” Nott piped up, adjusting the heat beneath Lestrange’s cauldron so that it stopped steaming. “Most of the school is trying to get into it.”

“I’m not most of the school.” Harry set his jaw and returned to mincing up the rue on his chopping
It isn’t that bad,” said Tom, and Harry raised an eyebrow. Quite frankly, it was amazing that Tom had broken the silence first. “Slughorn may be a pompous old fart, but you can count on him getting a good word in for you wherever you decide to go. Besides, the Christmas party allows you to meet many of the Slug Club alumni, which includes a lot of higher-ups in the Ministry.”

“And others,” added Lestrange, and he leered at Harry. “Last year, there was an international model. He was a sexy thing. Had a French accent, too, from his years in France.”

“Oh, him,” said Nott, pulling a face. “Honestly. He must be thirty years older than you, Peregrine.”

“He is only thirteen years my senior!” snapped Lestrange, returning to his station and throwing a handful of dust from the table into Nott’s cauldron out of sheer spite.

“Peregrine!” barked Nott as it coughed up sparks, and he shoved Lestrange, who knocked into their table, which promptly toppled over. Nott managed to grab his cauldron, succeeding in burning his hands. Lestrange, however, was in too much of a shock to catch his, which tumbled forwards. He only managed a warning shout.

Harry turned around at the sound, and the first thing he saw was scalding, fiery red liquid flying out of the cauldron, directly towards him.

His brain didn’t even manage to generate a coherent thought, much less an order to at least cover his face with his arms, but then a hand had latched onto arm, spinning him out of the way and directly into a hard chest.

“Merlin’s beard!” cried Slughorn, hurrying over – or at least, Harry assumed he was hurrying over, judging from the sound of footsteps. At this point, all that his mind was registering was that somehow, he was in Tom’s arms.

He tried to pull away, but Tom’s grip tightened further. It wasn’t even horrible. Harry had expected future Dark Lords to smell like death and the blood of their victims. But instead, the scent of Tom was mellow. Like sunlight that Harry could bask in. It warmed him to his bones.

Glancing upwards, he could see Tom glaring around the room, the occupants of which seemed to be frozen in time.

“Harry!” came Lestrange’s voice, greatly distressed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to!”

Harry managed to turn his head, the initial shock fading away, though his heart continued to flutter like a bird in his ribcage. “What, no ‘Hardwin’ anymore?” he asked.

Lestrange and Nott were standing by their toppled table. Nott was nursing burned hands, cursing under his breath, and Lestrange was looking more human than he ever had before, his black eyes wide and his skin ashen. He started to smile at Harry’s words, but then caught sight of Tom’s face and immediately paled again.

“Goodness, goodness me,” said Slughorn. “What happened here?”

Tom finally seemed to remember himself, loosening his grip on Harry. Harry stepped out of his arms, dragging a flustered hand through his hair.

Every other student was watching from their respective tables. Mulciber from directly in front of Harry’s, his eyes cold and calculating; Ignatius, looking torn between remaining where he was and
checking on Harry; and Hermione, and hand to her lips, frowning as if she had seen something that
nobody else had.

“I don’t know.” Harry turned to Slughorn. “I didn’t touch anything.”

“Well, nobody is harmed,” said Slughorn, ruffling his moustache. “Everybody, return to work. As
for you, Mr. Lestrange, we’ll see if we can recover your potion… you ought to know by now to
show more care while brewing… Mr. Nott! What happened to your hands?”

Nott was standing off to the side, grimacing. The palms of his hands were covered his swollen red
blisters. “I burned myself.”

“Goodness me, what a calamity…” Slughorn waved his wand, and the fallen table righted itself.
“Off to the Hospital Wing with you. Mr. Mulciber, might you escort him, make sure he doesn’t get
himself into any more trouble?”

“Of course, sir.” Mulciber left his station, sparing one more curious glance in Harry’s direction
before he and Nott were gone.

“Let’s see, let’s see…” Slughorn jabbed his wand at the smoking puddle on the ground and it rose
into a dancing stream in the air before splashing back into Lestrange’s cauldron, which had been
righted on the tabletop.

“Thank you, Professor.” Lestrange bowed his head in shame, and Slughorn turned.

“It is going to be very temperamental until it settles, so you must be more alert than usual,” he said,
waggling his finger. “No more trying to exterminate Mr. Delacour, do you hear me?”

Lestrange mumbled something under his breath, but Slughorn had already started to the next desk,
chattering about “such dramas” and “my classroom is far too exciting, don’t you agree, Miss
Ghannam”.

“Thank you,” Harry told Tom, turning to him and smiling breathlessly. “That could have been
nasty.”

“Think nothing off it,” said Tom with a strange look upon his face. “Accidents happen all the time,
don’t they, Peregrine?”

Lestrange ducked his head down even further so that his shoulders were level with his ears, and he
didn’t speak again. Not even when Mulciber returned, making a jibe about Lestrange’s sexy old
man.

By that time, he was long gone. But so was Harry. He was lost in the memory of sunlight.

Chapter End Notes

So, one word: sunlight. ;)

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Lestrange dropped to his knees, and he allowed Tom to Crucio the living daylights out of him.

Chapter Notes

With this chapter, we officially bypass 200 pages. *whoop whoop*
I dedicate the sandwich to Rosa2377.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As they entered the Great Hall for lunch after a trying Charms lesson, Tom and Nott were locked in a debate that Harry found to be, quite frankly, pointless.

“The Banishing Charm, will, without a doubt, appear in our exams,” said Tom, successfully cutting off Nott who was midway through an argument opposing this theory. “If the Summoning Charm is to be assessed, they aren’t well likely to ignore its counter-charm.”

“But the Summoning Charm was in our O.W.L.s,” protested Nott. “Why would they reassess it when there is such a large inventory of trickier charms to choose from?”

“Because they are looking for improvement.” Tom’s tone was bordering on irritable now, and Nott twitched nervously, immediately looking to Harry. This response had become instinct of late, for a reason unbeknownst to Harry – what could he do if Tom was getting crotchety?


Tom gave Nott a black look, and Harry shrugged, wanting no part of this pissing contest, if it could even be called that (Nott would no doubt surrender without a second thought). “I don’t know.”

It was then that he was approached by a fourth-year Slytherin holding a slip of parchment.

“Dippet wants me to pass this message to you,” said the Slytherin, slapping the note into Harry’s hand and successfully interrupting Tom and Nott, who had begun all over again.

Tom must have directed one of his fearsome holier-than-thou looks on the boy, something that Harry had grown accustomed to seeing on the Head Boy’s face, as the fourth-year lowered his head meekly and whispered, “R-Riddle.”

He slipped away like a shadow, and Harry sighed. He didn’t know what he could do about everyone’s terror of Tom, so focused on scanning over the note instead.
“I always wondered how he got into Slytherin,” remarked Tom, reading the message over Harry’s shoulder.

“Who?” asked Harry absent-mindedly, folding the note back up and shoving it into his pocket.

“That boy.” Tom looked down at Harry, raising an eyebrow. “He’s a Mudblood, you know.”

“Don’t call him that.” Harry pinched the bark out of his voice, pivoting on his heels so that he could stare directly into Tom’s face. Scream all you want at Slytherins, Harry had found, but it would be like trying to budge a boulder using your voice alone. Diplomacy was key in the serpent house. “It’s completely uncivil.”

But deep in his bones, Harry knew that this was a test.

*Does Harry Delacour have what it takes? Is Harry Delacour still a Muggle-lover?*

No. He was just a person who believed in a free world. No matter his final goal here, no matter the consequences, Harry was set that he would not shift his morals. After all, without his conscience to guide his feet, what did he have left?

“Hm,” said Tom with a curious expression upon his face. Harry held Tom’s gaze for long enough to convey that when he looked away, it would not be in submission. And look away he did. Such deep-water eyes were there to drown in, and it was not Harry’s day to drown.

On Tom’s other side, Nott snorted. “Why are you always so defensive of Mudbloods? It’s not as though you’re one.”

*Are you?* The question was silently tacked onto the end, but Harry didn’t acknowledge it. As far as he was concerned, blood status didn’t matter. Already walking away, he said, “I have to pay Dippet a visit. Don’t wait around for me.”

Harry passed back through the Great Hall entrance, leaving behind the cosy clamour of students snatching bites of food between classes while fretting over homework and textbooks. Outside was quiet and cool – the perfect place to allow Harry to fester in peace.

Sometimes it slipped his mind that these people actually enjoyed tossing such derogatory terms in others’ faces. Sometimes it was so easy to forget exactly what their corrupt values were.

Yet they were still only schoolboys.

The sound of Harry’s footsteps reverberated down the corridor – a solitary pair of feet walking, until a second joined in at a quicker pace.

Harry paused, turning to see he it was. To his astonishment, it was Tom, looking slightly frazzled, his tie looser than normal as if he had been tugging it in thought. His long strides allowed him to gain ground quickly, and once they were a reasonable distance from each other, Tom stopped. There was a cast to his features that Harry hadn’t seen before. Could it be uncertainty, of all things?

“Tom.” He frowned. “What is it?”

Tom took another step forward. There was a hesitancy in the movement which made Harry re-
evaluate whether Tom was here to chew him up then spit him out for what had been said in the Great Hall.

“I am not going to apologise for calling him a… that.” Tom’s voice was abrupt. “But I will apologise for touching one of your sensitivities.”

The train of thought in Harry’s head came to a screeching halt. It deafened him. What?

“What?” he repeated aloud, very coherently. Tom looked off to the side. Wait. Had Harry made him flustered? Harry was struck by how strangely endearing this was when compared to the typically cold aloofness about him.

“Just forget I said it.” Tom spun around, starting back down the corridor. Harry could imagine the curses that were probably resonating in the other’s skull in that moment.

“No!” Harry almost tripped over his own feet in his scramble to grab Tom’s sleeve. “No. I… thank you.”

Tom’s gaze dropped to Harry’s hand, his thin fingers scarred from years of trimming Aunt Petunia’s thorned rose bushes, from learning how to wield a knife in the kitchen. And there was the sentence of *I must not tell lies*, the scar tissue pale and distorted on the back of his hand.

Harry quickly let go, hiding his hand. It spoke too much of his past. It wasn’t available for scrutiny.

Tom looked back to Harry’s face, and Harry flushed. Maybe he should have let Tom be. But if he had, he would have lost the olive branch that Tom was offering, and it was not likely to come again.

Tom, on the other hand, seemed pleased by what he saw as his eyes softened slightly, and he reached down for Harry’s hand.

Harry flinched back, but regretted doing so because Tom’s touch was warm and gentle, and not once did he invade Harry’s privacy by examining his scars any more. He simply pressed something, wrapped up in napkins, into Harry’s hand and quietly said, “You should eat before Herbology.”

He left the way he had come. In silence.

Harry remained rooted to the spot, watching Tom’s retreating back, and when he was out of sight opened the napkins. Inside was an apple, charmed so that it wouldn’t squash the warm sandwich which accompanied it.

Harry felt a grin spread across his mouth and inhaled the scent of fresh bread.

If Hermione had sewn any doubt into his mind, it was gone now. Things were workable after all.

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When Hermione entered Dippet’s office, Dumbledore was also there, seated upon a plush chair and eating from a box of Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans.

Hermione closed the door behind her and said, “Good afternoon, Professor Dippet, Professor Dumbledore.”
“Miss Granger,” greeted Dumbledore, and Hermione loosened up, as she always did when she heard her true name, as if it was a reminder that she hadn’t been forgotten. “Please have a seat. Would you like a sweet?”

“No, thank you,” replied Hermione, glancing around the room. Harry hadn’t yet arrived, if he had been summoned at all.

In fact, Harry was quite late and didn’t arrive for another ten minutes, during which time the only sound was Dumbledore’s occasional “ooh”s and “ah”s as he sampled the beans.

Hermione wondered whether Riddle was teaching Harry blatant disregard for the professors. But surely not, she supposed. He had become Head Boy somehow, after all. What she was worried about was that he was teaching Harry… other things.

“Mr. Potter,” said Dumbledore when the office door opened, revealing a dishevelled-looking Harry.

“Sorry.” Harry practically slammed the door closed behind him as he flew into the room, finishing what looked to be the remains of a sandwich. “I got caught up.”

“Yes, thank you for joining us.” Dippet gestured for Harry to take a seat. “I’ll keep this brief, as I’m sure you two have classes soon.”

Harry’s eyes found Hermione, as if he hadn’t noticed her presence before, and he immediately straightened slightly, his expression becoming more guarded.

“Harry,” she said, hoping that her voice conveyed everything that she couldn’t say.

Why are we fighting?

Stop this nonsense at once.

I’ve seen how much Riddle wants you, and it’s a bad omen.

And she had seen it, if during Potions the other day had been any indication. She had observed the way Riddle had pulled Harry out of the way of the potion spill, straight into his own arms. She had seen his unwillingness to let go.

“Hermione,” returned Harry, and never had she seen his eyes so cold when facing her.

He took a seat anyhow, and Hermione turned back to face Dippet, who was sitting behind his desk. But her heart was like a heavy stone in her chest, a chill running down her spine as she focused on the wall behind him.

Surely this was just another argument, like any other that she had had with Ron before. But she seldom fought with Harry, so perhaps this was different after all. Perhaps they weren’t going to make up in their own time. Perhaps she really was losing him.

Hermione swallowed. If all the wrongs were righted in the world, all the lies, the gambles, the cheats, would that be enough to break down the wall that was stacking higher and higher between herself and Harry?

She thought of his eyes, such frozen crystals, and was no longer so sure of the answer.

“Now that you’re both here,” said Dumbledore, passing Harry a look over his half-moon glasses,
“Armando and I thought it would be best to discuss your future lives.”

“Future lives?” blurted out Hermione’s supposed cousin.

*Oh, Harry.* It was so typical of him to have not considered that far ahead.

“Yes.” Dippet spoke up now, steepling his fingers together and resting his chin on them. “We all realise how unlikely your return to the future is, with Albus’s discovery of the Tempus Charm… and I’m afraid that with you rapidly approaching the second half of your final year, soon enough you will be leaving.”

“And not returning,” said Harry quietly, slowly nodding his head.

“What do you recommend we do?” asked Hermione. They had no money, no family, no home. They were well and truly stranded.

Dippet and Dumbledore exchanged a look, as though this was not the first time they had met people in this situation, nor the first time they had been asked such a question.

“The circumstances are quite different this time,” said Dumbledore calmly. “And we can agree that these two are also very good students. We made an exception for Rubeus, so surely it can be done again…”

Dippet furrowed his brow, deep in thought, and Dumbledore selected a yellow bean from the sweets box, examining it over his glasses. Hermione held her breath, though wasn’t entirely sure what she was holding her breath for.

“I suppose it can be done again,” said Dippet, after a pregnant pause. He alternated his stern gaze between Hermione and Harry and said, “Upon graduation, Hogwarts may act as a home for you until you have found your feet in the outside world. But this isn’t an offer extended lightly.”

“Of course not,” said Hermione and Harry in unison, and Hermione shot a sideways glance at him. His gaze was fixed on Dippet, but his lips were now pressed together in a straight line.

“Within the castle, you may act as assistant teachers should you achieve your N.E.W.T.s,” continued Dippet, “while beyond these walls, you search for a place elsewhere. Might I ask what you are both looking to do?”

“I’ve been working towards a position in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” answered Harry, then scratched his cheek guiltily. “I mean, back in our time, I wanted to be an Auror. I don’t know if things have changed, though.”

Dumbledore had Summoned a book, shabby with age, from a shelf and was now consulting it. “Everything looks in order,” he said. “Defence Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology, Potions. The only prerequisites for that department.”

“How do you know that I’m doing…” Harry’s voice tapered away when Dumbledore smiled, tapping the end of his long nose.

“And yourself, Miss Granger?” asked Dippet, turning to her.

“I was actually also looking for a position in the Ministry,” said Hermione. “In the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. But I’m still undecided.”

“I expect that with your grades,” remarked Dumbledore, “you will be accepted anywhere that you
Hermione beamed, unable to contain her pleasure when she heard this. This was before she recalled exactly what the circumstance was that had forced them to discuss this whole matter, and the smile faded from her face.

Stranded. Of course.

“We will be tackling this matter further down the line,” said Dippet, standing from behind his desk and moving away to potter about the office. “All seventh-years will be submitting applications to the areas of their choice in May, which you will do, too, alongside your peers. But it would be pointless to worry ourselves about it right now. For the time being, you two have classes to attend.”

The door swung open, a dismissal from their meeting.

Harry frowned and tore a mouthful out of his apple with a provocative crunch. “Had best be off then. Thanks for your time.”

He bounded out the door before Hermione could even open her mouth to say “wait”. But wait for what? What would she say that was any different from last time?

“Mr. Potter,” called Dumbledore, and seconds later, Harry appeared apprehensively in the doorway.

“Yes…? Sir.”

Dumbledore’s eyes were very bright and very blue when he turned his gaze on Harry. “You never gave me the opportunity to offer you one of the wizarding world’s most sublime treats, if I do say so myself. Mr. Bott’s finest.”

“Oh.” Harry stared. “I’m fine, thanks.”

“Such a pity.” Dumbledore popped a pale brown bean in his mouth, and then gave a cry of “alas”.

“My dear friend,” said Dippet without much concern, turning his head slightly. “Whatever is the matter?”

“Vomit flavour,” said Dumbledore, though made no move to remove the bean from his mouth. “I am feeling the need to eat my words now.”

Harry was looking on with an astonished expression upon his face. “You aren’t going eat another one for…” he ticked off some numbers on his fingers. “Forty-eight more years,” he said.

“Harry!” Hermione jumped to her feet, breaking the wall of silence between them without meaning to. “You can’t just divulge everything you know about—”

“About the future, I know!” Harry rounded on her, eyes blazing. “But one bloody bean isn’t going to change anything! Just get off my sodding back for once!”

He turned and stormed out of the office, and his rage was palpable in the air, lingering long after he was gone.

Hermione stood frozen. The only movement she made was to lift her hand to her mouth, stifling a shuddering breath that she took in. She had seen Harry angry before – when everybody called him a liar for unveiling Voldemort’s return. When he had been excluded from the Order for an entire
summer. But even then, he hadn’t been like this.

“My, my,” said Dippet. He had refocused on the small gathering. “What in Merlin’s name did you do to warrant that attack?”

“I don’t know,” said Hermione. And she really didn’t.

***

On a night not unlike any other, Tom Riddle called for order in the second Knights of Walpurgis meeting of the year.

Nor was he in an excellent mood about it. Until the common room cleared of stragglers, he had been planning on catching a few winks, but unfortunately, Harry had chosen to sleep with the drapes around his bed left open. Once Tom’s eyes had adjusted to the dark, he had found himself watching Harry sleep.

It was a cold night, and the promise of snow whispered through the air outside. Harry was bundled up on his side so that all Tom could see was a mop of unruly black hair and thick dark lashes that he knew to conceal poison-green eyes. Every now and then, Harry would shift, curling up like a very adorable bean on his side as he shivered.

Harry always shivered in his sleep, and though he never cried out, Tom suspected that he was suffering from bad dreams. Tom had once been prone to those, before he had taken his life into his own hands and made the decision to command it. He had chosen to be the general of his own life. He would have no regrets.

But that didn’t mean that he forgot.

It was as he remembered his own demons that once stalked him in the night that Tom resisted the urge to climb in behind Harry and pull him in. Wrap the smaller boy up in his arms, protect him from the dangers that lay out there. Harry Delacour was too innocent, too pure for this world. He belonged in a safe shelter, and Tom would provide that for him.

The desire to sleep with somebody by his side was a completely new sentiment to Tom. Everybody knew that if you were lucky enough to score a shag with Tom Riddle, then you best be prepared to run helter-skelter straight afterwards, because Tom. Didn’t. Cuddle.

But he wouldn’t do that to Harry, wouldn’t boot him out and leave him out in the cold. That was reserved for underlings, not powerful little Parselmouths. And oh, yes, Tom envisioned Harry breathing the dirtiest things in Parseltongue into his ear.

:I want you to fuck me, Tom…:

“It’s now or never, Riddle,” whispered Mulciber’s voice in the darkness, and Tom bolted upright in bed. He hadn’t slept at all, but he had no idea how many hours had passed.

And fuck. He had a raging hard-on.

“I’ll be there in ten,” he ground back, and listened to the whispering of feet on the floorboards as Mulciber, Lestrange and Nott shadowed out of the dormitory, leaving him alone with a boy who he was thinking very indecent things about now.

Tom pulled on a robe and slipped into the bathroom.
Maybe give him twenty.

This was precisely why Tom was in such a filthy mood by the time he arrived in the Room of Requirement, not ten but twenty minutes later. Not that he would ever reveal that he hated the lot of them for disrupting him – after all, he had been the one to call for the meeting.

The Room of Requirement had set itself up as per usual, with the table in the middle of the room. The six members of Tom’s inner circle were milling around when he arrived, and upon his entrance, immediately began buzzing in a state of unrest.

“Sit,” ordered Tom, not in the right frame of mind to play games with them.

Several looks were exchanged then, but none had the guts to speak up before Mulciber finally stepped forward, taking charge as he always did when Tom wasn’t present. “Where?” he asked. “My lord.”

Tom allowed a moment of ominous silence before stalking forward, quietly cocking his head to the side like a cat with the canary. “Do I look as though I am in the mood for this?”

“My lord,” began Dolohov, hovering behind Mulciber, but Tom cut right across him, his voice like a hot knife through butter.

“Is that not a table that the Room has conjured for us?” he asked, and perhaps his tone was even, but there was a danger in his gaze that had everybody bowing their heads in submission. All except Mulciber.

“My lord,” he persisted, but Tom could tell that the bravado was an act. His caramel-brown skin had become pallid, his eyes diverted to the side so that he did not come across as a challenger. “When you entered the room, the table altered itself. The layout is now different, we don’t know where you wish us to seat ourselves.”

Tom stared at Mulciber for a moment longer, his nostrils flaring and his mouth pressed into a hard line. Mulciber took this as his moment to join the rest in bowing his head down, taking a step back.

Tom turned and evaluated the changed table.

The displeasure bled out of his face immediately, and his features slackened in astonishment.

The chairs around the table had been positioned differently to accommodate for the eighth chair which usually remained empty – it had been placed at the head of the table, sitting directly next to Tom’s.

Tom righted his face back to cool indifference as he turned back to the gathering. So, the Room of Requirement knew.

“Order yourselves as you normally do,” he said. “That seat changes nothing.”

There was a rush to take their places around the table, starting with Mulciber to Tom’s right and finishing with Rosier on the other side of the table.

Tom took his place at the head. He did not sit, nor did he acknowledge the empty chair to his left. Instead he simply moved his gaze around the table, and they each held his gaze in turn for as long as they dared before looking downwards.

Tom smiled sharply and removed his wand from his robes, twirling it between his fingers, and
every set of eyes followed the movement. It was here that there were no rules, no boundaries. It was here that they were off the radar for a select number of hours and Tom may do as he pleased.

It was not an opportunity to be squandered.

“We shall begin as we usually do,” he said in a drawl. “I remind you all, esteemed Knights of Walpurgis, that I am a merciful lord who gives credit where credit is due. But if I am to do that, I must also give punishment where necessary. Leniency cannot be afforded if we will one day purge the wizarding world of Mudbloods.”

There were murmurs of consensus around the table, and Tom allowed it to pass through like a breeze for several moments before continuing. “I am disappointed to say that on my blacklist today are the very same two who were on it last time. Francis. Peregrine.”

Nott and Lestrange had been expecting it. With resigned airs about them, they both stood, beginning to move around the table to kneel before Tom, but he lifted a hand which ordered them both to stop.

Everyone flicked their gazes back to Tom in astonishment.

“As of our last conference,” he said, “our incentive has been to recruit the seventh member of my inner circle. Both of you are to be penalised for endangering the subject of that motion. Know that your foolish actions in class have brought this down on your own heads. However. Francis, you were successful in convincing the Mudblood Poole to distract The Other Delacour, and that feat of yours is what will deliver you from punishment today.”

“I… thank you, my lord.” Nott bowed down, low enough for Tom to see the back of his neck as he grovelled. “That is very gracious of you, long will I remember–”

“Enough.” That shut Nott up, and he fell back into his seat as Lestrange moved forward, alone. When he knelt at Tom’s feet, Tom snapped, “Rise.”

Cringing, Lestrange did so. A droplet of sweat trickled down his temple and his black eyes darted around the place restlessly. He didn’t look half as handsome as the entire school seemed to think he was in that moment.

Tom leaned down and placed his lips near Lestrange’s ear. “I don’t like how close you and Harry are becoming,” he breathed, low enough to ensure that nobody else could hear what was being said. “I don’t like how often I see you two together. Perhaps you are entirely platonic in your intentions, but I don’t care. Harry is mine, and if you don’t back off now, I will hurt you more than the Cruciatu ever could. Do you understand, Lestrange?”

Lestrange. Tom never addressed them by their surnames, but how it terrified them when he did.

Now, Lestrange’s lips quivered slightly, but he held his head high. This was why he had been included as among Tom’s seven.

“I would never hurt him intentionally,” murmured Lestrange, eyes trained on the wall behind Tom’s shoulder.

“Do. You. Understand?” repeated Tom, each word gritted out like stones in his mouth.

“Yes,” whispered Lestrange. “Yes.”

“Excellent.” Tom raised his voice to its normal level, and the room collectively let out a breath that
it had been holding. “Now kneel.”

Lestrange dropped to his knees, and he allowed Tom to Crucio the living daylights out of him.

Perhaps it was overkill, but if he wanted to be taken seriously, thought Tom as Lestrange twisted on the ground, his screams muffled against the floorboards, he would have to stake a claim for Harry with proper threats.

Anyway. He was in a bad mood.

When Tom finally let Lestrange up, he was feeling slightly calmer, though the rest of the room was on edge again. It had been the longest Cruciatus Curse session anyone could remember, and all throughout it, Tom had seen them staring at their hands in their laps, the table, anything which was not Tom or Lestrange.

Now, Lestrange dragged himself back into his chair, panting unevenly, his robes a rumpled mess and his hair matted with sweat. His eyes were glazed and unable to meet Tom’s, which Tom accepted as a victory as he addressed the rest of the table again.

“Now we can get back to business,” he said, at last sitting down and stretching his long legs out beneath the table, a lazy stance which showed no hint of his inner vindictiveness. “I hold this conference to alert you all of the fact that Harry will soon be joining our ranks.”

Tom could see that everybody was containing their own opinions on this matter, resisting the urge to explode lest they suffer the wrath of Tom’s magic as Lestrange had. He allowed Mulciber to speak, however.

Mulciber tended to be the voice of reason, when he wasn’t trying to provoke Harry.

“Delacour is still a Muggle-lover,” he said. “Nothing has changed, my lord. You cannot allow an outsider like him into our ranks. Francis told us about what he said in the Great Hall today. Surely you cannot…”

Tom silenced Mulciber with a look, and then passed another one in Nott’s direction. He should have known that the big-mouthed prat would blab to the others.

Nott shrunk away.

“Harry has potential,” said Tom, turning away from Nott. “You can’t have missed it. He has contempt for Poole, a Mudblood, already, and we have seen the grudge he has been holding against his cousin.”

“This is ridiculous, we don’t even know what that the grudge is for,” argued Mulciber, silver eyes bright with insistence. Tom straightened, his posture no longer quite so lazy, and Mulciber retreated.

“Remember your place,” warned Tom, because now Mulciber was walking on very thin ice.

“I apologise, my lord.” Mulciber’s chin still jutted out slightly. “But please reconsider at this point in time. Delacour is completely oriented towards Dumbledore’s ‘Light’ side.”

Tom took a moment to compose himself before speaking. “Nature or nurture, gentlemen?”

There was a moment of confusion as the group looked among themselves, an eyebrow raised here and there.
“I believe that a person’s innate nature may appear to be dominant to begin with,” continued Tom, “but nurture him under the right conditions and nature may be overruled after all.”

“How?” Mulciber gestured around them. “My lord, I am sure I can speak for all of us when we ask how you plan on nurturing Delacour into one of us, and in such a short space of time.”

Tom hummed, a smirk twisting his mouth.

He was Tom Marvolo Riddle. He had risen from being an outcast, raised in the wilds of Wool’s Orphanage, to the reigning Heir and King of Slytherin. He had not gotten to where he was by playing fair.

“A little manipulation, here and there,” he said, waving his hand vaguely. “What I have in mind may be cheating, but Harry needn’t ever know. I’ll be needing everybody’s help, though. There is much to be investigated beforehand.”

Mulciber leaned forwards, an interested glint in his eye and his lip curling upwards slightly. “What needs investigating, my lord?”

Tom leaned back into his chair, lacing his fingers behind his neck. He smiled distantly around at them all. Mulciber and Lestrange, Nott and Avery, Dolohov and Rosier. Soon they would be joined by another.

“Memory Charms,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

I couldn’t help myself from including Dumbledore’s vomit-flavoured bean. Harry Potter & the Philosopher’s Stone FTW!!
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

"Delacour’s got a rogue Bludger on his tail!"

Chapter Notes

Now, back to those Memory Charms… well, no. But we’ll get back to it soon enough.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If games of Quidditch were won by intimidation alone, Ravenclaw’s team would have been flattened before they had even taken to the air.

Standing behind Crockett with Black and Avery flanking him, Harry watched as Georgia Horne, Captain of the Ravenclaw team, stepped forward to shake Crockett’s hand. She must have been two heads shorter than him and was very stocky, with very kind blue eyes.

Crockett accepted her handshake but stared down at her with a sneer that suggested that he might snap her up and eat her for breakfast. Excellent sportsmanship.

Harry attempted to smile at Horne around Crockett’s shoulder to soften Crockett’s obvious animosity for her, but it probably came out as more of a grimace, judging from the raised eyebrow he earned from her in return.

Harry turned his head slightly to look for Lestrange. Unbeknown to Harry, Lestrange had been avoiding him like the plague of late. Today, he had retreated to the back of the crowd, and Avery had stepped in, marching Harry to the front of their pack. Avery couldn’t have been more obvious that it was to keep them apart.

But why? In all honesty, Harry had come to find himself looking forward to Lestrange’s company.

“No playing dirty, you hear me?” said Swanson, the Quidditch referee, stepping between the two teams with the Quaffle tucked under his arm, the trunk which contained the two Bludgers and the Snitch hovering over her shoulder. He gave Crockett a pointed look as he said this. “Now up into the air!”

The students in the stands around them roared as the players kicked off on their broomsticks, coming up to circle above Swanson. The formation resembled that of a two-tier cake, with Harry and another seventh-year called Jeanine Dodd, the Ravenclaw Seeker, facing off at the top.

“You’re in my Charms class, aren’t you?” asked Harry conversationally as they waited for the game to begin. “I remember Flitwick holding you back once.”

Dodd reddened. “Yes, well, we can’t all be prissy.”

Oops. He had been tactless enough to hit a soft spot. Harry opened his mouth to try to make
amends, but then Swanson had released the Bludgers, one of which hurtled past Harry, mere centimetres from his nose.

He jerked backwards then ran his hand through his hair – Lestrange had been rubbing off on him, making sure that he kept his hair swept backwards for Quidditch. But it was undeniably useful in keeping his vision clear.

As an afterthought, Harry glanced downwards, scanning over the circle of players beneath him. Lestrange was baring his teeth at one of the Ravenclaw Chasers – the Chaser in turn looked terrified. Harry once might have also seen Lestrange’s expression as menacing, but now found it nothing short of amusing.

Crockett managed to catch Harry’s eye, lifting one figure and mouthing something.

*One minute*, his lips read, and Harry nodded stiffly. Best to keep the game short and prevent Ravenclaw from scoring many points – that would keep them from being real competition, when their hands were already full dealing with the other teams.

The Snitch was released next, darting about energetically before vanishing into the distance. It was the only bright thing in sight on such an overcast day. Harry tightened his grip on the handle of his broom. Let the best Seeker win.

Swanson threw the Quaffle upwards, and Billingham’s voice echoed from the stands. “Let the Slytherin versus Ravenclaw match begin!”

There was a kerfuffle at the beginning as per usual as Keepers rushed for the goal posts, Chasers fought for the Quaffle and Beaters went after the Bludgers.

Harry shot upwards to get a view of the entire pitch – at least, he tried to shoot upwards. Naturally, Cleansweep Fours were nothing compared to Firebolts but were considered at the top of the range these days.

“Black immediately steals the Quaffle from Cox, though I think that Crockett collided with Cox on purpose – isn’t that Blatching? Dear me, Swanson was distracted by a scuffle between Lestrange and Horne, so it seems like Slytherin gets away with it. Perhaps distraction is another ruse of theirs? I foresee a very dirty game ahead– and Black scores! Ten points to Slytherin!”

It seemed to Harry that the entire school groaned – with an exception to the Slytherins. They really were disliked, weren’t they? But then again, if Billingham was correct, it hadn’t been fair play…

Harry swept up and down the pitch, his sights set on finding a flash of gold.

A streak of lightning cast the world in eerie light for a moment, causing every player to pause momentarily to stare skywards. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

“Excellent, a thunderstorm!” Billingham sounded nothing short of thrilled. “Those are always fun… ah, Lament and Snowy Owl have executed a Dopplebeater Defence, aimed straight for Shafiq, the Ravenclaw Keeper. And Alda successfully protects Shafiq…”

A Bludger bolted in Harry’s direction, and he ducked his head to avoid it. It veered sharply, turning back to come in the direction that it had come, and Harry performed a Sloth Grip Roll, narrowly avoiding it.

The Bludger came straight back at him.
This complicated things.

Harry dropped downwards, moving straight towards the grass below him. Time to get out of the open, if one of the Ravenclaws had tampered with the Bludger…

He had to get to Crockett.

“Avery manages to stop the Quaffle, bad luck, Horne– oh, what’s this? Delacour’s got a rogue Bludger on his tail!” Billingham could have at least sounded less pleased.

In his peripherals, Harry saw the Bludger closing in, and he ducked again, protecting his head with his arm as it passed over his head.

*You have got to be shitting with me.* Lament and Snowy Owl fell either side of Harry, appearing out of nowhere. Their bats were held at the ready – and those bats were kept quite busy, too. The Bludger was determined to get Harry, it seemed. What worried him was that with the possibility of Dobby tampering with the Bludger ruled out, there was someone else out to get him.

“Where’s Crockett?” shouted Harry over another roll of thunder.

Lament smashed the Bludger out of the way and shouted back, “Mid field!”

“I need to get to him!” The first droplet of rain hit Harry’s nose. This was just perfect. A rogue bludger *and* a storm to fly against.

“Not likely!” That was Snowy Owl, steering Harry towards the outskirts of the field. “Can’t let you out into the open, or that Bludger’ll have a field day!”

“I can’t fucking catch the Snitch like this!” barked Harry.

“The Slytherin Seeker and Beaters are having a row, it appears!” bellowed Billingham. “Not an excellent time, chaps! Perhaps you haven’t noticed that there’s a rogue chasing after you! And up at the Slytherin goal posts, Avery has missed the Quaffle! Cox scores ten points for Ravenclaw! Ladies and gentlemen, Slytherin is in shambles today!”

“Look, I’ve dealt with a rogue Bludger before!” Harry glared as best he could at Snowy Owl without falling off his broom. “Just deliver a message to Crockett for me, I don’t need you guys to follow me around!”

Lament and Snowy Owl exchanged looks.

“You’re restricting me!” Merlin and Morgana, Seekers were solo fliers, surely they knew that?

“Fine!” Snowy Owl swung his bat at the Bludger as it closed in again. “What do I tell him?”

“One minute isn’t possible!”

“Got it!” Snowy Owl took one last vicious hit at the Bludger and was gone.

“Good luck!” Lament fell away, vanishing behind a barrier of rain, and Harry shook himself off. Just him and the Bludger again.

He had been gone for too long. Where had Dodd gotten to? It was impossible to tell. The storm ensured that he could barely see ahead of his own nose.

For a few minutes, he danced around the Bludger as best as he could, having no plans to have his
arm broken a second time, praying that Dodd was having as much difficulty as he was (though he highly doubted it). Billingham’s voice was the only thing which updated him on the happenings on the field, alongside the constant “ooh”s and “ah”s from the audience. Ravenclaw was being rewarded with numerous penalty shots, so Harry could only guess that the Slytherins were whipping out the dirty moves.

Eventually came the announcement of, “Captain Crockett is calling for time out!”

*About time.* Harry flew straight for the ground, landing just as Swanson managed to restrict the rogue Bludger in the trunk with difficulty. “Sorry about this, Delacour,” he said, shielding his eyes from the rain. “I haven’t seen a Bludger behave this way before!”

“It’s more common than you’d think,” muttered Harry, wiping his sopping hair out of his face and snapping his goggles onto the top of his head. He found the rest of the team gathering beneath the shelter of the eaves of the Quidditch stadium, all resembling drowned cats that had been pulled through a bush backwards.

That is to say they looked terrible.

“Our performance is absolutely shocking!” shouted Crockett, jabbing a finger out to the field. “We’re being slaughtered! Tell me why that is!”

“Well,” said Avery. “We didn’t anticipate a Bludger targeting Delacour. Nor a thunderstorm.”

“You should have!” Crockett took in a deep breath, realising that that was an unreasonable request, and passed his gaze over the team. “What isn’t helping is that we’re blind out there.”

No sooner had Crockett spoken, a tentative hand touched Harry’s shoulder. He glanced around, immediately straightening when he saw who it was.

Hermione.

He hadn’t been expecting her, not since he’d snapped at her in Dippet’s office all those days ago. Yet here she was, a knitted bronze-and-blue scarf wound around her neck and gnawing on her bottom lip. “I, uh.” She blushed. “The Impervius Charm is used for water-proofing. I taught it to you in third-year, remember?”

“Oh.” Harry stared at her, unsure of what to say.

“Of course, the Impervius Charm!” Crockett tapped his goggles with his wand and said, “*Impervius.*”

The rest of the team followed his lead, and mutters of the charm passed through the group like a wave. Harry made no move to charm his own goggles. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Right, I should be off cheering the Ravenclaws, I know.” Hermione wrung her hands, flustered. “It’s just, I… this is so difficult. I mean, I think that I’ve been being a bit judgemental. About what you’ve chosen to do.”

“A bit,” repeated Harry incredulously. She had jumped down his throat, last he remembered.

“Look, Harry,” snapped Hermione, fire flooding back into her tone. “You haven’t been much better! And I worry. It seems that I’m the only one left to worry for you.”

“Hermione.” Harry lowered his tone, stepping away from the Quidditch team so that they wouldn’t
hear him. “I get it, you’re worried. But I know what I’m doing, believe me. I used to think that Tom was a manipulative, arrogant tosser too, and maybe he is, but I’ve seen that somewhere deep down, there’s a part of him that will repent. I just need to get closer to it.”

“Delacour, come here,” came Crockett’s voice. “We’re discussing tactics.”

“Just—” Harry held up a hand, his gaze not budging from Hermione’s. “Give me a moment. Please.”

“You really think that?” There was water welling in Hermione’s eyes, and she swiped it away. “You really believe that about Tom Riddle?”

“Yes.” Harry grabbed her hands. “And it hurt that you didn’t believe in me. Too few people have ever believed in me.”

“I believe in you,” whispered Hermione. “I always have. It’s Riddle I don’t believe in.”

“Then believe that I believe in him.” Harry reached up to brush away a tear that was sitting in the corner of her eye. “Do you have my back?”

“Yes, Harry.” She sniffled, and her smile was watery. “Didn’t you know that I always have?”

“Delacour!” It was Crockett again, sounding very impatient. “I hate to ruin the moment, but we have a game to win over here.”

“Should I go?” Harry raised an eyebrow playfully at Hermione, and laughter bubbled out of her throat.

“Yes!” she pushed him away, then dragged him back. “No, wait. Impervius.”

She tapped her wand against his goggles, and Harry pulled them back over his glasses.

“Like good old times,” he said.

“Now go.” Hermione waved him away. “And look out for that Bludger!”

Harry began to turn back to join Crockett at the others, a grin on his face. Then he saw Tom, watching him from a short distance away. Or rather, watching both him and Hermione, his handsome face expressionless.

The stupid grin on Harry’s face settled into something more civilised, and he nodded once at Tom before Crockett finally had enough of waiting, locking his arm around Harry’s neck and dragging him over.

“Stop making googly eyes at your cousin,” he said.

“I was looking at Tom,” snapped Harry, shaking Crockett off with some difficulty and settling his Cleansweep more firmly on his shoulder. “And I wasn’t making googly eyes.”

“Riddle never comes to Quidditch matches,” said Lestrange, hunting for Tom with his eyes. “Considers them beneath his attention.”

He then snapped his gaze back to Crockett quickly, as if he hadn’t meant to speak aloud.

Huh.

“Right,” said Crockett. “Let’s quickly settle this. Black, I want you on Sinclair. Lestrange, you’re
on Cox. I’ll stay on Horne. At this point, the Ravenclaws have sixty points on us. Delacour, you are not to catch the Snitch until we have levelled the score. Lament, Snowy Owl, I want one of you on Delacour at all times. We can’t lose him until the Snitch is caught. And Delacour, I prohibit you from straying to centre field. None of you are to deviate from this—”

“Wait,” interrupted Harry. “The Snitch isn’t going to just fly into my hands, you realise. I have to get out there, and I can’t get out there if centre field is banned. And if Lament, Snowy Owl and I are always bundled together, we’re a moving target to the other team.”

Crockett puffed up, and he leaned down into Harry’s face. “Listen, Delacour—”

“No, you listen!” Harry thrust his face straight back into Crockett’s, and the rest of the team watched on, startled. “I may not be Captain here, Captain, but I once was one, and for a reason. This is what I’m good at. Let me be good at it!”

Crockett straightened, considering. Harry settled back, wondering whether he had crossed a boundary, but then Crockett grinned. “Merlin, you’re hot when you pull rank.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open.

“Okay, team.” Crockett began pacing. “We’ll allow Delacour free reign, but the rest of you, do not deviate from the plan. Lament, Snowy Owl, do as you will. So let’s pull our heads out of our arses and win this game already!”

He tossed his ponytail over his shoulder and strode back into the rainfall. The rest followed out, fixing their goggles back over their eyes and laughing when the rain was repelled from their faces.

The Ravenclaws were already waiting, shifting irritably on their brooms.

“The Slytherin team definitely took their time emerging,” came Billingham’s voice, ringing through the stadium. “But I suppose that they were in dire need of that time out.”

Crockett gave a stiff nod to Swanson, who ordered everybody back into the air, and when he released all the balls, Harry was ready.

“If Crockett was hoping that the rogue Bludger would stop being a rogue Bludger while they waited, he was terribly wrong.” Billingham’s sights were apparently set on Harry now. “It’s straight back at Delacour, nasty thing, isn’t it? Let’s see—oh! Slytherin have already scored themselves another ten points, courtesy of Lestrange. Very neat… perhaps Slytherin have decided to stop resorting to cheap tricks to distract the other team, and finally do something useful.”

“Bloody Billingham,” Harry heard Black say as they whizzed past each other. “Watch out, Delacour!”

Harry narrowly missed another collision with the Bludger, giving him at least five more seconds to check the scores. Fifty points left to cover.

Unexpectedly, another black blur came in his direction. Harry veered upwards, swearing. The second Bludger couldn’t possibly be rogue too, could it?

“Oh dear, the Ravenclaw Beaters have adopted the tactic of targeting Delacour.” There was Billingham again, as always giving the answer to Harry’s questions. “Two Bludgers on one player, that isn’t very fair…”
Harry trusted that Snowy Owl and Lament would deal with the second Bludger for him, skirting the field and dodging where necessary as the Slytherins slowly ticked nearer to their goal.

Forty more points... thirty more points... twenty more points... ten more points...

“Would you look at that,” said Billingham. “They’re practically neck-and-neck! Surprisingly, the Slytherins actually do have a droplet of talent in their ranks—”

He cut off with a squawk as Lament hit a Bludger at him. It missed its mark, but Billingham was still hysterical. “Bumphing is a foul!” he screeched. “Ref, surely you saw that! Penalty shot for the Ravenclaws, please!”

Swanson had indeed seen it, and Horne was offered the Quaffle for a free shot.

“Lament!” Crockett was fuming when he pulled up. “You idiot! We were gaining on them!”

Lament shrugged his shoulders. “Worth it.”

Harry laughed at Crockett’s expression, and laughed even harder when Horne had her shot but Avery saved it, throwing the Quaffle directly into Crockett’s hands. A very devious sneer crossed the Captain’s face, something which could have rivalled even Tom’s.

“Finish this, Crockett!” shouted Harry after Crockett. He stopped laughing very quickly.

The rogue Bludger went for Harry again, and he swerved out of its way – straight into the path of the second Bludger.

It smashed into his arm with a sickening crunch, and Harry cried out, doubling over.

“Ouch,” called Billingham, who had quickly recovered from his near miss with the Bludger. “Beaters Alda and Glen used the Dopplebeater Defence, doubling the force acting on the Bludger, and it looks like it scored a bullseye!”

“Hardwin!” Lestrange came hurtling towards Harry, pulling up just short of him. “Fuck, you can’t keep playing, let me help you—”

“No!” Harry somehow managed to snarl through the pain. “You heard Crockett. Don’t deviate from the plan. Crockett’s about to score the shot which’ll allow me to go after the Snitch.”

“Yes, but…” Lestrange stared at Harry’s limp arm, his eyes wild. Then he caught sight of something behind Harry and shoved him out of the way. Harry tumbled sideways, caught with his guard down, and the rogue Bludger barely missed them both.

“Go,” ordered Harry, and with one last fretful glance at him, Lestrange left, just as Billingham announced, “Crockett scores ten more points for Slytherin! Ravenclaw and Slytherin are both sitting on ninety points, but will Slytherin forfeit the match with their Seeker in such bad shape?”

Harry rose above the others, now unable to sit still. Was it only him, or had the rogue Bludger become more… well, rogue? It was dogging his tail relentlessly now, forcing him forward, forward, he couldn’t stop…

Bloody hell, where had Dodd gotten to?

There! Circling uncertainly in the rain, waiting. The Snitch was refusing to make an appearance. Harry advanced on her. He was familiar enough with the Snitch’s pattern of movement to know
that any moment, it was going to appear… right by her left ear. It was like a pesky little bug, buzzing around her head, though a pretty bug at that. But Dodd was completely unaware of it.

Harry narrowed his eyes, urging his broom forward faster. He could hear the Bludger skimming the end of the broom, a menacing noise in the back of his mind.

“Delacour has spotted the Snitch!” said Billingham, and Harry could sense heads turning his way, including Dodd’s. No matter. It didn’t change his end goal.

Dodd squinted in Harry’s direction, and then they widened as she registered that he couldn’t be more than a few metres from her, and he was showing no sign of stopping. With a squeak, she dived out of the way, allowing Harry to snatch the unsuspecting Snitch from right above her head.

He barely managed to not fall from his broom while doing so, gritting his teeth against the pain which crawled back up his arm, burning hot in his flesh.

