The Glass Serpent and the Dark Horse

by KaedeRavensdale

Summary

In which Tom Riddle Senior never could fully put Merope’s claims of being pregnant out of his mind and set out to bring his child home, unwittingly changing the fate of both the Wizarding and Muggle worlds and laying waste to the machinations of a certain scheming old man.


‘Stay for him, if not for me Tom. You have a son.’

He hadn’t believed the witch, Merope Gaunt, when she’d tried to feed him that line all those years ago yet Tom Riddle Senior had never quite been able to shake the feeling that maybe he’d been wrong. That maybe he really did have a son. That maybe he was being raised to be a freak just like his freak mother. He’d dwelled on the matter for years, shut away from the world in Riddle Manor suffering through the trauma that whatever the bloody hell she had done to him had left behind, fuming and ruminating and doing all that he possibly could to craft in his mind an image of the child as a Demon crawled up from hell, the type of monster that you’d expect a witch to be accompanied by in the folklore of the middle ages, in an effort to make the thought repugnant. A nightmare to be driven from his mind forever. Yet lingering on the matter for so very long had ultimately had the opposite effect.

A son. He had a son. A little boy with dark curls and blue eyes-Merope’s only remotely flattering feature-and the trademark Riddle smile. A Wizard, no doubt, but that was a flaw which could be over looked. Gotten around if he was raised right. Taught better than to go around casting spells and dosing people with potions and what not.

The reality of the fact that he would not receive anything near the proper moral groundwork under Merope’s tutelage was what had finally led him to push aside and overcome his fears, making a recovery which had left both his parents and professionals amazed. Even knowing that he’d have to face the woman again, to somehow steal away his child and make off with him, Tom had set out to reunite with the boy. That had been three years ago and now, after countless leads had terminated in dead ends, he may finally have found him.

What he’d imagined had been bad, but it turned out that the reality was so much worse. The sun beat down from the crown of the sky, compounding the already stifling mid-June heat tenfold. Cicadas droned in the over grown and wilting garden. The wreckage of a building upon which a German bomb had fallen was visible at the far end of the street as he stood on the bowing rickety wooden porch, nose to nose with the peeling blue paint of the front door.

Wool’s Orphanage.

He’d wanted his son to be real. Wanted, desperately, to find him soon. But he suddenly found himself hoping that this lead, like all the others, would again amount to nothing.

He’d rather have more disappointment than know that his son had lived here of all places, even if only for a moment. Still, if he was here he couldn’t leave him. He had to check.
Appalled by his surroundings and beginning to wilt in the heat like the under-watered plants beside him Tom Riddle Senior raised his fist and knocked sharply on the door.

Twenty minutes of knocking later the door was finally opened and the now very much annoyed aristocrat peered down the sharp slant of his nose at the teenaged boy who’d answered; one of the Wards, by the look of the uniform he wore-ratty wool dyed a dour grey-and not the Matron. Clearly the building wasn’t the only thing about Wool’s Orphanage that was sub-par.

The boy was blonde with watery brown eyes; they plainly had no relation and he paled instantly at the sight of him, tripping over the question of his purpose there. Tom’s tone might have been a good deal more clipped than necessary but he wasn’t exactly raised to care for how he treated those below him on the social ladder. “I would speak with your Matron, provided they can be bothered to beggar a damn of course.”

Given the fact that the door wasn’t answered in person, nor even in a timely fashion, he expected to find a washed up old maid. What he can across instead was a slovenly bint who teetered on her feet, hair escaping from its pined up position as if inviting a strike of lightning, who was more drunk than a gold fish dropped into a bottle of fifty proof despite it being barely noon.

“You’re the one who they’ve put in charge of the children?” he drawled, horrified.

The woman hiccupped, attempted to focus on him, and ended up speaking to the wall over his left shoulder instead. “That I am. Mrs. Cole.” He shuddered when her bloodshot eyes ran over him; Tom had never quite managed to return to a place of comfort while in the presence of any woman other than his mother, but even back when he’d been a play boy having Matron Martini eye him up like a butcher’s cut would have left him feeling like he needed an immediate and very thorough wash. It was made all the worse when she attempted to lean coyly to the side and toppled over. “What can I do for you, handsome? Don’t get much of your kind around here.”

I can imagine not. He thought. What an absolute embarrassment. If it were up to him this woman wouldn’t have been trusted to run the seediest brothel on the face of the earth! “I’ve been looking for my long lost son for a handful of years and the most recent lead led me here.” Unfortunately. “You wouldn’t happen to have a child here, a boy, by the name of Riddle would you? He’d be twelve, now, or around it.”

The woman sobered up so quickly that someone just walking in on the matter might have thought he’d given her the back hand. “R-Riddle?” her lower lip quivered. “As in…as in Tom R-Riddle?”

“Tom Edward Riddle, yes. I am.” A sinking feeling had congealed in the pit of his stomach. Why, damn it? Why hadn’t he come for him sooner? His son would have been less damaged had his mother raised him! What had Merope been thinking leaving the boy here to begin with! “I take it that you do have my son here, then?”

“Yes.” Her voice had taken on the high, breathy quality of someone who had just witnessed something terrible she and sank down into the chair behind the desk. Bullets of cold sweat had broken out across her brow. “Yes. We’ve had him here for nearly twelve years now. Ever since that poor girl had him in our entry way. Named him just before she died: Tom for his father and Marvolo for hers. Had I known that the Devil himself had been birthed that night I’d have thrown the baby out with the bathwater to die in the cold. Saved us all.”

“Need I remind you that I am his father!”

Even a non-magical child would have acted out stuck in a place like this for all his life! Throwing him into such a hostile environment, never having known anything even close to normal, and then
expecting him to function was like throwing a lion into a circus ring and expecting it not to kill someone. How dare she call his son, his blood, a monster! And to his face no less.

She stared at him with eyes that he’d formerly believed only soldiers returned from war could have. “You don’t understand. He didn’t even have teeth yet he bit a wet nurse until she bled. He was adopted twice and taken back within a week after strange things began happening around their homes. We tried to have him exorcised when he was six; he boiled the holy water and broke every bone in the arm of the priest without even touching him. He hung a rabbit from the rafters at eight. Terrorized two of the other children into catatonia. Steals compulsively. Lies. Speaks to snakes. I don’t care if you’re his father you won’t be safe from him either! You don’t want him!”

“What I don’t want is for him to stay here.” His son. His boy. Tom was still young. Had been made to act out by the cruelty of circumstance. He could save him. One he realized that he was safe, no longer needed to constantly be ready to attack, his son would calm on his own. “Show me his room.”

“But-.”

“Now!”

The woman jumped and quickly scrambled up, babbling about unimportant things he didn’t care to listen to as she led him up to the top floor. The room at which they stopped was small and unadorned with a bare desk, a scratched wardrobe and a rough cot which looked months unslept in as the only furniture. The single tiny window set into the wall provided a depressing view of a brick wall.

His heart constricted. This was where his son had lived for over a decade?

“Where is he? I’d like to take him now; Little Hangleton is almost a full day’s drive from here.”

“He won’t return from Boarding School until tomorrow afternoon; the train will arrive at King’s Cross at four.”

Boarding School? Wool’