“Harry Delacour has caught the snitch!” cried Billingham. “Against all odds, Slytherin has won the match! Now please, can somebody restrain that bloody Bludger? It’s been giving me anxiety this entire time.”

Harry landed on the ground inelegantly, dropping his broom to the ground and releasing the Snitch so that he could examine his arm. It was bent at an unnatural angle.

Behind him, he could hear Swanson restraining the rogue Bludger again, and barely noticed the Slytherins flooding out of the stands as the rest of his team landed around him, huddling together and slapping each other on the backs.

“I knew I could count on you, little Captain,” said Crockett, ruffling Harry’s hair up affectionately. “Just next time, do it without the drama.”

“Because I enjoy having my arm broken,” retorted Harry, without any real zeal. Crockett merely winked, turning to celebrate with the others. Lestrange replaced Crockett very quickly. His russet waves were drenched with water, and he leaned against his broom, scanning over Harry. It was hard to believe that once Harry had seen Bellatrix in his eyes. Now, he couldn’t see her at all.

“Are you alright?” asked Lestrange finally. “Your arm, I mean.”

“Well, I’d be lying if I said that it was fine.” Harry tried to shrug, which hurt more than he wished to let on. He gritted his teeth against the discomfort, but it must have shown on his face as Lestrange stepped forwards, his hands fluttering about the place awkwardly.

“Should get you to the Hospital Wing—” he cut off, his face paling, and he took a few steps back. “I mean, um, you should… I’ve got to go.”

“What are you—” Harry would have tagged after Lestrange if he could, but he knew that there was truth in that he had to get to the Hospital Wing immediately.

“You ought to get your arm looked at.” Harry turned, startled, but relaxed when he saw that it was only Tom, holding a semi-transparent Umbrella Charm over his head and his Slytherin scarf draped over his shoulders. Harry noted that his hair, which was usually immaculately styled, was slightly dishevelled, as though he had been dragging his hands through it in distress.

It occurred to Harry then that Tom had been doing so while watching the match.

“Were you worried about me?” he blurted out before he could stop himself, then looked
downwards, alarmed by his outburst, his hair falling into his eyes. Tom showed no change in expression, taking Harry’s uninjured arm and pulling him beneath the Umbrella Charm.

“You’ll catch a chill,” Tom said simply, taking the scarf from around his shoulders and winding it around Harry’s neck. It was warm and woolly, and Harry nestled his nose into it. It smelt like it had been baking in the sun, and like parchment. Tom must have been studying before he had come to the match.

“Thank you,” Harry murmured, looking up at Tom from beneath his eyelashes. Tom gently unhooked the Quidditch goggles from Harry’s face and looked at him for a moment, as though memorising the lines of his features. After the moment had passed, Tom wrapped his arm around Harry’s shoulders, leading him out of the bustling crowd and towards the castle.

“You need to see Madam Pomfrey,” he said roughly, and Harry nodded his consent, allowing Tom’s warmth to seep into his bones as they began the hike up through the slippery grass.

He would be glad for the company.

***

Hermione watched from the stands as Harry and Riddle left the gathering, Harry leaning into Riddle as if Riddle was the only support he had.

Believe that I believe in him.

Harry’s words replayed in her head as her eyes followed them out of sight. She would have liked nothing more than to have joined Harry down on the pitch, had been itching to do so since his arm had taken a hit from the Bludger, but she now knew to respect his wishes.

Believe that I believe in him.

She would always believe in Harry, so if offering him her trust was all that it took to mend their bond, then she would gladly do so. But trust was a two-way street. When, and if, the time came to alert Harry to the dangers that she thought Riddle posed, then she could only hope that Harry would show her the same courtesy that she now showed him.

A blind man could see the desire that Riddle had for Harry. At the very least, this was one-sided and Harry still had some sense nailed into that head of his.

“What a disappointment,” sighed Rowan, watching the Slytherins celebrating in the rain. “I suppose that if Ravenclaw beats Hufflepuff, we still have a chance at the Quidditch Cup… but this is still a mighty shame.”

“Oh well, Hermione doesn’t think so,” remarked Quincy, scattering flower petals in the wind. “Hazel, hawthorn. And a little bit of a Carolina rose.”

“What do you mean?” asked Rowan, looking around Hermione so that he could evaluate Quincy properly.

“Hazel represents reconciliation,” said Quincy patiently, his unusually violet eyes dreamy. “Hawthorn for hope, and Carolina roses are the funniest little things. They whisper of the dangers of love.”

“What I mean is, about Hermione.” Rowan pushed his glasses up his nose nervously.
“Ask her yourself. She’s sitting right next to you.” Quincy scattered the last rose petals. “I shall send these east, for light and luck.”

He smiled, brushing off his hands, standing and drifting away through the throngs of Ravenclaws without another word.

He was Luna through-and-through.

“Yes, of course,” stammered Rowan, watching his friend leave before looking to Hermione. He had been behaving oddly all day, always skittish when he met her eye. “You’d have been unhappy if Ravenclaw won? Is it about your cousin, being the opposing Seeker?”

“I don’t care much for Quidditch,” said Hermione, staring into the far distance, her thoughts drifting like smoke. “It’s not about whether Ravenclaw won or not, I just…”

Am so glad that Harry is willing to speak to me again.

“You just…?” It became evident that Hermione wouldn’t finish the sentence, so Rowan stood, offering her his hand.

It seemed rude to not accept, so she did, and Rowan beamed at her, adjusting his tortoiseshell glasses again. “I, um. Hermione. I have something to ask you. I’ve been meaning to ask you for a while.”

“What is it?” Hermione glanced at him curiously. His face was flushed, and he kept twiddling his fingers, unsure of what to do with them. Finally he settled for cupping the back of his neck and smiled terribly shyly.

“Hermione,” he repeated, and she understood what was coming. There was a shortage of butterflies in her stomach, though. “We have known each other for a little while now, and I enjoy the time we spend together. The intellectual debates and all that.”

“Yes, I find our intellectual debates to be stimulating.” Hermione looked sideways, heat flooding into her face because she knew what she was going to have to say. “Rowan, I consider you a friend, but—”

“I find you very bright and beautiful, in fact, you are quite brilliant,” Rowan rushed on, sounding quite panicked at Hermione’s words. “And I must ask if you would do me the honour of being my girlfriend.”

“I, I, um. Oh, Rowan.” She looked down at her feet, shifting where she stood. All the noise surrounding them seemed have melted away, and it was only the two of them in this uncomfortable little bubble. “I’m sorry, but at this point in time, I’m not ready for a relationship like that.”

“But… why?” Rowan looked absolutely stricken, and he pushed his blonde hair back from his forehead so that it stood upright. “I thought that…”

“Things are so busy for me right now.” Hermione turned away from him, staring down at the Slytherin crowd which was beginning to taper away as students returned to the castle. “With N.E.W.T.s, and with Harry…”

It seemed that bringing Harry into this had been a bad idea. Rowan’s eyes narrowed and a scowl crossed his mouth. “Right. Your cousin. Messing around with Riddle. I’m sorry, but I think he’s old enough to take care of himself, especially if he wants to do something as foolish as that.”
Hermione immediately felt a rush of defensiveness. Yes, it was foolish. Harry was a fool. But he was a brilliant, brave fool, and he was her brilliant, brave fool at that. It didn’t sit right to have somebody else call him so.

Her brow furrowed. “That is none of your concern, Rowan.”

“No, I think it is,” insisted Rowan, refusing to accept her answer. “He has been behaving tactlessly, insensitively, and it’s been hurting you. Hermione, I… I hate to see you unhappy. Your cousin is an idiot for doing this to you.”

Hermione felt her eyes go cold. Yes, she was unhappy. Yes, Harry had hurt her, but she had hurt him, too. The path that destiny had cleaved for them to walk would be a painful one, but that tragedy belonged to them. No one else. Not Tom Riddle, not Rowan Poole. Just them.

She took a step back. “You should go,” she told Rowan flatly.

“Hermione—”

“Please.” She straightened her scarf, staring directly ahead at the sky. It looked like a vast canvas, grey tears dribbling down into the horizon. “Go.”

Rowan sighed, passing by her. He paused long enough to say, “He’s going to leave you in pieces on the ground. But rest assured, I’ll always be here to put you back together.”

Then he was gone.

No, Rowan. I put myself back together.

Hermione waited in the rain for a little while longer, lost in thought. By the time she headed back to the castle, the Quidditch pitch was abandoned, and her only companion was the mist that her breath left in the air.

She figured that it was about time she paid Harry a visit. She’d allowed him and Riddle enough time alone. There was only so much she’d put up with.

Chapter End Notes

In a couple days, I’ll be going on a short trip, so I don’t know if I’ll get another chapter up before I leave. If I don’t, I’ll see you all in about a week from now. <3
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

In a white courtyard with snow falling like feathers around them, Tom Riddle asked Harry Potter to attend Horace Slughorn’s Slug Club Christmas party with him.

Chapter Notes

Hahahaha “see you all in about a week” I said. LOL I’M THE WORST SORRY. I got stuck having to write this project due before Christmas, but it’s done now so… let’s just watch Harry punch somebody.

| *～▽～* |

On another note, Merry Christmas for when Christmas does arrive!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The storm lasted all day, finally settling as night fell and Madam Pomfrey reluctantly let Harry leave the Hospital Wing.

“You are not to strain that arm of yours,” she warned as she walked Harry to the door. “Because if you do, there will be hell to pay.”

“I’ll be good,” promised Harry, flexing his arm. “Besides, it feels alright. I’m sure that I can–”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Madam Pomfrey pointed out the door. “Now go. I have an electrocuted patient to tend to.”

She walked away, clicking her tongue. “Quidditch matches are always disasters.”

What Harry was fascinated by was that somebody had managed to get electrocuted in the thunderstorm. But he didn’t ask and hurried along before Madam Pomfrey could rethink her decision to release him.

Harry checked the time and saw that it was past eleven. By this time, Slughorn must have shut down the celebrations in the Slytherin common room, despite his own elation at the win. The Potions Master had made sure to pay Harry a visit while Madam Pomfrey forced various vials of medicines down his throat. Slughorn had entered the Hospital Wing, his face glowing beneath his moustache, and swiftly departed barely ten seconds later once he had seen Harry’s predicament. In those ten seconds, he had awkwardly patted Harry’s shoulder, who was mutinous from all the prodding Madam Pomfrey had done, and shaken Tom’s hand for being such a “supportive partner”.

That man really was a silly twit.

Of course, Tom had coddled Harry all day, which could have given anyone the wrong idea, before Madam Pomfrey had eventually sent Tom packing for being a distraction. She had still allowed
Hermione a short visit, as well as the Slytherin team and Ignatius, who brought Minerva McGonagall along to complement Harry’s flying.

The rest of the day passed without comment, with Harry stretching his healing arm every now and then and staring dully out the window. His breath clouded the glass as he watched over the grounds, wishing that he could leave.

Now, Harry was no longer so sure if he wanted to. Outside was frigid with the cold, and he was glad for the scarf that Tom had left behind. Tom’s scent had yet to fade from it, and Harry buried his nose into it, inhaling.

To be honest, it was a rather nice smell. It smelled like a place that he belonged. It smelled like home.

Walking down the empty corridors, Harry flinched sharply when something swooped above him, dropping a light object which bounced off his head. Glancing up, he saw that it was a tawny owl who passed him a disapproving look as if to say, “I’ve been looking all over for you, you know,” before flying back in the direction that it had come.

Harry looked down at the floor for the object that had clocked him over the head. An envelope was lying at his feet, and he stooped to pick it up, tearing it open to reveal the message inside.

“Lumos,” he whispered, pointing his wand at the writing.

To Mr. Harry Delacour,

I am pleased to invite you to the annual Slug Club Christmas party on the 20th of December at 8.00pm in my office on the sixth floor.

Please bring a date with you – the more the merrier!

Prof. Horace Slughorn

Harry stared at the invitation then flicked the light out, folding the invitation away.

“Great,” he mumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Really excellent. Now I have to find a bloody date.”

He supposed he had options. He could go with Hermione (though he imagined that Hermione would bring either Rowan Poole or Quincy Lovegood), or even drag Ignatius along which might cheer him up a little after his altercation with the Blacks. If worse came to worst, Harry supposed, he supposed that he could bring Crockett along as a joke, though he suspected that Crockett wouldn’t view it as so. Harry quickly binned that idea.

That was when he remembered somebody who he wasn’t exactly on good terms with anymore, though this particular person had been trying their hardest to get into Slug Club for a good while now.
Maybe Harry could kill two birds with one stone by asking Margot Greengrass to the Christmas party.

Harry looked outside through a window.

It had begun to snow.

***

The following morning, Harry woke before any of his roommates and dressed quickly, throwing on his uniform and a scarf for good measure. He could tell that today was going to be one of those days that he wanted to bundle up in a blanket like a burrito and not leave the fireplace.

He stormed into the Great Hall, a man on a mission, and his sights went directly to the blonde girl who was quietly drinking a cup of tea by herself, as always the early bird of Slytherin house.

“Margot,” he said loudly, summoning her attention. Her eyes narrowed slightly when she caught sight of him, but other than that her expression did not change.

“Harry,” she acknowledged, watching him shrewdly as she took another sip of tea. “What can I do for you?”

“Do you want to go to the Slug Club Christmas party with me?” blurted out Harry – there really was no other way of putting it. Margot stared at him in silence, her teacup still against her lips. Clamouring surrounded their bubble as students moved around them, oblivious to the scene playing out.

Finally, she said, “And why would I do that?”

“I…” Harry was mildly baffled, and beginning to also feel somewhat foolish. “Because isn’t that what friends do?”

Margot placed the teacup on the table and laced her fingers together. “Harry,” she began, smiling gently. “We have not spoken in a long time. We’ve both made our stances clear – I do not approve of Riddle, and you have joined his ranks. The question I ask is, are we even still friends?”

Harry looked at her in silence, turning the question over in his head, before finally saying, “If we exclude Hermione, you were my first ally here, Margot. You progressively became my first friend, and I’m sorry that I said some harsh things before. I really am. And true, Tom is a part of my life now. But… that didn’t make me stop considering you as my friend, and that’s the truth.”

Margot’s smile became smaller, sadder, and she drained her tea before standing. She pulled Harry in close as she murmured into his ear, “I’m happy that you think that. But times have changed, and things are different now. So no, I will not go to the Christmas party with you.”

She pulled away, and her eyes were regretful when she looked past Harry’s shoulder. “You’re already spoken for.”

With that said, she pulled her book bag over her shoulder and walked away. Harry turned to watch her leave the Great Hall, thoroughly bewildered, and saw that Tom was striding towards him, a frown etched into his face.

“Harry,” he said when they were face to face. “I woke up and you were already gone. Is something the matter?”
“No,” said Harry quickly, then he tugged at the ends of the scarf he was wearing and admitted, “Well… yes.”

Tom’s eyes immediately latched onto the scarf, and Harry blushed, muttering, “Sorry, I don’t have a scarf of my own. I should probably give this back to you.”

“No,” interjected Tom, and he straightened the scarf around Harry’s neck. “Keep it. I like seeing you wear it.”

Harry thought that his face might melt off from embarrassment.

“Have you eaten yet?” asked Tom, clicking his tongue in disapproval when Harry shook his head.

“Not really hungry.”

“At least drink something warm, then.” Tom found a mug of hot tea on the Slytherin table and pushed it into Harry’s hands. “It’s snowing outside if you haven’t noticed.”

“Oh, I noticed.” Harry took a sip of the herbal tea, and it warmed him to his fingertips. There was a moment of silence during which Harry looked anywhere but at Tom before it was finally broken.

“Walk with me?” asked Tom, and the request with tentative. Harry shot him an astonished glance. People did not simply ‘walk’ with Tom Riddle. Or so he had thought.

“Alright,” he relented, leaving the tea and following Tom out of the Great Hall.

He was led out into the courtyard, which was devoid of any other students in these early hours of the morning and thick with the snow which was falling from the pale sky.

Harry turned his face upwards, allowing flakes to gather on his skin. Icy, sharp. This was what he liked about snow. It numbed him.

“You said that something was wrong?” asked Tom, facing Harry. Harry brought his face back down, brushing snowflakes off his skin.

“That’s right,” he said and grinned sheepishly. “When I was coming back from the Hospital Wing last night, I got Slughorn’s invitation to the Christmas party. It said to bring a date with you, and a few days isn’t a very long time to find a date in my opinion.”

Harry laughed, recalling the disaster of the Yule Ball. “Nor am I a very good date to have.”

“About that,” began Tom.

“I asked Margot.” Harry looked to his feet. “She said no.”

“You asked Greengrass?” Tom’s face darkened.

“I thought we could go as friends.” Harry’s voice sounded small to his own ears, and Tom’s eyes softened.

And then there, in a white courtyard with snow falling like feathers around them, Tom Riddle asked Harry Potter to attend Horace Slughorn’s Slug Club Christmas party with him.

A moment for the history books, Harry would later think. But at the time, he stood frozen, not really registering the question, until he opted to say, “Could you repeat that?”
There was a sparkle in Tom’s dark blue eyes, and he dutifully repeated, “Would you like to go to the Christmas party with me?”

Harry swore that Slughorn requested that his guests bring dates just for the dramas that ensued.

“O-okay,” he stammered, looking down and pulling at a loose thread on the cuff of his sleep. “Are you sure? I mean, yes, I would love to.”

Tom opened his mouth, but Harry didn’t want to hear it – what if he laughed, said that he had only been joking? That was a type of humiliation that Harry would not stand for.

“I have to go now,” he jabbered, spinning around and fleeing—no, calmly strolling out of the courtyard.

Except that as soon as he was out of sight, he took off at a pelt and found himself directly at the entrance to the Ravenclaw common room.

There was a bronze knocker in the shape of an eagle on the door, and when it spoke, Harry jumped.

“I can start a war, or end one,” it declared.

“Good for you,” said Harry, but then it continued and he realised that this was his riddle.

“I can give you the strength of heroes or leave you powerless. I might be snared with a glance, but no force can compel me to stay. What am I?”

Harry eyed the knocker and said, “I don’t want to enter, can you just tell Hermione that I’m here or something? Send a message, anything?”

The knocker was silent and Harry groaned loudly, running a hand through his hair. He didn’t have time to solve a riddle – he had just, somehow, become Tom’s date to the Christmas party and he was no longer sure where he stood in this whole matter.

Luckily, the door swung open at that moment and out came Quincy, Hermione by his side. Astonishingly, Poole was not in sight.

“Harry!” said Hermione, pleased when she caught sight of a somewhat ruffled Harry. “What are you doing here, so early? Did the snow wake you up? It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“I’m having a little grief, and I need somebody to talk to.” Harry flashed Hermione’s companion a brief smile. “Hi, Quincy.”

“Good morning, Harry Delacour.” Quincy’s startlingly violet eyes met Harry’s. “Spiritually, snow symbolises the unknown. It makes you wonder what really lies beneath the layer of white.”

“Excuse me?”

“I can see that you will be speaking to your cousin for a little while.” Quincy continued down the spiral staircase which led to the main corridor. “Remember, Harry, nothing is as it appears.”

“Quincy will be Quincy.” Hermione’s laughter was tinkling, the bursting off little bubbles on the surface of an effervescent beverage. “I’m curious, what was the riddle that the knocker asked you? Did you make a dent in it?”

“No,” said Harry indignantly. “I wasn’t trying to enter, I just wanted to see you.”
“Repeat the riddle, knocker,” said Hermione, ignoring Harry, and the bronze eagle recited, “I can start a war, or end one. I can give you the strength of heroes or leave you powerless. I might be snared with a glance, but no force can compel me to stay. What am I?”

“Gobbledygook,” said Harry.

“That’s an easy one, it’s love.” Hermione grinned when Harry sputtered, turning bright red again. “Oh dear, Harry, your grief doesn’t have anything to do with Slughorn’s party invitation which was sent out last night, does it?”

“Well…” Harry twiddled his thumbs, blinking rapidly. “Since we’re back on, you know, speaking terms, I thought that I could confide in you that there have been recent developments in—”

The Ravenclaw door opened, and a short girl with a head of frazzled hair floated out, humming to herself as she adjusted the bangles around her wrists and the rings on her fingers.

Harry instinctively took a step back from this alien-like creature.

Then the girl’s head snapped around, her magnified eyes from behind thick spectacles taking note of Hermione and Harry’s presence.

“Sybill,” greeted Hermione, her tone lukewarm, and Harry bit back a smirk. So he and the fabled Trelawney finally met.

“Hermione,” returned Trelawney, her eyes fixing to Harry’s face. “Who is this troubled boy?”

Harry began to object that if he was a boy, she was an infant, but Hermione got in first. “This is Harry, my cousin,” she said.

“But of course!” Trelawney fluttered over to Harry, waving her hands in front of his face and picking at the air as if there were invisible cards floating around him. “You are a fascinating one… I see fear, so much fear… there’s regret, such strong regret! And it’s fuelling a deep-seated fury that you may not even be conscious of… goodness gracious me…”

Before Harry could protest, Trelawney seized his hand and flipped it over to examine his palm. Just as he mustered the strength to yank himself out of her grip, Trelawney stumbled backwards, releasing him as she gasped loudly and clutched a hand to her heart.

“What is it now?” sighed Hermione, but then Trelawney whirled on her, startling Hermione enough that she managed to grab her palm and gaze down at the lines, all the while shaking her head.

“It all aligns, it all aligns…” Trelawney backed away, interchanging her gaze between Harry and Hermione and murmuring prayers beneath her breath. “The two of you… are cursed with death!”

She turned and fled down the staircase as if she couldn’t bear to look at them a moment longer.

“She’s still like this, huh,” said Harry, awestruck. “Still the same old Trelawney.”

“I know.” Hermione scoffed and they began down the staircase. “I have to put up with that every day. Yesterday, she was spouting nonsense about Rowan becoming the unfortunate victim of manslaughter.”

“There is something very wrong with your house.”

“It’s one person.” Hermione grimaced.
“Speaking of people,” said Harry, casting exaggerated glances about the place, “where is your usual entourage? I’m primarily referring to Poole, of course.”

Hermione bit her lip and trained her eyes on the ground in front of them as they walked. “We had a bit of an altercation after the Quidditch match yesterday.”

“You don’t need that bag of dirt anyway,” Harry promptly offered.

“He’s not a bag of dirt,” said Hermione without much enthusiasm. “He just has such a strong and unfounded dislike for you. I don’t understand it.”

“I can’t say that I’m overly fond of him myself.” Harry shrugged. “Bag of dirt and all.”

“I know you dislike him, but that’s different, and I’ve finally started to see it.” Hermione looped her arm through Harry’s and pressed herself against him as they passed through the corridors, the cold finally beginning to seep into her bones. “It’s as though Rowan has some sort of vendetta against you.”

“Hermione,” said Harry seriously, “most people have vendettas against me nowadays.”

“But not here.” She lowered her voice as other students passed by them. “Nobody knows you here, nobody has any reason for it.”

“Poole’s got a massive, teenage boy crush on you,” said Harry. “That’s reason enough. He probably just thinks I’m competition or something.”

“We’re cousins,” argued Hermione.

“And incest isn’t that uncommon, apparently.” Harry sneered. “Just look at the Black family.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I don’t want to talk about this. Firstly, where did you get that scarf, because I want one.”

“Um,” Harry stammered. “I’m borrowing it from somebody.”

Hermione looked at him with vague suspicion in her eyes. “I can tell that there’s a story there, but before I extract that from you, you’re going to tell me what you wanted to talk to me about in the first place.”

“Ah, yes.” Harry latched onto the opportunity to change subject, but his face fell when he realised that it really wasn’t that much of a subject change. “About Slughorn’s party… and the whole date thing. I… might have a date.”

“Well, that’s surprising,” said Hermione. “No offence, it’s just that your head is usually so far up your arsehole that you wouldn’t notice a person flirting with you if they were stark naked and asking you to—”

“Hermione!” Mortified by both the content of her sentence and that fact that it was coming out of Hermione’s mouth, Harry felt like sinking into the earth. “Don’t talk like that! Blimey, has Ron heard you talking like that?”

Hermione flushed. “Well, other people’s language can rub off on you.”

“Then I want to know who you’ve been speaking to.”

“Who is your date, Harry?” Hermione interrupted, no longer wishing to dwell on the previous
subject, and Harry stumbled.

“Well, he is a certain strikingly handsome individual,” he dragged out.

“Are we playing a guessing game?” Hermione yielded. “I thought that only girls did this, you should have heard Lavender and Parvati sometimes… alright, strikingly handsome… Ignatius Prewett? He is undeniably very attractive.”

“No. Um, he is very talented…”

“Heaven forbid, is it Crockett?”

“Some may consider him to be more reserved than Crockett.”

“Malciber? Black?”

“I think that he is secretly a bit of a gentleman.”

Hermione turned her head to scowl at Harry. “Are you pulling my leg? Because I doubt that there exists a person who is handsome, talented and reserved at the same time, much less a gentleman to boot.”

“And his future self may or may not be out for my blood.” Harry’s voice shrunk to a pea’s size. Hermione’s face swept clear of emotion – it was startling how he could observe it as it happened.

“Riddle asked you to be his date?” she said.

“Yes.” Harry hastily tacked on, “But I’m sure it’s just as friends.”

“Just as friends,” Hermione echoed, and her eyebrows were nearly at her hairline. “Did he say those words?”

“Well, no.” They began the trudge through the courtyard, and Harry surreptitiously scoped out the place to make sure that Tom had left. “But I just assumed–”

“Don’t just assume these things, Harry.” Hermione caught a snowflake on her tongue before levelling a disapproving look on him. “This is why you never have much luck in love.”

Harry thought of Cho Chang, he thought of Ginny Weasley, and he felt horrible. “And I suppose that you have luck?”

Hermione quirked an eyebrow, mildly offended. “This isn’t about me. This is about Riddle who is now supposedly vying for your affection.”

“Vying? There is no vying, and I highly doubt that it’s for my affection, this is Tom we’re talking about. I doubt that the word ‘affection’ is part of his vocabulary.”

But then he recalled Tom wrapping him up in a scarf, spending the day as Harry’s company in the Hospital Wing, and his sudden, compulsive need to make sure that Harry was always well-fed.

Maybe he had been blind all along.

“Call it what you like.” Hermione waved a dismissive hand. “But whatever you do, be careful. Promise me that. If you’re going to spend the entire night together, you’re going to follow Mad-Eye Moody’s rule. Which is…?”

“I don’t want a repeat of Jenkins. You were caught off guard by someone you didn’t suspect, and Riddle may catch you off guard because you trust him, of all things.” His companion leaned her head against his shoulder, her grip tightening on his arm. “If only you’d exercise self-preservation more often. Honestly, you worry me sick.”

“Yes, I trust Tom.” Harry stubbornly stuck to his opinion. “And I think that he may trust me, too. Maybe.”

“These are dangerous times.” They entered the Great Hall and Hermione released Harry, swivelling on her heels to look at him soberly. “I want you to let me have your back.”

“I am letting you,” insisted Harry, glancing toward the Slytherin table. The usual troupe were seated now, tucking into breakfast, and their ringleader was nowhere in sight. “But there are other people, too, guarding my other sides.”

“Like Riddle.” Hermione’s tone was flat.

“Yes, like Tom, and Ignatius and Lestrange. Margot. Maybe even Crockett.” Harry pulled away from her. “Look, I should get going. Last day of class to prepare for and all that…”

“You have a free period first up,” reminded Hermione.

“And there is lots to prepare!” Harry held up one finger. “Such as, should I do Transfiguration—” he brought up another finger “—or should I do Potions?”

“You’re ridiculous,” huffed Hermione, moving towards the Ravenclaw table, and as soon as her back was turned, Harry let out a sigh of relief.

Whenever she started on Tom, he knew that he had to swiftly defuse the bomb that might otherwise go off as had already happened before. He didn’t want to fight with Hermione, not again, but as of late, they had begun to wrangle horns over more than one issue.

Their time in separate houses was beginning to take its toll on their relationship, and for the first time, Harry wondered whether if this had been their original sorting, would they have ever become friends in the first place?

“Hey,” said Harry, coming to stand behind his usual company at the Slytherin table. “Have you seen Tom around?”

“We assumed that he was with you,” said Mulciber haughtily, his silvery eyes like shards of glass. “Him having you on a leash and all.”

Harry bristled, and Lestrange piped up, “Let’s all calm down for a moment. I know that energy’s high with all this romance in the air—”

“Romance?” repeated Harry, alarmed. “Who said anything about romance?”

“Slughorn’s Christmas event,” said Lestrange slowly, as if testing Harry’s intelligence. “Dates. All the opportunities to ask those who we sorely wish to spend a heart-throbbingly perfect night with.”

“Right.” Harry ducked his head. If he became any more paranoid, then people would be able to read his mind as easily as his face. “Romance. Dates. Obviously. You know, I think I’ll head to the library now, I’ve got lots to do…”
He rushed off, flustered, hearing a mutter of, “What’s got him so worked up?” before he was out of earshot.

This was bad. This was very, very bad.

Could it be, that after all this time, he had only just figured out that maybe, *maybe*, he had a teensy tiny bit of a crush on Tom?

“Correction,” said Harry’s meddling brain. “You may be infatuated with him. Haven’t you noticed the dopamine rushes to your brain after so long? It happens every single time you see him. And just think about the way you look at him. Think of those deep sea eyes that you want to drown in… Perhaps it’s overdue that the limerence kicks in…”

Harry pressed a hand to his heart and swore under his breath.

Surely he wasn’t stupid enough to fall for his potential enemy… was he?

***

“Class dismissed,” said Professor Gwin. “Except for you, Mr. Poole. I wish to have a word with you about your most recent assignment, please.”

The rest of the class surged to their feet, scrambling out the small door like sardines in a tin.

“Have you ever considered false memory charms?” Nott asked Tom in a low voice as they pushed out of the Ancient Runes classroom. “All you need to do is use Legilimency on him to discover any links to Mudbloods, then you can alter–”

“Hey, Delacour!” Lestrange elbowed Nott out of the way to push through the barrier of students swarming out of the classroom, and Tom’s heart leapt in his chest, Nott’s words immediately fleeing his mind. His eyes scanned over the students, seeking out Harry, who had actually agreed to be Tom’s date to the Christmas party.

Tom wanted to laugh in Crockett’s face. Straight as a pipeline, his arse. If only Crockett had seen the pretty blush on Harry’s face, the demure manner in which he lowered his eyes and burrowed deeper into his scarf, *Tom’s* scarf.

Harry would be his, *his*, a hundred times over, and it was high time that he staked his claim.

To his disappointment, Lestrange was only calling Hermione Delacour, who was mulling over a textbook as she walked. Tom hated to admit it, but over time he had come to realise that she really was a bright witch. Not that she rivalled his own intelligence whatsoever, of course.

Delacour’s mind was clearly in some other dimension because when Lestrange’s hand landed on her shoulder after calling her name several times, she jumped sky-high before turning to glare at him.

“Whatever is Peregrine up to?” murmured Tom to Nott, whose mouth had dropped open so that he resembled a stunned fish.

“We didn’t think that he’d actually have the balls to do it,” said Nott. “Especially with the deadline creeping in, and him being so chummy with Harry…”

“He’s not chummy with Harry,” snapped Tom, his mind scooting back to the beginning of September to recall the bet between Lestrange and Rosier. It appeared that Lestrange was finally
trying to shag Delacour. Amazing.

He decided to stand back with Nott and watch the show.

“I was hoping that I could study with you later today,” Lestrange was saying charmingly, his fingers snaking down Delacour’s arm. “Tonight, even.”

Delacour looked severely uncomfortable as she shrugged herself out of Lestrange’s grip. “I already have study partners,” she said.

“Oh, come on, I’m sure that they can live without you for a night.” Lestrange winked, dragging his gaze lecherously down Delacour’s body. “I need help with some homework, and people say that you’re the best for the job.”

“I wouldn’t study with you if you were the last human on earth, Lestrange,” said Delacour, her voice like ice. “Now, if you’d excuse me. I’m meant to be meeting someone here—”

“Hermione?” Harry’s gently lilted French accent rang through the corridor, and Tom saw Delacour relax minutely at his arrival. “I was waiting for you further down the corridor, you’re late—”

Harry’s gaze cut straight to Lestrange, who was practically undressing Delacour with his eyes, and he frowned. “Am I missing something here…?”

“No,” said Delacour, but Harry clearly read between the lines, since he took a step in front of Delacour, his body a barrier between his cousin and Lestrange.

“I’m just talking to her, Hardwin,” said Lestrange, grinning wolfishly as he tugged on his tie. “A guy and a girl can talk, can’t they?”

“I think we should go, Harry,” began Delacour, nudging Harry’s shoulder, but Harry didn’t budge.

“What were you saying to her?” he asked, and his tone was black.

“What are you so suspicious about?” Lestrange gave a little laugh, smiling down at Harry as if he were an adorable little doll. “I didn’t realise that it was illegal to talk to classmates.”

“Then why did she look so uncomfortable?” snapped Harry.

Merlin, Tom loved seeing him like this. So defensive, and so aggressive at the same time. Tom’s scarf, still wound around the green-eyed boy’s neck, was just the icing on the cake.

“I was only proposing that we could study together tonight.” Lestrange leaned around Harry to speak to Delacour. “No harm in that, just a little fun…”

Delacour took a step back, and Harry took a step forward.

“Back off, Lestrange,” he warned, eyes like chips of crystals. How such a small, delicate boy could be so dangerous was beyond Tom.

“Don’t be rigid, Hardwin,” said Lestrange. “I’m sure that your cousin will agree with me once she’s screaming my—”

Tom never found out exactly what Delacour would be screaming, because Harry darted forward and landed a solid punch on Lestrange’s nose.

“Harry!” Delacour shrieked as Lestrange stumbled backwards, tripping over his own feet and
fetching up on the floor. He stared up at Harry in awe as he held his nose, blood dribbling out of his nostrils.

Tom burst out into laughter, doubling over as tears streamed down his face.

Nott took a step away from him, looking utterly terrified, and when finally Tom stifled his laughter and glanced in Harry’s direction, he saw that the boy looked equally as astonished by the outburst.

“Fuck,” said Lestrange, shocked, and he brought his hand away from his nose to examine the blood on his finger. “You do pack a punch, don’t you, Hardwin?”

“What is going on out here?” Professor Gwin poked her head out of the classroom, as did Poole – Tom had completely forgotten that they were there.

“I can explain, Professor,” said Delacour, stepping forwards and pushing Harry behind her.

“Great Merlin!” cried Gwin when she caught sight of Lestrange on the ground, his face all bloody. “Somebody tell me what is going on at once!”

“Hermione!” Poole surged forwards, running straight to his darling dearest, eyes slightly insane. “Are you alright?”

“She’s perfectly alright, Poole,” sneered Harry from behind Delacour, and Poole puffed up like an offended ball.

“You–” he began, but Lestrange cut him short, pulling himself to his feet.

“It’s my fault, Professor,” he said, a resigned note to his voice. “I provoked Hardwin– I mean Harry, and he retaliated.”

“I can vouch for Peregrine’s words,” said Tom calmly, and Gwin’s eyes darted over to him.

“Mr. Riddle,” she said wildly. “You are Head Boy, explain to me your role in this… this matter.”

“He and Nott were just bystanders,” interjected Harry. “I didn’t even notice that they were here until after the… after I…”

“And don’t some consider bystanders to be just as bad as the bully?” Gwin straightened her back and frowned down over all of them, scattering her judgement. “I am disappointed that Mr. Riddle and Mr. Nott did not come and fetch me when this began, and I am disappointed in you, Mr. Lestrange, for defending the one who clearly attacked you–”

“I was making unwanted sexual advances on Hermione Delacour, and Harry was simply being a good cousin and defended her,” said Lestrange sharply. “That is all, Professor Gwin.”

“Sexual… advances…?” Gwin’s jaw hung on a loose hinge for a moment and Poole let out an almost comical gasp of outrage. “This is… Mr. Lestrange… I thought better of you… come back into my classroom with me immediately, I wish to speak with you in private. The rest of you are dismissed.”

Lestrange dug through his bag and pulled out a dragon-hide pouch, tossing it in Nott’s direction. Nott fumbled to catch it.
“Give Caspian Rosier—” Lestrange spat the name out like a tooth “—twenty Galleons for me when you see him next, would you? I couldn’t bear to look at him…”

He retreated into the classroom, and Gwin passed them all fleeting glances before slamming the door shut behind them.

“Wow, he lost the bet,” said Nott, jangling the dragon-hide pouch before tucking it into his own bag. “That’s a first.”

“Which bet?” asked Harry sharply, and Nott reddened, avoiding his gaze.

“Um,” he muttered, checking his watch. “Ah, is that time? I, um, need to go and, uh, meet with the mermaid in the restricted section…”

“There is no mermaid in the restricted section,” said Harry.

“Goodbye, everyone!” Nott all but fled the scene of the crime.

“Everything is really completely fine, Rowan,” Delacour was saying to Poole, and then Poole whipped around, rounding on Harry.

“This is your fault!” he snarled. “You’re the one who built the bridge for your friends to cross so that they could harass Hermione!”

“Oh, shut up,” retorted Harry. “Don’t talk about things you don’t understand.”

“I understand that you’re allowing people to lay their filthy hands on Hermione—”

“Rowan,” said Delacour calmly. “If you hadn’t noticed, Harry punched Lestrange.”

“I would have cursed him to Hell and back,” snapped Poole.

“I don’t need your protection!” hissed back Delacour, finally losing her cool. “I don’t need anybody’s protection, I am not a damsel in distress!”

“This domestic that we are witnessing is very entertaining,” interrupted Tom smoothly, and three pairs of eyes shot in his direction, “but if you haven’t forgotten, there is a professor one wall away from us, and I don’t fancy losing house points over your petty little argument.”

Poole’s eyes flashed, and Tom tilted his chin upwards, casting his darkest look upon the Mudblood. He would not allow somebody of such low class to speak to his Harry in such a filthy manner.

Almost immediately, Poole yielded and he lowered his gaze, letting out a small “tch” before stalking down the corridor and out of sight.

Tom turned his gaze back to Harry and Delacour. Delacour was gripping Harry’s arm as if to restrain him from throwing another punch. Tom frowned and stepped forwards, dragging Harry out of his cousin’s grip and examining his face.

“Are you alright, Harry?” he demanded. “Are you feeling light-headed? Did you hurt your knuckles?”

“A little,” muttered Harry, shaking out his hand. “Lestrange has got a sharp little nose. But it isn’t as though I haven’t punched anyone before. I’m fine.”
“Don’t be so dismissive.” Tom tucked Harry under his arm, where he would be safe. “I think that I should take you to the Hospital Wing, just in case.”

“For goodness’ sake, Riddle,” intervened Delacour, stepping in front of him to block off his path. “Harry doesn’t need the Hospital Wing, he isn’t an ice sculpture which could shatter at the slightest pressure!”

“I think that the safety of Harry’s health is worth a check-in,” replied Tom haughtily, his lip curling slightly. “You may not need it, but I require a little reassurance.”

“Can we not–” begged Harry.

“Sh, Harry,” said Delacour crossly, before addressing Tom again. “How dare you suggest that I don’t care for Harry’s health!”

“Then prove that you do!” Tom heard his voice beginning to rise, but then Harry’s hand found his, squeezing lightly, and those bright green eyes peered up at him beseeching.

Stop it. Harry’s silent words rung, blunt as a spoon, through Tom’s head, and he drew in a deep breath, falling silent.

“Hermione,” said Harry softly, gazing at his cousin seriously. “May I speak to Tom?”

Delacour didn’t move, her mutinous gaze remaining on Tom.

“Alone.” Harry’s tone sharpened, and Delacour let out a small puff of air, tearing her eyes away from Tom as she gave a small nod and walked away, her shoulders almost as high as her ears.

“Harry,” said Tom, allowing his aloof façade to slip now that everybody was gone. “You worried me. Don’t do that again.”

“You don’t need to baby me,” countered Harry, his eyebrows dipping downwards. “Hermione does that enough.”

“I know.” Tom shook his head – his thoughts were so irrational right now. “I’m just not accustomed to what you did. It was hilarious, don’t get me wrong, but it was such a... such a Gryffindor thing to do.”

Harry’s lips tugged upwards, and he tightened his grip on Tom’s hand. “I’m more than just a Slytherin,” he said.

Tom wanted very much to question this remark further, but then Harry was dragging him down the corridor and Tom followed willingly.

“That drama has made me hungry,” More-Than-Just-A-Slytherin said. “And we also need to discuss some things.”

“Things?” inquired Tom, and Harry turned his gaze downwards.

“Things like us going to the Christmas party together,” he said shyly, and Tom’s heart stuttered painfully. “And whether it’s as friends or not.”

“No,” said Tom, perhaps a little too fiercely due to Harry’s startled laugh. “I mean, if you’ll have me, that is.”

Harry paused in his tracks, releasing Tom’s hand.
I said something wrong, thought Tom, cursing himself.

But then Harry grabbed the lapels of Tom’s blazer, pulling the Head Boy down to his height.

“I’ll have you,” he whispered, a spark in his eyes, and he pressed a soft kiss to Tom’s cheek to seal the promise.

Chapter End Notes

#when your bestie doesn’t approve of your boyfriend
So we’ll have Sluggy’s Christmas get-together next chapter, look out for it :D
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Harry would lose this new game they were playing, and as the winner, Tom would savour watching the vanquished fall.

Chapter Notes

I hope you all had a great Christmas (if you celebrate it). :) I shall now gift you all a fluffy chapter which you probably deserve after twenty-two chapters of shit. Writing most of this chapter was like pulling teeth out for some reason, but my English Writing teacher always taught me that resilience is key in writing! SO I PERSISTED FOR ALL YOU LOVELY READERS. I hope it turned out alright.

Word travelled the school quickly that Tom Riddle was courting Harry Delacour.

“Courting,” spat Harry as he and Hermione ambled through the school idly. The Christmas holidays had begun, and many students had already left to spend Christmas with their families. A number had elected to stay at Hogwarts, while others were remaining for an extra day to attend Slughorn’s Christmas convention.

“I’m not going to pretend I’m happy about it,” said Hermione flatly.

“But who even says ‘courting’?” Harry kicked at the snow beneath his feet, the cold stinging his cheeks and nose. “They make it sound so… ostentatious.”

“We’re in the 1940s wizarding world, Harry. It’s what people say.”

“Tch.” Harry glanced to his right – there were a few Slytherin girls sitting on a bench and watching him. They immediately lowered their eyes and tittered when they saw him looking at them.

Things had been like this since the student body had discovered that he and Tom had gotten together. It wasn’t a difficult conclusion to come to. Tom had taken to holding Harry’s hand wherever they went, glaring at anybody who dared come too near.

Crockett seemed pissed off – probably because he couldn’t flirt at Harry anymore, though then again, he flirted with whatever had a pulse so Harry didn’t take it to heart. Ignatius was mildly disgruntled by the development, as he voiced to Harry, but otherwise appeared to be unperturbed. With an exception to Mulciber, Tom’s crowd found the whole matter amusing (Rosier had been oddly cheerful of late, for a reason unknown to Harry, but it probably had something to do with the bet that Nott refused to elaborate on). And then there was Hermione.

If Crockett was pissed off, then Hermione was downright livid. She hid it well, but Harry knew her well. He could see darkness surface in her eyes when she thought that he wasn’t looking.
Most people from the other houses avoided Harry like the plague, as if he had become an extension of the intimidating Head Boy himself, and the Slytherins would giggle behind their hands but otherwise treat him with respect as they hadn’t done before.

Those Slytherin girls were the perfect example.

Harry wasn’t precisely sure of what to do about these changes and did his best to ignore them.

“How is your good friend Poole, by the way?” he asked, and if it was possible, Hermione deflated even more.

“I don’t know what to do about him.” She sighed heavily, tugging her sweater sleeves down over her knuckles. “He barely speaks to me anymore, but I’m also glad of it. I wouldn’t know what to say to him anymore. Things are so awkward now.”

“How about Quincy?” Harry knew Quincy Lovegood to be one of Poole’s oldest friends, and he wondered whether any other relationships had been affected by this bump in the road.

“Quincy thinks that Rowan’s being unreasonable.” Hermione gave a soft laugh. “He is so much like Luna, it’s uncanny. He can give the impression that he’s completely oblivious to everything that’s going on around him, but he’s not. Because Rowan is giving me the silent treatment, Quincy has stepped in to keep me company. He’s a sweet one.”

“That’s good.” At least Hermione wasn’t lonely in her own house. “So, who are you taking to the Christmas party with all these dramas of yours?”

“Quincy.” Hermione sighed. “He deserves it. Besides, taking Rowan wasn’t an option for me, not with everything that has been happening.”

“Good riddance,” said Harry with relish. Then he paused. “Um. I can’t believe it only just occurred to me, but what are you doing for dress robes?”

“I’m also astonished that it only just occurred to you,” said Hermione crossly. “The party is tomorrow night, you realise?”

Harry reddened. “I had other things on my mind.”

“Well, you can thank your lucky stars that you have me.” Hermione shook her head. “I may not be a very good seamstress, but I’m strong in Transfiguration if I do say so myself.”

“You’re going to Transfigure yourself some dress robes?”

“Well, they’re too expensive to ask for a loan from Dumbledore. And I’ve already Transfigured myself some.” Hermione took a step back from Harry to evaluate him from head to toe. “I’m going to Transfigure some for you.”

“You… I…” with his mouth hanging open, Harry was sure that he looked like a complete idiot before he finally managed, “You would do that for me?”

“I think that we’ve established that I would do a lot for you,” snapped Hermione.

Harry leapt forward and pulled Hermione into a crushing hug, grinning from ear to ear. “Have I ever told you that you are an actual life saver?”

“Perhaps once or twice.” His friend sounded somewhat pleased, if muffled by his shoulder. “But
one can never hear it enough. I’m going to need your measurements, of course. And you’re going to have to get ready with me tomorrow.”

“I’m not going into the girls’ dormitory with you,” argued Harry, mortified.

“Yes, you are.” Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. “The Ravenclaw girls’ dormitories are not spelled against boys like the Gryffindor ones are. I’m the only seventh-year Ravenclaw girl at Hogwarts at the moment, so you can use it freely.”

“But…” Harry had little to say to this.

“Please, Harry.” Hermione dropped the scary act and smiled winningly in a most un-Hermione-like manner. “I promise I’ll make you look good. Your boyfriend won’t even recognise you.”

Harry sputtered. “He’s not my– I mean, he is, but can you say that in less of a lofty tone?”

“It’s just–” Hermione sent a swift glance about to make sure that there was no one in earshot “– you’re not even gay, Harry! Last time I looked, you were still hung up over Ginny!”

“I can’t help it if I like Tom, Hermione,” retorted Harry, stung. “Maybe I’m not gay, but there are other sexualities out there, you know.”

Hermione groaned, slapping a hand to her forehead. “I know, I know, that was an awfully rude thing of me to say. But are you sure about Riddle? Absolutely sure? Because if you have any doubts, even just one, you need to back out now. I have a gut feeling that you really shouldn’t–”

“Trust him?” asked Harry bitterly. “I know perfectly well that you don’t trust him, you say so about a gazillion times a day. But does this gut feeling of yours have any evidence to support it?”

Hermione’s eyes were very shiny when she looked at him. “You go with your gut feelings every day, Harry. Aren’t I allowed to do so for once?”

A rush of shame surged through Harry, sending a cringe down his spine. It occurred to him, for the first time, how hypocritical he was being. If their positions had been reversed, he probably would have been acting the exact same way as her, if not worse.

“Can we not talk about this?” he muttered, averting his gaze. Imagining Hermione falling for Tom was not something he was in the mood for stomaching. “I have to go meet Tom in the library now anyway.”

Hermione’s ears perked up. “Why?” she asked.

“Potions thesis.”

“You’re going to study with him,” demanded Hermione, “but refuse to do so with me?”

“Will you stop guilt tripping me?” said Harry, a growl in his voice.

“Fine.” Hermione threw her hands in the air. “Fine. But for what it’s worth, I’m not guilt tripping you – I’m saying it as I see it.”

“Whatever.” Harry stalked away from her, shoving his hands into his pockets. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The exasperation abruptly drained from Hermione’s voice when she asked, “I won’t see you at all for the rest of the day?”
“Probably not,” Harry called over his shoulder, drawing in a deep, calming breath. It was the holidays. The holidays were the perfect time to stop thinking about everything. Even a time-traveller like himself should be given that opportunity, what with all the stress that was going to turn his hair prematurely grey.

Harry glanced back to Hermione. From the distance he had covered, she was but a small, lonely figure in a white wonderland. Regret clawed its way up his ribcage to grip his heart. But he couldn’t help it if they saw things from different angles. He couldn’t be blamed for their differences.

Keeping this in mind, Harry hurried indoors, all the while snow angels fell from the gathering storm clouds in the sky.

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Tom closed the door to the restricted section, returning to the main sector of the library. His mind was swarming with unexplored ideas gathered from the many texts he had read on false memory charms.

How he had not thought of false memory charms before Nott, he did not know. But Legilimency he had. As of late, he had been prodding into Harry’s mind gently when the other boy was least expecting it. As they were taking notes in class. When Tom kissed snowflakes off his eyelashes. It was too easy, really. Already, Tom had caught glimpses of the smile of a redhead woman who shared Harry’s beautiful green eyes; he had heard the bright laughter of a gangly, freckled boy; he had seen Hermione Delacour’s usually sharp, deep brown eyes soften; he had felt the unadulterated pain of watching a handsome, dark-haired man slump back into a veil, never again to reappear.

Tom had seen into Harry’s soul, and it was more addictive than any drug could ever be.

He found a quiet corner in the library, laying out his books on the table just as Harry arrived, his mouth twisted in a manner which suggested that he had been deep in thought.

“I’m not late, am I?” asked the green-eyed boy, unloading his own books on the table.

“I only just arrived myself,” Tom lied, adjusting the seating arrangement so that he could sit directly next to Harry. He peered at Harry’s Potions work, at the endearingly messy handwriting. “Where are you up to?”

“I’m discussing brewing techniques which might extend the time frame during which the effects of Felix Felicis last.” Harry scowled, sinking into the chair next to Tom. “I’m not entirely sure why I’m doing the Potions N.E.W.T. level, you know.”

“Because Potions is a very important subject to be educated in,” reasoned Tom, winding his arm around Harry’s waist and pulling him in close. Harry leaned into the embrace, allowing Tom to inhale his scent. Harry always smelled like a wood nymph – like running water, pine needles, a rushing breeze. Maybe it was from all that Quidditch, but whatever it was, it was intoxicating.

“Ha,” said Harry with a snort of derision, and he pulled away slightly so that he could bend over his parchment and begin writing.

Tom grabbed the opportunity to sneak past the defences of Harry’s mind. It was always more difficult to perform Legilimency when their eyes were not in contact, but Tom didn’t wish to risk Harry discovering what was happening and so willingly took the extra strain. Especially since, Tom thought, Harry might have a clue that he was a Legilimens.
It had been during their first meeting on the first day of September, when Harry had arrived at the Slytherin common room late, and Tom had let him in. He recalled poking the new boy’s mind, to which Harry had yanked up a clumsy shield – a budding Occlumens, apparently.

Now, Tom took greater care when slinking into his mind, since said mind was sensitive to the invasion of unwanted persons.

Once safely past Harry’s defensive walls, Tom cast out his line, fishing for ‘Mudblood’.

A hazy image of a blonde boy with a sneer on his face floated into existence.

“Mudblood,” Tom heard the boy spit, right into the face of a younger Hermione Delacour. Her features were softer then, there was no hard light in her eyes. They were barely into their teenage years.

So Delacour was a Mudblood. That could be of use.

Tom reeled in his line and cast another out, this time in search of ‘Muggle-born’.

Delacour surfaced again, her face full of laughter. There was also a small boy with mousy hair, holding a clunky Muggle camera like none that Tom had ever seen before, and a woman. The one with the green eyes.

Tom retreated from Harry’s mind before he began to push his luck, sitting in thoughtful silence as Harry continued his work, completely oblivious to what Tom had done.

Tom tightened his grip around Harry’s waist slightly. That woman – his deceased mother, surely – was another Mudblood with a close connection to Harry.

A connection which could be exploited on a later occasion, after Tom had investigated further.

False memory charms, indeed.

***

The following day was spent solely in Hermione’s company.

With the decreased Hogwarts population, only one house table remained in the Great Hall, which all students sat at. Over breakfast, Harry had suffered through Hermione and Tom glaring at each other from their respective sides of the table, all the while doing his best to ignore the withering stare that Poole was casting upon him from further along.

Every mealtime of the holidays had been like this thus far.

After breakfast, Harry hugged Tom farewell, promising that they would meet in the main entrance hall at half past seven that night. Then Hermione was dragging him away, resolutely turning a blind eye to Poole’s yearning gaze which seemed to follow them all the way out of the Great Hall.

“Poole is doing it again,” observed Harry once they were around the corner. “The puppy dog eyes.”

Hermione slumped. “I know,” she said, then brightened. “But today, let’s not think about that. Let’s not think about any of this big mess.”

True to her word, once they had entered her empty dormitory, not a single word about Poole, Tom, time-turners, or self-preservation crossed her tongue. Harry knew that Hermione would have great
difficulty in avoiding troubling topics – that was the way her mind worked, she was constantly trying to solve problems. That she spent an entire day not doing so proved how desperately she wanted to reconnect with Harry, and this he appreciated beyond belief.

The first part of the day was spent mostly in silence. After Hermione had taken down all of Harry’s measurements, he lay on her bed and read *Potion Making: The Intricacies that Few Appreciate*, a dry text which Tom insisted would help in his studies. In the background, Harry listened to Hermione shifting about the place, murmuring spells beneath her breath and adjusting fabrics. She was steadfast in ignoring any opinions that Harry offered forth on the dress robes, insisting that he wouldn’t even be able tell the difference between ivory and cream if she waved them in his face.

“Aren’t they the same thing?” asked Harry, baffled, to which Hermione turned her back and muttered about ignorance.

When lunch time rolled in, they went to the kitchens rather than the Great Hall – Hermione claimed that she didn’t want to face Poole again. Harry didn’t complain. Sneaking down to the kitchens reminded him of days long past. In the kitchens, Hermione thanked the house-elves profusely and attempted to offer some freedom, to which they all refused, horrified, and Harry swiftly removed Hermione from the kitchens before she could do any harm.

They returned to her Ravenclaw dormitory, and Harry felt distinctly more light-hearted. He had been offered a window to catch a glimpse of their happier past – their kitchen visits, Hermione’s S.P.E.W. obsession. And remembering made him feel that they hadn’t yet lost everything.

After Hermione applied the finishing touches to Harry’s dress robes, she bade that he try them on for any fitting adjustments.

The ensemble was very sophisticated, Harry thought as he examined himself in the mirror. The jacket and trousers were both white – “ivory,” corrected Hermione – with sharp, fitted lines that were flattering on his short, thin build. His shoes were light brown leather, and the bow tie knotted at his throat was bottle green.

Few alterations were made – Hermione tightened the waistline of his trousers and Transfigured a few golden buttons for his jacket sleeves, and by that time it was past three o’clock in the afternoon.

They spent a couple of hours lying about and just talking. They talked about classes, people. They entertained each other with anecdotes from the year that they hadn’t before, and as five o’clock came in, whispers of early evening creeping over the horizon, they spoke in hushed tones of the lives that they had left behind.

Hermione went and changed into pretty dress robes of royal lapis lazuli, taming her bushy hair into neat ringlets which cascaded down her back like a waterfall. In the end, her transformation was as drastic as it had been for the Yule Ball in fourth-year.

It turned out that Hermione was (unsurprisingly) greater help when it came to preparing than Ron had been back then. She was successful in disciplining his mess of hair into gentle waves and made him polish his glasses before they finally left.

Quincy was waiting for Hermione in the common room. He wore a thick thumb ring and there were tinkling bells sewn to his sleeves. His dress robes were an alarming shade of silver – they were so bright to look at, like the reflection of the sun in a fast-flowing river.

“Good evening, Hermione, Harry,” said Quincy breezily, the bells on his sleeve jangling. “You
both look lovely tonight.”

“But Quincy,” countered Harry, “this is what I always look like.”

“Oh, shush you,” said Hermione, laughing as Quincy led the way out of the common room. Her tone abruptly sobered. “You will keep out of trouble tonight, won’t you?”

“Yes, Mother,” retorted Harry. “I promise that I won’t smoke, I won’t do drugs, I won’t accept drinks from strangers and I will most certainly not have unprotected sex.”

“Sweet Morgana,” said Quincy, sounding scandalised.

“Please excuse Harry.” Hermione curled her lip playfully at the subject in question. “He’s in one of his moods again.”

Harry snorted, and as they came to the bottom of Ravenclaw Tower he split off from their small group. “I’m supposed to meet Tom in the entrance hall, so I’ll see you later.”

Hermione hesitated. “Maybe I should go with you.”

“What, and abandon Quincy?”

“I’d be perfectly alright alone,” offered Quincy.

“No,” said Harry, perhaps too sharply. He gave her a pointed look. “Hermione needn’t accompany me anywhere.”

Hermione smoothed out her deep blue dress robes with her palms, smiling tightly. “Of course,” she said. “Sometimes it is easy to forget that you’re a big boy now.”

Harry clicked his tongue, turning and marching away to meet Tom.

Only then did it strike him that there were nerves fluttering in his stomach – he had fucking butterflies. Harry Potter did not get butterflies.

But apparently, he did.

***

Tom parted ways with the other Slytherins as they left the common room. Once they had learned that Victoria Farley and Lucienne Carrow, the two seventh-year Slytherin girls, would be taking each other as dates to Slughorn’s convention, Nott had settled for a sixth-year Ravenclaw, Mulciber for a fifth-year Slytherin and Lestrange for absolutely no one.

“I am a man in grieving,” he had declared as he buttoned him his shirt that evening. “A lone wolf. It’s a bloody miracle that I only got one month’s detention from Gwin.”

“She has always had a soft spot for redheads,” put in Nott, smirking.

“My hair is auburn!” argued Lestrange. “Don’t compare me to those Weasleys.”

“Let us not be immature this evening,” said Tom, evaluating his reflection. His dress robes would do, he supposed. They were a stylish cut, the shirt high-collared and the jacket of black velveteen material which came to rest just above knee height.

There would surely be Ministry officials around, so he had to look presentable if he wanted to make
a good impression. Slughorn was useful in that way – he always gathered a decent crowd of wizards and witches.

Now, waiting for Harry in the entrance hall where other couples were meeting, Tom promised himself that by the time the night was over, he would have fulfilled much.

The movement of white in his peripherals caught Tom’s attention, and he turned his head slightly. Only to swivel around on the spot fully, barely remembering to keep his jaw from falling open.

Because here came Harry, garbed entirely in white like a bride in her wedding gown.

He looked so demure, so delicate as he approached, and there were eyes turning his direction as he walked.

Tom fought the urge to snap the necks of them all.

“Hello, Tom,” said Harry, grinning in an embarrassed sort of way once they stood in front of each other. He cupped the back of his neck, averting his gaze. “You clean up nicely.”

_Oh, my sweet little serpent._

“You are a vision, Harry,” said Tom earnestly. “But then again, you always are."

Harry reddened, ducking his head. Someone – probably Delacour – had dealt with his disarray of hair with an iron fist. It looked soft and wavy, and now that it wasn’t poking in any direction which defied gravity, was long enough to reach halfway down his neck.

Tom fought the urge to run his fingers through it.

“Shall we go, _mon amour_?” he asked the Frenchman, offering his arm, and Harry accepted it shyly.

With the weight of the smaller boy in his arm, Tom let out an inward sigh of relief.

All was right in the world.

Except that it wasn’t, because as soon as they entered Slughorn’s large, open-plan office, with an impressive eight metre Christmas tree in the centre and bunches of mistletoe in every corner, strangers began trying to pry Harry away from Tom.

“Such, green, green eyes,” said one wizard, practically salivating as he pounced into Harry’s pathway. “I am the chief executive officer of Valkyrie Stone, if I could take down your name, I think that your face would be–”

“He is not interested,” snapped Tom, pulling a bemused Harry behind him and towering over the wizard.

“And you!” said the man, seemingly set on recruiting. “You are a handsome one also, it is not often that I extend invitations…”

“I don’t care.” Tom wove his way through Slughorn’s guests, dragging Harry along by hand.

Once the wizard had been left far behind, Harry asked, “What’s Valkyrie Stone?”

“One of the biggest beauty brands in wizarding Britain.” Tom laughed with derision. “You don’t want to have anything to do with them, they’re notorious for also being completely corrupt.”
“Oh?” Harry clearly wanted to know more, but then along came Horace Slughorn in all his glory, done up in lacy, chocolate brown dress robes. A tall, muscular witch was in tow, her expression vaguely bored as she looked around the place.

“Harry, Tom!” cried Slughorn. “I was hoping to catch you two! Harry, I have Thomasina Greenwich here, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Galatea – Professor Merrythought, you know – has been telling her all about your successes in Defence class. Thomasina, this is Harry Delacour, as promised.”

“Delacour, hm?” said Greenwich, turning her cool gaze on Harry.

“I have a well-known potioneer who would like to meet you, Tom,” began Slughorn, but with a stoic set to his shoulders, Tom refused the invitation.

“I would rather remain with Harry,” he said, and Slughorn looked shocked – it was most unlike Tom to do this. But with so many predators around, Harry may as well have been a rabbit in a den of wolves. This rabbit was not about to lose the protection of one of the most dangerous wolves in the den.

“Well then,” said Slughorn, bewildered. “I’ll leave you to it then.”

Tom tuned his ears back in to Harry and Greenwich’s conversation.

“Not from around these parts?” asked the Ministry witch.

“France, actually.” Harry lifted his chin slightly. “My cousin and I transferred from Beauxbatons Academy. You may meet her tonight.”


Tom bristled mildly – this woman was being a presumptuous bitch.

Harry didn’t appear to be fazed whatsoever, though there was a sheepish note in his voice when he said, “I didn’t grow up speaking French – my French is quite shocking, actually, so I was transferred to an English-speaking school.”

“How is it that one who has a French surname, so almost certainly comes from a French family, does not even know their mother tongue?”

“What is this, the Spanish Inquisition?” interrupted Tom.

Greenwich paused. “Was I pushing boundaries?” she asked. “I’m sorry. In my line of work, that is what I’m accustomed to.”

“It’s fine,” said Harry, tugging Tom’s hand gently, a soothing gesture. “My father was from the Delacour family. He met my mother in England, which is where I grew up in the beginning. When they… when they died, my dad’s family took me in – they lived in France, so I had to attend a French school with my cousin. As I already told you, my French was abysmal, but I got by. But I suppose that my French was only part of the reason of why I came to Hogwarts – Grindelwald was the other part. My uncle and aunt wanted me and Hermione – my cousin – to be out of his way. So here we are.”

“How interesting,” said Greenwich. “How did your parents die?”

“Now you’re pushing boundaries.” Harry’s voice was humourless.
“Apologies.” Greenwich smiled, drumming a long, tan finger on her chin. “Horace was correct, I have indeed been speaking with Galatea. She speaks of your talents highly. I’m merely trying to get a feel for you and whether you would be useful in my department. You graduate part way through next year, after all.”

“I—” Harry began, but Tom cut across him smoothly.

“I’m afraid that I need to steal Harry back,” he said.

“By all means,” murmured the witch, waving them away.

“What is it?” Harry sounded genuinely confused as Tom led him away, searching for a private space.

“Surely you aren’t considering the Department of Magical Law Enforcement?” he demanded, steering Harry around a band of tipsy wizards at the refreshments table.

“I never said that!” said Harry indignantly.

“Then are you or are you not?”

The hesitation was all Tom needed for confirmation.

“Look, Tom,” said Harry. “Since fifth-year, my goal has been to become an Auror.”

“An Auror?” Harry, his Harry, was not to become a Dark wizard catcher at all costs. That would pit them against each other one day and could not be allowed.

Tom found a door in the corner of the large office and pulled it open to reveal Lestrange locked in an embrace with some witch – probably another model.

The door was open long enough for Lestrange to catcall and say, “Looking good in white, Hardwin!” before Tom slammed the door shut again in disgust.

“Why can’t he keep his hands to himself for one night,” he muttered, searching around the room for an escape route again. There was Delacour in one corner, deep in conversation with that feather-headed Ravenclaw whose name Tom didn’t know. Crockett was downing Firewhisky as if there was no tomorrow in the middle of the room. Slughorn was still playing matchmaker between his guests, no further than three metres from Crockett’s Firewhisky fest. These were three places to be avoided.

Tom mapped out another pathway in his head and took off, all the while Harry rambled defensively about Aurors.

There was a doorway leading to a small garden outside. Nobody else was present. Perfect.

Blissful privacy.

The rose shrubs were dusted with snow, and magic ensured that the flowers remained in full bloom. The bushes framed a cobbled path leading to a rustic wooden bench, and small, floating lights, like stars, were sprinkled through the air.

“Why has nobody come out here?” demanded Harry, forgetting that he was lecturing Tom about Aurors. “It’s gorgeous.”

“Probably because it’s about zero degrees,” said Tom.
“Ah.” Harry wrapped his arms around himself, at last registering the temperature. “That’s quite a good point.”

Tom rolled his eyes and removed his jacket, draping it around Harry – it reached as far as his ankles.

“Don’t be ridiculous, you’ll freeze,” said Harry sharply.

“I’m cold-blooded,” dismissed Tom. “I’m used to it. Besides, if it gets too bad, I’ll just use a heating charm.”

“I can do that, too—”

“Haven’t I already told you?” Tom smiled wryly. “I like seeing you wear my clothes.”

“Oh.” Harry scratched his cheek, concealing his own smile very poorly. “Well, I suppose that it’s the least I can do for you, since you managed to get me out of there. I’m not overly fond of parties, and I hate crowds.”

“I don’t think you should be an Auror,” said Tom bluntly, returning to their original conversation abruptly. “It’s a dangerous line of work.”

“I’m accustomed to danger.”

“I’m not sure you really understand how serious this is.”

“Tom.” Harry’s voice was deadly quiet. “Please don’t patronise me.”

Tom huffed out a breath. “I’m not patronising you. I would never patronise you. I’m just showing concern.”

Harry’s eyes went very gentle, and he gave a mild laugh. “It seems as though everyone’s showing me concern nowadays. The world has gone soft on me.”

“You’re doing a wide range of subjects,” said Tom, “and you’re doing well in them all. I’m sure that many other departments would accept you, if you insist on entering the Ministry.”

“This isn’t really up for discussion,” hinted Harry, pulling Tom’s jacket more firmly around himself.

“I think it should be,” countered Tom. “I feel… I feel protective of you, Harry, and I don’t feel comfortable with the idea of you putting yourself up against Dark wizards.”

The term ‘Dark wizard’ tasted like soot in his mouth as he said it.

Harry’s lips tugged downwards, and he stared resolutely at a rose bush as if it held all of life’s answers. “Defence Against the Dark Arts is what I’m made for.”

“You’re very good at it,” agreed Tom. “I’ll certainly give you that. But would you really say that it’s what you’re ‘made for’…”?

“I don’t expect someone like you to understand,” said Harry quietly. “You, Hermione… you’re both good at everything you do. You can be anything or anyone you want. But people like me have to take what we’re given. And Defence is what I’ve been given.”

“You’re wrong,” said Tom, taking Harry’s chin in his hand and tilting the other boy’s head up so
that their eyes met. “Nobody is ever given anything. What you get it what you take, otherwise you
don’t get anything at all. Whether it be through hard work, manipulation… I’ve learned, Harry,
that in this world there is only power, and those too weak to seek it.”

Something akin to deep alarm passed through Harry’s eyes, but it might have only been a trick of
the light. “Things don’t have to be that way, Tom,” he whispered. “We’re not divided into good
people and bad people, strong people and weak people. We live in a world that is varying shades of
grey. Nothing need ever be completely black.”

Tom released Harry’s chin, turning away as he gave a cynical chuckle. “That’s very idealistic of
you. And that’s what I love about you. You try to see the best in everyone.”

“Not everyone.” Harry reached up to cup Tom’s cheek with a hand. “Only the people I think can be
saved.”

Tom leaned into Harry’s warm touch, his heart cold. “I’m not a good person,” he said softly. “I
may not be deserving of your hope anymore.”

“I choose who is deserving!” snapped Harry, his expression fierce. “It’s never too late for anyone.”

“It is for me.” Tom smiled, brushing his finger down Harry’s cheekbone.

Together they stood in silence, a silence of mourning. In the cold night, their breath billowed out in
translucent clouds, mingling in the air between them.

Overhead, there was a golden glow, and then a sprig of mistletoe materialised, framed by glittering
lights.

“Harry,” said Tom hesitantly, breaking the fragile hush. “May I kiss you?”

The light in Harry’s deep green eyes, framed by thick lashes, was all the answer he needed, and he
tilted his head down, Harry standing on his toes, and they met in the middle.

There were no fireworks, no shimmering stream of light from the heavens. Harry’s lips were warm
and soft against his own, and nothing in the world had ever felt more right than this.

Tom knew in that moment that he had chosen his seventh and final member correctly. They were
made for each other.

Tom rested one hand on the small of Harry’s back, the other tangling through the silky strands of
his hair, and he wordlessly whispered all the promises of the world against Harry’s mouth.

When they surfaced for air, Tom’s cheeks felt warm, and Harry’s own face was slightly flushed,
his lips swollen.

They stared at each other, then Harry started laughing, giddy as a child.

“What?” asked Tom, vaguely offended. “Was I that bad?”

It wasn’t his fault he was so out of practice. He slept with people, but kissing was an intimacy that
he didn’t allow many.

Harry choked back his laughter, though a wide grin remained on his face. “It’s not that. It’s just that
this… this is all so unexpected. Never in my life would I have imagined that this could happen...
Tom, I don’t believe you at all.”
“Believe me?” asked Tom, perplexed.

“It’s not too late for you.” Harry intertwined their fingers together, his knuckles white as he tightened his grip. “I don’t know how I’m going to do it, but I’m going to prove it.”

Tom thought of the countless times he had cast Unforgivable Curses, he thought of the Horcrux he had made of Myrtle Warren, and he thought of the Riddle family who he had murdered the year before. One day, their deaths would make for his second Horcrux.

But Harry didn’t know any of this. He believed that Tom was not a kind person, but that was all. That was how it would remain until the time came.

Tom would not be the one to change.

Harry would be.

It would be near impossible to make the guilty innocent again. But to make the innocent guilty… that was an easy task. It was something that Tom would happily do, if it ensured that it meant that Harry would never leave his side.

Harry would lose this new game they were playing, and as the winner, Tom would savour watching the vanquished fall.

But with Harry enfolded in his arms, the memory of their first kiss lingering like a sweet lullaby, Tom felt something within him that he never had before.

He took out his wand and Harry leaned his head against Tom’s chest, tilted slightly to watch.

Taking a deep breath, Tom circled his wand in the air and breathed the king of all spells, the one spell which he had never been able to conquer. “Expecto Patronum.”

The incantation hung in the air, joining the snow and the stars.

Then a light emerged from his wand, and Harry gave a muffled gasp as the silvery flow kept on coming, more, more, more, it was never ending.

Until at last there was a mammoth creature, gliding through the night sky on massive wings.

“A dragon,” Tom whispered.

A gigantic dragon, completely regal in its flight.

It circled low overhead, and Tom reached up hesitantly to touch it. His fingers slid right through its belly.

“It’s beautiful, Tom,” said Harry, his irises reflecting the glow of the Patronus. It looked as though there were silver tears swimming in his eyes.

“It really is,” murmured Tom, and together they watched the dragon as it ascended into the sky, at long last free from the cage that it had been stranded within for all of Tom’s life.

It gradually faded back out of existence as if it had never been there.

“You need a truly happy memory to conjure a corporeal Patronus.” Harry finally spoke, glancing up at Tom. “What did you think of?”
Tom did not lie. He told the truest truth that he had ever known. “I thought of you, Harry,” he said. “Just you.”

Harry did not respond, but he inclined his body into Tom’s, and those were all the words that needed to be said.

Chapter End Notes

These two have such an effed up relationship, I don’t even know anymore XD Regarding Tom’s Patronus being a dragon, I credit Akasha Roy on Quora for the idea. You can read what she has to say here. Just scroll down until you find her name. I personally think that she provides great reasoning as to why his Patronus would be a dragon rather than a snake.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

“I challenge you to a duel, Harry Delacour.”

Chapter Notes

You don’t even know how long I’ve been waiting for this chapter to come. This chapter and the final chapter are the two which I have been anticipating since the very beginning. AHHHHH I MEAN I CAN’T BELIEVE THIS STORY IS RAPIDLY APPROACHING THE END??!!!!
A lot happens this chapter, so do fasten your seatbelts for the ride.

The days succeeding the Christmas party were unlike any that Harry had ever experienced before.

The student population reduced drastically as the final students headed home for the holidays, and so did the size of the table in the Great Hall. Harry could now easily count the remaining students to be three Hufflepuffs and two Gryffindors he didn’t know, as well as Hermione, Poole and two younger students from Ravenclaw house, and himself, Tom and a Slytherin fourth-year.

To say that mealtimes were awkward with Harry, Hermione, Tom and Poole all within a two-metre radius of one another was an understatement. Hermione had taken to sitting at the furthest corner of the table from Poole, and Harry would sit next to her to keep her company, which strung Tom along for the ride as well. Tom now considered himself and Harry to be attached at the hip, and while Harry appreciated the affection that was showered upon him (his years of neglect resulted in a craving for intimacy), sometimes it could be stifling.

He understood that Tom had grown up in a similar environment, having been raised in the wilds of an orphanage, and affection had probably also been a rarity for him, but sometimes Harry liked to have space. He was, after all, a private person who was unaccustomed to being shown blind adoration. Harry had dated Ginny for a small length of time, and she was nothing like Tom, and he doubted that Cho would have been either (if things had worked out between them).

But there was something endearing about Tom holding him so close, as if afraid that they would lose the tie that they had just discovered. And if Tom Riddle was now capable of love (dare he call it love?), then surely Harry was altering something in the timeline.

By this point, he and Hermione had accepted that they would not be returning home. The least that Harry could do was steer the future down a brighter path. There would always be more Dark wizards out there. But to avoid the crisis of arguably the Darkest of them all would absolutely be a success.

So Harry allowed Tom this closeness.
At night, with nobody else in their dormitory, Tom had a tendency to climb into Harry’s bed, curling his long body around Harry’s and falling asleep with his lips pressed against the junction between Harry’s neck and shoulder.

Harry suspected that Tom had begun suffering from nightmares.

He suffered from them, too. For a short while, Harry had been given a reprieve, but the dreams had started up again with a vengeance.

Images of Dumbledore falling from the top of a tower, limp as a ragdoll, stood at the forefront of his nightmares. But there was also Sirius, traces of a lingering laugh still drawn into his face, and Cedric, who had died so suddenly that he had never been given the opportunity to smile one last time.

Nothing had changed.

But there was more.

Harry was haunted by disturbing visions of the future, in which he was an old man standing at King’s Cross Station, watching Ron, Ginny, Fred and George, Luna and Neville, and even Draco Malfoy pass through the barrier to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters to attend Hogwarts. They would spare the elderly wizard no glance, simply moving forward in their lives that Harry was no longer a part of. They would continue onward with the flow of time, but Harry Potter would forever be stranded in a place which he did not belong to.

Even worse was when a hand touched his as he stood there, and when he looked to his side, it was Hermione, white-haired and with wrinkles of age in her skin. She would smile at him, but there was a deep sadness in her eyes, an accusation. It was Harry’s fault that she was lost in time. It was he who had agreed to let her come Horcrux hunting with him, and if she hadn’t come with him to look for Ravenclaw’s lost diadem, she never would have gone back in time with him.

This should have been his burden to carry alone. Hermione Granger should have been boarding the Hogwarts Express with the people of their own time.

Harry would jolt upright, the memory of the vision still raw in his mind, and he grounded himself in the cool darkness as he reminded himself that it had just been a dream.

With that in mind, he would burrow back beneath the bed quilts, burying himself back into Tom’s arms as if they would provide all the protection that he needed. But there was little that Tom’s physical presence could do for the deep, gnawing regret that grew from the shadows in his heart.

Harry never questioned Tom’s dreams, just as Tom never questioned his. That was a privacy that neither would ever breach, and Harry was glad of it. This was not something that he would willingly speak about. Not to Tom, and definitely not to Hermione.

To distract themselves, when they weren’t ploughing through their massive workload they talked about things that they had never spoken of before.

Tom finally confided in Harry that he was an orphan, that he had been bullied terribly until he learned how to hold his own. If the bullies were afraid of him, and everyone else was afraid of the bullies, then he sat at the top of the hierarchy.

Harry wanted to reciprocate with tales of his own miserable childhood, but knew that the rules that bound him would not allow it. So he would simply squeeze Tom’s hand, a gesture which wordlessly said that he understood, and they would continue to speak. As if they were telling the
stories of people they had never known, rather than themselves.

***

“I just recalled something,” said Tom over dinner one night. As per usual, he sat to Harry’s right, and Hermione sat to Harry’s left. Here she was cushioned in the far corner and sheltered from Poole’s stares which, over the past days, had gradually transitioned from yearning to accusatory. This Harry found concerning, so he had taken to walking Hermione back to Ravenclaw Tower every night, ensuring her safe passage.

After all his bad dreams, he had become paranoid, and that paired with his strong dislike for Poole made him a skittish and cynical person indeed.

“What did you just recall?” asked Harry lightly, finishing up his dinner as he watched Poole get up and leave the Great Hall.

Tom’s eyes were very bright when he said, “You say that your mother was a Muggle-born.”

“Yes…?”

“And your father was a pure-blood.”

Harry took a moment to take a drink, giving him an excuse for a brief silence during which he turned over Tom’s words in his head, searching for a discrepancy. He came up blank.

He had stuck by the real story when it came to his lineage. There was no way he could have confused it while he spoke of it.

Harry placed down his goblet carefully, turning to face Tom. “That’s right.” His tone was mild.

“Do excuse me as I test my memory,” said Tom, and his handsome face was impossible to read. “I am doing my best to remember everything about you that I can. Correct me if I’m wrong, but after your parents’ death, you went to live with your aunt, uncle and cousin in France.”

Harry could hear alarm bells being triggered in his head, telling him to shut down this conversation immediately, but saw no way to do so. He tried to catch Hermione’s attention subtly, but she was so immersed in her book that she didn’t notice her surroundings.

“Your father was the elder brother of your aunt,” continued Tom. “Isn’t that right? So that would make your aunt a pure-blood.”

“Yes.” Harry almost gave a sigh of relief as he thanked his abysmal luck for finally getting something right. He had never spoken of Hermione’s background to Tom, so he couldn’t be aware of her Muggle-born status.

Things were redeemable, after all.

“It’s just interesting,” said Tom, a gleam in his eyes.

“Not really.” Harry attempted to laugh it off, but then Hermione stood abruptly on his other side, slamming her book shut.

“Walk me back to Ravenclaw Tower, Harry?” she asked sweetly, and Harry grinned apologetically at Tom.

“I’ll see you later,” he said, and Tom’s eyes shuttered momentarily before he took Harry’s hand in
his and pressed a soft kiss to his knuckles.

“Stay safe,” Tom murmured while Hermione shuffled impatiently behind them.

“It’s the corridors of Hogwarts Castle,” said Harry, his cheeks warm. “I doubt anything will happen.”

Tom’s face read that there were plenty of things which could go wrong, but he let Harry and Hermione go without another word.

“Does Riddle know that I’m Muggle-born?” demanded Hermione as soon as they were out of the Great Hall and around the corner.

“You were listening that whole time?” Harry swore under his breath. “I wanted your help, why didn’t you cut Tom off mid-sentence, get up and drag me along with you?”

“What’s the use of that?” Hermione shot a worried glance behind them, searching for potential stalkers. “We’d only be delaying the inevitable. It’s better to know what Riddle is thinking than to not know.”

“Then let me establish that he knows nothing.” They rounded another corner. “He is only aware of the fact that I’m a half-blood, my mum was a Muggle-born and my dad was pure-blooded.”

“Yes, and your pure-blooded father was supposedly the elder brother of my Muggle mother!” Hermione slapped a palm to her forehead, releasing an anxious groan. “How stupid of me! When we came up with this story at the beginning of the year, I never even realised this major discrepancy. We should have made your mother the one to be related to my family! Well, it’s too late to change anything now.”

“I’ll make sure that Tom never figures out you’re a Muggle-born, then,” said Harry weakly. “I’ll say that you’re a half-blood if he asks.”

“And if he discovers that you’re outright lying to him, then we’ll be in even deeper shit!” snapped Hermione.

Harry flinched. Hermione never swore. Never. It had to be a bad omen that she had started to.

Then I won’t say anything,” he said.

“That’s what I’m worried about.” Hermione gnawed on her thumbnail as they walked, her mannerisms agitated. “You may not have to. Most people in my house know that I’m Muggle-born, so if word somehow got to Riddle’s ears… oh no, oh no… Riddle’s a damn genius, he’ll figure out our secret…”

“Hermione.” As they reached the bottom of Ravenclaw Tower, Harry grabbed her arm, forcing her to turn to him. “It’s going to be okay. I won’t let Tom find out. And even if he did find out that we’re not cousins, what’s the worst he could do?”

“I don’t know.” Hermione gazed at him with wide, terrified eyes. “That’s what concerns me, we don’t know what he’s capable of. He may not even be sane. Before anything blows up in our faces, you need to get out of there, Harry.”

Harry released her arm abruptly, stuffing his hands into his pockets and stalking away. “That’s not an option.”
“You told me to trust you!” Hermione lunged after him, grabbing the back of his robes. “During that Quidditch match, when your team called for time out. You spoke to me, remember? You asked me to have your back, and I did. I always have, and I’m calling in the favours now. I need you to trust me this time.”

Harry stood frozen, her hand a weight on his back which tethered him to reality.

He had hoped… he had wished with all his heart that Tom could be his new anchor. “We’ve barely had weeks together,” he whispered. “Properly together.”

“Love can make you blind,” said Hermione. “Let me be your sight.”

“Fine.” Harry whirled around, staring down at Hermione with desperate eyes. “I won’t let Tom go on a whim, so explain to me why. Why you think he is so untrustworthy. Don’t give me this bullshit about your ‘gut feeling’. Don’t tell me that it’s because he’s going to one day be Lord Voldemort, because he may not anymore. I need proper material here. So why, Hermione? Why?”

His voice rung like a bell through the stone walls.

Hermione took a deep breath, her face pale. “Earlier this year,” she said, “I spoke to Margot Greengrass. And I’m not meant to tell you what she told me. It’s a pure-blood secret.”

Harry snorted, beginning to turn away again, but Hermione clung to his sleeve. “Wait. I’m not finished. I’m not meant to tell you, but I will. You mustn’t mention this to anyone else, though.”

“I’m all ears.” Harry crossed his arms and tapped his foot on the ground restlessly.

Hermione took in another deep breath. “She told me about magic sensitivity. It’s a trait that few pure-bloods still possess to this day. Magic sensitive witches or wizards can—”

“–sense others’ magic, obviously,” interrupted Harry, scowling. “You can skip the theory and get to the point.”

“I am!” retorted Hermione. “Magic sensitivity is highly coveted among pure-bloods, and the reason that Margot Greengrass was Queen of Slytherin before Riddle took over is because she is magic sensitive. But then people learned that Riddle is magic sensitive, too. I assume that this, paired with him also being Slytherin’s descendant, was what made him everybody’s favourite.”

There was an expectant silence, as if Hermione was waiting for the shoe to drop. It never did.

“That’s it?” Harry threw his hands up. “What, am I meant to have some sort of miraculous epiphany? Or is it a puzzle and you want me to figure it out? I’m not playing a game here!”

“Riddle just wants you for your magic!” Hermione burst out. “Why else would he take an interest in a lowly half-blood when the rest of his cronies are pure-bloods? Have you ever asked yourself that, Harry?”

“You’re wrong.” Harry’s insides felt cold, his chest an empty cavity. “It’s not like that.”

“Can you try your hardest to not be absolutely daft right now?” cried Hermione. “Greengrass says that she senses that you are powerful, powerful beyond belief, so there’s little doubt that Riddle senses it, too. He wants you to be the powerhouse of his team, and once he has drained you, he is going to spit you back out on the streets!”

“And you don’t understand.” Harry took a step back from her, and he felt awfully light. “Did you know
that on the night of Slughorn’s Christmas party, Tom conjured a corporeal Patronus? A dragon, a beautiful dragon. And do you know what his happy thought was? It was me, Hermione. It was me.”

“He could have lied!” Hermione looked to be close to tears. “He could have been thinking of anything, and he is just trying to reel you in. You’ll be his prize catch! Don’t let him do this to you, Harry. Don’t let him do this to us.”

“Things are changing.” Harry backed up another few steps. “Can’t you feel it? I think that I may be succeeding in changing Tom. I just need more time.”

“He is tricking you!” shouted Hermione. “Why won’t you listen to me for once? I am not mad! Tom Riddle is the mad one!”

“I can’t talk to you like this.” Harry hurried down the corridor to get away from her.

“What happened to trust?” Hermione’s voice dogged his steps. “How can I trust in you if you can’t even trust in me?”

“I don’t need your trust anymore.” Harry said it so quietly that he wasn’t sure that she even heard him, and he spoke no more as he left.

It was about time to move into the next chapter of his life.

***

She should have told Harry earlier. If she had, none of this rubbish would have happened. Riddle would not have Harry in his clutches right now. She could have prevented this.

Hermione stormed up Ravenclaw Tower, whirling into the common room like a hurricane.

It was empty, and she paced before the fireplace, desperately trying to wrap her head around everything which had happened and what the next step forward was.

I don’t need your trust anymore.

Harry’s tone had been dull, broken, as if he had lost all faith in her.

It broke her heart.

Hermione pressed her hand to her mouth, her mind in a frenzy.

Solve it, her brain hissed. Solve it. Solve it. Solve it solve it solve it solve it solve it solve it solve it solve it solve it solve it.

Because that was what Hermione Granger did. She solved problems.

But as she paced, faster and faster, this problem was beginning to seem more and more unsolvable. No problem should have been impossible.

At long last, her mind broke down into bits and pieces, shards of senseless understanding of all that had happened. Which is to say, none of it made sense at all.

And so Hermione wept.

She collapsed into an armchair, buried her face into her hands and allowed herself the luxury of
tears for one night.

The first night that they had arrived here, she never should have encouraged Harry to get closer to Riddle. She had been the one to plant the seed which now bloomed into a plant of black, poisonous thorns. It was her own fault that they were being torn apart.

“Hello?” a voice echoed down the staircase which led to the seventh-year boys’ dormitory. “Is someone there?”

Hermione jumped to her feet, alarmed, turning to the fire to hide her face. She cleared her throat and said, “It’s just me, Rowan.”

Her voice sounded hoarse to her ears.

There was movement in the corner of her eye as the lanky Ravenclaw appeared through the doorway. “Oh. Right. I heard a sound and I thought… never mind.”

Hermione saw him retreat up the stairs, but then he reappeared again within a split second and was by her side in an instant. “Are you crying?” he demanded, his hands hovering uncertainly. “What happened?”

“Nothing of your concern.” Hermione swiped at her tears angrily, whipping around and moving for the girls’ dormitory.

“It was your cousin again, wasn’t it?”

Hermione paused and looked over her shoulder. Rowan’s hair was mussed, his glasses lopsided, as if he had been lying around in his bed and come down on short notice. He was watching her, a tidal wave of fury in his eyes.

“No, Rowan,” she whispered. “I did this to myself.”

***

Hermione sat up in bed, frustrated.

Sleep was purposefully evading her, punishing her.

She threw away her covers and slipped over to the window, gazing out at the half-crescent moon. Across the grounds, the snow was finally melting, its glory only short-lived. As with anything else, good things only lasted so long.

Perhaps it was time to go for a midnight stroll.

Hermione had never been out after curfew without Harry or Ron, nor without Harry’s Invisibility Cloak, but she needed to think properly, without being stifled by the dormitory’s walls.

The open air of the castle’s corridors might help. Because help will always be given at Hogwarts, for those who deserve it.

She prayed that she was deserving.

Slipping into her night robe, thick socks and shoes, Hermione tiptoed down into the common room. It was empty, the only source of light coming from the glowing embers of the dying fire.

She crept out the common room door, casting “Lumos” once she was safely outside.
With her ears alert for any sound, Hermione made her way down the winding staircase of Ravenclaw Tower and began her night-time wandering.

She didn’t come across any students or professors, so her luck was holding. But nor were any ideas coming to her regarding what she should do next.

It was as she was passing the dungeons that another shape slipped out of the darkness.

“Nox,” whispered Hermione, flicking out her light and pressing her back to the wall behind a suit of armour, holding her breath as the person passed.

To her astonishment, it was Riddle himself, his cheeks hollowed out by shadows in the light of his wand.

What in Merlin’s name was Riddle doing sneaking around at night all alone? Hermione did the only thing that made sense to her – she followed him. Surely he would lead her to his devious lair, where she could snatch blueprints as evidence of his plan to hijack Harry and thus redeem herself.

Right?

To her great disappointment, Riddle led her straight to the library, pushing the door open silently. Hermione hung back an extra ten seconds before tracking him into the black cavern of books.

It was easy enough to find him in the restricted section. He carried the only light in the library, so from a distance she was able to tell which aisle he was standing in, and exactly which shelf of books he was perusing.

Hermione ducked into another aisle and crouched down low, her wand clutched tightly in her sweaty hand as she waited for him to leave.

Riddle remained exactly where he was for a long time, his Wand-Lighting Charm a beacon through the night. From several aisles away from him, Hermione could almost hear his soft breathing, the shift of his feet when he moved, the flipping of pages. Against her will, she began to doze off, her head resting back against a shelf of books…

The crashing of the books that her head had been resting against startled her awake. As they fell from their shelf, clattering to the ground, Hermione muffled a gasp in the palm of her hand, waiting for Riddle to come storming around the corner to find her spying on him.

But nothing happened.

Releasing a long breath, she glanced up and saw that Riddle’s light had vanished.

She must have slept longer than she thought, and he left during that time.

Hermione gathered up the fallen books, sliding them back into their place before rising to her feet and striking up her own light again. The floorboards beneath her feet creaked menacingly as she peered down the aisle that Riddle had stood in for so long.

There was not a sign of life down there.

Carefully, Hermione manoeuvred her way down the aisle, placing her feet exactly where Riddle’s had been before scanning over the books he had been searching through so avidly.

It was the Memory Charms section.
Hermione slid her finger across the spines of the books, her eyes widening as she read on.

*Charms to Alter the Memory.*

*A History of False Memory Charms.*

*The Secret to Persuasion: Falsely Created Memories.*

“Harry,” she whispered, turning on heel and fleeing.

***

Over breakfast the following morning, one of the school owls swooped in and dropped a letter on Harry’s plate, right onto his toast.

“Really?” he complained, turning over the parchment to see who it was from. It was nameless but said in bold letters: *PRIVATE.*

“Who is it from?” asked Tom, peering over Harry’s shoulder, and Harry hurriedly tucked the letter away.

“My aunt and uncle,” he lied. “I haven’t heard from them in a long time.”

“Of course,” said Tom, his tone mild.

Harry glanced down the small table to the professors. Dumbledore was drizzling what looked to be treacle into his bowl of porridge.

Surely the letter was from him, or perhaps Dippet if it read ‘PRIVATE’ across it. Could it be regarding his and Hermione’s time-travel? Had Dumbledore found a way for them to return home?

Harry wanted to go home. He really did, but he didn’t want to leave Tom behind. It was a very tricky predicament that he now found himself in.

He snuck a look at Hermione, who was sitting by herself with her nose buried in a book. Sensing Harry’s gaze on her, she glanced towards him. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and there were massive shadows beneath them.

Harry looked away from her, pressing his shoulder against Tom’s for comfort. Until he and Hermione could find middle ground, have a reasonable conversation, they would exchange no more words.

Harry didn’t want to lose Tom, but nor did he want to lose Hermione. He was afraid that if they spoke again and breached the exact same topic as yesterday, something fragile would finally break between them. Something which couldn’t be mended.

The letter in Harry’s hand seemed to be burning hot, begging him to open it. He stood and said, “I’m going to the bathroom.”

“I’ll come with you.” Tom’s response was automatic.

“It’s fine.” Harry smiled sweetly, pinning Tom back into his seat with a glance before he walked away.

He moved outside into the courtyard for privacy before ripping open the letter. He wasn’t sure what he had been anticipating, but this wasn’t it.
Please don’t burn this message before you read the rest of it.

It is vital that you and I speak soon, face to face. Meet me at the top of North Tower tonight at ten o’clock. **DO NOT** bring anyone with you.

Now you can burn this.

It was not signed, but the message and handwriting made it obvious who it was from.

“Hermione,” Harry muttered, screwing the message up in his fist and setting it alight with his wand.

Games. More games. Why couldn’t they just be straightforward with one another for once?

It occurred to him for a moment that this was another Elijah Jenkins situation, in which someone lured him right into their trap under the guise of another person. But he would go either way, and he would be prepared to unleash hell if he was ambushed.

Never again would Harry go down without a fight.

When he and Tom met again in the Slytherin common room, Tom was sitting in an armchair with a quill between his teeth and his brow furrowed, poring over a text.

“Tom,” said Harry, climbing onto his lap and plucking the quill out of Tom’s teeth.

“What is it, *mon amour*?” asked Tom, putting down his stack of parchments and resting his hands on Harry’s waist.

“The letter told me to meet Dumbledore tonight at ten o’clock.” Harry wrapped his arms around Tom’s neck, looking into those depthless, deep blue eyes. “I think it’s about future pathways or something.”

“Pathways in which you don’t become an Auror?” offered Tom, and Harry laughed.

“Mm, no,” he said, and a crease appeared between Tom’s eyebrows. Harry sensed a lecture on the horizon and hurriedly pressed his lips against Tom’s, swallowing any words that the Head Boy had been stringing together.

Tom groaned, his tongue probing Harry’s lips apart so that he could explore the other’s mouth fully. Harry allowed him that, allowed himself to be submissive for once.

A lewd mewl unexpectedly dragged itself up his throat, and Tom swore into Harry’s mouth quietly. Straddling Tom’s lap, Harry could feel Tom’s hardness through his trousers and ground his hips back playfully.

He was not expecting Tom to growl and flip their positions, pressing Harry’s back into the ground, Tom’s knee separating his legs.

He moaned at his own growing erection, his fingers dragging through Tom’s hair. Tom detached his lips from Harry’s and began licking down his neck, unbuttoning the top of Harry’s shirt and biting down on his collarbone sharply.
Fuck, Tom,

Harry cried out in Parseltongue, and he could feel Tom grin into his skin.

You like that, my lovely?: he purred, working further down Harry’s chest, stripping him entirely of his shirt, just as the common room door opened.

“Holy shit!” shouted the fourth-year Slytherin boy, hastily exiting the common room again. “Show some decency!”

The door slid closed again, and Harry sat upright, clutching his shirt to his body. “I completely forgot that we weren’t the only Slytherins here for the holidays,” he laughed. “Oh, wow. Let’s not do that again.”

“Well, I suppose the mood is ruined now,” said Tom, sighing. His usually immaculate hair was ruffled, his clothes in need of straightening. “Though I must say that you look rather delectable right now.”

Harry buttoned his shirt back up, passing a sideways smirk to Tom. “There’s really no need to make your intentions any clearer.”

“My intentions can never be clear enough,” said Tom seriously, standing and offering Harry a hand. “I’ll always want you, Harry. Make no mistake about that.”

Harry accepted the proffered hand, smiling softly, and wished, he wished with all his heart that Hermione could understand that what they had here was real.

***

Hermione was already waiting for Harry when he arrived at the top of North Tower five minutes early.

She stood by one of the large, open windows on the highest level, watching over the grounds, oblivious to Harry’s presence. She little more than a silhouette against the moonlight.

“I’m here,” he said into the silence, and Hermione turned, her eyes very sad as she considered him.

“I didn’t know if you were going to come,” she said.

“Well, I’m here.” Harry grimaced, maintaining his distance. “You said that it was vital. Did you discover the plan for my assassination or something?”

“This is not funny!”

“Am I laughing?”

Again, they regarded each other. At long last, Hermione said, “I followed Riddle to the library last night.”

“You what?”

“He was sneaking around after midnight!” said Hermione defensively.

“And so were you, it appears,” countered Harry, scowling. “So, Tom went to the library at night. Other than being out after curfew, I don’t see what the problem is.”

“The problem is the books he was reading!” Hermione took a step towards Harry, hands held out beseechingly. “I know that he’s planning something perfectly horrific, he was researching false—”
“I knew it.”

Harry and Hermione both whirled around to face the intruder who was emerging from the staircase.

Cloaked in shadows, Rowan Poole was almost unrecognizable.

“Rowan!” whispered Hermione, her face alarmed. “What are you doing here?”

“Keeping an eye out for you, it seems,” sneered Poole, “since nobody else seems to care about your wellbeing anymore.”

“What is going on?” asked Harry loudly, turning to Hermione. “He isn’t meant to be here, is he?”

“Shut up, Delacour,” said Poole, stalking forwards. “All year I’ve been watching you treat Hermione like trash. You have ignored her, hurt her, taken advantage of her kind heart.”

“You don’t know anything.” Harry bared his teeth at Poole.

“I know enough.” Poole lifted his chin, staring down his nose at Harry. His glasses glinted white in the moonlight. “I know that it’s time to put an end to this.”

Harry had never seen the awkward, presumptuous Muggle-born Ravenclaw act like this before. Act as if he was an actual threat. He wasn’t entirely sure whether he should be worried or amused.

Hermione stared at Poole. “I… I don’t understand.”

“Well, I understand enough for both of us.” Harry advanced on Poole so that they stood toe to toe. He gave a nasty little laugh. “I think that Rowan Poole believes himself to be in love with you.”

“What… I…” Hermione stepped between him and Poole, eyes darting between them wildly, before she finally said, “Rowan?”

“It’s true.” Poole’s gaze did not leave Harry’s face, his features like stone. “I challenge you to a duel, Harry Delacour.”

“Come off it.” Harry turned his back. “I’m not duelling you.”

A jinx ricocheted off the ground right in front of Harry’s feet, missing by mere centimetres.

“Yes, you are,” whispered Poole, and his voice was soft, dangerous.

Harry looked back over his shoulder slowly, his eyes finding Hermione first. Her mouth was hanging open, and she looked to be trying to find her voice.

She quickly seized it again. “Don’t be ridiculous, Rowan!”

“Hm.” Harry sized up his Ravenclaw nemesis, who he had originally thought to be nothing compared to Draco Malfoy. Perhaps he had been incorrect. “I accept the challenge, Rowan Poole.”

“Harry,” hissed Hermione. “Stop this at once!”

Harry ignored her. “What are your terms, Poole?”

Poole straightened his back so that he stood taller. He was like a crane in height. “If you win, I’ll stay away from Hermione.”
“You’re doing a pretty good job of that by yourself,” said Harry.

Poole did not rise to the bait. “And if I win, you stay away from Hermione. I don’t want to see her hurt again.”

“Do I not have a say in this?” snapped Hermione, but was ignored entirely.

“Agreed.” Harry raised an eyebrow. “Anything goes in this duel?”

“Anything goes.” Poole nodded his head. “Last one standing wins.”

“But no Unforgivables,” put in Hermione in a final desperate attempt to have her word acknowledged. “Right?”

Harry simply smiled a taut, ugly smile. “I would stand back, Hermione. This could get messy.”

Her eyes as round as saucers, Hermione backed up, her hand pressed to her heart.

Harry and Poole turned, pacing to opposite ends of the circular room. Harry found himself standing by the window that Hermione had originally been by. It was less of a window than a hole in the wall which stretched from the roof to the floor.

But the view it displayed of the grounds was beautiful. There were rolling, snow-capped mountains in the distance, far beyond the wild lawns which Harry had grown to love since he was eleven-years-old – a neglected, orphaned boy who finally found a place to call home.

Harry revolved one-eighty degrees again to face Poole. He inclined his entire torso in a bow, whereas Poole only gave a jerk of his head.

Poole did not respect him enough to bow properly. Typical.

Coolly, Harry straightened, bringing his wand forward. Poole mirrored the movement.

There was silence for a single, unbreakable moment. Then–

“Entomorphis!” Poole flung the hex at Harry, who easily brought up his wand to block it.

He fired several harmless sparks at Poole, and while Poole was preoccupied with those whispered, “Colloshoo.”

Poole’s feet stuck tight to the ground when he tried to move, and he sent Harry a poisonous glare, lifting his wand and shouting, “Expelliarmus!”

Harry caught the Disarming Spell in his wand and threw it straight back in Poole’s face, who dropped like a stone to avoid it.

“Expelliarmus!” Harry shot another Disarming Spell at Poole. Poole clumsily blocked it, the soles of his shoes glued to the ground.

“Stupefy!” he said, and as Harry skipped around the blue, fast-moving light, Poole managed a counter-curse on his feet.

So they were heading into this territory. Harry made no move to cast another spell, waiting for Poole’s next move to confirm that things were about to get dangerous.

Poole clambered to his feet, his eyes narrowed. “Confringo!”
The curse rebounded off Harry’s Shield Charm. They were really doing this.

“Expulso!” Harry sent Poole flying into the wall behind him, and there was a sickening crunch when Poole’s head made contact with the stone.

The other boy simply cracked his neck, blood dribbling down his forehead as he stood again, and he grinned sharply. He raised his wand, his eyes crazed, and cast, “Fiendfyre!”

“No!” Hermione bound into the middle of the duelling ground, throwing herself at Harry and pushing him to the ground, out of the way of Poole’s curse which burst out of his wand, an unstoppable, untameable stream of fire.

Harry raised his hand to shield his eyes from the molten red light which surrounded them, staring up at Poole who stood among the flames, his face glowing. The Fiendfyre licked up the walls, still climbing out from the tip of his wand.

“You can’t control it!” Harry shouted. “This is Dark magic, Poole! You have to stop it!”

“But anything goes,” said Poole, tilting his head innocently and smiling. His eyes gleamed mean. “Don’t you remember, Delacour?”

“Rowan!” Hermione was sprawled on the ground by Harry’s side, both of them at Poole’s mercy at his feet. “Are you mad?”

“I’m sorry you have to see this, Hermione.” Poole’s mouth twisted slightly. “But somebody has to do away with your cousin.”

“Like hell!” Harry launched himself to his feet, and the Fiendfyre roared up to block his path to Poole. He stumbled backwards, trying to part the flames with his wand, but it was totally uncontrollable.

He shouted over the roaring of the fire, “You have to get out of here, Hermione! Go and get Dumbledore!”

“I can’t!” Hermione’s voice was panicked as she tried to control the flames behind her. “There’s no opening! But I think that the professors will notice that North Tower is up in flames soon enough, anyway!”

“Isn’t this a fun duel, now?” called Poole, barely visible through the barrier of smoke that was rising. “You are completely blind in there, Delacour, so I may as well practise some spells on you. Crucio!”

“Protego!” Harry released his hold on the flames for long enough to bring forth a Shield Charm, but it cost him. The Fiendfyre drove him back further so that his and Hermione’s protective circle shrunk.

“You’ve had practice since last time!” Rowan sounded positively delighted. At this point, he was merely a disembodied voice in the flames. “How about we cast our minds back a little further? Confundo!”

Harry conjured another Shield Charm, leaping backwards from the flames which flickered closer to his feet. He and Hermione’s backs were flush against each other as they circled.

“Poole is absolutely off his rocker,” he told her. “We have to get out of here now – I’ve got no more leeway. If he sends one more spell my way, either I take it or we both burn.”
“Only Rowan can control this Fiendfyre!” Hermione pushed back a persistent tongue of fire. “There’s no way out.”

Perspiration trickled down Harry’s forehead and into his eyes. “Even he can’t control it. I don’t think that he’s mastered it yet. If he had, you wouldn’t be in here with me. It’s only a matter of time before he goes up in flames, too.”

“Then what do we do?” Hermione cursed, grabbing Harry’s hand with her free one. Her fingers were moist with sweat. “After all we’ve been through, this is not the way to die!”

“I can surrender.” Harry scowled, squeezing her fingers before releasing them. “If I surrender, I may buy us more time.”

*The deal that you and Rowan struck at the beginning of the duel is binding!* hissed Hermione. “If you surrender, we can’t see each other again!”

“I know.” Harry’s chin jutted forward stubbornly. “But I value your life more than my own pride.”

“No, Harry–”

“Poole!” shouted Harry, and it was impossible to locate Poole when he giggled in a sing-song voice, “Ye-es?”

“I surrender.” Harry raised his arms as high as he dared. “You win the duel.”

“Oh, but that was too easy.” Poole’s location seemed to shift again. “You would give up on Hermione that quickly? I always knew that you were a cowardly piece of shit. Didn’t I warn you, Hermione?”

“No, Rowan.” Harry couldn’t see her face, but her voice was trembling. “You are the cowardly one. You can’t even fight your own battles without hiding behind cursed fire.”

The flames began to inch away from them, bit by bit, to form a charred passageway which led to Poole. His cheeks were slightly burned, his sleeves crumbling, and his face was tight with concentration as he ordered the flames to give way.

But the Fiendfyre was not obedient, and Harry could see the difficulty that Poole was having.

“Hermione,” the Ravenclaw said quietly and extended the hand which was not grasping his wand. “Soon you’ll see things my way.”

Harry nudged her forward. “This is your way out, ‘Mione. Take it.”

“What?” Hermione whirled around to face him. There were streaks of charcoal across her face, and it looked as though several centimetres of her hair had been burned off. “I’m not leaving you here! We never agreed to that!”

“Never agreed to anything.” Harry gave her a half-smile, pushed her forward again gently. “Go.”

Hermione took a step away from him, her eyes shining, then another, until she was right in the middle of Poole’s burned path. Finally, she turned to face the other boy. “Rowan,” she beseeched. “If you… if you love me, if you really love me, you need to stop this at once. If he dies, it will break my heart. And you’ll be the one responsible for that.”

“He can’t control it, Hermione!” Harry called after her. “I told you that already!”
“You are so full of shit,” snarled Poole. “You think that I can’t control it? I’ll prove that I can! For you, Hermione. Only for you.”

He raised his wand, whirling it in the air. There was so much pain on his face that Harry half expected him to break down into tears. But instead, the flames in the room began to spin, just like Poole’s wand, swirling higher and higher up into the air. The stifling heat which seared his skin was gradually vanishing, because the Fiendfyre was being sucked back into Poole’s wand, and Harry watched with wide eyes as the last of the flames were swallowed back up, as if it had never existed.

But the scorched walls, the soot and burns which marred all of them was evidence enough.

Poole turned his nose down on Harry. “I won, Delacour. You keep to your side of the deal now.”

“Harry,” Hermione whispered. “I told you, I told you, not to go through with the duel.”

Harry wasn’t listening. Poole’s earlier words rung through his head, finally gaining his full attention.

**Crucio! You’ve had practice since last time.**

Harry stared at his shaking hands, his trembling fingers.

**How about we cast our minds back a little further? Confundo!**

His wand dropped from between his fingers, clattering on the ground noisily. He fell to his knees.

“Is it time for your dramatic speech?” asked Poole, sighing noisily. “Let’s hear it, then.”

“Jenkins,” whispered Harry.

“E-excuse me?” The amusement in Poole’s voice drained, as did the colour in his skin. He resembled a statue made of wax now.

“Jenkins,” Harry repeated in a louder voice, slowly raising his eyes to meet Poole’s. “Elijah Jenkins.”

“Jenkins?” asked Hermione, befuddled. “The one who tortured you, Harry? What… what has he got to do with any of this?”

“You–” Harry raised a shaking finger, pointed it at Poole, a condemnation. “You did it, didn’t you?”

“I think that his senses are addled from the smoke,” began Poole, but his face was pallid and he was taking steps backward.

“No!” spat Harry, and Poole jumped, no longer so confident in himself. “It was you, wasn’t it? You were the great mastermind behind their plan, the mastermind who was never caught. You are in so many of mine and Ignatius’s classes, you would have known that we were close. You were the one who advised that Jenkins lure me out of my common room with a note from him, weren’t you? You have proven yourself to be capable of Dark arts today. Did you also suggest the use of the Memory Charm, followed by a Confundus Charm, and, last but not least, the Cruciatus Curse to finish it all off?”

“I… I…” Poole was retreating rapidly now, turning to run back down the stairs, but Hermione got
to the doorway first, her wand pointed steadily at him.

“I can’t allow you to leave yet,” she whispered. “Not until the professors arrive.”

Poole’s jaw worked for a moment, a vein throbbing in his temple, then he spun around to watch Harry darkly. “Fine,” he breathed. “Yes, I admit it. I helped Elijah Jenkins and Axel Renshaw corner you like a common garden snake. And you were very predictable. It was disappointing when you woke up again after that ordeal. For a little while, I thought that you were out of my hair completely.”

“You’re insane,” growled Harry, clenching his fingers into fists. He bowed his head to stare at his wand, abandoned upon the blackened floor. “But that isn’t all that you’ve done this year, is it?”

There was a long silence, then Poole said softly, “No. At first I tried something harmless. The Bat-Bogey Hex after Transfiguration one day. But you blocked it, and it hit Hermione instead.”

Harry recalled that day. He had assumed that it was one of the Slytherins who fired it.

“I would send that little brat Umbridge your way, too,” continued Poole. “I knew that she annoyed you. More harmless fun. But Hermione was always unhappy – you made her unhappy – so I ramped things up. I helped Jenkins and Renshaw. I cursed the Bludger during your Quidditch match. Sadly, it did little more than break your arm.”

“You’ll be expelled for this.” Hermione had lowered her wand and her gaze was horrified.

“I’ll be worse than expelled.” Poole shrugged, inclined his head slightly to smile at her. “But you were worth it, Hermione. You were always worth it.”

“You have become unstable,” said Hermione, and she pressed her fingers against her lips. “For me.”

“Yes, yes,” agreed Poole, nodding along eagerly. “That’s the point, Hermione. I wouldn’t just die for you. I’d kill for you.”

“That is not something I’m proud of.”

“I’ve heard enough.” Harry grabbed his wand, watching his scarred knuckles flex around the length of wood. He pushed himself back to his feet. He had felt light-hearted, disbelieving that his tormentor had been this harmless boy. But he couldn’t deny it any longer, and his conviction was fierce. “I challenge you to another duel, Rowan Poole. No more Fiendfyre. Face to face.”


“Because a few well-placed curses on Poole is overdue.” Harry sneered.

Poole sneered right back. “You aren’t as dangerous as you think you are, Delacour. I accept your challenge.”

There would be no bowing this time. Harry raised his wand, prepared to curse the bastard standing before him black and blue, but was never given the chance.

“Expelliarmus,” snapped Hermione, disarming both him and Poole. “I will not tolerate this any longer. It’s time to end this.”

Harry stared at Poole, willing as much ice into his gaze as possible when he said, “You’re the
cowardly piece of shit, Rowan Poole. I have no respect for you.”

Poole stood still for a very long moment, his nostrils flaring as he breathed heavily. His hair stood on end, his skin was burned, his glasses were cracked – he looked absolutely deranged.

Then, with a bellow of fury, he charged at Harry, his hands finding purchase on Harry’s shoulders as he prepared to bash Harry’s skull in against a wall.

Harry pivoted, manoeuvring all of Poole’s momentum so that they ended up in reversed positions, and too late realised that the open hole in the wall was there.

For a split second, both Harry and Poole hung out the window, Harry lying on his belly as he grasped Poole’s hands to keep him from falling completely.

“Don’t let me go,” begged Poole. “Don’t let me go.”

“I won’t let you go,” chanted Harry, staring down into Poole’s wide, frightened eyes. “I won’t let you go.”

But he could feel himself slipping, heard Hermione shrieking as she ran to their assistance, but the weight of Poole’s body was too much on his slippery palms.

Harry alternated his gaze between Poole and the ground beneath them, so far, far away. The distance seemed to expand as he watched it. Their sweaty fingers slipped, and Harry scrambled to hang on. But he was simply too small, too light, to maintain this much longer.

Poole must have read it in Harry’s face, because he whispered in that moment, “Harry Delacour. I don’t want to die.”

Tears dripped down Harry’s cheeks, landed on Poole’s glasses.

Then he let Rowan Poole go.

Harry’s scream echoed down after Poole as the ragdoll boy vanished, engulfed by the maw of darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Well.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

“I killed Rowan Poole.” Harry raised his head, his gaze glassy as he looked to Dumbledore, to Dippet. “I killed Rowan Poole.”

Chapter Notes

It just turned 2018 here in Australia, so Happy New Year for when it happens to all of you! On a more serious note, the aftermath of the dramas of last chapter is only just beginning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The professors did not find Harry and Hermione until another five minutes later.

By that point, Harry had well and truly retreated into himself, his back pressed against a wall and his arms wrapped around his knees, shivering as if his very soul had been turned to ice.

Hermione sat on the opposite side of the room, her head leaning back against the wall, contemplating all that had happened in silence.

There was no longer a tear in sight. Hermione had immediately gone into shock at the death of her once friend. While Harry had initially wept for this innocence he had newly lost, now his heart was as silent as a grave.

Flitwick entered the charred top floor of the North Tower first, panting slightly from the run up the staircase. “What in Merlin’s name happened up here?” he squeaked when he saw Harry and Hermione. “It was on fire barely ten minutes ago.”

It became evident that neither of the two traumatised students were going to speak, and Dumbledore and Merrythought came in shortly after Flitwick to examine the remains of the place.

“Would one of you care to explain what you are both doing out at this time of night?” asked a stern Merrythought into the silence, but Harry merely buried his face into his arms, making no move to do any of the explaining which she called for.

“The body,” whispered Hermione, because it now lay on her shoulders to be the strong one. “At the bottom of the tower. Somebody should collect his body.”

“And which body might that be?” said Merrythought, but Dumbledore had already taken Hermione’s word as truth, signalling that Flitwick should come with him before turning to move back down to the bottom of North Tower.

As Dumbledore exited the room, he told Merrythought, “Please take these two to Armando’s office. I believe that there is a story to be told.”
“Of course, Albus.” Merrythought dipped her head, leaning against her cane as she observed Harry and Hermione. “Come along, then.”

Harry rose to his feet but did not immediately follow the Defence professor. He paused by the hole-in-the-wall window. So desperately did he want to look down there, but he was frightened of what he might see.

A corpse of broken bones? Or complete darkness, a sea of the unknown?

“Harry,” murmured Hermione, and he directed his dull gaze towards her. She stood in the middle of the doorway, her face white beneath the soot and her hand stretched towards him. “It’s time to go.”

Harry wet his chapped lips and left the window behind him. He did not accept her proffered hand, passing Hermione in silence. He knew that this would offend her, but he wasn’t deserving of any comfort or support.

Because he had done something terrible. He had… he had…

This was just another brand-new horror to add to his growing list.

Merrythought led the way to Dippet’s office, Harry several paces behind her with Hermione bringing up the rear.

“Alohomora,” said Merrythought to the stone gargoyle which stood guard at the entrance of the office, and the gargoyle bowed its head, fanning its wings aside to let the entourage pass.

Merrythought moved up the stairs briskly, Harry and Hermione hurrying to get in before the gargoyle could resume its previous position.

The professor had barely knocked on the door when it creaked open to reveal Dippet sitting behind his desk, fingers laced together. The circular office was lit only by floating candles and the dim lighting cast shadows across his sombre features.

“Please sit,” the Headmaster advised the two students, gesturing to the seats which were positioned before his desk.

Harry lowered himself into one – he no longer had the energy to conjure a sense of wariness. There was a constant ache behind his eyeballs, as if his body was willing him to shed more tears.

But his mind told him, “Hang in there, Potter. Hang in there.”

He clenched his hands into fists, nails biting white half-crescent moons into his palms, and stared resolutely into his lap.

There was a long moment of silence during which Dippet regarded both Harry and Hermione in turn, his face expressionless. Behind them, Merrythought paced restlessly, keeping an eye on the door for Dumbledore and Flitwick’s entry.

It was the longest wait of Harry’s life.

At long last, Dumbledore entered. There was not a sparkle to be seen in his bright blue eyes.

“Where is Filius?” asked Dippet, standing.

“He is delivering Mr. Poole to the Hospital Wing,” said Dumbledore, closing the door behind him,
and Hermione gulped out a gasp as if she had been retaining the noise within herself for a long time.

“Is he alive?” she whispered, and Harry looked up, not even daring to hope.

The flat light in Dumbledore’s eyes was the only answer they needed. Harry bowed his neck again. Hermione mumbled something which was muffled by her hand. Merrythought drew a cross over her heart.

“His neck snapped upon impact with the ground.” Dumbledore’s voice was grim. “He would have died almost instantly. Nothing could have been done.”

“This is… a great tragedy.” Dippet collapsed back into his chair, his gaze spent as he alternated it between the staff and students. “Mr. Poole’s parents will want to see him. The Ministry must be alerted to the happening.”

“Yes,” agreed Dumbledore, coming to stand by Dippet’s chair. “But first, we must hear for ourselves what happened.”

Harry shrunk in his chair, his hair shielding his vision of the rest of the room. All he could see were his hands, his goddamned traitorous hands.

If only he had held on for longer. One more second.

One more second…

Neither Harry nor Hermione spoke. Dippet said, “Galatea. Would you be so kind as to gather the other professors and make them aware of the situation?”

“Of course, Headmaster.” Merrythought tapped her cane on the ground before stepping out of the office.

“Now, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger,” said Dumbledore once Merrythought was gone. “Would you be so kind…?”

I can’t, thought Harry. I can’t.

Hermione made a dry noise in the back of her throat, as if she was forcing herself to breathe in dusty air. Then she began. “Earlier today, I sent Harry a message. I asked him to meet me at the top of North Tower at ten o’clock. There were matters I wanted to discuss with him.”

“Matters, Miss Granger?” pressed Dumbledore.

“We’ve been having disagreements.” Hermione’s voice was meek, she sounded as though she was holding herself together with something as fragile as sewing thread. “We haven’t been seeing eye to eye about… about some of his friends.”

“Hm.” Dumbledore straightened and there was a glint in his eye as he read between the lines. “Go on.”

“I wanted us to speak in privacy, I know that we were breaking rules to be there at that time, but I was desperate—” Hermione paused, inhaling sharply to steady herself. “Rowan must have followed me. All year, he and Harry haven’t gotten along very well, you see. Rowan challenged Harry to a wizard’s duel. Harry accepted.”
Dippet made a noise beneath his breath, and Hermione pressed on. “It started off harmless, really. As if it were part of any school duelling club. But then Rowan upped the ante – he sent a Stunner at Harry, and things got ugly. I remember… I remember Harry cast the Expulso Curse at Rowan, and Rowan hit the wall. He got angry. He… conjured Fiendfyre.”

“Fiendfyre?” repeated Dippet.

“It certainly explains why the tower was up in flames,” murmured Dumbledore.

“The Fiendfyre trapped Harry and I in the middle of the room,” continued Hermione, and her voice was colourless. “Rowan attempted the Crucciatus on Harry, and the Confundus Charm. Harry warded them both off, but in the end was forced to surrender. There was no other way. Rowan barely managed to reel the Fiendfyre back in. But then something truly horrific happened. We… we learned—”

She cut off with a choking noise, passing a distressed glance to Harry who would not meet her eye.

“What did you learn?” coaxed Dumbledore, and Hermione shook her head, her lips pressed together in a tight line. The professors turned to Harry. “Mr. Potter?”

Harry’s shoulders hunched higher.

“Don’t,” begged Hermione. “He can’t. Don’t make him say it. R-Rowan was… was an accomplice. In Harry’s torture, earlier this year. He cursed a Bludger to maim Harry.”

“The rogue Bludger.” Dumbledore glanced to Dippet, they exchanged looks. “I always wondered about that.”

Hermione swallowed a lump in her throat. “Harry challenged Rowan to another duel. You weren’t there, but I saw… I felt such unveiled rage in that room when the challenge was issued. I thought that they would do irreparable damage. So I disarmed them both before the duel could begin. But Rowan charged at Harry, and Harry…” she hiccupped, the tears streaming from her eyes were audible in her voice. “Harry pivoted, Rowan ended up hanging out the window, Harry was holding onto him. I wanted to help, but I froze up, I didn’t know what to do. I had everybody’s wands, I was the only one with power up there, and yet I was useless, and then—then—”

“I killed Rowan Poole.” Harry raised his head, his gaze glassy as he looked to Dumbledore, to Dippet. “I killed Rowan Poole.”

“It wasn’t intentional!” cried Hermione, leaping out of her seat. “And it wasn’t Harry’s fault, I should have been faster, I should have—”

“Don’t you dare.” Harry turned a furious stare towards her, and Hermione dropped back into her seat, cowering before his outrage. But all his fury was really channelled inwardly, towards his own core. “Don’t you dare blame yourself for this one, Hermione, I swear…”

“I’m afraid,” interrupted Dumbledore, sighing heavily and pinching the bridge of his nose, “that looking at the outcome of this event alone, you would be convicted of manslaughter, Mr. Potter, and you, Miss Granger, would be viewed as his accomplice.”

“Albus,” began Dippet, but Hermione cut right across him.

“Professor?” she whispered. “Are Harry and I going to be sentenced to Azkaban?”

“You are both of age,” said Dumbledore, stepping forwards and beginning to circle Harry and
Hermione’s chairs in thought. “You are both fully responsible for your actions. When the outcome stands solo, you both indeed would go to Azkaban.”

Hermione opened her mouth, closed it again, cast one last desperate glance in Harry’s direction. He did not look her way, returning his eyes back down to his lap.

Azkaban was the least that he deserved for what he had done. The wizarding world had titled him the Saviour. Because that was what he was meant to do. He was meant to save people. But he had wound up killing someone instead. True, Poole had hurt him, had tried to murder him on separate occasions. But two wrongs didn’t make a right.

He deserved to be held culpable for the death of Rowan Poole.

“But that is not how the Ministry works.” Dumbledore paused by Harry’s chair. “They will have to take into consideration Mr. Poole’s past actions, if you speak correctly. Evidence will have to be gathered, primarily from Mr. Jenkins and Mr. Renshaw themselves. They are the only living wizards who can speak for Mr. Poole’s claim to have been their accomplice. The Reverse Spell can be used on his wand to prove what was cast during the duel. I have never encountered a situation like this among students before, but it is more than likely that there will be a hearing.”

“Reporters are going to flood the grounds tomorrow,” added Dippet, scratching his beard in a weary sort of manner. “But that can’t be helped. Word is going to get out, and you two had best brace yourselves for when the tidal wave hits.”

Harry nodded his head slowly, silently, and Dumbledore’s presence at his side was like a weight on his chest.

“If you were acting purely on defence, Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore rested his hand on Harry’s shoulder, “then there is little to be afraid of.”

“I disagree, sir,” said Harry quietly, standing, and Dumbledore’s hand fell away. “There is a lot to be afraid of.”

***

When Harry had not returned by midnight, Tom decided that there was little point in waiting up any longer.

He read in bed for another half hour, but still Harry made no appearance. His meeting with Dumbledore was certainly running over time. The Deputy Headmaster was an obtrusive old bastard.

After putting away his book, Tom spent another ten minutes pondering what Harry was hiding from him – Delacour could not be a Muggle-born, after all, if her mother was a pure-blood. So the question lay in whether Delacour was actually not a Muggle-born, or if her mother was really a Muggle, making Harry’s father either a Muggle, too, or a Muggle-born, as opposed to the pure-blood Harry claimed him to be.

Tom rolled over in bed, squeezing his eyes closed tightly. It was doing his head in, trying to puzzle out the enigma that was Harry Delacour. Because when it came down to it, he knew next to nothing about the Beauxbatons transfer student. He had grown up in England. His parents had died when he was eight. He had moved to France to live with his father’s family. He had transferred to Hogwarts because his French was poor and because Grindelwald was on the move.

That was all.
But from the glimpses of Harry’s past that Tom had seen through Legilimency, the boy had certainly had a troubled life. There were so many heartbreaks. So many deaths. None of these topics had been breached between them during conversation, but Tom trusted that in time, Harry would reveal all. Including why it was that Delacour’s blood status didn’t add up to the story that was being told.

Tom was nodding off when a small, warm body slid into the bed beside him, shivering. Tom tucked Harry’s head beneath his chin, allowing his own body heat to help thaw out the freezing boy.

They lay in utmost silence for a long moment, then Harry whispered, his voice bleak, “I have to tell you something.”

“Mm.” Tom didn’t open his eyes, waiting.

There was another pause, then Harry shifted, curling up into a tighter ball. “I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

Harry didn’t sleep – there was no change in his breathing as happened when he became unconscious. But nor did Tom. Long ago, he had learned how to subdue the unwanted, creeping fingers of monsters which hailed bad dreams, but they had returned.

He dreamt of losing Harry. Something which he would not abide by.

So he stayed awake, reassuring himself that those were just nightmares and nothing more. When it became evident that Harry was not planning on either sleeping or talking, Tom decided to take a quick dip into Harry’s head.

He had gathered plenty of information by that point. But there was no such thing as being overly prepared.

Tonight, Harry’s mind was particularly vulnerable. His budding Occlumens barrier was a wilted form, harshly abraded. Tom carefully stepped around the shield and into the labyrinth of Harry’s mind.

Equipped with his usual fishing rod, Tom quietly cast out his line for ‘Muggle’. He reeled several memories, all of which featured three recurring faces.

A large, beefy man with a bristly black moustache, shoving Harry into a small cupboard under the stairs.

A woman with a very long neck, watching Harry slave away in a garden beneath the sweltering sun.

An overweight boy, punching Harry in the nose. Harry’s glasses broke in half, and the snap resonated through Tom’s very soul.

He sent the images back to where they had come from, a sneer upon his face. He had seen enough. But as he was turning to slip back out of Harry’s mind’s barrier, a memory caught his eye.

It was impossible to miss – fresh, new, shimmering as brightly as diamonds beneath the sun. It sat out in the open, exposed and unprotected. Tom’s morbid curiosity wouldn’t allow him to pass it by. As he approached it, he sensed that it was throbbing with such feeling, like a raw, beating heart, torn straight out of somebody’s chest.

Tom had never seen anything quite like it before. He lay his hand upon the image but flinched
away from it when it zapped him with electric shock.

Cradling his hand against his chest, Tom stared at this new addition to Harry’s head, startled. He hurriedly retreated from Harry’s mind, still reeling from the encounter, and released Harry, rolling onto his back, staring up at the canopy of his bed.

What could have happened to Harry which was so awful to bring about an innate response like that? Tom considered himself to be a skilled Legilimens, but this was a memory which Harry was subconsciously guarding with all his power. A memory which he was trying to suppress.

It was untouchable.

Tom would be getting no answers that night evidently, and it frustrated him to no end. He and Harry lay in their mutual silence until the new day dawned.

***

Harry had cried through the night.

Not great, wracking sobs which would have alerted Tom immediately. The silent, painful tears which punctured holes in his heart. He had spent the entirety of the night considering the weight of what had occurred and understood it to be nothing like he had experienced before.

And he had experienced a lot.

He had been in the graveyard when Voldemort returned. He had told the truth and been branded a liar. He had been the sole witness to Snape’s betrayal and the death of the greatest wizard of their time. He had stood by and watched, powerless, when Sirius had fallen through the Veil, destined to be forever trapped in the world of the dead. He had been the only known survivor of the Killing Curse.

Harry Potter had been known as many things in his time. The Boy Who Lived. The Boy Who Lied. The Chosen One, the Saviour, Triwizard Champion. Albus Dumbledore’s favourite, Draco Malfoy’s schoolyard nemesis, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger’s best friend. Gryffindor’s Golden Boy, Heir of Slytherin.

He had been brave and idiotic, insane and dangerous, childish and naïve. But never, never, had he been a killer.

Harry got out of bed early and went to the bathroom to inspect himself before Tom was given the chance to.

His eyes were bloodshot and surrounded by dark circles, his green irises as lifeless as glass beads. His skin was as white as milk, and his scar looked raw and red.

Observing himself from an unbiased viewpoint, Harry thought that he could indeed pass as a killer.

But today was just another day in his troubled life, and each day brought new dramas and conflicts. He would cry no more. He would bow his head and accept what he had done.

*If you hadn’t done it, a little voice reasoned in the back of his mind, then you would be the one lying at the bottom of North Tower.*

*But now you have fallen to Rowan Poole’s level, said another voice, the predominant one. You have surpassed Rowan Poole’s level, because despite his attempts, he never became a murderer.*
You did nothing but defend yourself.

But there should have been another way.

There was no arguing with that. Between himself and Hermione, the Boy Who Lived and the brightest witch of their age, they should have brought Poole to his knees to face justice.

There was no justice in the afterlife.

Harry’s shoulders began to shake as he stared at his traitorous face in the mirror, bringing up a hand and dragging his nails down his cheek. Long, red trails were left down his face.

What have I done?

Unable to look at his reflection any longer, unable to confront the monster that he had become, Harry whirled out of the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

Tom jolted upright in bed, stared at Harry blearily from across the room. “What happened?”

His breathing ragged, Harry brought his gaze to his feet, knowing that he had to say it before Tom found out some other way. But what was there to say?

Last night, Rowan Poole fell to his death from the top of North Tower. And I’m the one who let him go.

A shudder ran down his spine. “I can’t,” he choked out, and he fled their dormitory in blind anguish.

The Slytherin fourth-year was already down in the common room, sitting on a sofa, fiddling with his fingers fretfully. He rose to his feet when Harry flew into the room.

“Did you hear?” he asked, stunned. “Dippet just made an announcement, barely minutes ago. A student is dead.”

On this day, the wizarding world would learn that he, Harry, just Harry, was responsible for the death of a human.

His eyes met those of the fellow Slytherin whose name he didn’t even know. The common room walls were closing in on him from all sides, caging him between their ancient walls. Then, wearing only his night robe, Harry ran.

He thundered out of the dungeons, up into the main corridors of Hogwarts. He encountered no one, and there was a kind of hush over the school as if even the castle itself was in mourning the death of one of its wards.

With no destination in mind, Harry continued forwards, his heart galloping in his chest as he sucked in painful breaths of air. All he knew was that he had to escape the claustrophobia which was threatening to overwhelm him.

Outside. Yes, outside. Aim for outside.

But he knew that he had made a mistake when he stumbled to a stop by the entrance to the main courtyard. Because gathered outside in bundles with cameras and notepads in hand were the reporters that Dippet had spoken of.

Dumbledore was standing before them all, speaking. “We ask that you respect that these are school
grounds,” he was saying. “Do not encroach on the students’ and professors’ privacy.”

Frozen, Harry watched the gathering from the entranceway. They hadn’t noticed his appearance yet, he could still turn back.

“Isn’t that Delacour?” piped up a voice, then a single lightbulb flashed in his direction. Suddenly the reporters were all rushing at him, surging past Dumbledore as if he wasn’t even there.

Rooted to the spot, Harry’s mind came to a standstill. There were cameras lights flashing in all directions, blinding him, and he automatically brought a hand up to shield his eyes. Countless voices were baying for his attention, but he managed to pick out several sentences launched in his direction.

“Delacour! Is it true that you threw Rowan Poole from the top of a tower last night?”

“What was your reason for doing this?”

“Are you aware that Poole was a Muggle-born?”

“Do you stand by the opinion of your house’s founder, Salazar Slytherin, that Muggle-borns are undeserving of a place at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?”

“I…” Harry backed up rapidly, hand clapped against his mouth. He was going to be sick. “I…”

A firm grip landed on his shoulder, startling him.

“Mr. Delacour will not be answering your questions at this time,” said Tom smoothly, ignoring the clamouring of the crowd as he led Harry back inside.

Dumbledore’s voice was audible as he called for order right before the entranceway doors closed behind Harry and Tom.

Harry stared ahead blankly. He had been expecting this response, but nothing could have properly prepared him for it.

“So,” said Tom in a clipped voice, releasing Harry and turning to face him.

Harry didn’t respond, didn’t meet Tom’s gaze.

After a very long silence, Tom persisted. “Is what they are saying true?”

His one-worded response was like lead in his mouth. “Yes.”

Tom nodded his head slowly, and when Harry dared to lift his gaze, the Head Boy’s face was impossible to read.

“I’ve never had anything against Muggle-borns, though,” he whispered hoarsely. “Blood status plays no role in this event. I was… I was defending myself. He wasn’t meant to die.”

“Defending yourself,” repeated Tom. His tone was awfully cold. “Didn’t you say that you were sitting in a meeting with Dumbledore last night?”

Something jolted in Harry’s chest. His tongue felt like sandpaper in his mouth. “I lied.”

“You lied.” There was no surprise in his voice. Evidently, Tom had been expecting as much. “Then where were you really?”
“At the top of North Tower.” Harry’s voice faded into a bruise of a shadow. “Meeting Hermione.”

A nasty sneer curled Tom’s mouth, and he looked away from Harry. “I should have known. Delacour is always trying to take you away from me.”

“She just wanted to talk.”

“And look what happened.” Tom paced a few steps backwards. “Now everybody knows that you killed the Mud– the Muggle-born. Do you know how serious this is?”

“I know more than anybody else,” said Harry quietly. “And it is destroying me.”

Tom clicked his tongue, turning and walking away. “You can’t let your emotions overrule you, not now,” he said bluntly. “Be sharp, Harry, or else the press will eat you alive. Firstly, get yourself changed. Unfortunately, your first appearance in the newspapers will be in your pyjamas. I suppose we can work with that. Secondly, I don’t want you to go outside again. Stay inside the common room. Only Slughorn and that fourth-year can bother you there. Thirdly, you are going to tell me everything. No more lies.”

“Fine.” From beneath his eyelashes, Harry snuck a subtle glance up at Tom. He was so severe, so business-like. Gone was his affectionate side which Harry had been becoming so intimate with. “For what it’s worth, I… I really am sorry.”

“For?”

“For lying to you.” Harry swallowed loudly. “If I had told you where I was going, maybe you would have stopped me. Maybe none of this ever would have happened.”

“What’s done is done.” Tom brushed his fingers against Harry’s as they walked, a subtle gesture. “You have made your bed, and now you must lie in it.”

***

The bed was a thorny one indeed.

Harry spent the entire day in his bed, his covers pulled over his head as he attempted to shut out the world. He told Tom his story, hoping that that would be the end of it, but Tom insisted on interrogating him for every detail. He then proceeded to give a lecture on how to keep your head above the ground when the rest of the world wanted to bury you beneath it. This only succeeded in tempering Harry’s depression.

At last, Tom left Harry be, leaving the Slytherin common room to get up to whatever mischievous he wanted to. It was both a relief to be alone, and a disappointment to have no distraction from his own unpleasant thoughts.

At one point, Slughorn poked his head into the dormitory, seeking a word with Harry, but Harry merely buried himself beneath his covers again, willing himself to vanish from sight, and Slughorn left again.

Occasionally, he wondered how Hermione was holding up, whether she had left her dormitory and encountered any reporters. She had no one to keep an eye on her in Ravenclaw, and whenever Harry’s old mindset drifted in, he thought that he should go spend time with her.

But he had promised Tom that he wouldn’t leave the Slytherin safe zone in this troubled time.
Besides, he doubted Hermione would want to see him anyway. He didn’t want to see her, or anyone for that matter.

Tom didn’t return until much later that night. Harry was too emotionally drained to even ask where he had been.

“Harry?” Tom asked into the dark, a Wand-Lighting Charm held aloft.

“Mm.” Harry didn’t bother rolling over in his bed to face Tom when he responded.

“Would you like to sleep alone tonight?”

Harry gave an almost imperceptible nod of his head, and Tom retreated without question, for the first time in weeks going their own ways.

But time alone was what Harry needed. For the remainder of the holidays, that was exactly what he was going to get before he had to face the hordes of students returned for the final half of the school year. The hordes of students, the press, and the Ministry.

Support from loved ones wasn’t what he wanted. He wanted to recharge without the interference of others.

Wearily, Harry closed his eyes.

He would explain himself to Tom tomorrow.

But the following day, Tom left the Slytherin quarters early in the morning, and only came back once it was dark and Harry had fallen asleep. If Tom kept this act up for the whole final week of the holidays, Harry doubted any explaining would be needed.

He was grateful.

But on the third day of his reclusion, a visitor came asking for him.

At first, Harry ignored the persistent knock, knock, knock on his dormitory door, but eventually he tired of it and dragged himself out of bed in his usual pitiful state.

He would have been surprised by who it was if he hadn’t been so dismal.

“Delacour,” greeted the fourth-year, eyebrow cocked as he appraised the sorry state of his senior.

“What,” said Harry dully, half-blind without his glasses on and unable to care.

“I thought you might like to see this.” The boy produced a newspaper, held it out for Harry to take.

Through blurred vision, Harry managed to read The Daily Prophet in bold black letters.

So the article he had been anticipating had finally arrived. The practical side of him advised that he shouldn’t read whatever shit they had dumped on him, but his masochistic curiosity got the better of him.

Harry swiped the newspaper out of the fourth-year’s hand, muttered, “Thanks,” and began to close the door behind him.

“Hey, Delacour,” said the fourth-year before the door fully closed. “For what it’s worth, Mudbloods have it coming for them.”
Harry paused as means of acknowledging the words, then gently pushed the door closed with a click.

He didn’t bother to return to his bed to read the article. He simply turned his back on the door and stared at the front page.

Taking up half the page was a photo of him, standing in the Hogwarts entranceway with wild eyes flickering about the place.

He truly looked mad.

Harry read on.

HOGWARTS: SAFE OR NOT?

By Cecily Pollock

Another student has died within the walls of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry within the past few days. It begs for an answer to the question: is Hogwarts safe any longer?

It is common knowledge among British witches and wizards that 1943 hailed the death of a Ravenclaw Muggle-born student named Myrtle Warren. On the 3rd of January, the birth of 1945, another Ravenclaw Muggle-born student, seventh-year Rowan Poole, was killed. Friends and family say that Poole was reserved and studious with a bright future ahead of him. He had no known enemies, so what reason was there behind his tragic death?

The Daily Prophet managed to snatch a few words from the parents of the murder victim as they made their way into Hogwarts School to say their farewells to their son.

“Tell me about Rowan Poole,” asked yours truly.

“Rowan was a sweet boy,” sobbed Alexandra Poole. “I can’t believe that I’ll never see him again, happy, breathing… he was always so full of life.”

“The perpetrator had better face justice,” put forward Augustine Poole, “or all my faith in humanity will vanish.”

Upon being questioned why their son remained at the school over the Christmas holidays in the first place, Mr. Poole replied, “We were visiting friends in Wales. We’re… you call us Muggles, I believe? Long train ride. We couldn’t bring Rowan with us.”

I commented nonchalantly that it is because of their visit to Wales that they will never see their son again. Both Mr. and Mrs. Poole refused to comment on any further questions after that.

But the victim is not the only character in this narrative.

On the night of the breach, Headmaster Armando Dippet owled the Ministry of Magic all details regarding the event and word has slipped that Poole’s death was a result of falling from the top of North Tower, one of the many turrets of Hogwarts Castle. Slytherin seventh-year Harry Delacour and Ravenclaw seventh-year Hermione Delacour, cousins, are said to be the only witnesses. Rumour has it that Harry Delacour was closely involved in Poole’s fall. Some even go so far as to
say that he pushed him.

Slytherin house is notorious for its prejudice against Muggle-borns, and it is likely that Delacour was carrying forth Salazar Slytherin’s wish to purge the school of those with ‘impure’ blood and that his cousin was an unwilling accomplice in the matter. A common opinion is that an expulsion is in order.

Upon our arrival at Hogwarts to question these witnesses, we encountered Delacour who seemed very off-kilter [see photo at top of page]. He seems a fishy character and refused to comment on any of the claims against him. Delacour was promptly led away by none other than the Head Boy of Hogwarts, Tom Riddle. We eagerly await the day that he speaks.

Earlier today, Minister for Magic Leonard Spencer-Moon announced that the Delacours’ hearing will be held on the 10th of January where truth will become public.

But there is undeniably a recurring pattern here – should Ravenclaw Muggle-borns be concerned while Harry Delacour walks free?

Harry fell to his knees.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Harry tries so hard to be the good guy. This time, it really backfired on him. ;-;
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

A wave of barely contained elation flooded through Tom’s inner circle, because at last, after so many years of waiting, the circle would be complete.

Chapter Notes

So. This was drab as hell to write. Either because I’m burning out or because being stuck in Harry’s depressed mindset is taking its toll on me. Or both. Sorry that this chapter took forever (forever = one week) to come out. Tch.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On the morning of the 10th of January, Harry finally managed to talk some sense into himself. It was about time, too, as the hearing was to be held in a few hours’ time.

As of the past week, he had been successful in his feat to avoid human interaction. Tom’s constant absence made it easy. Harry wasn’t sure where the Head Boy was spending his time but thought that it was likely the library to study. No matter the pickle that Harry and Hermione had gotten themselves into, the N.E.W.T.s year would continue its steady march forwards.

Earlier that morning, Slughorn had nervously delivered Harry a message from the Headmaster regarding the procedure of the hearing.

*After the charge is read out, wrote Dippet, you will plead not guilty. The prosecution will then open its case and all evidence will be examined. Next, the defence will open its case. Likewise, all witnesses on your side will be examined. You should be aware that Elijah Jenkins and Axel Renshaw will also be present. They have been questioned within the past few days by Albus Dumbledore and proven Rowan Poole’s claims that he was involved in your torture to be true. There is only a slim likelihood that you will be found guilty, but despite that, stay alert. Good luck.*

So Dippet believed that he should plead not guilty. Staring grimly down at the message, Harry wondered whether he should do the opposite of that.

But upon further consideration, he decided that that would do nothing but draw suspicion into Hermione’s court as well, and she would likely be convicted as his accomplice. That couldn’t be allowed.

Why did they have to be attached by the hip in this case? It wasn’t fair for her, an innocent bystander.

Balling up the parchment, Harry hurled it across the room and earned little satisfaction when it gently bounced off the wall.

For a few long moments he glared at the crumpled letter on the ground, channelling all his fury,
hatred, anguish at that little heap. It abruptly burst into livid red flames. This did bring him some satisfaction, but it hardly lasted long. It was almost immediately overwhelmed by a tidal wave of despair.

Harry swept across the room and stamped out the fire with his foot.

There were only three hours left to prepare for the hearing, so he paid a visit to the bathroom for the first time in a week. He would probably have a better chance of emerging not guilty from the trial if he looked half sane.

But as he evaluated himself in the mirror, he didn’t look sane at all – instead, he probably could have passed as a corpse. With a grimace, Harry turned the shower on, cranking it up to the highest temperature so that he could at least regain feeling in his fingers and toes.

Beneath the scalding water, he scrubbed his scalp clean of oil, washed away dried tracks of sweat and tears on his skin. It was like peeling away a layer of himself which he had once been.

Upon emerging from the shower, Harry felt somewhat more alive, his skin flushed and his eyes sharper.

But his hair.

When it was wet and falling into his eyes, he could tell that it was long, easily long enough to be tied back. It made him look young, pretty. Innocent. How disgraceful.

Sneering at himself, Harry picked up his wand from beside the sink and held out a lock of hair with his other hand. “Diffindo.”

The snippet of hair curled up when it was severed from his head, as if coiling painfully into the fetal position before its death. Harry let it go, watched it float down into the sink.


Gradually the sink filled up with black curls of hair, until finally Harry paused, looking back at his reflection to evaluate his handiwork.

His hair was now very short at the back and sides, but he had maintained a long enough fringe at the front, only to conceal his jagged scar. At least he no longer looked quite so innocent.

Wrapping his towel around his waist and knotting it in place, Harry left the bathroom to find himself a suitable outfit for his hearing.

Perhaps a convict costume would be appropriate.

Tom was waiting for him in the dormitory.

Harry paused when he caught sight of him, then continued on his way, shuffling through his belongings to find a clean shirt. He had certainly neglected the hygiene of both himself and his clothes this past week, so when he found a shirt, it smelled musty.

“Tersus,” he muttered, tapping the shirt with his wand, and it smoothed itself out as though it had been ironed, refreshing its scent.

He pulled it on in silence, waiting for Tom to speak.

“Why did you cut your hair?” he finally said.
Subconsciously, Harry brought his hand up to run it through the short strands. His head felt a lot lighter than before. “I didn’t like it.”

“It was beautiful when it was long.”

Steadily, Harry finished buttoning up his short. Then he turned to look at Tom, whose face was devoid of emotion as he leaned against his bedpost.

“Maybe I didn’t want to be beautiful anymore,” said Harry.

“Mon amour,” murmured Tom, stepping forward and away from his bed. “A haircut doesn’t take away from the fact that you are, to put it simply, stunning.”

Harry didn’t reply, stared down at his hands. His familiar, reliable hands, scarred and tanned. His hideous, traitorous hands, too weak to hold on.

Tom held open his arms, and Harry walked straight into them without hesitation. Tom’s body was warm, a solid presence, and Harry remembered for the first time what human comfort was. It was something which he had unknowingly been craving during his isolation.

He buried his face into Tom’s shirt, inhaling his sunlight scent, allowed Tom to run soothing hands down his back. They slotted together like two puzzle pieces which were destined to fit.

Why did I allow myself to forget what this feels like?

Because you don’t deserve it.

Harry hung onto Tom tighter, then said in a muffled voice, “I’m scared.”

“Don’t be, mon amour.” Tom leaned away from Harry so that they could meet each other’s eye. “You have Dumbledore on your side, and as much as I hate to admit it, that insufferable old man isn’t going to lose. In a matter of hours, you are going to walk free again.”

Harry tore his gaze away from those dark blue eyes which could so easily be mistaken for black, and he whispered, “What if I don’t believe that I should be allowed to walk free?”

“Don’t say that,” snapped Tom, and Harry started. “You were purely on the defence.”

“But I did to him exactly what he was trying to do to me.”

Tom took Harry’s face between his hands, inclined his head so that they were forehead-to-forehead. “Listen to me carefully. You may have done to him what he tried to do to you, but your intent was different from Poole’s, and intent changes everything.”

A shiver ran up Harry’s spine, and he pulled away. “Maybe,” he said. “Maybe.”

“Everything is going to be fine.” Tom grabbed after him. “Please, Harry. Promise me that you won’t do anything regrettable at the hearing.”

“Like what?” Harry passed Tom a sideways smile which felt bitter on his face.

“Declare yourself to be guilty. Make sure that you lose.” Tom’s hands were desperate as they clasped Harry’s. “I know that you’ve been having a hard time. But don’t jeopardise your entire future just because—”

“Just because I killed someone?”
“You didn’t kill him!” shouted Tom. “You tried your damn hardest to hold on even though that git didn’t deserve it! He isn’t worthy of your guilt!”

“I have a conscience,” retorted Harry. “I’m only human.”

“Then be more than a human!” Tom gripped Harry’s shoulders hard enough to bruise and his eyes were fierce. “If that’s what it takes to make you see sense. Now please, Harry. I want you to promise me that.”

He pressed a frantic kiss to the corner of Harry’s mouth as if that would force Harry to see things from a different perspective.

“Tom,” murmured Harry, closing his eyes. “Where have you been?”

“What do you mean?”

“This past week. You’ve never been around.”

Tom tensed, shifted slightly. “I’ve been studying. Making plans.”

“Plans for what?”

“For when this whole mess is over.” Tom smiled, and it was a smile which once would have made Harry’s knees weak. But he was too empty to feel anything anymore. “I’m going to make sure that you’re happy again.”

Harry sighed, and the sound was as light as a butterfly’s breath. But he said nothing.

Tom read between the lines. “Don’t doubt your worth,” he said.

“I should finish getting ready.” Harry’s tone was flat.

“As you wish.” Tom’s fingers shadowed over Harry’s cheek, a loving caress, and then he left to give Harry that privacy that he wanted.

Once the dormitory door shut, Harry collapsed onto his bed, massaging his eye sockets with the heels of his hands.

There. He had faced Tom. Next on the list was Hermione. If anything, he expected her to be more difficult.

As it turned out, he was correct.

He and Hermione met outside the Headmaster’s Office to Floo to the Ministry of Magic.

She was wearing a long skirt and a respectable blouse, her hair pulled back into a stern bun.

When they encountered each other, there was an initial awkward silence.

“How have you been?” asked Hermione at last, and Harry pulled his shoulders upwards into an excuse of a shrug.

“As you’d expect,” he said. The whole exchange was horribly formal, and Hermione nodded her head once, a sharp gesture.

“Of course.” Up close, she didn’t look well. Harry suspected that she had applied make-up
underneath her eyes, probably to conceal shadows, and there was a frazzled light to her expression.

“I’ll be speaking before you, won’t I?” asked Harry, and Hermione gave another nod of her head.

“That’s right.” She did an awfully good job of hiding whatever emotions were roiling beneath her surface. A skill that Harry wished he possessed.

Another awkward silence.

Over their week of consolidation of all that had occurred, perhaps she had finally realised that Harry truly was responsible for her friend’s death. Because those two had undeniably been friends, even if their relationship had fractured towards the end.

Perhaps Hermione hated him now.

Unable to bear the tense silence any longer, Harry opened his mouth to say the password to Dippet’s office, but Hermione cut him off.

“I have to tell you something,” she said quietly. “About Riddle.”

Harry stiffened. “I’m not in the mood.”

“You’ll want to hear it.” She fidgeted with the cuff of a sleeve, looked to the ground. “It’s… it’s the reason why I asked to meet you. That night.”

A black cavern in Harry’s chest whirled open, threatening to swallow his heart whole.

He subconsciously pressed a hand to his chest, turned back to the office gargoyle. “I’m not in the mood,” he repeated. “Alohomora.”

The gargoyle swept out of the way, revealing the staircase, and Harry moved forwards, never glancing back.

It was time to meet his destiny, dire as it may be.

***

Tom watched Harry pass Dippet’s gargoyle from around the corner.

It hurt to watch that boy’s tragic deterioration. He had once walked proud and true, but now his figure was slumped, downtrodden. There was not a hint of light to be seen in his eyes anymore.

Tom blamed it on Delacour, who followed Harry into Dippet’s office several seconds later. It was her own fault for clinging to Harry. If she had just let go, the Mudblood Poole never would have targeted him.

Harry was still a chivalrous fool, but he was Tom’s chivalrous fool. Once, Tom had believed that the raven-haired boy’s chivalry would be his downfall.

Tom was never incorrect.

But it broke his heart, which was why he was going to fix this. He was going to clean up Hermione Delacour’s mess, for good this time.

The gargoyle bowed back to its original position, and Tom turned away. Harry’s fate was in Dumbledore’s hands now – and he supposed that that was the safest it was going to be. For now.
Meandering back to the library, lost in thought, Tom almost missed the impressive Eurasian eagle-owl which alighted on one of the corridor’s many windowsills.

It made a cooing noise to capture his attention and Tom glanced at it. Clasped in its talons was a parchment letter.

It was about time that somebody replied to him.

He strode over and freed the message from the owl’s grip. The owl screeched in his face and launched back out the window. Tom ignored it, tearing open the letter’s wax seal to read it.

My lord –

I do agree that this is an opportune moment to cast the False Memory Charm on Delacour, if you insist on doing so. The others agree. We have all been reading the newspapers, and along with what you tell us of Delacour’s condition, he has never been more vulnerable, even as a budding Occlumens. Since he has also distanced himself from everybody, primarily his cousin, few would find it suspicious if he, to be it lightly, changed. It could easily be explained as being his natural response to the Mudblood’s death.

Please wait until we return in two days’ time before you take action.

Do remember that I still maintain that there would be more suitable candidates to fill the position of the seventh member of your circle.

Cassius Mulciber

Satisfied with the response for the most part, Tom set the letter alight with his wand and crumbled the ashes out the window.

It wasn’t often that he sought the approval, if it could even be called that, of the members of his inner circle. But he wasn’t so arrogant as to refuse to seek validation when it came to an action as drastic as this.

Tom returned to the library briefly to confirm details in the books before moving back to the Slytherin common room where he would go unbothered.

He chose an armchair in a private corner, reclined, and closed his eyes.

False Memory Charms were a tricky business, and to seamlessly perform one meant that the practitioner was exceptionally in touch with their consciousness. To weave a false memory was a purely internal process.

With his eyes closed, Tom delved into his own mind, conjuring up images of the memories he had gathered from Harry.
The first to appear were of those three Muggles – he wasn’t sure how they were linked to Harry, but there was already a seed of spite implanted within the memories. It was easy enough to manipulate. Tom merely had to inflate the sentiment into turbulent abhorrence.

The overweight boy was a tyrant.

The beefy man and the skinny woman were embodiments of the devil.

In this copy of Harry’s memories, Tom crafted Muggles into truly detestable creatures.

He tucked the false memories into a safe corner of his mind alongside the memories he had already altered over the past week. Here they would be accessible when the time came, then he came to himself with a gasp. Wiping sweat from his brow, Tom observed the empty common room.

Quiet, peaceful. Completely oblivious to what its ward was currently doing.

Grimacing, Tom closed his eyes again. Draining as this might be, he wasn’t done yet.

He stepped back into his mind, collecting up the memories of Delacour. A common sentiment that Harry harboured towards her was a quiet buzz of resentment. Delacour thought herself to be smarter than him, sharper and more perceptive. She thought that she knew best, was rigid in her ways.

Tom magnified this in the memories.

Hermione Delacour was contrary, opinionated. She was conceited, thought herself to be superior. What else could be expected of the dirty-blooded spawn of Muggles?

Pleased with his alterations, Tom stacked the false memories with the others, moving on to another significant change that would have to be made.

The redheaded woman.

The circumstances of this Mudblood’s death were unknown to Tom, but Harry’s memories contained traces of bright green, the woman pleading for Harry’s life.

The Killing Curse.

This scene mystified Tom to no end, but there were no answers to be found within Harry’s head. Wherever the answers lay, Harry had hidden them very well.

In Tom’s copy of the memory, the woman wasn’t pleading for Harry’s life. She was pleading for her own.

She was cowardly, repugnant. Mudbloods should not be welcomed into the wizarding world, because they were all like this. They could not be trusted to not betray their secret society.

Gradually, the number of false memories increased, the pile stacking higher and higher. For hours Tom worked to refine Harry’s views of the world. When these memories were transferred to Harry’s head, he would finally see the scum which were Muggles, the deceit of the Muggle-borns, and the glory of pure-bloods.

He would finally see that he had done a service to everybody in ridding the world of Rowan Poole.

It was late afternoon when Tom finally let up. Sweat was running down his forehead and into his eyes, and he was panting as if he had run a particularly long marathon.
But it would be worth it.

For a few long minutes he lay back, waiting for his heart rate to return to normal, gulping down air. Few wizards played with False Memory Charms because of how mentally exhausting they were, especially if it was many memories which needed to be altered. But Tom couldn’t allow himself to burn out just yet. There were still more memories to organize.

He dragged himself to his feet and headed up to the shower.

***

It was evening by the time Harry and his entourage returned.

Tom had been waiting by the gargoyle, confident in Dumbledore’s ability to bring Harry back to him safely.

At long last, the gargoyle bowed out of the way and Delacour was the first to emerge. She barely glanced at Tom as she passed by him. Her hair was a bird’s nest, as if she had been tugging at it all day, and her face was white, her eyes wide and stunned.

A ball of dread began to form in Tom’s stomach. What had Harry done?

For a long time, nobody else emerged from behind the gargoyle, and Tom was just beginning to give in to the panic when a lone figure passed through, very small and very pale.

Dumbledore, tall and bearded, followed Harry out, but Tom paid him no mind.

“Harry!” he managed to choke out, rushing forward and pulling the green-eyed boy into his arms. For once he didn’t care for the audience, because this was all that mattered. Harry had returned to him. “What happened?”

“I got off,” murmured Harry, his voice dazed. “Free of charge.”

Tom could have wept, but he didn’t. He looked at Dumbledore, met those brilliant blue eyes. For the first time in his life, he said to the man, “Thank you.”

Dumbledore gave a small dip of his head, his face weary, and he said to Harry, “Their judgement may sting. But never forget, all of this is just debris.”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry quietly, and the Deputy Headmaster disappeared behind the gargoyle again.

Wordlessly, Tom led Harry back to their common room, patiently waiting for Harry to break the silence.

Once they were safely within Slytherin’s walls, Harry ducked out of Tom’s arms, retreated a few steps. His face was shadowed, his gaze evasive. All relief faded from Tom’s bones and his expression hardened.

“What happened?” he demanded, yet again.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Harry shrugged and slumped onto the arm of a sofa, bringing his hands up to cover his face as though he could block out the world that way.

“I think that it would be best if you told me,” said Tom disapprovingly.

Most unexpectedly, Harry burst a blood vessel. “What if I don’t fucking care what you think?” he
barked, and the mirror above the fireplace exploded. “What if I don’t give a flying fuck what anybody thinks anymore?”

Tom raised a lazy eyebrow, but Harry was far from done.

“Never has anybody given a damn how I feel!” he shouted, storming around the common room, and bricks were flying out of the walls when he passed, sofas ripping themselves to shreds, tables splintering and the wood in the fireplace erupting into wild blue flames which threatened to creep past the grate and onto the floorboards. “Nobody cares if little puppet Harry is sick of his stupid, pathetic life! I’m expected to mindlessly follow orders and be the hero, and I try to be the hero! But even when I try my hardest, I still do nothing right! So, what if—” the chandelier overhead creaked “—I don’t—” the entire thing began to shiver “—want to be—” the crystals vibrated as if an earthquake was nearing “—the hero—” the entire chandelier shattered “—anymore?”

A magnificent rainstorm of glass cascaded down over them and the ruined common room. Harry stood in the middle of it, his nostrils flaring as he breathed wildly.

Tom smiled, and it was a very wide smile. “You don’t know how long I have waited to hear you say that,” he murmured. “Harry. I never wanted you to be the hero.”

For a split second, a look of horror crossed Harry’s face as he registered what he had done, then those expressive green eyes of his welled up with tears.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, to who Tom did not know, and then he ran, past Tom and out of the common room like a shadow.

Tom watched him go.

The Slytherin who had been lurking around the entire holidays peeked out from the staircase which led to the fourth-year boys’ dormitory. “Is it over?” he asked.

Tom opted to ignore him, lifting his wand to clear the damage.

“Merlin,” said the fourth-year, eyes wide as he examined the results of Harry’s wrath. “Delacour is powerful. Absolutely bonkers, but powerful nonetheless.”

Indeed, thought Tom, gesturing to the broken chandelier upon the ground, and it flew back up to its original place, all crystal shards restoring themselves. And it is long overdue that he became mine.

***

It was two days later that Hogwarts filled up again, the corridors once again bustling with professors chasing rapscallions, students rushing to class and owls sailing overhead with letters gripped in their talons.

But with the newly renewed life came talk.

It was worse than when Harry had been chosen as the fourth Triwizard Champion. It was worse than when he had been denounced as a lunatic, a liar, after revealing that he had witnessed Voldemort’s return.

Ever since his outburst after the hearing, Harry had returned to his subdued state. He had returned to the common room, apologising quietly for his temper tantrum, and gone back to his brooding in his dormitory.
The brooding easily continued into the revival of the school year.

Lestrange, Nott, Mulciber, Avery, Rosier and Dolohov seemed, of all things, pleased by the drama. They appeared almost proud of Harry’s dramatic ‘defeat’ of a Muggle-born, and that did nothing to lift his spirits.

The other Slytherins were impassive at best – their house had been targeted in the newspapers, and they were unhappy about it. While in public, they formed a unified front around Harry, but once they were within the safety of their own walls, they melted away in contemplative silence.

Harry had noticed that Crockett and Parkinson avoided being near him like the plague. Margot made no attempt to connect with him, but he sometimes saw her watching him. Simply watching. Nobody other than Tom and the rest of their group spoke to Harry, and while he felt terribly isolated, he was glad. He didn’t want to speak with anyone either.

The other three houses tiptoed around him, as if afraid that he might throw one of them from the top of a tower. Ignatius had approached Harry once or twice before, but it quickly became evident that he was mostly unresponsive.

From then on, Ignatius let Harry be.

Tom was a great help in blocking out the rest of the student body, but that didn’t mean Harry didn’t hear the whispers.

“Why do you think Delacour killed Poole?”

“I heard that Poole was in love with Delacour’s cousin. Delacour didn’t like that.”

“Haven’t you read *The Daily Prophet*? Delacour just hates Muggle-borns.”

“Slytherin scum.”

“Murderer, more like.”

“He should have been expelled.”

“He should have been put in Azkaban.”

“He should just kill himself.”

Their voices made his ears bleed, and Harry reminded himself of what Dumbledore had told him after the hearing.

“They are all going to talk,” Dumbledore had said gently. “Like many other great witches and wizards, you will be doubted, and that may feel overwhelming. But keep your chin above the water, Mr. Potter, because one day, they will all need you.”

Harry knew, knew deep in his heart, that they would indeed need him one day. They would all need the Boy Who Lived. And what none of them knew was that he was a figure from the future, trying desperately to save them all.

But a sliver of darkness had crept into his ear, it whispered to him.

*Why bother anymore?* it asked. *Why bother?*

What scared him was that he no longer had an answer.
Once, Harry had heard Sybill Trelawney. She was delightfully pleased with Poole’s death and made no attempt to hide it.

“I said this would happen!” she would say to whoever paid attention to her for more than five seconds. “I called it!”

And then there was Hermione. Harry had not spoken to her since the hearing. He hadn’t even spoken to her at the hearing, because all she wanted to talk about was Tom.

Harry didn’t want to talk about anything, least of all Tom, or even Poole.

He had tried, once. Never again.

It had been on the first day back at school. Harry had arisen early, before anybody else in his dormitory, and he had gone straight to the top of North Tower. He had been doing that a lot of late. It seemed one of the only places that he could be alone with his thoughts.

But other people had had the same idea as him that morning.

Harry recognized the downy blonde hair which belonged to Quincy Lovegood. He had been scattering white flowers out the hole-in-the-wall window, surrounded by other Ravenclaws.

Harry recalled hanging back in the shadows, knowing that he should leave but was unable to, because watching Quincy fractured what remained of his heart.

The violet-eyed boy was singing a song as he let the white flowers fall from his fingers. It wasn’t even a song, it was nothing but a tune. It was the ancient chanting of sticks and stones, the humming of wildflowers in a grove, the lamenting of somebody who had lost his mother, father, and now his best friend.

It was haunting, bittersweet. It lured Harry out into the open.

“Quincy,” he had faltered, and Quincy had stopped singing.

He hadn’t turned to face Harry, but the other Ravenclaws had, suspicion and fury shining out from their eyes.

“Quincy,” Harry remembered repeating, his voice as unsteady as a shadow. “I… I’m so sorry, I–”

“Let’s go, Quincy,” one of the Ravenclaws interrupted, and they pushed past Harry with snarls upon their faces as they escorted Quincy away.

“Snow,” said Quincy sadly as he passed Harry, and their eyes met for a split second. Then Harry was all alone at the top of North Tower.

Snow.

“Snow symbolises the unknown,” Quincy had once said. “It makes you wonder what really lies beneath the layer of white. Nothing is as it appears.”

That single word – snow – was like a bullet in Harry’s chest, and he braced his arm against a wall, breathless from the strength of his self-hatred.

Quincy’s words had to be an accusation, that Harry had appeared to be a friend, and had turned out to be anything but. Yes, an accusation. What else could they be?
It seemed to take eons for the next article about Harry to emerge from *The Daily Prophet*, an article which all the students were panting after at that point, but emerge it did.

They thought that it would be an answer to all their questions. Harry thought it would be yet another condemnation.

Seated between Tom and Nott at the Slytherin table one morning, it seemed like any other day as the owl post arrived. The usual stares, the usual whispering. Harry even dared to believe that everything was beginning to quieten down.

But optimism would always be the bane of his life.

He knew that something was wrong when a hush fell over the Great Hall and all heads ducked down over their newspapers. Even the professors had gone silent.

“Hardwin,” said Lestrange grimly, holding up a copy of *The Daily Prophet* which had just been delivered to him. “Page four.”

Wordlessly, Harry snatched the newspaper from him before anybody else could and flipped the pages over to reach his destination.

He, Hermione and Dumbledore took up the largest photo, standing side-by-side as they faced the cameras. Dumbledore was his usual quiet, reassuring presence in the frame. Hermione stood tall and without a hint of weakness in her stance. And then there was him. Harry. His hair was in his eyes, his shoulders slumped. Vulnerable, pitiful.

Harry would have felt disgusted at himself if he had any feeling left in him.

Beneath were photographs of Poole’s angry parents, and one of Elijah Jenkins and Axel Renshaw. Both delivered to speak their parts before returning to whichever hole in the earth they had re-emerged from.

Harry could barely stand to look at their faces.

He realised that his hands were shaking so badly that the newspaper was rustling like leaves caught in a wind, and Tom reached out, encircling one of his slim wrists with his fingers.

“You shouldn’t have given it to him, Peregrine,” said Tom darkly.

“No,” said Harry. “He should have.”

With seven pairs of eyes on him, Harry began to read.

**SHOULD HARRY DELACOUR HAVE BEEN RELEASED FROM HIS LEASH?**

*By Cecily Pollock*

*As you are all aware, Daily Prophet readers, I have been following this student-gone-barmy case*
for the past couple of weeks. The update I bring to you is regarding the hearing of the Delacours’ on the 10th of January. I believe that we can correct this to being the hearing of Harry Delacour, singular, as little suspicion was held over the head over Hermione Delacour, friend and – dare we say – love interest of the deceased, Rowan Poole.

The hearing was not open to the general public due to sensitive witnesses, but yours truly was granted a seat.

The entire Wizengamot was present in the court upon my arrival. As Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Chief Warlock, was to appear as a witness for the defence, Leonard Spencer-Moon, our very own Minister for Magic, took the temporary place as Chief Warlock for the hearing.

Delacour was the first to step up to speak, and I recount that he was very shifty-eyed about the whole matter. I summarise his account of the night of the 3rd of January:

He and Miss Delacour met at the top of North Tower to discuss matters (the subject was not divulged) when they were interrupted by Rowan Poole, who challenged Delacour to a wizard’s duel. Delacour was overpowered by Poole’s use of Fiendfyre, and at the duel’s conclusion, Poole clumsily charged at Delacour, resulting in them both hanging out the open window, and ultimately Poole’s fall to his death.

I repeat, this is Delacour’s account of the story, and I while I am not trying to discredit it, it does seem an unlikely tale. Fiendfyre is considered a Dark Art, and Poole is not practised in the Dark Arts. We all wonder how reliable a narrator Delacour is.

You, dear readers, may ask why Veritaserum was not used on the one in question, but I remind you that Veritaserum is not always dependable. There are methods that one can learn to subdue the effects of the truth-telling serum, including the consumption of its antidote and the use of Occlumency. Additionally, if Delacour really is barking mad, his conception of the ‘truth’ would differ greatly from ours.

Hermione Delacour’s own account was a spitting image of Delacour’s. I speculate whether she replicated his story because she felt threatened by her cousin’s tendencies. Anonymous contacts of mine from within the walls of Hogwarts tell me that the two Delacours have often been seen having disagreements throughout the year, with Harry Delacour going so far as to alienate Hermione Delacour. All evidence suggests that he is a temperamental character, so him threatening her doesn’t seem far-fetched at all.

The most unexpected of witnesses stepped forward next. Elijah Jenkins and Axel Renshaw, ex-Gryffindor students at Hogwarts School, presented a case that Poole had been an accomplice in the torture of Delacour earlier this year. This was the first time we at The Daily Prophet had heard of this juicy event, and it left me with yet more speculations. If Delacour was aware of this, had he murdered Poole in cold blood after all? Some do say that revenge is sweet.

Dumbledore had an entirely different viewpoint. He declared Poole to be the unstable one as opposed to Delacour and presented the fact that Poole had pleaded guilty to these crimes before his death. Dumbledore put forward that Delacour was acting purely on self-defence with Poole attempting to murder him.

There was much for the Wizengamot to consider during the deliberation period.

While they met in private, I attempted to question Dumbledore, the Delacours, Jenkins and Renshaw, but the former three refused to comment and the latter two were rapidly whisked away. Where to? I presume that they are being held in a psychiatric hospital of a sort – being responsible
for torture, neither can be sound of mind. Therefore, how valid can their word really be?

The Wizengamot were in deliberation for a few hours and when they finally emerged, they cast their judgement on Delacour. He was declared not guilty.

It was a surprise for us all. All evidence in support of defence seemed dodgy to me, and Slytherins like Delacour are notorious for being manipulative. One can only wonder how much he brainwashed the witnesses.

Poole’s parents were livid about the result when I spoke to them after the hearing had passed–

Harry stopped reading there, resentment curling behind his navel. He didn’t want to know what Poole’s parents thought. He wasn’t interested in hearing about what a good little boy Rowan had been, how he didn’t deserve the fate which had befallen him. He didn’t need to read about more people who hated him.

Harry stood, tossed the newspaper in front of Lestrange. The rest of the Great Hall was stirring as they all finished the article, and he could sense the spotlight returning to him, just as hostile as before.

“Well?” asked Lestrange haltingly.

Harry stepped away from the table, swallowed with an audible click in his throat. “Bullshit.”

He left them all to their readings.

***

Tom picked up Harry’s half-finished mug of bitter black coffee, taking a thoughtful sip as he watched his beloved stalk out of the Great Hall.

Titters were beginning to circulate around the room, and Lestrange and Nott stood, making to follow Harry like loyal puppies.

“Leave him,” said Tom, and he met Mulciber’s eye, who was perfectly relaxed as he drank from his teacup. His manner suggested that he was viewing a particularly entertaining theatre show.

“But–” began Lestrange, and Tom cut him off like a hot knife through butter.

“I am confident that Harry will be feeling like himself tomorrow,” he said, and there was a glimmer in his eyes when he spoke.

The group immediately pressed in closer to Tom, all eager to hear his words.

Even Mulciber put his cup down and leaned forward, his pale eyes vaguely intrigued. “Tonight?” he asked.

“Harry is long gone,” said Tom by way of response, and it was all the confirmation that was needed.

A wave of barely contained elation flooded through his inner circle, because at last, after so many years of waiting, the circle would be complete. Never would they be stronger.

Pleased, Tom laced his fingers together and placed them beneath his chin, gazing around and
considering them all.

First there was Peregrine Lestrange, his eyes as black as night. He was Tom’s ruthlessness.

Then there was Francis Nott, sharp of nose and with front teeth too large for his mouth. He was Tom’s intelligence.

There was Caspian Rosier, classically gorgeous with flowing blonde locks and chocolate brown eyes. He was Tom’s beauty.

Next came Antonin Dolohov, large and muscular. He was Tom’s inhumanity, it ran as thick as blood through his veins.

Cassius Mulciber. His skin brown and warm, his eyes silver and cold. He was Tom’s boldness, and that put him above the rest.

But now there was another, the last one.

Harry Delacour, whose green eyes were a mystery and his voice a poem. He was Tom’s power. He was Tom’s snake whisperer. He was Tom’s first and only love, and unlike the rest, he would not bow before the Dark Lord’s feet. They would stand side-by-side, as equals.

Delacour stood, The Daily Prophet tucked under her arm, and followed Harry’s path out of the Great Hall.

Grimly, Tom looked to Dolohov. “I want you to intercept Delacour. Don’t let her reach Harry.”

“I won’t.” Dolohov stood, checked the time and paled. “Oh. I’m afraid I can’t. Dumbledore expects me to be in Transfiguration in five minutes. The lesson is meant to begin early today.”

“So be it.” Tom turned to Avery. “The task lies in your hands, then.”

“I have Transfiguration, too,” said Avery apologetically.

When Tom turned to Rosier, Rosier shrugged by way of saying, “Me too.”

“Must I do everything myself?” asked Tom, annoyed, and as he made to stand, Lestrange leapt to his feet.

“I can do it,” he offered and lowered his gaze meekly. “Throughout the course of this year, I have been… disappointing. I hope to somehow earn my way back into your favour, my lor– Riddle.”

It was true. Lestrange had done little right this year, and Tom rested his chin in his hand, regarding the other boy shrewdly. Finally, he relented. “Of course. But remember – Delacour must not speak to Harry at all costs. She will be attempting to mend their relationship, and that cannot be allowed.”

“Yes, sir.” Lestrange snapped a salute and strode out of the Great Hall, a man on a mission. While Dolohov, Avery and Rosier prepared to head to class, Tom gestured for Nott to pass him The Daily Prophet.

“Let’s see what the fuss is about,” he said. The paper was wrinkled beyond repair from where Harry had gripped them.
Without attempted to straighten out the pages, Tom read the article.

***

The library seemed a good place to go. It had become a haven of a sort since school had started again. Nobody went there to talk, so there was nothing for Harry to overhear.

The librarian, whose name Harry could never remember, barely spared him a glance when he crossed the threshold. This was another thing he highly appreciated. The librarian was always lost in her own little world of organizing and repairing books that she seldom paid attention to what was going on around her.

Harry doubted she was even aware of the fact that one of the students was dead, much less that he was involved.

Harry went straight to the Charms section, tucked away in the furthest corner of the library. A place where he would go unbothered.

The library was mostly empty at that time of day with only a Hufflepuff and a Slytherin sitting together at a table, their heads ducked over a heavy book as they puzzled over some tricky theory. They seemed thoroughly absorbed in their reading but Harry avoided going near them either way. He ducked into the most secluded Charms aisle and stood there for a moment, listening to his own breathing.

Listening to his breathing had become common for him. Sometimes, that was the only thing which reminded him that he was truly alive in this cruel world which tried so hard to drown him. It tried, and Harry knew that it was succeeding.

_Their judgement may sting. But never forget, all of this is just debris._

He pressed his hands to his face, sunk to the floor, and mourned all that he had lost.

“Hardwin,” said a voice in a low tone.

There was the rhythmic sound of footsteps approaching him.

Harry didn’t lift his head.

“Hardwin,” repeated the voice more urgently, and a hand touched his shoulder.

Shuddering, Harry lifted his face from his hands and brought his eyes up to meet Lestrange’s. Wordlessly, he awaited an explanation.

Peregrine Lestrange. The kindest, most unkind boy Harry had ever had the fortune, and misfortune, of meeting.

He was glad that they had met. He wished that they had never met.

Lestrange’s face was a picture of distress as he assessed Harry, a broken figure upon the floor.

“I’m sorry,” the black-eyed boy said, and his voice cracked. “I’m sorry that this has happened to you.”

Harry drew his knees into his chest, stared ahead of him blankly. “So am I.”

Lestrange lowered himself to the floor to sit next to Harry, met his eyes solemnly. “There’s
something that I have to tell you. I shouldn’t, but… but despite everything…” he gave a fractured sort of laugh. “You have earned my loyalty, Hardwin. Harry. And I consider you a friend. I admit that I don’t have much of a conscience, but I have enough of one to know that I could never live with myself if I didn’t tell you this.”

Silently, Harry waited. Lestrange’s gaze was shifty, he was gnawing on his thumbnail. Harry had never seen the debonair wizard that he knew behave like this.

“I implore that you don’t think ill of any of us after I tell you this,” Lestrange finally said, and he took a deep breath, met Harry’s empty eyes. “Riddle is going to cast a False Memory Charm on you tonight.”

Something small lurched in Harry’s chest, it startled him enough to make him blink before he retreated into himself again. “Is he?” he asked detachedly.

Lestrange cast a wild glance over his shoulder as if afraid that somebody had followed him here. “But it’s for the best. If you could see yourself… you are completely crushed, Harry. Demoralised. Shamed. It hurts to see you like this. But with the False Memory Charm, you can be happy again. Riddle can repair you.”

“But I’d be living a lie,” murmured Harry, looking down at his hands, cradled loosely in his lap.

“Anything would be better than this hellhole that you are stranded in,” said Lestrange fiercely, grabbing Harry’s hands from his lap so tightly that both their fingers turned white. “Trust us, Harry. You have nothing to worry about. All of us – me, Francis, Cassius, the others – we’re brothers. We look out for each other, and you can be a part of that. Please. Trust us.”

Trust.

Harry felt like laughing.

That little idea, that little seed of hope which grew from trust, always had to make an appearance to taunt him. Trust. It was something which Hermione rambled on about like a mad woman.

Hermione.

“Will I remember everything?” asked Harry, and his voice was as small as a mouse. “Will I remember everyone? All my memories… what’s it like, to live a lie?”

Lestrange released Harry’s hands, leaning in. A tiny smile curled the corner of his mouth. “It’s like waking from a bad dream.”

After Lestrange left, Harry remained for a long time afterwards, staring ahead of him at the Charms books which lined the aisle.

Maybe Lestrange was right.

Maybe things would be better this way.

To give in was the weak option. But for once, just for this one time, Harry didn’t want to be strong.

He was a killer who didn’t deserve a reprieve, yet he had just been offered the holy grail.

In the back of his mind, Harry knew that if he went through with this, there was no going back. No going back to Ron, who had lost him. No going back to Ignatius, who had stayed by him. No going
back to Margot, who had released him. No going back to Hermione, who believed in him.

_Hermione._

Somewhere within his numb chest, Harry’s heart was being carved up into millions of pieces because Tom had betrayed him, and this was a betrayal which could not be forgiven. But with the False Memory Charm came oblivion, the sweet, desensitising effects of oblivion.

Oblivion. The weak man’s salvation.

Harry came to his decision.

***

It was an overcast night. There was not a star to be seen in the sky. As darkness crept in, the shadow world came to life.

A heavy hush lay over Hogwarts Castle that night like a thick blanket which smothered all who dared to breathe too loudly.

In Gryffindor Tower, a boy with dark red hair and the most beautiful brown eyes that Harry Potter had ever seen looked out a window in silence. The beauty of this stifling night was not lost on him.

In Ravenclaw Tower, a girl with a keen gaze scoured through book after book on Memory Charms, desperately seeking a solution to her problem. As the hours ticked by and she found nothing, she buried her face in her hands and wept.

In the Slytherin Dungeon, a pretty blonde girl sat alone by the fireplace, staring into the flames and wondering what she had done wrong in her life.

In the deepest dormitory of the Slytherin Dungeon, a black-haired, green-eyed boy drifted into the world of dreams and waited for his time to come.

And there was one other. A boy with the face of an angel but the mentality of a demon delicately pushed his way into the green-eyed boy’s mind, bringing mountains of false memories with him. Standing in that deep and dark recess, the boy with the handsome face smiled.

He released the false memories, each one taking flight like a dove, and he said into the silence, “Obliviate.”

Chapter End Notes

Don’t hate me, everyone. There are still five more chapters of drama to write and if you kill me, none of that will happen. On a side note, we’ve just about hit 300 pages! :3
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

All year Tom had caught glimpses of Harry’s potential, but it had always been quelled by his need to be chivalrous, by his cousin’s reprimanding words. At last, the beast came out to play.

Chapter Notes

This chapter didn’t want to come out. It’s like I have a bad case of writing constipation (excuse the vulgar image). So, sorry it took forever. Hopefully this chapter will relieve you of some of the cliff-hanger heebie jeebies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Do recall that you all have under three weeks to complete your Felix Felicis potion and submit your thesis,” said Slughorn to the class as he peered into Hermione’s cauldron. “It is a busy time of year, isn’t it, Miss Delacour?”

Hermione pushed her frazzled hair behind an ear unsuccessfully, prodding the contents of her cauldron wearily. “It is indeed, Professor Slughorn.”

As she said these words she glanced towards Harry, who was quietly writing notes in his book, tucked in beside the tall figure of Riddle.

With only half an ear on what Slughorn was saying, Hermione told herself that today was the day she would finally do it. She would finally evade Harry’s new bodyguards and speak to him. She was his cousin, for crying out loud.

Pretend cousin, she corrected herself. As the year wore on, the line between friend and cousin had slowly blurred into one and Hermione had begun to view Harry as an actual blood relative.

But things hadn’t been the same between them since the hearing. Since before then. Since Rowan’s death.

Rowan had been a fool. A crazy, spectacularly dangerous fool. But that didn’t change the fact that they had been friends. Because of this, Hermione had been blinded by guilt. The guilt had been cloying, every waking hour she could almost taste it on her tongue. She had been the one with the wands that night, she was the one who deserved all the blame, not Harry. Harry, who, as a Slytherin, had a target drawn up on his back and took all the shots from the press.

Hermione had finally accepted that Rowan’s downfall had been inevitable, that he hadn’t been sane of mind and wouldn’t have let up until Harry was dead.

What now kept her up at night was that rather than wallowing in deep-rooted regret about Rowan, she should have been there for Harry. Harry was the one who was still alive, and he was the one
suffering because of the toxic relationship she had had with Rowan. But in the end, she hadn’t been there for him, and they’d drifted apart like two stranded buoys in the ocean. As hard as she tried, she couldn’t bring them back together.

Hermione was fully aware that Ravenclaw house shunned her. While Quincy had not openly rejected her, he had put himself into a corner where he was untouchable. It wasn’t only Hermione he had retreated from – it was everyone. That only made her feel worse.

But Harry had it worse. It seemed that the entire school was against him. Even himself. He didn’t deserve that. Riddle and his cronies stayed by his side, and Hermione would have appreciated the support that they provided if they hadn’t been, well, them. It was obvious that they were trying their hardest to keep Hermione apart from Harry, and it was working. It would take a team effort to overcome the forces of Riddle, but in his despair, Harry appeared completely docile.

The responsibility to make amends once again lay on Hermione’s shoulders alone. It was something which had always exasperated her about being friends with the likes of Harry and Ron. Sometimes she thought that she was the only rational one who existed in this world.

So today was the day, she reminded herself. Today she would not back down when she was intercepted by Lestrange or Nott or Mulciber or whoever else Riddle sent to obstruct her path to Harry. Today, she would be bold. She would be fierce. She would be Hermione Granger, the girl she had been born as.

“…so do come along, Miss Delacour,” said Slughorn, and Hermione started.

She realised that she had been mushing the exact same lump in her potion for the past few minutes and hurriedly put down her stirrer. “Sorry, what was that?” she asked.

“My Slug Club dinner,” repeated Slughorn, seemingly oblivious to her disjointed behaviour. “Admittedly it is earlier than it would normally be, but given the, ah, dire events of late, I believe that we could all do with a little cheering up!”

“Is Harry invited?” asked Hermione immediately, and Slughorn gave an indulgent smile. “Why, of course!” he said, twiddling with one end of his large moustache. “Our Harry has certainly had a rough year, and I am astonished at his capacity to pull through with all that has happened. I would say that the poor boy is well into recovery by now. Between you and I—” here Slughorn lowered his voice and cast Harry a conspiratorial glance—“it almost certainly has something to do with having such a supportive partner.”

“Excuse me?” said Hermione.

“Surely you are aware that Harry and Tom are seeing each other?” Slughorn laughed. “One day, I am sure that I will feel truly blessed to have witnessed the beginning of their surely long and prosperous relationship. Those two will achieve great things—”

“No,” interrupted Hermione, then added, “Sir. What I mean is, you believe that Harry is recovering? He doesn’t look as though he is…”

“Have you not spoken to him at all of late?” Now Slughorn looked shocked. “I’m sure his appearance will catch up with him soon enough, but that boy has most certainly seen the back of the worst of it all. I would say that his experiences have changed him, but they have changed him for the better in my most humble opinion…”

Changed…? Dreading what she would see, Hermione turned her head slowly back towards Harry.
Sure enough, now that Slughorn had pointed it out, his behaviour was somewhat more carefree than it had been of late. Lestrange was attempting to add extra Occamy shell to Harry’s potion, which had Harry tugging furiously on Riddle’s sleeve.

“Could you tell the prat to stop it?” Harry was saying. “He’ll listen to you…”

“Ah, young love,” sighed Slughorn, meandering past Hermione and patting her shoulder. “It brings out the best in us. Do come to my dinner, Miss Delacour. It would feel awfully empty without you.”

Hermione nodded stiffly, unable to tear her eyes away from this new Harry.

Could it be that Riddle, the manipulative, evil bastard, had cast a Memory Charm on Harry already? Could it be that she was too late?

No. There was no such thing as too late.

Willing the minutes to pass faster as she waited for her potion to thin out impatiently, Hermione was immediately out the classroom door and waiting for Harry when Slughorn announced their dismissal.

Jiggling up and down impatiently, her knuckles white as she clutched her book bag over her shoulder, Hermione was sorely irritated when Nott and Mulciber exited the classroom before Harry. She moved out of their way, hoping that they wouldn’t notice her, but her luck was terrible that day.

“Delacour,” said Mulciber, pausing and sneering at her. Nott came to a halt by his side. “Whatever are you doing, lurking out here?”

“That is none of your business,” retorted Hermione, squaring her shoulders and meeting Mulciber’s cold gaze. Not that she would ever admit it aloud, but Mulciber frightened her more than Lestrange or Nott ever could. There was an air about him which suggested that he would readily cause her great harm if she ever made the mistake of stepping on his toes.

“Move along, then.” Mulciber’s eyes glimmered as he stared down at her. “It is inconsiderate of you to stand in the middle of the doorway.”

“I am not standing in the middle of any doorway!” snapped Hermione, who was clearly not an obstruction to any of the students flowing into the corridor.

“If you wish to speak to Harry,” interjected Nott, his manner completely matter-of-fact, “then know that he doesn’t want to see you, and if he changes his mind, I’m sure he’ll seek you out himself.”

“Ah, yes.” Mulciber smirked. “He is very upset with you, Delacour.”

Hermione opened her mouth to inform them that she didn’t believe a word of their dastardly lies, but then Harry emerged from the classroom, Riddle by his side and Lestrange tagging along behind.

Hermione immediately forgot what she was going to say, because she hadn’t seen Harry up close in such a long time and drinking in his familiar face was enough to appease her, if only momentarily.

Harry met her eye, then looked away. He was expressionless, unreadable. It was so unlike the Harry that she knew that she wanted to grab his shoulders, shake some sense into him. Harry Potter was anything but expressionless.
“What is this cosy gathering?” asked Riddle, glancing at Mulciber and Nott for an explanation.

“We were just telling Delacour that Harry wants nothing to do with her,” said Nott, passing Hermione a sideways look.

“As if I believe that rubbish.” Hermione attempted to push past Nott, who had become a physical barrier between herself and Harry, but was unsuccessful.

_Be bold, Hermione. Be bold._

“Harry.” Hermione raised her voice and spoke around Nott as if he wasn’t there. “Tell me they aren’t being serious.”

Harry and Riddle’s gazes met for a split second, some unknown communication passing between them, then Harry stepped forwards. “I’ll speak to her in private.”

Hermione could have collapsed in relief – but she maintained a stoic front before their audience, following Harry further down the corridor and away from curious ears.

It appeared that Riddle and the others would wait for Harry, judging from their stances as they stood by the Potions classroom door.

Her time was limited, then.

Turning back to Harry, what Hermione first noticed was that his arms were crossed, a defensive manoeuvre if ever she had seen one.

She opted to ignore it and said beseeching, “I’ve been trying to speak to you for so long, since after the hearing, but Riddle always manages to cut me off. They’re purposefully separating us, isolating us, so that we’re easier to herd. Can you see now that something fishy is underway?”

Harry didn’t speak for a moment, simply looked at her, and there was a gleam in his eyes which she didn’t like. Finally, he said, “Why is it so hard to believe that maybe I don’t want to speak to you?”

Lost for words, Hermione’s mouth hung open before she remembered herself. “If this is a game,” she said sharply, “then it is far from amusing.”

“I forgot,” said Harry, and a sneer was beginning to pull at his mouth. “You always think that I’m playing games. You never take me seriously, do you?”

“What—”

“Poor incompetent Harry,” said Harry, and he leaned forwards so that their noses were almost touching. Up close and personal. “You always thought that I was the useless one, didn’t you? That you’re the only one who can ever do anything right. But these past few weeks, you’ve left me alone with only my thoughts as company. And do you know what I realised? That you are the useless one.”

“That is enough,” said Hermione, taking a step back while attempting to maintain a stern mask, but Harry simply followed her and his expression had moulded into something truly nasty.

“Why the hell was I blaming myself for Poole’s death? You were there, too. You disarmed me, you had my wand, but did you lift a finger to help me when Poole was dangling? No, you didn’t.”
He lifted a finger, jabbed her in the chest, and she stumbled backwards again. “The Daily Prophet should have dumped the shit onto you, the hearing should have been for you.”

Hermione could hear Mulciber tittering from further away from them and knew that they could hear all words being exchanged.

Her face pale, she didn’t stand down. “Harry,” she said, and her voice was uneven. “You need to listen to me right now. I don’t disagree with you, I absolutely hate that you were forced to endure all the blame alone, but you’re not yourself. I know what has happened, Riddle has—”

“This is not about him!” hissed Harry, and there may as well have been sparks flying out of his eyes. “You are the one who killed Rowan Poole, and I feel that I should say good riddance to that as well. I’m glad to be rid of that interfering little Mudblood.”

He was beyond reasoning. Hermione knew that this wasn’t him talking, but that didn’t mean that she was going to simply listen to it like a doormat. Her will hardened.

Harry’s finger was still hovering accusingly in her face, so she reached up and grabbed his hand, throwing it away from her.

“How dare you,” she said, and her voice rung as clearly as bells through the corridor. But that was all she was able to muster. “How dare you.”

“How dare I?” Harry laughed, a horrible sound, and wiped the hand that she had touched down his outer robes as if she had dirtied it. Then he walked away from her, the rift between them becoming greater, and paused only once to say over his shoulder, “I despise you.”

Hermione watched as he joined Riddle again, sparing her not another backwards glance, then they were off.

She stood there, frozen for a few moments longer.

This wasn’t right. None of this was right, and that wasn’t Harry she had just spoken to. That was some malformed version of him that had been created by Riddle.

Harry had been so broken, so vulnerable, she never should have left him alone. But because she had, Riddle had taken advantage, perverted Harry’s mind. If only she had pulled her head out of her arse earlier, she would have been in time to warn him. But now, there was nothing that she could do.

Tell Dumbledore, a little voice said. He’ll know what to do.

But no. Running to Dumbledore with her tail between her legs was not an option. If she was going to win Harry back from Riddle, it would be by her own hand.

Setting her jaw, Hermione ploughed forwards, a fire burning in her heart once again.

They had been through too much together to fall apart now.

***

It quickly became evident to Tom that the False Memory Charm had been successfully cast on Harry, and it elated him.

It was true that Harry had been something of a trial run – and now that it had been proven to Tom...
that these False Memory Charms were effective, the possibilities were limitless.

The morning after Tom had delved into Harry’s mind for the last time, it had not initially been noticeable that there had been any effect on Harry.

All members of the dormitory had inconspicuously watched as Harry woke, went to the bathroom and returned, dressed and prepared for the school day. His conduct had been reserved, his eyes tired – nothing had changed.

As soon as Harry was out of earshot, Mulciber had immediately voiced his doubts, to which Lestrange sprung to Harry’s defence almost viciously. Instead of being baited into their petty argument, Tom had waited patiently as time passed, placing himself carefully at Harry’s side to observe his interactions with others from in the box seat.

He never pushed, he never pried, and gradually, Harry’s newfound wings unfurled.

Where Harry had bowed his head when facing snide remarks from classmates, he began lifting his head and sneering in a practised manner which cowed said classmates into silence. Where he had avoided people’s gazes like a spooked creature, his eyes were now as bright as cold crystals, meeting any challenger head-on. Where his voice had shrunk into a meek shadow, when he spoke now his tone was collected and cool.

Mulciber noticed these changes and was forced to swallow his words.

But what really topped it all was what had occurred several days after the False Memory Charm had taken effect – the confrontation between Harry and Delacour. Harry’s words to his cousin – “I’m glad to be rid of that interfering little Mudblood” – had ensured that none could doubt his newfound allegiance ever again.

That night, while the others slept, Harry slipped into Tom’s bed, curling up against Tom’s body, his head tucked beneath Tom’s chin as if this was where he had always belonged.

Burying his nose into Harry’s hair, Tom inhaled the crisp scent of soap and closed his eyes. Harry’s breath warmed his collarbone.

With their legs tangled together as they dozed, Tom was no longer quite so sure of what he would have done if Harry never became his. He had never been the fool who believed in soul mates, but when they were together he sometimes wondered whether such a thing truly existed.

Harry may have become colder. He may have been quicker to sneer, to serve himself before others. He may have lost his chivalry which formed the framework of his distinct Harry-ness. But his eyes were no longer hollow when he gazed at Tom, and that was all that mattered. Sometimes, Tom thought that he caught glimpses of an underlay of sadness, but that was better than nothing at all.

Unbidden, Tom murmured into the silence, “Join my company.”

“Hm?”

“The Knights of Walpurgis.” Tom opened his eyes to stare into the dark. “Some might call it a brotherhood. A clique. But in the end, it’s merely a place where all of us belong.”

Harry remained silent for an age. Concerned, Tom gently probed his mind but found nothing but a forest of roses, deceptively pretty. He knew that if he pushed beyond the floral barrier, he would be met by thorns, impossible to pass. It appeared to be an unfortunate drawback to the method of casting the False Memory Charms. Harry’s mind was now a forbidden arena.
At last, Harry gave an almost imperceptible nod of his head. “If you will have me.”

“*Mon amour.*” Tom tilted Harry’s chin up with his hand and said, “Know that I will always have you.”

He kissed Harry there, bound by shadows.

This romance of theirs was one shrouded by the mystery of the twists and turns of a gnarled path. The result of being such an unlikely pair – Tom Riddle, the Heir of Slytherin, and Harry Delacour, the pet snake of Ignatius Prewett, the Gryffindor Golden Boy. But not anymore.

If anything, this scenario proved that the cunning could use any means to achieve their ends.

***

The following day, Tom swiftly established a Knights of Walpurgis meeting for that night, the very first one of the new year. But more than that. The very first one to consist of the complete circle.

The memory of their last meeting was still fresh in everybody’s mind, during which the seating had been rearranged by the Room of Requirement, placing the seventh member of the circle by Tom’s side. With that member finally being recruited, Tom’s Slytherins became edgy, as if no longer sure of where they now stood.

Needless to say, tensions were high for the entirety of the day with an exception to Harry, who seemed completely oblivious to the shift in dynamics. Harry, and also Tom, who was content to stand back, his arm around Harry’s shoulders, watching on in amusement as the rest of his inner circle floundered.

But they somehow managed to stumble through the day, snarling when another so much as breathed too near them. Sadly, Delacour did not approach them at all – Tom would have found great entertainment in watching Mulciber jump down her throat, given his current short-tempered state.

Instead, she distanced herself from their territory, her face buried in a book, leaving Tom to observe her from afar.

He had to give it to her. He was impressed by her tolerance. Not only was her Mudblood friend dead, but her house had shunned her and now her own cousin had turned his back on her. She had nobody, and yet she still held her chin high.

A stoic spirit, despite the fact that she had already lost the game they had been playing.

Tom did not say this aloud, but hidden in the shadows, he spared her a cursory nod of his head. She had proven to be a worthy opponent, dirty-blooded or not. Such feats would always be acknowledged by Lord Voldemort. But just like all the others, she had suffered a crushing defeat. In that manner, Delacour was no different from the others.

Pushing her to the back of his mind, Tom returned to his wait for the night to roll in. It could prove to be an interesting one.

***

As was customary, each member of the Knights of Walpurgis stole away to the Room of Requirement, leaving the Slytherin common room separately at two minute intervals in the dead of night.
Over dinner, Lestrange quietly offered to take Harry, the newest member of the family, to which Tom disagreed, glancing at Lestrange sharply.

*Back off*, his eyes read. *Don’t make me say it again.*

Lestrange quickly averted his gaze, a sure sign of submission, but Tom’s hackles remained raised. He didn’t appreciate how bold Lestrange had been of late – since their last meeting, Tom had made it clear that he did not intend to share Harry with anybody. These small signs of rebellion were not characteristic of any of his inner circle. It didn’t sit well with Tom.

“I’m sure I can manage alone,” said Harry, absent-mindedly cleaning his glasses on his shirt. Without them on to soften his face, his sharp features seemed harsher. Those aristocratic features of his were befitting of a pure-blood.

Not for the first time, Tom’s mind revisited this story, and how it didn’t add up.

Harry, the son of a pure-blood father and a Muggle-born mother. Delacour, Harry’s paternal cousin and the daughter of two Muggles. How could it be possible for a pure-blood’s sibling to be a Muggle?

There was a terrible itch in the back of Tom’s skull, begging for answers. But now was not the time.

“Nonsense,” he told Harry briskly. “I’ll take you there. You haven’t been there before, so we can’t have you getting lost along the way.”

“I have–” began Harry, and Tom’s ears perked upright.

“When?” demanded Avery.

“–not,” finished Harry weakly, deflating.

“There’s no need to lie, Delacour,” said Mulciber, his eyes gleaming. “We do like a little explorer, and I’m curious as to when you encountered the Room. It doesn’t make itself known to just anybody.”

“I haven’t been there.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Harry pushed his glasses back up his nose, met Mulciber’s gaze coldly. His voice was considerably darker when he said, “Are you calling me a liar?”

Nott shrank behind his book. Lestrange poured himself a cup of tea without looking at what he was doing and his cup quickly overflowed. Avery carelessly blotted the tea off the table, eyes trained on Harry. Dolohov crunched loudly on a chicken bone. Rosier looked away from his reflection on the back of a spoon.

Mulciber simply smirked.

As of late, when Harry grew serious, he was no longer volatile. All that previous volatility had been channelled into a far more dangerous attitude, like a serpent haunting the tallgrass. It was far more befitting of a Slytherin, Tom thought, and it kept the other boys on edge. That was what came from a bitter childhood in which your parents were dead, your mother a cowardly Mudblood who valued her own life above her own child’s. That was what came from growing up in the shadow of
your cousin, a person who believed herself to be superior above all else.

Tom was more than pleased with his many long nights of work on those memories.

When Mulciber made no move to respond to Harry, a knowing light in his eye, Tom repeated that he would be the one to show Harry to the Room of Requirement, concluding matters there.

Which was how, approximately six hours later, Tom found himself to be alone with Harry in their dormitory, waiting for two minutes to tick by.

While Tom held a time charm to keep an eye on the clock, Harry bundled himself up in Tom’s scarf, pulling on warm robes and woollen gloves to keep the chill at bay. In the end, he was little more than an unruly mop of black hair and a pair of bright green eyes, an adorable vision in Tom’s opinion.

Watching as the seconds ticked by, Tom said, “Before we leave, I believe that I should inform you of the standard rules of etiquette for these meetings of ours.”

“Etiquette?” Harry tugged Tom’s scarf down to expose his mouth so that his voice wasn’t muffled.

“For example, I am addressed as ‘my lord’.”

Something skimmed like lightning through Harry’s eyes, impossible to catch, and was gone the next instant. “Power play,” he guessed quietly.

“Preparation for the future,” corrected Tom. “The Knights of Walpurgis are a cause dedicated to the eradication of Muggles and Mudbloods from our world. Soon school will be out, and to achieve a success like this, like-minded individuals need an iron fist to follow.”

There was a long silence during which they both watched the final thirty seconds pass. It was the first time Tom had spoken openly about this to Harry, and Mulciber would chastise him for taking such a bold step. But how could a revolution be brought about without a little risk?

When Tom could no longer handle the silence, gnawing threadbare holes into his nerve, he said, “Do you understand me?”

Harry turned his face upwards, and his eyes were flat, dark, like that of a blood-thirsty shark. “If anybody is capable of purifying this world, it’s you, Mr. Riddle.”

He grabbed Tom’s shirt collar and tugged Tom down to his height, fitting their lips together in a kiss which was all cold air and steamy breaths.

Cold. Since that day, Harry had always been cold. Gone was that bright ball of fire, so different from anyone else Tom had ever known. Harry no longer possessed that rare warmth which thawed his heart. But perhaps that was for the best. Fire and ice could only ever end in disaster. But ice and ice could weave dreams from dust.

Giddy from prolonged oxygen deprivation, Tom pulled back from Harry’s lips. “It appears that I finally have somebody to fight for,” he whispered, pressing his forehead against Harry’s, and he felt when Harry shivered, as if somebody had run a finger up his spine.

There were so many things Tom would have very much liked to do to Harry in that moment, but their window of thirty seconds was over and they slipped away into the night.

***
The atmosphere in the Room of Requirement was tense when they arrived.

The last two seats left unoccupied sat at the head of the table, and delight flooded Tom’s veins like warm, heady soup. Intoxicating. For years he had been accepted by all as king, and finally he had a queen.

Tom took his seat, but Harry hesitated by the door, eyes expressionless as they raked over the entire scene. The trouble was that not only had a thorny barrier formed in his mind, but he had become so deadpan that it was impossible to imagine what was running through his head anymore.

For all Tom knew, Harry could be plotting how to overthrow him. But no, that was a ridiculous notion. It was laughable.

“Harry,” said Tom, extending a hand, but then Mulciber spoke up.

“My lord,” he said. “Surely an initiation is in order before Delacour may join our circle.”

Murmuring bubbled up among the inner circle, the word ‘initiation’ swooping between them.

“It is only fair,” put in Rosier. “We all had to pass initiation.”

“What does it entail?” asked Harry with a curious tilt of his head. Raven coloured hair fell into his eyes.

Tom remained silent, allowing somebody else to explain. He couldn’t believe that initiation had completely bypassed his brain during his elation.

“It is a duel with our lord,” said Lestrange, nodding his head in Tom’s direction.

“I have to win a duel against you?” This Harry addressed to Tom, who smiled indulgently. Nobody had even won against him, not in his entire life.

“That is impossible,” interjected Nott. “None of us could achieve that. We simply don’t possess the reflexes, spell knowledge or sheer talent.”

*But someone did come close*, thought Tom. Over the years he had worked hard to subdue his potential challenger.

Harry didn’t reply and his eyes glinted as he yanked Tom’s scarf off and tossed it to the side.

“Fine,” said Tom with a sigh, standing and freeing his wand from its holster. “Don’t worry, *mon amour*. All you need do is impress me.”

“I’ll do more than that,” said Harry, his eyes lidded as he pulled his gloves off with his teeth. “I’ll send you crashing to your knees.”

Harry’s words went straight to Tom’s groin, and he grinned sharply.

*At last.*

Mulciber cleared his throat loudly. “Begging your pardon, my lord,” he murmured, “but given that you are emotionally involved with Delacour… might I even say that you are partial to him, this may not be a fair duel.”

“I disagree,” said Tom without tearing his gaze away from Harry’s.
“Please reconsider,” said Mulciber boldly. “I only want what is best for the Knights of Walpurgis.”

Tom whipped his head around to direct a furious gaze on Mulciber. His right-hand had finally crossed the line. He had become far, far too brazen for Tom’s liking, but Harry spoke up then.

“If nobody would accept this duel as valid initiation,” he said smoothly, “then perhaps we could hear the alternative?”

Mulciber’s mouth set into a grim line. “A duel between yourself and the next in line.”

“Next in line?” Harry turned a questioning glance towards Tom, who sheathed his wand, vaguely disgruntled.

“The second-best duellist,” he said. “The one who came the closest to besting me.”

Harry’s eyebrows jumped up to his hairline as if surprised that anybody had been close to besting Tom.

At this point in time, he was far from invincible, and even Tom could acknowledge that. But come one day, it would be a whole different story.

“That would be me,” said Mulciber, and his and Harry’s eyes met, silver to green. Ice cold sparks flew.

“This should be great fun!” said Dolohov, and nods of agreement passed between the inner circle. For long, they had all noted the tension which was strung tightly between Harry and Mulciber. The showdown had finally arrived.

Tom frowned and looked towards Harry, searching for any signs of hesitancy. If he saw any then he could easily call this duel off. But Harry’s face was like stone and there was a brittle excitement dancing behind his eyes.

“So be it.” Tom lifted his wand and swept it across the span of the room. The table was instantly pushed to the side and a duelling circle was formed at the room’s centre. “Take a moment to prepare yourselves.”

Mulciber retreated to one end of the room, cracking his neck, no doubt revising the nastiest spells.

Tom approached Harry, who was watching Mulciber. There was a cruel keenness written across his face now and he flexed his fingers around his wand. Tom paused by his side.

“Cassius Mulciber is a dangerous duellist,” he warned, his voice low as he spoke. His lips barely moved. “I have crossed swords with him before, and his ability is nothing to scoff at. One word, Harry, and I can end this.”

“Don’t underestimate me,” said Harry quietly, and a tongue of lightning licked out from the tip of his wand. “I’m the best at what I do, yet this year I have been tortured by a madman. I have been defeated by a Mudblood’s use of Fiendfyre. Enough is enough. It is time to reclaim my mantle.”

Tom could taste Harry’s boiling magic on his tongue now. It was like potent smoke, filling his lungs until he couldn’t breathe properly.

At last. All year Tom had caught glimpses of Harry’s potential, but it had always been quelled by his need to be chivalrous, by his cousin’s reprimanding words. At last, the beast came out to play.
A smile curled the corner of Tom’s mouth and suddenly he was no longer so concerned. “Time,” he called, pacing away from Harry and returning to his seat. “Duellists, take your places in the circle. If either of you step beyond the border during the duel, it is an automatic win for your opponent. Anything goes, but do avoid the casting of the Killing Curse on your opponent or anything else which may cause permanent disfigurement. That could be somewhat awkward to explain to the professors.”

Tom heard Dolohov chuckle as Harry and Mulciber took their places in the circle.

Standing opposite the tall and lean Mulciber, Harry should have looked small and fragile. But there seemed to be electricity crackling in the air around him, magnifying everything about him.

For a few moments there was expectant silence. Then Tom pointed his wand into the air and a crack like a gunshot reverberated through the air.

The duel had begun.

A long, thin white light like a whip flew from Mulciber’s wand and Harry whirled out of the way, firing three consecutive balls of flame at Mulciber, who caught them in his shield. The balls exploded into wisps of black soot.

Both Harry and Mulciber paused for a breath of a moment, then–

“Confringo!” Mulciber lashed out with a wall of fire.

“Protego!” A massive barrier bounced into place in front of Harry, absorbing the spell, then he pushed back, his face straining a little. The Blasting Curse sprang straight back at Mulciber, who stumbled out of the way, caught off guard. Harry seized the chance.

Spell after spell was thrown with dangerous precision at Mulciber, and Mulciber was reduced to skipping around the circle, clumsily pulling up shields.

Tom leaned forwards, resting his chin against steepled fingers.

How interesting. Barely ten seconds in and Mulciber was already completely on the defensive. Even Tom hadn’t been able to overcome him so quickly.

“Locomotor Wibbly!” cried Mulciber, managing to slip in a jinx, and Harry’s legs collapsed beneath him.

Harry swore and Mulciber laughed. It was a high, whispery laugh, like the whistle of the wind in a small, abandoned attic. “Stay down, boy,” he said mockingly and then, “Avada Kedavra!”

Livid green light bounced off the ground near Harry’s hip, and Harry jolted furiously, as if he had been shocked by lightning.

Tom sat up a little straighter. The tables had turned and now Mulciber was playing with his food. Casting the Killing Curse and purposefully missing was enough to spook even the most stoic opponent.

Surely it couldn’t already be over for Harry? He had started so well.

Mulciber was relentless in hurling spells at Harry, who remained incapacitated on the ground, unable to utter a counter-curse for his legs between Mulciber’s teasing.
Red, green, white, blue, red, blue, orange – when Tom closed his eyes, the colours danced across his eyelids like a light show.

“You are pitiful,” snarled Mulciber, his fun finally wearing off. Vicious rage contorted his features like wax mangled by fire. “You are not deserving of our lord’s favour. Crucio!”

Harry jerked, arching off the ground as his nervous system was attacked by Mulciber’s fury. But he didn’t scream, he refused to scream, and from where he sat Tom could see sweat coursing like a river down his face, his eyes so wide and so green there in that dim room.

Somebody jumped to their feet behind Tom, and then a few more to restrain the first person, but Tom was unable to look away from Harry, who was panting painful breaths, his sharp features becoming more and more drained as the seconds wore on.

Withdraw, Tom demanded of Harry in silence. Damn your idiotic pride, withdraw this instant!

He never should have let Harry cross paths with Mulciber.

“Stop this, Cassius!” roared Lestrange behind Tom. He was surely the person to have jumped to his feet. “You’ve hurt him enough – this is madness! My lord, please…”

A muscle jumped in Tom’s jaw, but he didn’t speak. This was a duel, and he could not interfere. A duel could only end when an opponent stepped beyond the circle, was incapacitated, or surrendered. None of these three criteria had yet been met. Lestrange knew that perfectly well.

“Hardwin,” whispered Lestrange. There was pain in his voice, as if he were by a lover’s deathbed, and jealousy coursed through Tom’s veins. He didn’t have the privilege of being able to display such grief in front of his followers.

Tom got the horrible feeling that Harry was staring directly into his soul with those hollow eyes and then suddenly it stopped.

His body slumped back against the floor, cool relief washing over his face.

Tom’s eyes flickered up to Mulciber, who looked just as confused as he felt.

“Crucio!” he repeated, his wand still trained on Harry, but nothing happened.

Silence hung in the air like a stifling cloak. How could it be that Mulciber had lost the ability to cast the Crucius Curse? It wasn’t possible.

“Crucio!” shouted Mulciber, one last time, and his hand was trembling. It was the most undone Tom had ever seen the apathetic boy his entire life.

Then Harry began to laugh. His laughter resembled great, gulping hiccoughs, but it was laughter nonetheless.

Nobody spoke as Harry rolled around on the ground, tears of hysterical mirth rolling down his face. For the first time, Tom felt that he may be afraid of this green-eyed enigma.

“What did you do to me?” hissed Mulciber at long last, after interchanging desperate glances between Harry and his wand.

Harry choked off his laughter and sat up, pressing a hand over his heart to still himself. Then he
looked up and there was nothing human in his eyes at all. There was no ice in his gaze – ice was tangible. Instead, he wore the arctic wind like a mask – bitterly, bitterly cold, and completely intangible, untouchable. “No one can ever touch me with the Cruciatus Curse ever again,” he murmured. “I have at long last overcome it.”

Tom rose to his feet.

“Impossible,” said Mulciber immediately. “You can’t overcome the Cruciatus Curse. That’s… it’s not possible.”

“The Imperius Curse can be overcome.” Harry pushed himself into a standing position and Mulciber took a halting step backwards. “What makes the Cruciatus so different? You can’t harm a person without their own consent.”

“It doesn’t work like that.” Mulciber shook his head, disbelieving. “Magic doesn’t work like that. It’s a trick. Stupefy!”

He lashed out messily, and Harry calmly deflected the spell.

Mulciber’s hands quivered, face pale, and he shot another spell at Harry. Another, then another. They were weak attempts. Like a ball of yarn, Mulciber had reached the end of his nerve.

“Expelliarmus.” Just like that, Harry disarmed Mulciber. He stood there, his face a blank slate, a wand in each hand.

The duel had been won.

But Tom sensed that things weren’t over.

Mulciber stared down at his empty hands then back up at Harry.

When Harry cast the Cruciatus, Mulciber was expecting it.

The word ‘Crucio’ was like molten gold when Harry spoke it. The curse rolled off his tongue like honey, rich and sweet and delicious.

An eye for an eye.

Mulciber dropped to his knees, then fell flat, his limbs seizing up as he twitched and rolled. He was gagging, as if he was choking on his own tongue to swallow his cries of pain. He didn’t manage for long. Soon bloodcurdling screams were flying free from his lips, his voice growing husky as time wore on.

Tom slowly lowered himself back into his seat, eyes never leaving Harry.

Harry, Harry, Harry.

Vicious, cold, and so, so angry. His dignity had been stolen too many times that year, and Mulciber would pay the price thrice.

Minutes ticked by before Harry finally relented and Mulciber collapsed, gasping for air. Blood was trickling out both his nostrils, his eyes wet with tears.

Grimacing, Harry flicked his wand and sent Mulciber flying out of the circle, smashing against the wall behind him.
Malciber let loose a forlorn groan and Harry tossed his opponent’s wand to the ground, flipping his fringe out of his eyes. He turned and faced his audience, inclining his head into a mocking bow. “I believe I win this round.”

“Shit, Harry.” Nott was on his feet, running to Malciber’s side to heal his injuries.

The silence broken, everybody broke out into mutters, passing Harry sidelong glances.

Tom was up and moving towards Harry immediately. Something was swelling up in his chest, and he couldn’t identify what it was. Pride? Foreboding? Unease?

Harry was examining his wand, a furrow between his brow.

As Tom approached he could have sworn that he saw a crack running up the side of it, but Harry had it hidden in its holster before Tom could examine it closely enough.

“So?” asked the smaller boy, smiling slyly. “Did I impress you? Have I earned myself a place?”

Tom shook his head. “I thought you were going to lose. You don’t understand how it felt to have to watch you under the Cruciatus Curse.”

“It won’t happen again,” said Harry. When Tom didn’t soften, Harry reached out and tugged on his sleeve gently. “I’m serious. It can’t happen again.”

Tom twisted his hand around to grab Harry’s, his lips twitching slightly. “I can tell that I’m never going to be bored with you around, mon amour.”

Something changed in Harry’s expression, a minute twitch, and he laced their fingers together. “I really, really hope not.”

They stood like that for a split second, then Harry pulled away, casting a glance towards Malciber who was sitting upright, clutching his head, Nott and Dolohov assisting him.

“I should probably go say something to him.” Harry sighed, letting go of Tom’s hand. “I may have gotten a little carried away.”

“Don’t be soft with him,” advised Tom. “Cassius Malciber is a predator hiding in the shadows. You may have finally earned his respect, but you never know when he’ll be back for more.”

Harry smirked and set off across the room, picking up Malciber’s wand as he went. Passing by the others, Tom watched Avery clap Harry on the back. Then Lestrange jumped up and flung an arm around Harry’s shoulders, admonishing him with vigour before simply hugging him.

Nott proceeded to call Harry over to Malciber’s side and Lestrange tagged along.

Lestrange. Peregrine Lestrange’s behaviour had become something of a puzzle to Tom and it concerned him. He was no longer quite so sure where Lestrange’s loyalties lay.

Tonight, Harry had proven that he would be the most valuable asset to Tom’s circle. But in addition, he had proven to potentially be the greatest threat of all, should he ever decide to turn on Tom. Because he could easily take several of Tom’s Slytherins with him.

Thoughtfully, Tom watched Harry return Malciber’s wand and then shake his hand, smiling coolly.

He could only pray that altering Harry would not be his own downfall.
Thank you all for putting up with me and my useless updating skills. As well as all the horrible things I’m putting Harry through. ●〜●
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Mulciber was unable to conceal his shock. “You wish to expel Peregrine from the inner circle?” he whispered.

Chapter Notes

Can’t leave Sluggy out for long, so here’s a Slug Club dinner for a little ‘entertainment’.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Slytherin common room door slid open and in stumbled Harry, Lestrange, Avery and Black, all muddy and sweaty from early morning Quidditch practice.

“You are one risky bastard,” Lestrange was laughing, ruffling up Harry’s hair with a hand. “The Wronski Feint, for crying out loud… if you’d face-planted into the ground, Riddle would’ve cursed me black and blue.”

“I’ve been practicing the Wronski Feint for three years,” countered Harry and they disappeared up the staircase to the seventh-year boys’ dormitory for showers. “There will never be any face-planting.”

Lestrange’s voice drifted down the stairs, repeating, “But the Wronski Feint…”

Neither of them had noticed Tom, who was sitting in the back corner of the common room, flicking through his Arithmancy course book mindlessly.

Once they were out of earshot, Tom lifted his hand and gestured to Avery, who had yet to enter the sixth-years’ staircase.

“Riddle,” said Avery, leaving Black to his own devices and jogging over as he swiped damp blonde hair back from his forehead. “What can I do for you?”

Tom smiled tautly and snapped his book shut with one hand. “I have a favour to ask of you, Gideon.”

Avery immediately straightened, eyes brightening. Always so eager to help. “Of course. What is it?”

“I need you to keep an eye on Harry for me,” said Tom. “Especially when you two are at Quidditch together. I want you to report any suspicious behaviour that you may notice.”

Avery laughed, as if it was a joke, but abruptly ceased when he caught sight of Tom’s face. “Oh. Really? But… why? I thought he was your…”
Tom stared Avery down, and Avery slammed his mouth shut, giving a sharp nod of his head before turning and rushing away, unwilling to face Tom’s dark mood.

Once again, the common room was empty and Tom was left with his own wandering thoughts.

Ever since their last meeting, unease had crept up on Tom, stalking him like his own shadow. He couldn’t shake it. Within his heart lay unbidden wariness towards this new Harry Delacour.

Surely, surely Harry wasn’t a threat to him?

It swiftly became evident to Tom that he had to keep a careful eye on the boy in question, even when they weren’t together. The question lay in who to entrust with the task. The other seventh-years were the ones who spent plenty of time around Harry. It would make sense to ask one of them. But Lestrange was out of the question – whispers of possible mutiny shadowed the back of his mind. Mulciber was also immediately removed from the picture – Mulciber would be far too quick to cause Harry harm for no particular reason, which was unacceptable. That left Nott, but Tom was hesitant about that decision. While Nott was far from devoted to Harry, they were on genial terms, a risk that Tom couldn’t take.

Moving on to the sixth-years, Tom decided that Avery was the best chance he had. While Harry and Avery shared no classes, they were both part of the Slytherin Quidditch team, a domain that Tom could not stray within. Besides, Avery was indifferent towards Harry and still loyal to Tom above all else. That was what was important.

During breakfast the day following Harry’s initiation, Tom had overheard Nott, Dolohov and Rosier talking.

“You don’t think he’d have won against Riddle if they’d duelled…” murmured Rosier into his cup of tea. “Do you?”

“Who knows how many other aces Delacour’s got hidden up his sleeve,” replied Dolohov.

It was all the answer that Rosier and Nott needed to hear, and it set Tom on edge.

He hated to have to treat Harry with such suspicion, but precautions had to be taken to guard his own throne.

Tom checked the time. It was seven o’clock on a Saturday morning, and still the common room remained empty. It seemed that everyone was trying to catch extra winks before the week began all over again. It wasn’t a bad idea, thought Tom, heading back up to his own dormitory. He had done what he’d planned to do, and his fatigued brain could hardly refuse more sleep.

The heavy curtains were pulled shut over the windows, shielding the dormitory from the morning’s blinding threads of light. The hangings around Mulciber and Nott’s beds were still drawn tight, and Tom could hear the showers running in the bathroom.

He crossed to his own bed, shucking off his outer robes when he caught sight of Harry’s Quidditch shin and arm guards in a heap on his bed.

I wonder, thought Tom, and moved over to Harry’s bed, sorting through the sturdy materials. As he had been hoping, there was Harry’s wand holster and sheathed within it was the wand.

Carefully, Tom removed the wand from the holster. He did feel slightly guilty to be handling a wand when he wasn’t the master of it, but curiosity had been gnawing at him since Harry had hidden it from him after the duel.
Tom had never examined Harry’s wand up close before – he had once cast the Cruciatus Curse on Elijah Jenkins with it, but caught in the heat of the moment, he had paid little attention to it. The wand was rough-hewn, its handle darker wood than its length. It was unpolished, rugged, and completely ordinary. But when he lifted it up, closing his eyes, Tom felt a familiarity with this wand, an inexplicable sentiment. A wizard should not feel familiar with a wand which was not his own.

Frowning, Tom brought the wand up to his eyes and his frown deepened when he observed a jagged crack in the handle, splintering the wood in two.

“Please put my wand down,” said a voice from the doorway of the bathroom and Tom looked up with a start.

Harry stood there, pants sitting low on his hips and a towel around his shoulders. Tom didn’t have time to appreciate his lean physique – there was a freezing light in his eyes which Tom was unfamiliar with.

Tom slowly placed the wand back on the bed, as if he were tiptoeing around a spooked Thestral. Harry’s eyes followed the movement before saying, “I’m certain that a wizard of your calibre is perfectly aware that it is rude to handle another’s wand.”

“I’m sorry, Harry.” Tom lifted his hand in surrender. “It was rude of me.”

They stood there in tense silence for a moment before Harry sighed, his features loosening back up. He stepped forwards, towelling his hair dry. “If you wanted to know about my wand, you could have just asked.”

“You know me,” said Tom with a sly tilt to his mouth. “I’m not the kind of person who asks. If I want to find out something, I have to find it out myself.”

Harry sighed again, a hollow sound, and carefully sheathed his wand and strapped the holster to his forearm. “I know. But I’m a private person. Please respect that next time.”

“Of course.” Tom retreated to his own bed as Harry pulled a shirt on. “Might I ask what your wand core is?”

He saw the exact moment the question registered in Harry’s brain – the raven-haired boy froze for a split second, and when he began moving again his limbs were robotic. “Why do you ask?”

Tom lay back, folding his arms behind his head and watching Harry from the corner of his eye. “I don’t know how I should put this… but when I picked up your wand, I felt as if I knew it. As if I’m acquainted with it somehow.”

“Oh.” Harry pushed his damp hair back from his forehead and dumped his towel by his feet. He sat down on the end of his bed, his gaze distant. “It’s phoenix feather.”

Tom’s eyebrows went up. “Phoenix feather is one of the rarest wand core types,” he remarked.

“And it’s your wand core, too,” said Harry. “Isn’t it?”

Tom didn’t reply immediately. Then he said quietly, “How did you know?”

“You felt familiarity with my wand.” Harry gave a cynical little laugh. “It’s obvious. As you said, phoenix feather cores are one of the rarest types. So when you encounter another, it’s almost certain that you’ll feel some kinship towards it. Or rather, the wand will feel some kinship towards
“You sound like a wandmaker.”

“I’m far from a wandmaker, but I did have an excellent one back home.”

“Naturally, if he was able to construct a wand using a phoenix feather.”

They remained like that, in companionable silence for a minute, and Tom wondered how on earth it was that he suspected this boy to be a threat. But then he remembered, and his fractured soul gave a weary sigh.

Tom propped himself up on his elbows, pulling an invite from his pocket. “Say, Harry. Would you do me the honour of accompanying me to Slughorn’s dinner tomorrow night?”

Harry’s lips twitched into a half smile and he passed Tom a sideways glance. “I did receive my own invitation.”

“Nevertheless,” said Tom charmingly. “I would love to take you as my date.”

“Oh,” countered Harry, his tone bordering on teasing. “I could take you as my date.”

Tom clicked his tongue. “We can take each other.”

Their eyes met, and then Harry stood, coming over to Tom’s bed and crawling up to lie next to him. Tom shifted to allow Harry to burrow into his side.

“I’m sorry I’ve been so testy of late,” mumbled Harry. “I’ve just been stressed.”

“We all have, mon amour,” said Tom, pressing a kiss to his forehead, and they lay together quietly.

The peace was shattered when Lestrange burst out of the bathroom, his hair platinum blonde and dead straight. He launched himself at Nott’s bed, clawing at the hangings and shrieking about gits who moved other people’s hair products without permission.

Lestrange was only appeased once Nott had apologised and righted his hair to its naturally wavy, auburn state.

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Originally, Hermione had not planned on attending the Slug Club dinner. It seemed a waste of time when she could be slaving away in the library, doing something useful (such as cracking Harry’s little problem). Thus far, she had had no success – all the more reason to continue. Besides, she was beginning to fall behind on her classwork, which was unthinkable.

It was a Sunday afternoon and the library was beginning to fill up as students realised that they had yet to fill in assignments due the following week. Hermione sat alone at a table in the corner of the Charms section, her nose buried in The Secret to Persuasion: Falsely Created Memories. As fascinating as it was, she couldn’t enjoy it with the knowledge that her best friend had fallen victim to the charm the book spoke of.

With a heavy sigh, Hermione plonked the book down and closed her eyes, scowling as she recalled what she had read so far.

There is no counter-charm to a False Memory Charm. There are only two known methods which can act as correctives. One – the subject is able to resist during the casting of the charm, which
has only been achieved once before by Adeline Fantomworth. Fantomworth was murdered in 1765 by her brother before her technique could be questioned. Two – the threads which stitch the false memory to the authentic memories are exploited.

Method two made little sense to Hermione, but method one was no longer a viable option. There was more research to be done.

At that moment another person seated themselves at her table, and with her eyes closed, Hermione dared to believe that it was Harry, come to make amends. But when she opened her eyes, she was disappointed to discover that it was only Sybill Trelawney.

“Sybill,” she acknowledged the younger girl, who peered at her with worried eyes, magnified through her glasses to an abnormal size.

Unfortunately, Sybill was the only other student who seemed willing to speak to Hermione as of late.

“At lunch today,” said Sybill, “you left the Great Hall without finishing your cup of tea, so I took it upon myself to read your tea leaves.”

“Brilliant,” said Hermione without any enthusiasm.

“There has been a troubling shift in your fortune,” continued Sybill. Hermione had never seen her quite so concerned before. “I see that your near future is shadowed by death.”

“Perhaps you’re looking in the wrong direction,” said Hermione bitterly, standing. “As you may recall, Rowan Poole died.”

Sybill stood also. “Yes, there is death in your past. But in the future, too–”

“Stop.” Hermione flicked her wand and the books she had been reading sped off to return to their shelves.

“But–”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Hermione turned and swept out of the library, leaving Sybill to call, “Tread carefully!” after her retreating back.

Hermione paused once she had reached the corridor and shook her head. It didn’t look as though she would be returning to the library anytime soon. Slughorn’s dinner it was.

Perhaps a change of scenery would refresh her troubled mind.

She sent off a late RSVP with an apology for its tardiness before returning to Ravenclaw Tower, where everybody turned their backs on her when she passed by.

“Viper,” muttered one of the fifth-years as she walked by him, but there was nothing original about that. She was called a different name at least five times in the average hour of her life.

Ignoring the fifth-year, she returned to her dormitory to try to complete some homework from the safety of behind her bed hangings.

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“There you are, Miss Delacour!” called Slughorn. “I was afraid that you couldn’t make it to my dinner after all!”
Hermione smiled tautly. “I apologise. I lost track of time.”

She scanned over the large, round table with a quick eye. Slughorn had gathered together a small collection, consisting of only his favourites. She saw Harry, Riddle, Lestrange, Mulciber, Nott, Rosier, Avery and Dolohov – the entire Slytherin crew. There were a couple of Slytherin girls she knew only by face, four Hufflepuffs, three Gryffindors and three Ravenclaws, some of whom she recognised, but she was well-acquainted with none.

“Come, sit.” Slughorn gestured to an empty seat by his side and Hermione accepted his invitation. “I’m afraid we’ve done introductions already… but for those of you who don’t know, this is Hermione Delacour, very academically gifted if what my colleagues tell me is correct.”

Hermione passed a brief smile around the table as she sat, carefully avoiding making eye contact with any of the Slytherin boys.

“We were just discussing everybody’s plans once they have graduated from Hogwarts,” said Slughorn. He rapped his wand on the tabletop and immediately all the platters on the table floated up into the air, serving themselves up onto all his students’ plates.

Hermione watched the platters cycle around the table, recognising none of the foods. There was a plump roast bird with horned antlers, a dish of what looked like creamy blue salad, foreign vegetables which were crispy and golden, a bowl of shelled white balls bobbing around in rich orange sauce. Still more platters passed by her, each more bizarre than the last, and Hermione glanced away, opting to listen to Slughorn again.

“Naturally, all the Ministry Heads of tomorrow are sitting around this very table,” he was saying. “Miss Smith, remind me what it is that you wish to pursue?”

Smith looked up from poking at her food quietly. She was, to put it simply, gorgeous, her hair deep chestnut and her eyes a startling amber. Hermione knew her as one of the Hufflepuff Chasers, Judith Smith.

“Just last week, I was offered a position to study under Mr. Chauncey Greengrass,” she said, glancing up.

“Marvellous!” said Slughorn, clapping his hands together in delight. “The opportunity to study beneath the Head of the Department of Mysteries is not to be scoffed at. Raw talent runs in that man’s bloodline, you may well be able to steal some of it from him if you’re careful! For instance, his son, Rafferty Greengrass, has barely graduated from Hogwarts and is already climbing the ranks – he is currently the personal secretary of our Minister, Leonard Spencer-Moon. Rafferty was one of my own students – he was prefect, Slytherin Quidditch Captain and Head Boy all at once! He also received six Outstanding grades in his N.E.W.T.s, with one pesky Exceeds Expectations in Defence Against the Dark Arts… but still impressive, is it not?”

The entire time Slughorn gushed about the Greengrases, Hermione noticed Harry growing tenser from the corner of her eye. He said suddenly, “Margot Greengrass is equally as brilliant, in my opinion.”

The table went quiet, as if Harry had breached a forbidden subject. Riddle glanced at Harry sharply while Slughorn went silent. The Potions Master’s jaw went slack for a moment before saying, “Miss Greengrass is far from a bad student, but I don’t see her achieving much greatness is life…”

A muscle jumped in Harry’s jaw. “Greatness,” he repeated coldly.
The atmosphere was bristling with barely subdued magic – even Hermione could feel it, in the same way that one could sense a storm brewing on the horizon. It raised the hairs on her arms, on the back of her neck. She wondered whether this was what it felt like to be magic sensitive all the time.

Slughorn attempted an indulgent smile, but it was unstable on his face. “Harry, my boy… perhaps pure-blood traditions are different in France, but Miss Greengrass is not the heir of her family, and she is also a woman. This leaves her with only one responsibility.”

Slughorn’s unspoken words hung in the air and Hermione glanced down at her fingers, clenched in her lap until her knuckles went white.

“To procreate,” she said aloud, quietly. “To continue the pure-blood line.”

“Exactly.” Slughorn nodded in her direction before sending a beseeching look towards Harry. “Do you understand that? Harry?”

Hermione watched Harry from beneath her lashes, monitoring his response. The Harry that she knew, the expressive, volatile Harry, would have leapt up and voiced his disagreement passionately. He would have made a scene, if that was what it took to make people see.

With her heart in her mouth, Hermione waited. Harry’s eyes were hard, his shoulders tense. He was poised to launch to his feet at any moment and confirm that he wasn’t entirely lost.

But then all of a sudden he slackened, his eyes becoming shuttered once more. He glanced down, then back up at Slughorn and said promptly, “Of course I understand. I apologise if I pushed boundaries.”

The atmosphere around the table relaxed, the moment gone.

There was a prickling sensation in her eyes. Hermione felt an overwhelming desire to weep.

“Ah, where were we?” Slughorn helped himself to his golden vegetables. “Please feel free to begin eating. I shan’t hold you all back from your dinner any longer.”

Soft chatter arose from around the gathering of students, and soon the voices were joined by the tinkling of silverware on china plates.

Hermione didn’t speak but sampled some of the most innocent looking food on her plate. The roast bird with antlers was bursting with warm, meaty flavour, unlike anything she had ever eaten before.

Across the table, Harry rose to his feet. “Please excuse me,” he said, turning and leaving the room.

Hermione recognised that gait of his. She knew him well after their seven years together. The squared shoulders, the short and quick strides. The flexing of the fingers on his right hand.

This was Harry’s walk of regret.

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As soon as Harry excused himself, Mulciber turned to Tom. “I’m sorry your date retired so early.”

“I’m afraid that my memory altercations did not affect his views of Greengrass much,” said Tom quietly. “She’s a pure-blood, after all, and he was already fond of her. I didn’t think to change that.”
It was true. All that Tom had aimed to do was make Muggles and Muggle-borns inferior and pure-bloods superior in Harry’s eyes.

“Hm.” Mulciber said nothing more. In the past, he would have jumped on the chance to make a snide remark about Harry, but since their duel Harry had gained Mulciber’s respect – a difficult feat.

Tom glanced towards Lestrange, who was sitting between Nott and Avery further down the table. They were distracted, speaking in hushed tones. It was the perfect time to confide in Mulciber.

“Cassius,” he said in a low voice. “You have been a loyal companion for many years.”

“It has been my honour,” returned Mulciber around a mouthful of food to hide their conversation.

“I wish to ask for your opinion on a matter,” continued Tom, taking a sip of Gillywater. “I request that you do not share this with anyone else. The truth is, Peregrine’s behaviour has been a concern to me for a long time now.”

Mulciber’s head moved a fraction in Lestrange’s direction, his silvery eyes bored as he evaluated the one in question quickly. He listened on wordlessly.

“He has allowed his and Harry’s relationship to progress, despite all my warnings not to,” continued Tom. “They’ve become very close, and I dislike that.”

“Are you jealous?” asked Mulciber bluntly.

“No.” Maybe. “What I don’t like is that he is showing outright rebellion. I’m no longer sure whether he is worthy of remaining in my inner circle.”

Tom passed a sideways look at Mulciber. Even Mulciber was unable to conceal his shock. “You wish to expel Peregrine from the inner circle?” he whispered.

Tom set his jaw and his eyes travelled over to Lestrange, so handsome and carefree in this atmosphere. Yet a threat to all Tom’s investments. “Yes,” he said.

Mulciber went very quiet. “You haven’t told me everything, have you? You’ve never dismissed any of us before. You’ve been so set on gaining a full inner circle, and you finally have that. All of us have stood by you for years. What changed?”

Tom swirled the water around in his glass idly. “I have a queue of fine wizards waiting. I received an owl, for instance, from Abraxas Malfoy a year ago, requesting to join us, the elites of the group.”

“Abraxas Malfoy?” Mulciber’s eyebrows flicked up. “If you’ve had the likes of him waiting in line, why didn’t you recruit him as the seventh member immediately?”

Because he isn’t the power that I want my seventh member to represent, thought Tom. But Malfoy can replace the ruthlessness that Lestrange should have been.

He didn’t say this aloud, simply smiled thinly. “I have my reasons,” he said. “Back to the situation at hand – I believe that Peregrine has long exhausted all that he had to offer me.”

Mulciber’s gaze was dark, scrutinising. “That still isn’t it. You’re evading something, and I can’t give you reasoned judgement if I don’t know everything on your mind.”
Tom placed his glass back down on the table, drummed his fingers against his leg restlessly for a split second, then at long last sighed in defeat. “Ever since I cast the False Memory Charm on Harry, he has been different. He seems to have discovered his source of power and now it is unbridled. I worry that… I worry that one day he’ll turn on me with all that power, and he’ll have Peregrine Lestrange at his back if he does. You, of all people, should understand the extent of Harry’s magic. You alone went up against him. Like me, you must have felt the moment that something within him clicked.”

“Then rid yourself of him,” said Mulciber, and his voice was grave. “Leave Peregrine. He’ll find his feet again, eventually. It seems to me that Delacour is the threat here, he’s the root of the problem.”

“That,” said Tom dangerously, “is out of the question.”

A sneer overwhelmed Mulciber’s face. “Why?” he demanded. “Is it because you have feelings for him? Feelings fade, Tom. If your concerns are well-founded, Delacour will destroy you, and all that you’ll have left will be regret. Perhaps not even that.”

“I can’t do it,” repeated Tom. “Because–”

Because I think I might love Harry Delacour. I think that I love him, with all his perfections and imperfections. And it was me who did this to him. I have to take a chance on him. Even if he does kill me one day, even if he tears my heart out of my chest and pierces it one hundred times over, I’ll take it. Because at least there will be somebody, a wizard even more powerful than me, who can continue my legacy.

Those were all the unspoken reasons why Tom couldn’t bear to release Harry from his cage. Words he could never say aloud.

“Because?” asked Mulciber.

“Because I have to keep an eye on him,” said Tom. “If I get rid of Harry now, who knows what he’ll do? Peregrine, on the other hand, is merely one of Harry’s pillars of support. If Peregrine is removed from the picture, Harry may topple.”

“The rope you choose to walk on is a thin one,” warned Mulciber. “Removing Peregrine may anger Delacour, them being so close.”

“I’ll do it after we graduate.” Tom began eating again, the conversation over for the most part. “I’ll ensure that Harry sees little of Peregrine after leaving Hogwarts. That way they’ll drift apart and there should be little drama when Peregrine disappears from our meetings. I’ll make sure Harry sees sense.”

“How will you ‘ensure’ that they see little of each other? Who’s to say that Delacour doesn’t want to go back to France?”

“He doesn’t,” said Tom immediately. “Harry wants to become an—”

An Auror for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Tom bit back the words as shock shuddered through his body. That dream of Harry’s had been before. This new Harry… what did he want to do?

“He could take Peregrine with him, for all we know,” continued Mulciber matter-of-factly, oblivious to Tom’s sudden silence. “Then they could really put their heads together and plot your
downfall. I’m sorry, Tom, but for Salazar’s sake! This entire plan of yours is flawed. Normally you’re so much more thorough, but you seem to have many blind spots here…”

“I know what to do,” said Tom quietly. “I know what to do.”

Mulciber shut his mouth, took a drink from his glass. “Good. I’ve been by your side for a long time. I look forward to many more years of it.”

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As soon as the Slug Club dinner passed, Hermione opted to go for a quick night-time wandering before she retired to bed. Her mind was still buzzing with unanswered questions, it would be impossible to sleep.

Her original plan had been to slip into the library, continue her False Memory Charm research, but that hope was rapidly crushed when she discovered a couple of Gryffindor prefects patrolling in front of the library’s doors.

Resigned to returning to Ravenclaw Tower after all, she turned back – but soon found herself in the path of another prefect, who herded her all the way to North Tower.

It would have been excellent to have the Marauder’s Map right about then. To avoid being seen, Hermione slipped up North Tower’s stairs, praying that the prefect would not follow her up. Fortunately, he continued past the staircase, leaving Hermione to breathe out in relief, preparing to flee. That was when she heard voices, echoing down from further up.

Wrapping her robes more securely around her body, Hermione crept higher up the staircase – she blamed it on Harry and Ron. Even if she loathed the idea of returning to the place of Rowan’s death, their overly curious natures had rubbed off on her over the years. Who knew what she might discover at the top of the tower?

Concealed in the shadows of the doorway, Hermione peeked in and nausea overwhelmed her momentarily.

The walls were still scorched from Fiendfyre, a Dark stain which could not be removed easily. And opposite her – the hole-in-the-wall window, wide and gaping like an ugly, fresh wound which needed to be stitched up. Hermione could still recall standing there, her damned feet frozen, unable to move as she watched Harry and Rowan dangling from the window. She still recalled the exact moment that Rowan slipped, silent as death, and it had been Harry who screamed.

It had rattled her back into movement, that sound. It was the sound of a human’s life being torn into pieces.

The old Harry, the real Harry, had been a bleeding heart with the weight of the world on his shoulders. If that Harry could see himself now…

Pressing her hand to her mouth to overcome the emotions swelling like a riptide inside her chest, Hermione gazed around the room and she saw a lone figure in the dark, his glasses gleaming beneath the moonlight. For one overwhelming moment, she was certain that it was the ghost of Rowan Poole, returned to Hogwarts one last time, but then the figure shifted and it was only Harry, staring into the distance.

He wasn’t alone.

Quincy’s hair was bright and cold, like glowing ice in the dark. He was sitting there on the ground,
cross-legged, several feet away from Harry.

“I didn’t mean what you may have thought I meant,” said Quincy, and his voice was soft and serious. Hermione had never heard him speak like this before, and she knew that it was a moment she should not be intruding on. Yet she felt compelled to stay and listen, if only for a few moments.

“What do you mean?” The brittleness had faded from Harry’s voice, something Hermione had become accustomed to hearing. Now he sounded tired, and nothing more.

“Once, I told you that snow symbolises the unknown.” Quincy tilted his head to look up at Harry. “I said that you never know what really lies beneath that layer of white, that nothing is as it appears.”

“I remember.” Harry turned his head so that they were looking at each other. “Later, you said to me ‘snow’. I thought that it was a condemnation. I thought that I had betrayed you.”

Quincy shook his head, a silent gesture. “Truth be told… it was Rowan who betrayed me. I loved him dearly. I still do. But his behaviour has to be acknowledged. He practised the Dark Arts in secret, he tried to kill an innocent person. When it comes to Rowan… nothing was as it appeared. Sometimes I wonder how much of what we had was real.”

“I think it was real.” Harry lowered himself down to the ground so that they were sitting side-by-side. “All of it. Poole loved you, and he loved my cousin. It was me he despised.”

They were quiet for a very long moment. Tranquillity perched between them like a bird, a fragile thing, ready to take flight from that window at any moment.

Tranquillity was a rare thing those days, and hidden by the doorway, Hermione was thankful that Harry could experience it, if only for a short time. Even if she couldn’t be a part of it.

Then Quincy reached across and placed something in Harry’s hand. “I’m sorry for everything that has happened to you,” he said. “Truly I am.”

Harry’s fingers wrapped around the object Quincy had passed him. “I’m not.” He raised his face to look up at the moon. “I’ve never seen things more clearly than I do now.”

When Quincy stood, Harry stood also.

Quincy put a hand on Harry’s shoulder, squeezing softly. “Have courage,” he said before releasing Harry and turning to the doorway.

Hermione hurriedly retreated a few steps, allowing Quincy a wide berth when he left. As he glided past, Hermione saw that there were tears in his bright violet eyes.

Once the sound of his footsteps, spiralling back down North Tower, became inaudible, she returned to the doorway to watch Harry a moment longer.

Clasped in his fingers, now in view, was a white flower. A sword lily, the very same as the ones Quincy wore in his breast pocket for his dead parents.

They signify remembrance.

Harry lifted the lily to his lips and whispered something to it, before holding it out the window and letting it droop from his fingers. It sank like a feather, lost in flight.
Her time here was long expired.

Quietly, Hermione crept back down the stairs.

She was glad that her original late-night plans had been thwarted by the presence of patrolling prefects. What she had gained here was far more valuable than any time she could have spent in the library. She had seen that Riddle had not broken Harry entirely. Like a teardrop in the ocean, there was still some of her Harry left within him.

He still had compassion for others, even if it wasn’t for her. Even if it wasn’t for Muggle-borns. And yet it was still a priceless gift which had been handed to Hermione. Harry was not yet a lost soul. Hermione had just found a finger hold, and she would die before she let go.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this chapter was a little shorter than all the previous ones. It wrapped itself up at this point and I couldn’t force it to continue. Also, I think I wrote in a lot of references to earlier chapters, so apologies to my older readers who have been keeping up with my updates and can’t remember those chapters.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Avery marched up to Tom and said, “You asked me to keep an eye on Delacour for any suspicious behaviour.”
Tom sat up straight, ears pricked, turning his head towards Avery. “Yes?” “He’s vanished.”

Chapter Notes

WHOA THIRD LAST CHAPTER. OR RATHER, SECOND LAST BECAUSE THE LAST IS JUST AN EPILOGUE. THIS IS HAPPENING SO FAST. Well, not really, it’s taken me an entire year so far but there ya go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ten minutes remain of your time!” announced Slughorn to the class, flicking his wand in the air. “May the countdown begin!”

Bright blue ribbons twirled out of his wand, shifting above his head to form a timer, gradually counting down.

_Nine minutes and fifty-nine seconds, nine minutes and fifty-eight seconds, nine minutes and fifty-seven seconds…_ 

Hermione frantically averted her gaze from the countdown timer and stuck her stirring rod into her potion, splashing around furiously. In hindsight, she hardly needed to be in a rush to finish her project – it was practically complete already, unlike the majority of students in the N.E.W.T.s Potions class. All around there was a great kerfuffle as people rushed back and forth from the ingredients cupboard, clattering their mortars and pestles while they threw snappish remarks at one another.

Their five months of brewing Felix Felicis was finally coming to an abrupt end. Stirring her potion vigorously, Hermione cast her mind back to when the project had been assigned to them.

She had been sitting in the very same seat as she was now. But instead of an empty chair by her side, there had been Harry, wishing with all his might that he could challenge Tom Riddle on this terrain. But he hadn’t been able to, so Hermione had stepped forwards for him and offered herself in his stead. Slughorn had been delighted that a newcomer would challenge his reigning Potions champion.

As time wore on and the seat by her side became vacant, that simple challenge for the title of Potions champion had come to mean so much more.

Now, with it all winding down to an end, Hermione reminded herself that she had yet to lose. She adjusted the heat beneath her cauldron, cranking it up to the highest level. The snow-white potion
began boiling lividly, huge bubbles forming and bursting on its surface.

Hermione picked up her wand from the table and drew a figure of eight over the top of the cauldron. “Felixempra.”

The potion immediately coloured gold and the popping bubbles transformed into shimmering droplets, leaping like dolphins around the cauldron. Hermione quickly turned the heat off and her concoction splashed merrily about.

The Felix Felicis was complete.

Taking up a flask from the table, Hermione began pouring in the miniscule amount of potion. It was barely a mouthful.

There was a delicious fragrance permeating the air, rising like smoke from her cauldron. When she inhaled, she couldn’t help but smile despite all her unfortunate circumstances. There was no other way to describe it – Felix Felicis smelled like luck, and it warmed her to the bone.

The classroom’s din gradually ceased and soon there was silence as everyone drew in deep breaths, catching what they could of that hopeful scent, but then Hermione stoppered the flask and they all came back to themselves.

“Very well done, Miss Delacour!” said Slughorn, clapping his hands. “You are officially the first to have completed the task! If we go by scent alone, your Liquid Luck is perfect! If you could hand in that flask with your thesis… everybody, your potion should smell like that at this stage.”

“So, mine shouldn’t smell like cabbage?” muttered Ignatius from a few tables ahead.

Ignatius Prewett. If only he had stood by Harry’s side, maybe things would be different. But he had vanished and Hermione didn’t know why. He was now withdrawn, closed off. His bright demeanour was gone and he spoke to few people. Hermione had heard rumours that the Black family ordered him into isolation, but she didn’t know why. Something to do with a betrothal…

Her thoughts were cut short when another delicious smell wafted into the air.

“Tom!” cried Slughorn happily. “Excellent, you were barely ten seconds behind Miss Delacour! Everybody else, you have five minutes left!”

The racket started up again.

Hermione glared at Riddle across the room, but he didn’t even look at her. His strong, pale features were solemn, his dark eyes serious as he spoke to Harry in low tones. He was barely paying attention to his potion as he poured it into its flask.

She would have given anything to hear what was being said.

Harry was absent-mindedly stirring his own potion, not nearly vigorously enough, eyes locked onto his work. Then he gave a single nod and peered into his cauldron without much interest.

Hermione walked her flask of Felix Felicis and ten-foot thesis up to Slughorn’s desk where they would be sent off to N.E.W.T.s examiners to be marked. All the while she jumped aboard her train of thought again.

To release a subject from the restraints of a False Memory Charm, the threads which stitch the false memory to the authentic memories must be unpicked.
With more thorough reading and her revelation after hearing the conversation between Harry and Quincy the other night, Hermione thought that she might finally know what had to be done.

There would be no diving into Harry’s mind – she was no Legilimens. She would have to identify the exact memory which had been tampered with and, to put it simply, talk sense back into him. It sounded easier than it would be. There were probably multiple memories which Riddle had altered. The question was which one held the most powerful charm? How many held powerful charms? Besides, Hermione had never seen Harry’s memories, she would be working blind. And Harry would be resistant to her words… very resistant.

There was a reason why False Memory Charms were a formidable enchantment. Hermione prayed that she could be strong enough to release Harry.

Fortunately, she had been granted a starting point and was ever grateful for that. Harry had initially sprung to the defence of Margot Greengrass, a pure-blood. He had shown compassion to Quincy Lovegood, a half-blood. But he had displayed contempt towards her, towards Rowan, both Muggle-borns, and he had even referred to the latter as a ‘Mudblood’. Hermione discerned that it was likely that Riddle had focused on altering Harry’s views on blood status – it was a very Lord Voldemort thing to do.

This significantly narrowed down the options of which memories had been affected.

Hermione had gone on to list all the Muggle-borns Harry had ever known – the ones who had ever played roles in his life. There was herself. There was Rowan Poole. Colin Creevey, Dennis Creevey, and his mother.

*His mother.*

What on earth could Riddle had done to pervert Harry’s views of his own mother, a woman who sacrificed her life for him?

Whatever it was, today was the day. Today was the day Harry would be liberated, or else Hermione would die trying.

***

Another ‘serious’ talk between Tom and Harry was scheduled for when Potions class was finished.

Since his talk with Mulciber, there had been an itch in the back of Tom’s mind and he knew that it could not be alleviated until this conversation had been seen through.

When he handed his Felix Felicis up to Slughorn’s desk, Slughorn smiled at him. “By this time next week, we shall know whether Miss Delacour was successful in her feat to dethrone you,” said the professor, twiddling his walrus moustache. “I haven’t anticipated anything this much since… well, in a long time. It is long overdue you had a bit of competition around here, hm?”

Tom concealed his grimace. The truth was that he could no longer care less about Delacour’s challenge from five months earlier. He had bigger fish to fry, and she was defeated in the big picture anyway.

Tom gave a polite nod of his head and said, “I have been glad for the challenge. One can never achieve greater heights if they are not pushed to it by others.”

“Precisely,” agreed Slughorn, then, “Mr. Nott! I see that you are the third to have complete the set task, congratulations! *Two minutes, everyone!*”
Tom returned to the table he shared with Harry, sat down and simply looked at his companion.

Harry was chewing his thumbnail, eyebrows pulled low as he studied his potion. For a moment he tinkered around with the flame beneath the cauldron.

“Miss Bones!” said Slughorn to the girl who sat next to Prewett in class. “Fourth!”

She proudly stoppered her flask and Tom turned back to Harry, who was watching his potion boiling.

“Mr. Mulciber! Fifth!”

Tom glanced over to Mulciber, who yawned as he tipped his potion into a flask.

By now, Harry was looping his wand over the cauldron and saying, “Felixempra.”

The Liquid Luck turned gold and a few lazy droplets leapt into the air.

“Mr. Delacour! Sixth!” called Slughorn, right before, “Miss Ghannam! Seventh!”

The lesson continued like that for the remaining minute until every name had been announced and the countdown timer began flashing zero seconds.

The class cheered in unison as the final flask and paper were placed on Slughorn’s desk, but Slughorn waggled his finger sternly. “Don’t think that you are all off the hook yet, students. You have one more project to complete for the last half of the year.”

The cheer abruptly became a groan.

“But that can wait for next lesson,” said Slughorn after a pregnant pause. “You have all earned yourselves a breath of respite. Your grades shall be sent in next week – something to look forward to. You are all dismissed.”

For the first time that year, the class was slow to leave, many lingering to bombard Slughorn with questions.

“My thesis was short by half a foot – how will that affect my grade?”

“My potion didn’t achieve a uniform gold colour, what does that mean?”

“It still smelled like cabbage…”

While everybody queued up and Slughorn began his five minutes of fame, Tom tugged on Harry’s hand and led him out of the classroom.

Their talk was long overdue.

Hand-in-hand, they wandered out of the dungeons and to a quiet section of the castle. They wound up on the grassy hillside by the Great Lake, a chilly breeze gliding in from over the water. The ground was still damp from last night’s rainfall.

Harry gave a complicated little wave with his wand and a stream of hot air flowed across a large patch of grass, the water evaporating into the air. Harry proceeded to seat himself upon the grass which was still steaming, satisfied with his handiwork.

He ran a hand through his hair, tousling it further, and looked up at Tom. “Sit with me.”
Tom obliged and scanned over the lake, evaluating the view.

The water looked like ruffled black velvet beneath the sky, a canvas of blotched, pale grey. It promised a future downpour.

Closing his eyes, Tom allowed a breeze to wash over his face. It was crisp and cold, and he felt dizzy from the sheer, wild purity of it. He expelled a sharp breath of air.

Then a warm hand was cupping his cheek and Tom opened his eyes again. Harry was kneeling in front of him, peering into his eyes with concern.

“Are you okay, Tom?” asked Harry. “What do you want to speak to me about? Did something happen?”

This close, his eyes were very, very green, the irises shot through with dark threads. A web which Tom had unexpectedly found himself ensnared within, over time. He felt the corners of his lips beginning to tilt upwards, and he brought a hand up to cover Harry’s skinny, scarred fingers.

It was strange to think that Harry Delacour was here, really here. A person quite unlike any other Tom had ever met. The boy who had somehow, against all odds, managed to touch his withered heart.

“Harry,” he said haltingly. “We’ve crossed into the second half of the year. Very soon, we’ll all be heading our own ways. There will be no more Hogwarts life to come back to.”

Harry didn’t reply. He removed his hand, brought it back down. There was a disquiet light in his eyes.

Tom pressed on. “I wanted to ask you what it is that you plan on doing, once the year is out. Do you still wish to enter the Department of Magical Law Enforcement?”

There was no immediate response. Harry averted his gaze, turned his face to look out over the Great Lake. “I don’t know,” he finally said. “I’m no longer sure whether that department is for me.”

As expected. Tom didn’t remove his eyes from Harry’s profile. “Would you return home?”

Harry shifted, swallowed. His Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat. “Home?” he asked.

“France,” said Tom. “Where you come from.”

“France was never my home.” Harry’s knuckles whitened as his fingers curled into a fist. “It’s a place I was sent to when my parents died. I didn’t belong there.”

“But would you return there?”

Harry’s expression went hard. “I don’t know.”

Tom grabbed Harry’s hands and he begged, “Please. I need to know where you’re going to go, what you’re going to do. I need to know whether… whether this Summer, I’m going to lose you.”

Harry’s face didn’t change and his eyes remained on the distant horizon, his hands limp in Tom’s. It was impossible to know what was running through his head.

Tom took a deep breath of cold air, and when he exhaled a wispy cloud formed around his face. He blew it away and looked skyward. “I love you, Harry, and I want you to stay by my side.”
He didn’t dare to look at Harry for a response. He had never allowed himself this vulnerability before and it terrified him.

Then, at long last, Harry said quietly, “You love me?”

Tom laughed, but it came out as more of a choke. “I have no point of reference, but I truly think so, Harry. And you couldn’t understand how much that scares me. I’ve never had more to lose than I have now.”

Harry smiled a slow smile, a sad smile. “It’s fine to be scared,” he said. “Love is scary. But don’t let it petrify you to a standstill. Only then will you have everything to lose.”

He pushed himself to his feet and stood there, staring out over the waves. The sun was a faded dish of light in the sky, veiled by cloud cover, and it sat behind Harry’s head like a halo.

Tom gazed up at him, enthralled.

It occurred to him for the first time that he wasn’t deserving of this boy. This powerful, beautiful boy with a heart of gold. Once a heart of gold.

Harry cleared his throat and tugged his sleeves over his hands. “I’m sorry, Tom.”

Tom’s heart sank like a rock to the bottom of the ocean. “Why?”

“Because I can’t say that back to you.” Harry glanced down at Tom, pushed his glasses up his nose. “Not yet.”

“Well.” Tom pulled his shoulders up into a shrug, though his chest was heavy with the rejection, and he rose to his feet. “I suppose that I’ll have to keep working for it, then.”

Harry brushed the back of Tom’s hand but said no more.

Tom hooked a finger around Harry’s. “I,” he began, but his voice cracked and he winced. “I know that this is sudden, but would you stay with me?”

“Stay with you?”

“After I leave Hogwarts, I’m going to return to London – I have many friends there. Since Merrythought is retiring at the end of the year, I might even apply as the next Defence Against the Dark Arts professor.” Tom passed a worried glance at Harry. “You weren’t considering that, were you?”

Harry gave a small laugh. “No, I wasn’t. If we were to go to London, I might consider becoming an Unspeakable at the Ministry. I would study time. Or perhaps death.”

They have more to offer than just time and death,” said Tom. “Why do you fancy those two?”

“Time is a fragile thing,” said Harry. “I know that better than most people. As for death… there are a lot of dead people in my past, Tom. Ghosts I might wish to revisit.” He paused. “Maybe London is a good idea. A place of new beginnings.”

Hope blossomed in Tom’s chest. “You would come with me?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “I would.”

Tom smiled across the lake. Perhaps he had been wrong to worry. Once Lestrange was out of the
picture, Harry would have no one else but him. And that was perfect.

Where Tom had once seen only the promise of rain in the sky, he now saw whispers of a long and prosperous future.

***

The day was winding to an end, a wholly successful day in Tom’s opinion.

Several stragglers remained in the Great Hall for dinner but Tom was one of the many to have returned to his common room, already moving onto his latest homework assignments in a corner.

He shared a table with Mulciber and Nott as they ploughed through their workload and it was a rare evening of peace and quiet. Rosier and Dolohov were playing a game of Wizard’s Chess in the armchairs by the fireplace. Harry, Lestrange and Avery were at yet another Quidditch practice – with the Slytherin versus Gryffindor match rapidly approaching. Crockett was very riled up and could be seen barking at anyone in the corridors who so much as breathed too loudly. It had escalated to the point that every Head of House received complaints at least five times a day and finally Slughorn was forced to deduct points from Slytherin. This had managed to reign in Crockett by a fraction. Either way, students had taken it upon themselves to maintain a two-metre walking distance between themselves and the Slytherin Captain to avoid conflict.

Mulciber straightened suddenly and scratched his head. “Francis,” he said. “I need you to bring me my Transfiguration textbook from the dormitory.”

Nott shot Mulciber a dirty look. “Get it yourself.”

Mulciber yawned. “As I recall, I frightened away a first-year Gryffindor for you three years ago.”

Nott’s face started to go red.

“Whatever for?” asked Tom.

“She was greatly interested in dear Francis here,” began Mulciber, “and took it upon herself to woo him in the most outrageous ways possible, such as—”

“Enough!” shrieked Nott, launching himself to his feet and slamming his hands down on the tabletop. “That was three years ago, you prissy git! Fine, I’ll get you your textbook, just swear that you won’t repeat what happened…”

“Excellent,” said Mulciber slyly. “Of course I won’t repeat your secret aloud, it’s far too precious…”

Huffing, Nott stormed away.

Tom sighed. “You don’t need your textbook, do you?”

“No,” said Mulciber. “I just needed to get rid of him. So, any recent developments?”

“I have already told you everything you need to know.”

“Don’t hold back now.” Mulciber settled a lazy gaze on Tom. “You’ve gotten me emotionally involved and all that.”

“Emotionally involved,” repeated Tom, his upper lip curling into a sneer. “I highly doubt that you’ve ever been emotionally involved in your life, Cassius.”
Malciber didn’t disagree. “Look, you invited me into this matter and now I’m taking an interest. Are you still set of keeping Delacour and losing Peregrine?”

“Yes.” Tom set his jaw.

“How certain are you?”

“I’ve never been more certain in my life.”

Malciber gave a low whistle. “Wow. You’re actually serious. After we first discussed this, I started to believe that you were having me on. I mean, Peregrine has been with us for so long, I always thought that he’d be around forever.”

“Things change.”

Nott appeared in Tom’s peripherals, and Tom shut his mouth.

“Here’s your bloody textbook,” snapped Nott, dropping the heavy book on the table before looking to Tom. “What changes?”

“Lots of things,” said Malciber, and Nott’s attention flicked back to him. “Such as me no longer needing this textbook. Please return it to the dormitory, I have no use for it.”

“Are you pulling my leg right now?” demanded Nott.

Malciber turned to Tom. “So, this Gryffindor first-year of Nott’s snuck into—”

“You’re evil.” Nott snatched the book back up and trudged out of sight again.

“Where were we?” asked Malciber. “That’s right. What are you going to do if Delacour leaves?”

“He isn’t going to.” Tom looked sideways to the fireplace on the other side of the room. “We’ll move to London together.”

Malciber let loose a surprised laugh. “London. The one major city in Britain which the Lestranges don’t have a manor in. Very smart.”

“I thought so.” Tom tapped his nails on the arm of his chair. “I keep Harry close by my side, and Lestrange stays on the opposite side of Britain. Two birds with one stone.”

“Of course.”

They lapsed back into silence but Tom did not return to his work. He listened to the scratching of Malciber’s quill on parchment and gazed out the green-tinted window into the world of underwater life. Something darted by – a Grindylow, perhaps, or a mermaid which had strayed too far beyond her territory.

Tom abruptly stood, pushing his chair away with an awful scraping noise on the ground. “I’m going out for a bit.”

“What?” Malciber looked up, eyebrows raised. “Where to?”

“I don’t know.” Tom considered as he stacked his books. “Perhaps I’ll go watch Crockett shouting for a bit. That never fails to entertain me.”

“May as well make it a family outing.” Malciber began packing away his work as he called across
to Rosier and Dolohov, “Do you two want to go watch the Quidditch training?”

Malciber was waved away, the pair too deeply ensnared in their game of chess to listen.

“Fine.” He and Tom sent their books flying back up to their dormitory when Nott emerged from the staircase.

“I’m back,” he announced. “No more, Cassius, I swear to Merlin…”

“You’re behind the times,” said Malciber. “We’re going to the Quidditch stands, hurry up.”

Nott stumbled over his own two feet to pack up, scurrying after them out the common room doors. Tom had been anticipating a quiet trip but it was an altogether noisy one with his two companions bickering the entire way.

By the time they reached the stands, the sun was setting as was Tom’s patience.

The Slytherin team looked to be going through their finishing drills. Crockett had cast an Amplifying Charm on himself so that all within a kilometre could hear him.

Crockett, one of the blobs which was looping around the air above the other six figures, was busy hollering at the top of his voice. “NOT NEARLY GOOD ENOUGH, AVERY, THE GRYFFINDOR CHASERS WOULD HAVE STOLEN THE QUAFFLE FROM YOU BY NOW! LAMENT, WHAT ARE YOU DOING? WE DON’T WANT A REPEAT OF THE MATCH AGAINST RAVENCLAW, NOW DO WE? DISASTROUS. WHAT IF THERE’S ANOTHER ROGUE BLUDGER? WE CAN’T HAVE DELACOUR INDISPOSED AGAIN!”

Tom cast his eye around the Quidditch pitch.

There – he could make out Harry, the loner in the air, from the smaller build and the head of windswept black hair. He looked to be busy chasing after something, presumably the Snitch. But just the sight of him was enough to alleviate some of Tom’s irritation, and he couldn’t help the smile which crept across his lips. The fact that he and this unattainable, enigmatic boy might have a chance at a future together would never cease to amaze him.

Merlin. Since when was Tom Marvolo Riddle a besotted fool? If Malciber could see inside his head, he wouldn’t stop laughing for decades.

The figure of Harry rolled deftly on his broomstick to catch the Snitch, resembling a spinning top, and Tom’s stomach dropped. That little manoeuvre was probably nothing to Harry, but Tom was hardly a Quidditch player. He recalled a broomstick breaking his nose during first-year and internally scowled.

One day, he would discover a method to flight so that he would never have to go near one of those blasted devices ever again.

“EXCELLENT, DELACOUR, THAT IS A RECORD TIME – OH, WE ARE SO GOING TO KICK THOSE GRYFFINDOR BUTTOCKS AT THE MATCH!” roared Crockett, swooping around the pitch.

“Could somebody please remind me why we are here?” said Nott, his teeth clattering from the cold, but Tom was too preoccupied with the view to answer. Lestrang – impossible to miss, the light of the sinking sun transformed his hair into a shade of fire – had glided right up next to Harry so that they could hover beside each other in the air, talking as easily as if they had been doing this for years.
Sometimes Tom missed the days when Harry hated Lestrange’s guts. Though then again, he had also loathed Tom at the same time. They had all loathed each other. But at least Tom hadn’t known the bitter sting of jealousy back then. And even if he had, he wouldn’t have read into it like he did now.

He had become soft without even realising it.

Tom turned and walked away.

He didn’t need to see this. He shouldn’t have to resent Peregrine Lestrange. Harry did not belong to Lestrange. Harry did not love Lestrange.

But he didn’t love Tom either, and that turned the blood in his veins to ice and it hurt.

Yes, Tom Riddle was utterly besotted and there would be no denying it any longer.

“Leaving already?” asked Mulciber knowingly, keeping pace with Tom’s long, angry strides.

“Yes,” said Tom shortly. With the advantage of longer legs he quickly took the lead and Mulciber dropped behind with Nott.

*Five months more, Tom told himself, shaking his head sharply. Five months more and Lestrange will be out of your hair, once and for all. Keep it together, Riddle.*

He refused to admit to himself that if Harry had repeated three simple words back to him by the Great Lake, then maybe he would no longer feel this way.

Three words Tom had never heard from anybody before.

He sincerely hoped that it would be Harry to say them to him first.

***

Dolohov and Rosier had finished their game of Wizard’s Chess when they returned to the common room and had vanished, presumably to their dormitory, for the night.

Tom slumped into an armchair by the fireplace and massaged his temples, his eyes closed tight. The mother of all headaches was forming in his skull, pounding his brain into soft pulp.

Mulciber and Nott took seats across from him. Nott had already found a book, left lying on a table, to delve into, but Mulciber was watching Tom closely, as if waiting for something to happen.

“What,” said Tom, too drained to bother with niceties.

The girl looked somewhat taken aback by his attitude before simpering, “My name is Dolores Umbridge. And of course I know who you are, Mr. Tom Riddle. What I came to ask is whether you would consider tutoring me in Potions, word is that you are the best at that and–”

“He’s the best at everything,” interrupted Mulciber, appraising Umbridge with a cool eye. “Your source of information is faulty.”
Umbridge looked flustered.

“Isn’t it your bedtime?” continued Mulciber, checking the time. “It’s already eight o’clock.”

Umbridge was unable to summon a coherent response and turned back to Tom, who had closed his eyes again, of the opinion that this one-sided conversation was over.

“Mr. Riddle—” began Umbridge, and Tom whirled around to glare at her.

“My schedule is full, little girl,” he hissed and she squeaked like a rabbit.

“Yes, Mr. Riddle!” she squealed and scurried away to hide in a corner.

“Consider me impressed,” said Mulciber, smirking. “You rarely show that face in public.”

“Do not forget who it was that taught you everything you know about frightening other people,” countered Tom, resting his head back and staring into the flames which leapt like marionettes in the fireplace.

Avery chose then to burst into the common room, dirt and sweat smeared across his face, his hair standing upright as if he had run his hands through it on more than one occasion.

Setting his broom upon his shoulder, Avery marched up to Tom and said, “You asked me to keep an eye on Delacour for any suspicious behaviour.”


Tom sat up straight, ears pricked, turning his head towards Avery. “Yes?”

“He’s vanished.” Avery shrugged, standing his broom upright so that he could lean against it. “He was the first to get into the shower rooms after practice and he left before I managed to even clean up. Apologies for the mess I’m making, by the way.”

Avery lifted a foot and stared sheepishly at the grass stains he had left on the carpet.

“Never mind that,” said Tom impatiently. “Where did he go?”

“I don’t know. He took off quite fast, as if he didn’t want anybody to follow him. I skipped the showers and went straight after him but I lost him. So I came straight here to tell you.”

Tom noticed the absence of one person in particular and stood. “Where is Peregrine?”

The common room door slid open and in came Lestrange, still steaming from his shower, humming a nonsensical song as he entered. “What?” he asked when he registered all the sets of eyes on him.

“Do you know where Harry went?” demanded Tom, striding over to meet him.

“Ah, no.” Lestrange frowned and leaned his broom against the wall behind him. “Why? I thought he came straight back here.”

“He did not.” Tom waved Avery away. “Thank you, Gideon, for telling me. Go take a shower, I’ll take it from here.”

Avery ducked his head and headed up to the sixth-year boys’ dormitory, dismissed.

“Think,” said Tom aloud. “Where would Harry go? A place he wouldn’t want others to follow him
“It appears that there is much searching to be done,” said Mulciber, lifting an eyebrow. He gestured to the common room door. “Shall we?”

“Right. Yes.” Tom turned one-eighty degrees to face the door but ended up pulling a full three-sixty. He indicated between Lestrange and Nott. “Wait. You two aren’t coming.”

“Yes, we are,” said Lestrange defiantly. He was treading on a fine line.

“You’ll need extra eyes,” reasoned Nott, “or you may never find Harry.”

Tom allowed himself the luxury of rolling his eyes. “Fine.”

He stepped through the common room door, Mulciber directly behind him.

“Wouldn’t it be hilarious,” said Mulciber, “if Delacour simply decided to go to the toilet?”

“He left straight from the bathroom,” snapped Tom, his voice echoing down the stone corridors. “Now let me think.”

Harry. He sent up a silent call into the atmosphere. Where are you hiding?

***

It was silent at the top of North Tower. Few souls ever entered the top level anymore, for it was the home of a great tragedy and was haunted by the memory of Fiendfyre.

The walls breathed softly and spoke the story long passed in tones that no human could ever comprehend. They were lonely walls, but for one companion who returned every night to gaze skyward.

The boy with the sad green eyes pressed his palm against the walls, tracing his fingers along the scorch marks. He had once tasted this fire in his lungs, and the invisible scars would brand him forever.

A wind swept in through the open hole-in-the-wall window, carrying with it the first raindrop of the long and dark night which lay ahead. The drop flecked the boy’s cheek like a tear and the breeze wrapped around him in an embrace.

You are not alone, it said, caressing his face with icy fingers.

But that night, the boy and the walls would not be lonely any longer.

A third party stepped through the threshold, a girl with a stern face but a cracked, glass heart within her chest.

“Harry,” said the girl, and the walls held in a breath.

“Hermione,” said the boy, and out breathed the walls.

At long last, the girl spoke once more. “When we leave this place, either you will be mended. Or I will be broken.”

Silence reigned, holding them all hostage by the throat. The walls watched as the long-anticipated narrative began to play out.
This is it, guys. This. Is. It. Hooooooly fuck I am feeling so emotional right now. O_O
Don’t mind me crying in this corner.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

“I became a Slytherin,” Harry said, and there was an underlay of sadness in his voice.
“When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”

Chapter Notes

I hope that you can all find it within yourselves to forgive me for this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione’s words reverberated around the top of North Tower.

*When we leave this place, either you will be mended. Or I will be broken.*

Harry slowly removed his hand from the blackened wall and ran it down his face wearily, smudging a trail of ash down his cheek.

Hermione moved a few more steps into the room, her wand held tightly in a fist. She maintained a collected façade but deep inside, in a place where nobody had ever seen before, she was more afraid than she ever had been in her life.

She waited for Harry to start cursing her, to shout, to glare, anything but this awful silence. But he simply looked at her, then started walking towards her.

Unconsciously, Hermione tensed her muscles, anticipating an attack, but then he slid right past her, their shoulders almost touching as he made for the door.

*He was running away.*

*Not this time.*

Hermione swivelled on her heels and pointed her wand at the doorway. “*Protego Maxima.*”

Delicate threads of icy blue magic surged out of her wand and wrapped themselves around the entranceway, a glowing shield bouncing into place.

Harry stopped mere centimetres before it. He didn’t turn to face Hermione when he asked quietly, “What do you want? I made my stance very clear last time we spoke.”

Hermione took a deep breath, and when she spoke, her voice sounded awfully loud in that hollow room. “And I’m going to make my stance very clear now. If you want to leave, you’re going to have to fight me.”

“I could best you in a duel easily.” Still, Harry did not turn. The only sound other than their voices was the soft, warbling hum of the shield charm.
“I’m not going to give up on you, Harry.” Hermione took a step nearer. “Maybe you remember this, maybe you don’t, but once I said that I will always have your back. You didn’t want me, but the truth is… I never left. And the time has once again come to protect you. That’s exactly what I’m going to do. I’ll protect you from yourself if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Why couldn’t you just stay away?” choked Harry, and he looked over his shoulder at her. His eyes were welling with barely contained emotion. “I didn’t realise that there was anything particularly difficult about that.”

“Everything about that is difficult!” snapped Hermione, throwing up her hands. “I’m not going to leave you alone until…” her voice broke, but she pressed on. “Until you have gotten down on your knees and apologised to me for everything you said.”

Harry’s jaw worked and he glanced away. “There will be no apologising if I meant every word of it.”

Her heart sank, it threatened to shatter into millions of pieces, but Hermione held it together. If she couldn’t rely on herself, then she could rely on no one. She plastered a scowl across her face and said harshly, “Look me in the eye when you say that. Look me in the eye, and I’ll believe it.”

Harry’s gaze flickered to her, like a candle in the wind, but did not settle on her.

Hermione grimaced. “I know you’re still in there, Harry, and I’m going to find you.”

Harry broke. “This is me!” he roared, rounding on her, and his hair lifted, rustling in an invisible breeze. “Me! I am Harry, I’m just Harry, why can’t you see that? Why can’t you… why can’t you leave me alone? Why can’t you let me live my life?”

Hermione puffed up her chest, though she wanted to cry when she saw him like this. “Because you would be living a lie, and I can’t allow that to happen to you. I know that Tom Riddle cast a False Memory Charm on you. I know that he has turned you into his puppet, and that is a despicable act.”

“I am no one’s puppet.” But the words were uncertain, wavering.

A chance.

“I know you, Harry.” Hermione slowly approached him, wand dangling loosely in her grip to show that she wasn’t a threat. It was as if she was speaking to a child, a child who had been taught all the wrong things at such a young age. “I know you better than anybody else in the world, and this isn’t you. Let me help you—”

“Don’t patronise me,” Harry hissed and pointed his wand at her. Hermione came to a halt. She hadn’t seen him take it out. “I’m leaving, and I’m leaving now. Drop your shield, Hermione, or I’ll break it by force.”

“Fine.” Hermione’s gaze hardened. “I suppose we’ll have to do this the hard way.”

Harry looked at her suspiciously. The black smudge of ash beneath his eye was like a stark bruise on his skin.

Outside, the rain had begun falling.

Hermione circled the room, her heels drumming against the ground rhythmically as she walked. “Answer me a few questions. When you have, I promise that I’ll drop the shield. There’ll have to
be no fighting. Just a few innocent questions, then you can go.”

“I’ll answer them as I see fit, if at all.” Harry lifted his chin to stare down his nose at her. A manoeuvre he had almost certainly learned from Riddle.

As I thought.

Hermione smiled grimly and began pacing. She dragged one finger along the Fiendfyre soot across a wall and held it up. “Describe Rowan Poole to me.”

Harry sneered. “Filthy.”

Hermione struck up a second finger. “Describe the Creevey brothers.”

“Infuriating.”

A third finger. “Describe me.”

“Condescending.”

There was no hesitation. Perhaps she had been wrong…

“Are we done here?” Harry swivelled to face the shield, stretched across the doorway like a massive spider web. “If you don’t remove your charm this instant, I am going to–”

“What about your mother?”

There was a pause. “What about her?”

Hermione’s eyes drilled into the back of Harry’s skull. “Describe her.”

Another pause. His voice ached when he said, “My mother… was a coward.”

Hermione gave a small shake of her head, almost unnoticeable.

She had found the stitches.

“Your mother was anything but a coward,” she said softly. “I think you know that, deep down.”

Harry’s head was bowed, his hands trembling at his sides. “She… that night, she tried to save herself. She abandoned me.”

“Is that the lie Riddle planted inside your head?” Hermione gazed out into the rainstorm. “Is that the biggest lie of them all?”

Harry’s voice was almost imperceptible beneath the rattling of water droplets striking the roof overhead. “It’s not a lie.”

“It is, and you know it.” She did not remove her eyes from the rain, this beautiful downpour which would be the one to wash away all her past fears and regrets. “Your memory of her is the deepest and darkest one that you possess. You first heard her voice when you were thirteen, remember? The Dementor was sucking at your soul, and you heard her crying, begging. I know you did. Because that it the memory you hold closest to your chest, isn’t it? That is the memory that you keep tucked away inside a secret place, the place where your soul also belongs.”

“I heard her begging for her own life.” There was a tremor in Harry’s voice and he pointed his
wand at the shield barrier. “I answered your questions and you promised you’d drop the shield. Now do it.”

“Riddle made a mistake to target that particular memory,” said Hermione. She was so close, it was too late to back out now. “That memory is dear to you, Harry, and no matter what he has done to it, I think that you’ll always know the truth.”

“That is enough.” Harry shot a spell at the barrier, but it was half-hearted and ricocheted straight off. He swore under his breath. “Fuck.”

He attempted another spell, but again it bounced away. Now Hermione could see straight through him. Harry could have easily broken the shield by now, if he really wanted to. But there was a hollow cavity within his chest which wanted to hear the truth. A cavity which no lie could ever fill.

Hermione took slow, meandering steps to stand behind him. “You have a spirit which has been protected by a mother’s sacrifice.”

Another spell surged towards the shield. The spell was flung straight back at Harry, and it knocked his wand out of his hand. The useless length of wood clattered on the ground noisily.

Harry dropped to his knees, cradling his head as if he could shut out Hermione’s voice.

“You have a scar which has seen a mother’s sacrifice,” Hermione continued, relentless, and there were tears in her eyes.

“Stop,” Harry moaned, rocking back and forth, back and forth, a child in need of comfort after a long and dark night alone.

Hermione stooped down and picked up his wand, running her finger down the crack along its side. Jagged, rough. It was like a copy of the mark on Harry’s forehead.

Her will hardened. “And you have a heart,” she said, “a magnificent, beautiful heart, which knows the truth.”

Harry was undone.

Great, wracking sobs split the atmosphere and Hermione looked down upon this broken boy who had seen far, far too much pain in his short life.

“Enough,” he gasped. “I’m begging you. That’s enough.”

And so Hermione stopped.

“I’m sorry,” he continued, tears streaming down his cheeks like rivers, his forehead pressed against the cold ground. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, but it was all one big trick, it was all one big magic trick.”

Hermione froze, and time froze with her. There was a single moment in which the world stopped spinning and she became untethered, forgot all that she had ever known. Then she whispered, “What did you say?”

Harry reared upright to stare at her with massive eyes. His nose was stuffy from crying, his eyes bloodshot, and there was a red mark on the middle of his forehead from where he had pushed it against the ground. “There was never a False Memory Charm,” he breathed, licking away tears
from the corners of his lips. “It was all an act.”

Hermione dropped to her knees beside him, his and her own wand held limply. “I… I don’t understand.”

Harry hiccupped, scrubbed at his eyes with the backs of his hands. “I can’t pretend with you anymore, Hermione. I tried so hard... but I can’t do it anymore. What I’m about to tell you... you’ve got to swear you’ll never repeat it aloud, not to another living soul. And when the night is over, I am going to have to pretend again, and you are going to have to stay away. Do you swear it?”

Hermione met his eyes, too bewildered to even comprehend what was being said. “I still don’t know what you’re talking about. Are you saying... Riddle never cast a False Memory Charm on you?”

Harry laughed, a cruel sound which hurt her ears to listen to. “He did, and he broke my heart because of it.”

Hermione leaned against a wall, not caring that it was covered in soot, unable to tear her eyes away from Harry, Harry, returned to her at last. “Explain.”

“It... it started with Rowan Poole’s death. No, it started before that.” Harry turned his wet eyes out the hole-in-the-wall window. His eyes had never been more green than they were now, glowing like cat’s eyes in the dark. “It started on the night of Slughorn’s Christmas Party. The night Tom and I finally got together. The night that I realised I was going to help him, even if it cost me my life.

“I clearly recall Tom saying that night, ‘It’s too late for me.’ Too late for him to be healed, to amend the ways he viewed the world. That wasn’t good enough for me. It’s never too late for anybody to fix their ways. But I didn’t know how to prove that. I spent night after night thinking about it, but nothing ever came to me. I don’t have your scholar’s mind, Hermione. The only thing I have is determination, and so I wielded that to my advantage.

“But then Rowan Poole happened. He tried to kill me, and I ended up killing him. Something I can never forgive myself for, no matter what he has done previously. I’m not a killer. I’m meant to be the one who saves people. But I failed.”

Hermione stretched out a hand, took Harry’s fingers and squeezed tight, never wanting to let go. “You’re not a knight in shining armour, Harry. You’re just a boy. Saving the world is not your duty.”

Harry squeezed back and blinked back more tears. “But if I don’t try, then who else in this whole fucked up world is going to?”

“Oh, Harry.” Hermione crawled over to him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, leaning her head against his shoulders. His body was cold, and her heart was breaking for him, all over again.

“It seemed that everybody was against me after that. I was shunned, hated. People wanted me to commit suicide – I heard their whispers. Even you disappeared, Hermione, for a while.” Hermione opened her mouth, but Harry interrupted her before she could even begin. “And I don’t blame you. Poole was your friend, and nothing will ever erase that. I even convinced myself at one point that you also hated me. The world had turned its back on me, and as much as that hurt, it made it easier. To do what I had to do. I was already the villain in their eyes, so what was the harm in properly
playing the part?

“One day, Lestrange approached me in the library. He told me that Tom was going to cast a False Memory Charm on me, but that I shouldn’t worry. It would do nothing but erase the pain I felt. It would heal me, and they would all take care of me. We would be brothers. I would be living a lie, but it would be the sweetest of lies.

“At that point in my life, I was weak, I was broken. I wanted to give in. I nearly did. I would have happily accepted the False Memory Charm, because I had nothing else left to turn to.”

“What changed?” asked Hermione softly, and Harry leaned his head against hers. He sniffled.

“‘Oblivion,’” he murmured. “‘The weak man’s salvation.’ That’s what I thought to myself as I sat there on the library ground, all alone. And as I thought it, I realised what I had to do.

“My entire life has been an uphill struggle. No weak man could survive that, but here I am today. I knew that I wasn’t weak. I knew that I could never be weak, it’s not a luxury I can afford. I wasn’t about to give up, despite everybody who told me to quit. I happened to be sitting in the Charms section of the library, so I got straight to reading. I hit the books like I never have before, because I knew that it was my last chance. That night, Tom was going to get inside my head and mix it all up. Something I couldn’t allow. I read for hours but it was useless, until I finally read about a witch called Adeline Fantomworth, who had been able to resist a False Memory Charm by sheer force. No one knew how, but that small snippet of information was all I was going to get.

“That night, I felt when Tom entered my head. I saw the false memories when he released them, they fluttered around like thousands of loose sheets of paper, lost in the wind. Those memories fought to hold my real ones down, and I allowed them to for a few seconds, so that I could learn exactly what Tom wanted me to see. I saw that he had changed my uncle, aunt and cousin. I saw that he had changed the Creeveys, you. He had even made Draco Malfoy out as a great person. And then I saw an image of my mother, trying to save herself. I have never been angrier than when I saw that. It took all I had, even more, but I managed to shut all those false memories into a box and throw them into a chasm which I never visit. And then I grew a rose forest around my mind, filled with thorns, so that Tom could never see inside my head again, so that he could never see that I had rejected all his memories. He never suspected a thing.

“But when the sun rose the following morning, so did the most difficult task. I had to pretend. I had to lift my head high and become the Harry that Tom had attempted to create. Sometimes I stumbled. But it was an almost flawless façade.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Hermione lifted her head, gazed at Harry. “I could have helped you, you’re not cut out for this kind of thing.”

“I didn’t tell you because…” Harry swallowed loudly. “Because you had to believe it, too. If you, the great and mighty Hermione Delacour, believed the act, then Tom Marvolo Riddle sure as hell would as well.”

“I could have pretended.”

“You’re hardly an actor.” Harry smiled slightly. “Neither am I, for that matter, but I had somebody I loved that I was doing it for, and that was what pushed me to do it.”

“Riddle,” said Hermione, her voice harsh. “I cannot honestly believe that you could love him after what he tried to do to you.”
“I love him dearly.” Harry looked out at the rain and sighed softly. “I loved him dearly. He betrayed me, but nevertheless, this was a task that had to be done.”

“But why?” Hermione gripped his hand tighter. “You haven’t told me why you did it.”

“I think I have.” Harry’s lips twitched sadly. “Tom once told me that it’s too late for him. I was – am – trying to prove him wrong. You see, my job has not been seen through completely. I have yet to prove that a person who has crossed into the darkness can emerge in the light again.”

“You’re going to hold the façade until you ‘become’ Light again?” demanded Hermione. “To prove to Riddle that it can be done? Exactly how long are you planning to do this for? To pretend?”

“However long I have to.” Harry set his jaw. “These past weeks, I have said and done some horrible things, Hermione. And I’m sorry for it, but it has to be done if I am going to one day show Lord Voldemort to see the light again.”

The entire time they had been speaking, the charm which kept their true voices concealed began to fade, as it did every night until refreshed in the morning.

By this point, Hermione could hear Harry again, the Harry she had known for seven years, and there was her own voice – true and pure, with no lie to cover it up.

Up at the top of North Tower, Harry Potter and Hermione Granger spoke together for the last time. One final night before the act was to begin again.

Harry took his wand from Hermione’s hand and held it up to the dim moonlight through the barrier of rain. The crack in it was bold and black. “This crack appeared after I cast the Cruciatus Curse,” he said. “My own wand thought that I was a different person, that I was misusing it. Soon, I’ll have to purchase a new one. When that happens, would you… would you keep my old wand safe for me?”

“You would give up your original wand?” asked Hermione disbelievingly.

“My wand is not loyal to this new Harry,” said Harry, his tone grim. “The time will come when I can return to myself. Then I’ll find you and I’ll reclaim this old thing. When that day arrives, I hope it will be a much brighter world we live in.”

Hermione shook her head – tears were beginning to fall from her eyes, all over again. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“You have to,” said Harry fiercely, pulling away from her. He stood and extended a hand to her. “This is exactly why I tried to hold you at arm’s length, but you forced my hand and now you’re obliged to become an actress in this play. Promise me, Hermione, that you’ll follow through on this.”

Hermione looked from his face to his extended hand, then back again. Then she accepted his hand and was yanked to her feet. Setting her lips into a line, she said, “I’ll do my best.”

Harry let out a breath of relief. “Thank you.”

Biting her lip, Hermione reached for him and pulled him into one final embrace. She said into his ear, his soft hair tickling her nose, “You were cunning, Harry. You are cunning, more so than I could have ever anticipated. More so than any other person I’ve ever known. But maybe that’s a good thing.”
Harry wrapped his arms around her, cradling her close. “I became a Slytherin,” he said, and there was an underlay of sadness in his voice. “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”

Hermione let loose a little hiccup of air. “I’m going to miss you, Harry Potter,” she whispered.

Harry’s grip tightened just a little, but he said nothing, and they stood there with their arms around each other, the closest embrace either had ever shared.

An ear-splitting crack fractured the moment.

Harry and Hermione jumped a foot in the air without relinquishing their hold on each other as the shield charm was broken into thousands of pieces.

In stepped Tom Riddle, and there was murder in his eyes.

***

“When has your French accent gone?” asked Tom, and Harry wished that he would raise his

Behind Tom, Lestrange and Nott were shrinking away. Even Mulciber had the decency to look slightly alarmed.

“I…” Harry’s gaze flicked around the room, seeking salvation in any form, but found nothing. He met Tom’s eyes again, forcing himself to not flinch from the raw rage he saw. “I’m going to be honest with you, Tom. Hermione is… she’s not my cousin. And I… am not from France.”

Tom nodded his head slowly, his gaze never leaving Harry’s. Thunder rumbled in the distance. “It appears that I have been made a fool of.”

Lestrange and Nott retreated a few steps, Mulciber edged back an inch.

Harry rushed to disagree. “No–”

“Is Harry Delacour even your real name?” asked Tom, and Harry wished that he would raise his
voice again, because anything was better than this deafening quiet. This tender fury.

Harry didn’t reply and so nobody spoke at all. Each individual patter of a raindrop on the roof could be heard clearly in that moment.

Finally, Tom took it upon himself to speak another few words which would leave fractures in the air surrounding them all. “Tell me, Harry… was anything ever real with you?”

Harry bit his lip and whispered, “I wanted to be with you. That was real.”

Tom snorted, a cruel smile curling his mouth. “You say that after we catch you in an embrace with Delacour. Or should we even call her that?”

By his side, Harry could hear Hermione’s heartbeat, a rapid pummelling in his ears. She was just as scared as he was.

But this wasn’t her battle to fight. It was his. He couldn’t allow himself to be paralysed, not yet.

Harry swallowed. “Hermione and I aren’t—”

“Enough with the lies,” snarled Tom, and there was a swishing sound right before his wand appeared in his hand. “Delacour has gotten in my way far too many times. Initially, I had believed her to be a worthy opponent. But now I see that she is still nothing more than a filthy Mudblood, no different from the rest. No different from Rowan Poole. Phyllis Colbert. Myrtle Warren. As for you, Harry, I’m disappointed in you. Very disappointed.”

Harry straightened his back, gripped his wand more firmly. Fire laced through his voice, newfound and vicious. “You don’t get to say that, Tom. It’s you who is the disappointment. You tried to change me with a False Memory Charm, and I can’t forgive you for that.”

Tom’s eyes widened slightly. Deep and dark, dark blue. An ocean you could get lost in. An ocean you could drown in. “How do you know about that?” he demanded.

Unbidden, Harry’s gaze flicked towards Lestrange, lurking in the background. His face was white, like a skull hovering there. Lestrange gave a miniscule shake of his head and Harry’s eyes returned to Tom.

But Tom had already seen it.

He pivoted and studied Lestrange before saying in a dangerous whisper, “You told him?”

Nott and Mulciber also turned to stare at him. Lestrange remained rooted to the spot, like a rabbit caught in a car’s headlights, and he did not reply.

Disgusted, Tom turned away again. “I’ll deal with you later. Maybe I could torture both you and Delacour at the same time. You seemed to like her so much before, after all, trying so hard to get into her pants…”

Harry advanced forward a step, pushing Hermione behind him. “You’re not torturing anybody, Tom.”

Tom directed a malign stare onto Harry. “Move out of the way.”

“No.”

Tom’s tongue flicked out as he wet his lips. There was a crazed light in his eyes. “You really don’t
want to get between me and the person occupying my blacklist.”

Harry snarled, baring his teeth, and he split the air with his wand, a protective line sizzling through the ground, separating himself and Hermione from the other Slytherins. It blazed hot and white. “Fuck your blacklist, Tom Marvolo Riddle.”

Tom’s features slackened slightly, as if he had just come back to himself. But then he said, “So this is it. You would choose her… over me.”

Harry hesitated and glanced over his shoulder at Hermione. She was clutching her wand, knuckles pale and her lips quivering slightly.

She believed that he wouldn’t choose her.

Sadly, Harry turned back to Tom. “Today, you told me that you loved me. But if you truly loved me, you wouldn’t make me choose.”

“Love,” spat Tom. “Somehow, impossibly, I love you. Yet you don’t love me. I see now that love makes us weak. I was right to be afraid of it, and you told me otherwise, all the while seeing Delacour while my back was turned. You played me, Harry.”

“I never played you!” snapped Harry, throwing his arms wide. “It was you who played me, saying that you love me. What a load of bullshit. You don’t love me. If you loved me, you never would have tried to change me with a False Memory Charm. Hermione’s the one who loves me. She’s the one who has been loyal to me all these years, she’s the one who would rather die before she forced me to be a different person. If you can’t see that… then I’m afraid I no longer have faith in you, Tom.”

Tom’s lips thinned, his pupils dilated so wide that his irises were almost entirely gone. The flat and black eyes of a shark. “I’m giving you one last chance to move, Harry. You may have lied to me, but you’re still mine, and I don’t harm what belongs to me.”

“I do not belong to you.” Harry lashed out with his wand, sending a slash of scarlet light at Tom, breaking the bright white line between them.

Tom deflected, wild fury etched into his face.

Harry barely had time to regret that he had just initiated a duel because then Tom had thrown a wall of fire at him and Harry conjured a wave of water, extinguishing the flames.

Hermione, Lestrange, Nott and Mulciber all retreated in alarm, falling back into the room’s perimeter.

Tom ducked beneath five consecutive shards of ice that Harry sent his way before hurling back a huge storm cloud, alive with flickering tongues of lightning.

Harry engulfed the cloud in massive, thick-walled bubble and sent it spinning straight back in Tom’s direction. With a grimace, Tom caught the bubble and sent it flying out the window. He went on to conjure a whip from the end of his wand, flicking it around Harry’s ankles.

Harry crashed to the ground and rolled, sending a Severing Charm at Tom. The short, sharp spell caught Tom on the temple, slicing through skin, and while Tom blinked away blood from his vision, Harry managed to free his ankles.

He circled his wand in the air and shouted, “Expecto Patronum!”
His stag erupted from the end of his wand and charged at Tom with its antlers lowered for battle. With Tom momentarily blinded by the light, Harry slashed his wand and said, “*Confringo!*”

Tom blindly blocked the spell, attempting to duck away from the light, but Prongs stubbornly followed him.

“*Stupefy!*” Harry sent a stunner next – his Patronus would not last much longer without a Dementor in sight.

The stunner was sent flying back, directed at Hermione, who hurriedly whipped up a shield charm to protect herself.

Prongs was fading out of existence and it turned its head towards Harry as if to warn him.

*Shit.*

Once the Patronus was gone, Harry knew that he might well be defeated.

He took one final shot, a last effort. He slipped around behind Prongs and intoned, “*Incarcerous!*”

The spell hit its target. Immediately, big brown ropes crawled around Tom, binding his arms to his sides and his legs together as Prongs dribbled into a pale shadow, and then was ultimately gone.

Tom stumbled with his legs bound together, tripping and banging his head on the wall behind him. Harry towered over him, face expressionless. Tom’s gaze was mutinous as he stared up at the victor.

The duel had finished barely after it had begun.

“No way,” murmured Nott, watching his king’s fall.

Harry had won this round, but he knew that it was because Tom was so wild, so emotional. The duel may have had a completely different outcome if Tom hadn’t lost his head. But no matter what Tom’s current mindset was, it was still a win for Harry and that was what mattered.

Holding Tom at wand-point, Harry watched as Tom released himself from the ropes with a grunt.

“Stop this now, Tom,” he said softly. “No more fighting. You lost, fair and square, so it’s time to back down.”

Mulciber slipped up to Tom’s side like a faithful shadow. “We should go,” he advised as Tom pulled himself to his feet.

A muscle in Tom’s jaw was ticking furiously, but he gave a stiff nod of his head and turned, following Mulciber and the others as they trailed out the door, sending unsettled glances Harry’s way.

Harry kept his wand trained on Tom’s back. He knew Tom well, and that boy would cheat horribly if that would ensure a win.

Hermione crept up to stand by Harry’s side, her fingers coming up to encircle his wrist. “He’s leaving,” she murmured. “Lower your wand, Harry. It’s over.”

Slowly, slowly, Harry brought his wand down as Tom neared the doorway, showing no sign of turning.
His muscles relaxing, Harry looked at the wand in his shaking hands. He wondered, for the first time, exactly what it was that he had just done. He had ruined the whole pretence. The past few weeks had been for nothing.

He had ruined everything.

Another roll of thunder shook the ground and it wrapped around the voice which cried the worst curse of them all.

“Avada Kedavra!”

There was a breathless moment during which Harry’s gaze darted up and his eyes met Hermione’s. Harry had heard the curse, but he didn’t really hear it. It simply echoed around his skull. Meaningless words.

There was a split second during which Hermione’s mouth fell open, just a little – a morbid expression of faint surprise. She and Harry stared at each other, wordless, as a green light engulfed her body. Then she was no longer staring at him, and there was only him staring at her.

The body hit the floor with a sickening thud.

Lightning split the atmosphere.

“Hermione?” whispered Harry, staring down at her, unable to comprehend what had just happened. He dropped to his knees by her side, shook her shoulders slightly as if she was sleeping.

“Hermione? Hermione, you have to wake up.”

His voice was tiny in his ears, and she did not wake up from her eternal slumber.

Empty brown eyes stared up at the ceiling. Hermione had already left for a place far, far away.

The realisation hit him like a sword through his stomach. It was almost physically painful.

Hermione is dead.

***

Harry’s lips began shaking as he whispered, “No. No. Hermione.”

“Shit,” said a voice, and another said, “I’m leaving.”

Two pairs of feet fled back down North Tower, but Harry was unable to flee with them. He was ensnared in this moment, and a part of him always would be.

Lifting his eyes, Harry gazed at Tom who stood in the doorway, wand still outstretched. Tom’s face was grim, as if he had just completed a pesky task which had to be done.

Horrified, Harry looked back down at Hermione on the ground before him. Her eyes were still open wide, her lips slightly parted. A death she had not been expecting.

“What have you done?” The question was hollow as Harry spoke the words and Tom stepped into the room again. Lestrange was still in the doorway, frozen. He had not fled the scene of the crime with Mulciber and Nott.

“I did what I had to,” said Tom. “I always protect my investments.”
You killed her. Harry hissed, his voice unsteady. There was so much more that needed to be said, but with tears welling in his eyes and his mind devoid of reason, there was nothing else he could manage other than an anguished, Why?:

Tom did not answer, and Harry spoke no more.

But with his hand pressed against Hermione’s, he felt the moment that she vanished.

Astonished, his gaze darted downwards.

She was gone.

Trembling, Harry combed the air with his fingers, wondering what trick it was that Tom was playing this time. But judging from Tom’s equally bewildered face, this had been caused by a force far beyond both of their control.

Lestrange broke the silence with a hushed question. “Where did she go?”

Where did she go? The question reverberated around Harry’s head as he knelt there on the ground, completely and utterly alone. A little voice which sounded a lot like Hermione whispered in his head, Or rather, when did she go?

When, thought Harry. When.

The Tempus Charm.

Hermione had once told him the only possible way to reverse it.

The one who cast the Tempus Charm must kill you while you are in the time that you have been sent to.

Could it be that it was Voldemort who had cast the Tempus Charm to send them back in time? Could it be that the question wasn’t where Hermione had gone, it was when Hermione had gone?

Upon her murder by the hand of Tom… had she been restored to 1997?

The little Hermione voice in his head caressed him lovingly and said, Well done, Harry. Now join her in the future.

It was time for one final act.

“Kill me,” whispered Harry, raising his fingers and staring at them with glazed eyes.

“What?” said Tom. He was taking baby steps towards Harry, a slow but gradual advance.

“Kill me,” Harry repeated, his arms falling back to his sides limply. He looked up, met Tom’s eyes. The pupils were no longer dilated, his features weren’t twisted into ugly rage. “I can’t do this anymore, Tom. I can’t.”

“I’m not going to kill you, Harry.” Tom smiled crookedly. “It doesn’t matter that you lied, again and again. It doesn’t matter that I don’t even know the real you. I could never kill you.”

“I see,” said Harry hollowly, and he lifted his wand and conjured a dagger from thin air. Tom inhaled sharply. Behind him, Lestrange let out a small exclamation.

The hilt landed in Harry’s palm, and he wound his fingers around it, lifting it up to examine it. The
blade was serrated, sharp. It should do the trick.

“Put the knife down, Harry,” ordered Tom, his eyes as round as saucers.

Harry gave him a wounded little smile. “If you can’t find it within yourself to commit the deed, I’ll do it myself.”

“You’re being ridiculous.” Tom trod closer, wary. He held out his hand. “You’re not killing yourself. Please, hand that to me.”

Harry pulled his shoulders into a feeble shrug. “What’s the point? You only want me as a tool. The one person who loved me for me is gone. I am… completely alone.”

A tear tracked down his face. That one tear was real.

Tom bobbed down to Harry’s level. It was as though the crazed lunatic from minutes before had never existed. It was as though he had never committed a murder.

Tom’s eyes were gentle as he rubbed the tear away with his thumb. “You’re broken,” he said. “Since Poole died, you’ve always been broken. But I promise to fix you. Let me cast the False Memory Charm on you, Harry, for real this time, and all this pain will go away.”

Carefully, he pried the dagger out of Harry’s hand.

Harry sat there, staring at his empty palm in disbelief, unable to register what was happening. His eyes blurred over.

“Everything is going to be okay,” said Tom soothingly, holding the dagger away from Harry. “Everything is going to be okay.”

Harry kneeled on the ground, motionless, and then he threw his arms around Tom, burying his face in Tom’s shoulder, sobbing inconsolably.

He couldn’t see Tom’s smile, but he could feel it. It was a smile which said, “I’ve won.”

It was a smile of victory.

The downpour had finally ceased and the air was fresh with rain.

Lestrange tiptoed into the room. He asked timidly, “What are we going to tell the professors? What are we going to tell them happened to Delacour?”

Harry lifted his face away from Tom’s shoulder, resting his eyes on Lestrange. They were no longer tear-filled, swollen. They were the fierce eyes of a person who wasn’t lost any longer and had finally rediscovered the path. “What happened to the Delacours,” he corrected.

Tom and Lestrange looked at Harry, baffled.

They were no longer baffled when Harry closed his hand around Tom’s wrist and drove the dagger into his chest.

Tom let out a howl of rage, yanking the dagger free. “GOD DAMN IT, HARRY!”

Unadulterated agony was swarming Harry’s senses and he gasped, coughing up blood and saliva. But this pain was nothing. When Sirius had died, when Dumbledore had died, when Hermione had died, Harry had stared straight through the gates of hell, and he had lived to tell the tale.
This… he would take this ten times over, if it meant he could return to the side of the most loyal companion he had ever known.

He had run from the Second Wizarding War for too long. It was time to go home.

His sight was speckled with black dots now, his consciousness skipping every few seconds. Shuddering, Harry realised that Tom had lowered him onto his back and was scrambling at the wound with his fingers, attempting to staunch the bleeding.

Lestrange had finally taken his leave.

“Y-y-you…” The words refused to leave Harry’s lips. They trembled out, malformed, and Tom was panting furiously. He had picked up his wand and was attempting to heal the damage, but it was no use.

*After all, you don’t specialise in healing.* The thought drifted through Harry’s head like a daydream. *You specialise in killing.*

The world was spinning, a flurry of black flecks.

*Wait. There is still so much more to be said.*

Harry sucked in a small breath, but abruptly choked on it. Blood dribbled out the side of his mouth. Tom was chanting “Harry”, over and over again, making it his mantra.

“T-T-To–” Harry stuttered and his lover, his enemy shut up, recognising the beginning of his name.

“What have you done?” asked Tom brokenly, peering down at Harry, and Harry allowed himself to get lost in that sea of deep, deep blue.

“O-once,” began Harry, and the words were refusing to leave his lips. He tried again. “Once, I-I-I… l-l-lo-loved y-y-y-you.”

He trembled from the effort, his vision becoming unfocused. He forced himself back to the present, no matter how painful it was.

“B-b-b–” blood bubbled up past his lips. “But y-you… ne-ne-never l-l-loved m-m-m–”

“No.” Tom cut him off in a whisper, kissing his forehead. He had chucked his wand to the side and was now gripping Harry’s fingers like a lifeline. “That’s not true. I love you more than life itself.”

A bloody smile crept across Harry’s lips. His time was nearly up, and he was no longer frightened of the unknown which lay ahead of him. “Y-you l-lo-love an i-i-i-idea,” he said, fighting for breath, fighting those blasted black dots which were taking up most of his vision. He could focus on nothing but those eyes, floating above him, now. “You lo-love wh-wh-wh-what I could have… be-been.”

Those beautiful blue eyes filled with anguish. “Don’t you dare die!”

Who was speaking? It was so hard to focus. There were only dots, spinning like a cyclone through the air.

Surely… surely the voice belonged to a person he had once loved. A person who had once loved him.
There was time for one last goodbye.

He conjured one final breath, one final magic trick, and murmured, “I’m sorry. But I have to go now.”

The world collapsed into oblivion.

Chapter End Notes

… Short epilogue coming soon.
An Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Harry lifted his eyes to meet Hermione’s and he finally understood the haunted look within hers. “We’re back.”

Chapter Notes

One final chapter with you guys, before I call it quits for a little while. To those of you who don’t know – there will be a sequel, but I need to brainstorm, plot it out, turn possibilities over in my head. I will not be publishing anything which is half-assed! Unfortunately, I’ll be quite busy this year, so that sequel may be a little while off. I also just wanted to say that I have loved every moment of this journey, and I send especial thanks to those of you in the comment section. The conversations I have had with you all have been a delight! Thank you for your insight, your feedback, your ideas. I write this story for you, readers, and in turn, you inspire me. ♡ ▼ ◇ ▼ ♡ I'm going to miss you all when this little adventure is over.
I hope you’ll join me again one day.
Do remember to check out Firespawn's fanfic trailer which she created for "When in Rome".

Palms pressed against his shoulders, shaking his stiff body.

“Harry!” a voice cried in the far-off distance. “Harry! Get up!”

Excellent. Just another day of life with the Dursleys. There was Aunt Petunia, rattling at him and screeching in his ear at six o’clock in the morning. He had probably forgotten that it was Dudley’s birthday and that he was meant to fry up some bacon for breakfast.

Just another day.

Unable to put off the moment any longer, Harry opened his eyes.

Hermione was leaning over his face, eyes wide and haunted as if she had just seen a ghost. With a shiver she fell back, pressing a hand over her mouth.

Harry pushed himself upright, reclining on his elbows as he glanced around the place.

An empty classroom.

This was certainly not the Dursleys’ house. “What happened?” he asked hoarsely, then grimaced.

There was an awful taste of blood in his mouth.

He scrubbed at his lips with the back of his hand and came away with dried, rust-coloured crumbs. Alarmed, he glanced down over himself and launched himself to his feet with a grunt, patting
himself down. His uniform was torn over his chest, and the tattered material was mottled red.

“Wha–” Harry flattened his hand on his chest but felt no wound. “What…?”

Hermione was still sitting on the floor, staring at him as if she had just seen a ghost. “I thought you were dead,” she whispered. “You were lying there, covered in blood.”

“Dead?” repeated Harry, but before he could question her, a glint of gold lying across her breast caught his eye. Leaning down, he took the pendant up in his fingers, the chain lifting away from her neck.

A time-turner?

Blue eyes, deep and dark enough to drown in.

“Oh my god.” The gold charm slipped from his grip, clanging against the floor in that horribly silent room.

Harry stumbled backwards a few steps, pressing a fist against his heart, staring ahead blindly. He abruptly tripped over his own feet and his back slammed against a wooden desk. His spine aching, Harry lifted his eyes to meet Hermione’s and he finally understood the haunted look within hers. “We’re back.”

“Yes,” breathed Hermione, deathly pale. “We’ve returned home.”

Harry extended a hand ahead of him, flexing his fingers beneath the moonlight. “But how did… Tom?” Everything came back to him in a rush, an overwhelming wave of memories, and he tried to stand but collapsed beneath the weight of it all. “Tom?” he called, louder this time.

But the Room of Requirement was devoid of any life besides himself and Hermione.

Desperately, Harry hooked his fingers onto the desk behind him and dragged himself to his unsteady feet. Supporting himself against the furniture, Harry searched the room. That empty room. “Tom!” he cried brokenly, but once again, no silken voice answered him.

“He’s not here, Harry.” Hermione scooped up the fallen time-turner in her fingers. She held it up for him to see. “Tom Riddle is still in 1945, and we’re back exactly where we started.”

Harry took a few moments to register this, still disoriented from leaning into the maw of death and escaping, yet again. Finally, he said blankly, “I abandoned him.”

“No.” Hermione tossed the time-turner onto a table and wrapped her arms around him. “You’re exactly where you’re meant to be.”

A muffled voice crept in from the other side of the door. “They must have come this way, my sweet… I’m sure the Headmaster would like a word with the brats… maybe I can have my fun with them afterwards?”

The footsteps of Argus Filch shuffled past.

“You spelled a pumpkin around Malfoy’s head,” recalled Hermione, leaning her chin against the top of Harry’s head as he shrank in on himself within her arms. “Didn’t you?”

Harry let out a laugh which sounded an awful lot like a sob and he clutched at her arms with shaking hands. “What have I done, Hermione? What have I done?”
“You’ve done exactly what you should have,” said Hermione fiercely. “The world is in exactly the same state as when we left it. That means that Harry and Hermione Delacour were written in the past the entire time. We just never knew it.”

“I should have saved Tom.”

“You could have done nothing differently.”

With Harry curled up there, too hollow to even manage a tear, Hermione shifted so that she could look out the window at the moon. It shone bright and white, its face gazing sadly back at her. This ancient moon had held witness to the great tragedy of Harry and Hermione, but it kept its silence.

With Harry hanging onto her arms painfully, digging into her flesh as if he had nothing else to tether him to reality, Hermione murmured, “We never did find out the outcome of the Felix Felicis competition.”

Harry shuddered and finally relinquished his hold on her. Leaving her behind to watch, he staggered over to the window and pressed his palm against the glass, casting his eyes over the Hogwarts grounds, sleeping through the night.

His breath fogging the glass, Harry dropped to his knees and rested his forehead against the window frame. He closed his eyes tight and sent up a silent whisper into the universe.

*I’ll find you, Tom. Wait for me.*

Hermione cleared her throat behind him.

Reluctantly, Harry turned his head to look over his shoulder. She was standing there, the Marauder’s Map in one hand and the Invisibility Cloak in the other. “It should be useful to have these back, right?”

Harry gave a tiny smile, coming over and taking the Invisibility Cloak from her. He ran his fingers along the velveteen cloth, cold from lying there for so long. It had been barely a minute in this time, yet they had been away for half a year. Gripping his father’s cloak against his body, Harry said, “Definitely.”

Hermione opened the map, scanning the corridors for any sign of Filch, Mrs. Norris or Malfoy. She found the coast clear and nodded her head approvingly. “Come on, Harry. We have places to be.”

“Places?” asked Harry, and his voice was timid. “I thought that you were set on us remaining here at Hogwarts. No Horcrux hunting for me in the wild.”

Hermione gave a small smirk. “Living fifty years in the past can take its toll on a person. School’s out, Harry. Let’s find Ronald and get out of this place.”

For the first time that night, Harry felt his face stretch into a broad grin, remembering a long nose, a freckled skin and bright red hair.

He would be glad to see a familiar face.

As Hermione eased open the door, sending calculating glances either way down the corridor, Harry allowed himself one more glance out the window.
Tom – Voldemort – was somewhere out there, waiting for him. They would, undoubtedly, meet again, but when that time came, Harry would be ready.

Until then, he thought, and stepped across the threshold, following Hermione back into the world.

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Fifteen minutes earlier…

Draco Malfoy gripped the time-turner in his fist, hurrying down the corridors of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

He wasn’t precisely sure why it was that he was carrying that old instrument on his person, but the Dark Lord was not a person to be questioned.

“Leave this in the Room of Requirement,” the man had told Draco, exactly one day earlier. He had called the newly appointed Head Boy to meet him at Malfoy Manor, the location in which he had temporarily placed his throne. “Take care not to spin the charm. There is a powerful spell I have placed on it, and it would not do for you to activate it before the right time comes.”

Narcissa Malfoy had gripped Draco’s shoulder tightly – perhaps the completion of this task would redeem her husband in the Dark Lord’s eyes.

“I will, my lord.” Draco remembered dipping his torso into a deep bow, an obvious tremor in his voice. He accepted the time-turner, making sure to keep his skin from touching the Dark Lord’s. Too frightened to look him in the face, Draco proceeded to make a flighty exit from the room.

One night later, here he was on a personal mission appointed to him by none other than Lord Voldemort. It was an honour to be doing so. Or so he was told.

Pacing in front of the Room of Requirement, Draco pleaded for a place to hide the dratted thing in his hand. The Room was swift in conjuring a simple classroom.

Eager to rid himself of the item, Draco deposited it on the closest piece of furniture – a chair – and hurriedly retreated from the Room, the doorway sealing itself behind him as he rushed blindly down the corridor.

It was done, and Draco anticipated that the rest of his night would go undisturbed.

The moon, watching quietly from the sky, winked at him.
Quick breaths left Harry’s parted lips in puffs of vapour which billowed before his face like drowning clouds. Flexing the stiff fingers on his left hand, Harry tightened his grip on the wand in his right.

His dear wand still bore the ugly, jagged crack splitting it down the middle. A tattooed reminder of the fateful day he and Hermione had found themselves in a new world.

A new world, a place Harry wished he had never found. A place where he had fallen in love. He loathed himself for it. But the matter was beyond his own hands. Love was something beyond his control.

Harry pulled his cloak securely around his body to ward away the winter’s chill. Dusk was rolling in, wrapping London in long shadows which stretched along the sidewalks like creeping fingers. It was a gamble to have stepped into the open in the heart of London, the place Voldemort was most active, but a gamble which had to be taken.

Standing by the entrance of a dark alleyway, Harry ducked his head, concealing his wand in the folds of his robes. Naturally, he had cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself – it allowed him more mobility than wearing his Invisibility Cloak would – because there was no telling which Death Eater he might stumble upon.

Harry held his breath as a Muggle shuffled past, taking long drags of a cigarette. She took no notice of him, camouflaged into the bricks behind him, and continued on her way. Harry let loose a breath, slackening his shoulders.

That was when he heard the *click-clack-click-clack* of little heels thrumming along the pavement.

Eyes narrowing almost comically, Harry lowered his gaze to the ground once more and watched as the pointy pink shoes trotted past his hiding place. Immediately, he slipped out of the alleyway and onto the street, a mere shadow, his footfall silent as he stalked the witch into the silence of evening.

Closer, closer, closer he crept, the stout witch paying no mind to the unsettling quiet which had fallen around them like a stifling shroud. Harry allowed the Disillusionment Charm to melt away with each step, right before seizing the woman by the arm and Apparating away before she could so much as shriek.
They reappeared in a flurry of motion within a circle of trees in the Forest of Dean. As promised, before Harry could so much as blink the witch was hit by a Stunner and slumped to the ground, dirtying her fluffy pink cardigan.

“Cheers,” said Harry as Hermione and Ron stepped out from behind the cover of trees.

“No worries,” said Ron, and they gathered around to stare down at the incapacitated form of Dolores Umbridge.

After a heartbeat, Harry kneeled by her, hand hovering above her for a moment. He closed his eyes and listened for the tired throbbing of a fragment of a soul.

It stung his scar, and Harry flinched.

“Well?” asked Hermione in a hushed tone of voice.

By way of response, Harry steeled his nerves and reached down to Umbridge’s neck, yanking up the chain which was tucked away.

Out came Salazar Slytherin’s locket, humming in cold greeting.

Ron swore beneath his breath and Hermione gave a tiny nod of her head. They had been expecting it, ever since they had forced the locket’s location out of Mundungus Fletcher with the help of Kreacher.

There was another bitter moment of silence, then finally Harry snapped the chain away from Umbridge’s neck and hung it around his own, tucking it away so that it was in contact with his bare chest. The metal was hot and electrified his skin.

The soul of Tom Riddle, speaking to him once more.

\textit{Harry. The memory of long, cool fingers on his face. I never wanted you to be the hero.}

With a shudder, Harry straightened, willing the voice away. “We need to leave,” he said. “Now.”

“You alright with wearing it?” Ron looked at him seriously. “I mean, look what happened with Ginny, when she had the diary—”

“It’s fine,” Harry snapped unexpectedly, hand shooting up to lay protectively across the locket beneath his robes. He ignored the shock on both his friends’ faces and glanced away, jaw tense. “Are we done here?”

Hermione recovered first. “Yes. I’ll take us back to—”

Exactly where Hermione was planning on taking them was not revealed.

Overhead there was a crack, as loud as a thunderclap. Black smoke billowed out from seemingly nowhere, casting them in darkness, and a hurricane-like wind knocked the three off their feet, tossing them across the clearing as if they were ragdolls.

Harry flipped along the ground like tumbleweed, before finally finding a hold on the ground. He hung there for dear life, wind streaming through his hair until finally, it died away.

Blinded by the darkness, Harry could barely see as far as his own nose. Gaining his own feet again, he ducked down low, eyes stinging. Hermione and Ron were nowhere near him, and he wouldn’t call out for fear of alerting their ambusher.
Scrambling for the locket, a jolt of relief ran up his spine when his fingers found it.

The relief did not last long.

Pain split across his forehead, like nothing he had ever felt before, and Harry fell to his knees with a howl, dropping his wand and clutching at his scar with his free hand.

“Harry!” he heard Hermione’s voice distantly but could barely focus on it as the smoke parted before him, cleaving a path which was so clean and bright compared to the black which enveloped him everywhere else.

Once more, Harry’s skull threatened to tear apart from the unadulterated agony which he felt, and his eyes screwed shut.

And then suddenly, so suddenly, it all stopped. The pain dissipated, like a dream. Then a clear voice crooned in his ears, low and cold.

“Harry… Potter.”

A shiver crawled across Harry’s skin, raising the hairs on the back of his neck, on his arms.

That voice. A voice he had once known, in an age long passed.

Hardly daring to believe, Harry opened his eyes.

Towering above his kneeling form was Voldemort. Tall, thin, his complexion as white as death. The slitted nose of a serpent, head as smooth as a boiled egg and eyes the colour of fresh blood.

A face so unlike the one that Harry had known. “Tom,” he said.

A sneer curled the corner of Voldemort’s lipless mouth upwards and he ran his wand along Harry’s cheek with a tender viciousness, a motion which set off alarm bells in Harry’s head.

“I have been searching long and hard for you, Harry Potter,” murmured Voldemort, his gaze sweeping across Harry, committing him to memory.

Slowly, Harry rose to meet him, breath caught in his throat. Voldemort’s wand, pressed against his cheekbone, felt like a brand of ownership. Voldemort allowed him the dignity of standing, his eyes glittering rubies.

“And I’m afraid,” said Harry, more steadily than he felt, “that you will be searching again.”

Voldemort tilted his head to the side, a curious little gesture. “You will not be leaving my sight again, Potter,” he said, mellow as a song. “Not until you are dead, and it is your corpse being taken away from me.”

Harry knew that Voldemort was merely the shadow of the person he had once been, the schoolboy Harry had fallen for some fifty years ago, but hearing such words come from his mouth still splintered Harry’s already fractured heart.

“You have been angry for so long,” he said, and it sounded like a plea, “but I understand now. It’s me, Tom, I’m here, and I want to help—”

In a movement as swift as a whip, Voldemort had Harry by the throat, crushing his airway between long, pale fingers, like spider legs. Harry choked, eyes bulging, his hands swinging up on reflex to grip Voldemort’s arm, grappling to free himself from the stranglehold.
But Voldemort’s grip was firm and oxygen deprivation weakened Harry. His struggle rapidly slackened, spots dancing in the corners of his vision, and Voldemort’s face was blurring over.

Images of Hermione and Ron surfaced before his eyes. Then there was Luna and Neville, Ginny and the Weasleys, Dumbledore and Sirius and Lupin and his mother and father. The long-ago faces of Peregrine Lestrange, Ignatius Prewett, Margot Greengrass and the boy who had once been known as Tom Riddle.

Harry had never imagined that this would be how he would die. Surrounded by black smoke, asphyxiated in the most Muggle, most intimate manner by Lord Voldemort. With only his memories to comfort him as he spiralled down the bright white tunnel to the unknown.

Then abruptly he was thrown to the ground and he gasped in air, his entire frame shuddering from the shock of yet another near-death experience.

“Give me the locket,” Voldemort hissed and Harry looked up at him, eyes watering.

“Why not kill me and get it yourself?” he wheezed, his fingers scrambling for wherever he had dropped his wand.

Voldemort’s face went even whiter, if that was possible, and he kicked Harry in the ribs, sending him tumbling. :Do not mock me, insolent brat,: he spat.

Harry groaned and lifted his head to the sight of his wand, a mere metre ahead of him.

“I know you remember me, Tom,” he managed, pushing himself upright once more. He could tell that his ribs were bruised as he did so.

“Do not call me by that name!” Voldemort stalked nearer him and Harry scuttled backwards, closing in on his wand, desperate to put some distance between himself and his enemy.

“It was a long time ago,” he pressed. “And things didn’t go the way either of us planned. But you have to stop this, you have to remember–”

“How could I not remember?” Voldemort raised his wand, his eyes pulsing madness. “I remember that night all too well, Potter–”

“The night that you killed her.”

Hermione, her mouth opening slightly in morbid surprise as her body was engulfed in green light, then nothing. Just an empty shell, lying on the ground, a mockery of the bright witch she had been.

“Yes, I killed her,” said Voldemort, and there was no remorse in his voice. “I gave her the opportunity to move – a gift – but she refused, so now she is dead and so is your pathetic father. All to protect you, a perfectly ordinary, interfering, half-blood child.”

There was a pause, during which Harry entirely forgot that he was meant to be grabbing his wand and escaping. He shook his head once, a miniscule motion, and said in a low voice, “We aren’t talking about the same night. Are we?”

“I did not realise that we had the memories of an abundance of nights at our disposal, Potter,” said Voldemort, and there was such hatred in his eyes that Harry wanted to cry.

“Stop playing games,” he whispered. “I know that you remember Harry Delacour.”
But there was no recognition which sparked on Voldemort’s face, and a cruel smile curled his mouth. “Oh dear,” he said. “Is that another of your beloved companions who crossed paths with me?”

For the first time since Harry had returned to the future, he thought that he might hate Tom Riddle after all. “Yes.” His fingers closed around his wand, hidden from sight behind him, and emotion made his voice tremble painfully. “Yes, he was. Harry Delacour… I didn’t know him for long. Only half a year. But he’ll always be close to my heart.”

“Is this love that you speak of?” Voldemort’s pale face hovered there like a skull in the dark, so very mocking.

Harry grimaced. “Yes. And you thought you loved him, too.”

Voldemort went silent, disbelief rippling off him like waves.

Harry seized the opportunity. “You loved him a long time ago. It was during the Christmas of 1944 that you produced a dragon Patronus.”

Something fragile jolted in Voldemort’s gaze, as if that had awoken something in him. His wand remained raised, pointing steadily at Harry, but he made no move to utter a spell.

The locket, hot against Harry’s chest, crooned a soulful melody to him. *Keeping talking,* it seemed to say. *Tell the world our story.*

“And it was also during the Christmas of 1944,” said Harry, aching, “that you kissed him.”

Voldemort’s eyes widened a fraction – snagged in Harry’s words – and Harry leapt into action. “*Stupefy!*” he shouted, throwing himself to his feet, and the Stunner ricocheted off the shield Voldemort abruptly cast.

But it granted him enough time to spring back into the black smoke around them, blind once more, and he hurtled towards where he had heard Hermione’s voice before. “Hermione!” he bellowed in desperation as he ran. “Ron!”

“We’re here!” he heard somewhere to his right. He veered sharply, dogging the voices, and he could hear rustling behind him as Voldemort gave chase.

“I am not done with you, Harry Potter!” The outcry echoed all around, ringing sharply in Harry’s ears, and he could feel fingers shadowing his cloak, rippling like a banner behind him.

So he took a leap of faith.

Through the air he sailed, his eyes filled with smoke, and the earth seemed to still around him as he flew. Then Harry slammed bodily straight into Ron and Hermione, huddled together in the darkness.

With a crack, Hermione Apparated them away, Voldemort’s scream of outrage filling the atmosphere.

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Once safely hidden away inside 12 Grimmauld Place, Hermione and Ron backed Harry into a chair
where they could interrogate him.

Harry had almost forgotten what it was like, to have two against one. Despite a whole year passing since he and Hermine had returned, he had grown accustomed to it just being the two of them.

“Did he hurt you?” demanded Hermione, first up. Her bushy hair was a mess, poking around such that it could rival Harry’s own, and her skin was blackened from the smoke, as was Ron’s.

“You-Know-Who wouldn’t hurt him,” reasoned Ron, though his tone was sceptical. “I mean, weren’t you his school boyfriend or something?”

No matter how many times Ron was told of their adventure in the past, he never seemed able to fully comprehend what had happened. If Harry had been in his best mate’s shoes, he would have been the same. The whole story was completely mental, after all.

“But he’s tried to hurt Harry in the past,” Hermione argued, turning on Ron. “Just look at what happened during the Triwizard Tournament, if you’ve forgotten. You-Know-Who appears to have no qualms about harming Harry. Maybe he hasn’t made the connection yet—”

“There is no connection to be made,” croaked Harry, rubbing his reddened throat. He was sure that there were fingerprints there.

“You–” Hermione frowned, whipping her head around to stare at Harry. “What did you say?”

“There is no connection to be made,” repeated Harry, his hands clenching into fists on his lap. He was unable to make eye contact with either of them when he spoke. “Vol–”

“Don’t say his name!” Ron hissed, for the millionth time.

“You-Know-Who,” snapped Harry, glaring at the ground, “does not remember me. He does not remember Harry Delacour. He does not remember that night, Hermine. It’s all gone.”

Hermione’s mouth opened and closed, her face slack. She backed up a few steps, then collapsed into a chair opposite Harry’s. “How… is that possible?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe he extracted and destroyed the memories?” suggested Ron, glancing helplessly between his two shell-shocked friends.

“You don’t understand, Ron.” Hermione pressed her fingers against her lips, staring into the distance. Her eyes were blank, as if she was seeing something which wasn’t there anymore. “The Tom Riddle we met would never have destroyed the memory of Harry. He was mad, and he wanted to own Harry, like a possession. It was an unhealthy attraction. But the memory of Harry… that is something he would have treasured.”

Harry’s gaze shuttered as he listened to the words, and he swallowed painfully. He had come to realise, as horrible as it was, that everything Hermine spoke of was true. In the end, he had just been another item to Tom.

Ron pulled his shoulders up into a useless shrug. “Then maybe somebody destroyed the memories for him. I don’t know. Maybe they were jealous of you, Harry, even if you were gone.”

Harry exchanged a dark glance with Hermine. He would not have put it past Cassius Mulciber to have done something like that. But then again…
“Unlikely,” he announced. “Tom had them all wrapped around his little finger. He couldn’t have been OVERPOWERED by anyone.”

“Anyone but you.” Hermione’s voice rang through the room, clear as a bell.

Harry’s jaw tightened. “Well, obviously I wasn’t the one who did it.”

Nobody spoke for a long moment. Then Hermione said softly, “Ron, could you please ask Kreacher to prepare us a hot meal?”

From the corner of his eye, Harry could see them share a meaningful look and anticipated what was to come. This was a constant occurrence, nowadays.

“Alright,” said Ron, attempting a bright tone. “We could all do with that. Food is healing, after all.”

He went off in search of the house-elf, leaving Harry and Hermione alone.

“Harry.” Hermione inched to the edge of her seat, eyes beseeching. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” Harry gritted out.

“You’re not fine,” disagreed Hermione. “You’ve come face-to-face with him for the first time since we got back, for the first time in a year, only to learn that he doesn’t remember you. You can’t be fine.”

Harry did not say anything, merely looked at her. All that was not said aloud could be read in his gaze.

Hermione pursed her lips. “If it’s any comfort to you, this makes our job easier. Your job easier.”

“How’d you figure that one out?” The sarcasm dripped in thick rivulets from Harry’s voice.

“He doesn’t remember you, he retains no emotional ties. Shouldn’t that make destroying his Horcruxes less… complicated?”

Harry stood abruptly. “It changes nothing,” he said. “Just because he has forgotten doesn’t mean that I’ve forgotten.”

Turning on heel, he made to leave the room but Hermione called after him. “You’ve still got it, haven’t you?”

Harry paused. “Got what?”

“You know what.”

Subconsciously, Harry palmed the locket through his clothes. It had not stopped humming since he had first put it around his neck. He glanced over his shoulder at Hermione, tense and perched on the edge of her seat. “I’ll look after it for now,” he said.

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea.” Hermione held her hand out for it. “I’ll wear it first.”

“I’ll be fine with it.” Harry made no move to pass her the locket, and Hermione’s expression twisted into disapproval.

“You’ve been using the word ‘fine’ an awful lot,” she said. “You’re already agitated, Harry. The
locket will only make you worse.”

But the locket contained a fragment of Tom’s soul, and it had been whispering to Harry since he had first put it on, recalling stories of their past.

Despite the pure evil that it represented, it was something of a comfort to Harry. It was like walking with Tom’s arms around him once more. It was something that Harry craved but did not speak of.

One more smile. One more kiss. One more brush of their fingers in a darkened room. One more.

“Harry,” warned Hermione, sensing Harry’s inner turmoil.

Don’t, said the voice of Tom Riddle.

“Trust me.” Hermione raised her eyebrows, extending her hand a little further forward.

Trust me. Those two simple words were always capable of pulling on Harry’s heartstrings.

His fingers trembling, he yanked the chain off his neck, ignoring the Horcrux’s cry to never let go. Mutely, he tossed it over to Hermione and immediately felt a little lighter once it was out of his hand.

“Thank you,” she said, her knuckles white around the smooth metal of the Horcrux. “We’ll rotate every day. Ron can wear it tomorrow. That should give you a break for long enough. All we have to do now is learn how to destroy it.”

A year. They had been doing this for a year, and still they had not made any progress in that field. Little progress had been made in general, period.

The diary had been destroyed long ago. Dumbledore had taken care of the ring. Hermione had managed to snag Ravenclaw’s lost diadem the day that they had fled from Hogwarts, and now they had the locket. But there were still more out there.

With one last lingering glance at Tom’s Horcrux, Harry turned and walked away.

He couldn’t shake away the feeling that a voice was screaming for him to stay.

But perhaps it was only a memory.

Chapter End Notes

HAHA. Happy Easter, everybody! Hope you enjoyed the preview! :D

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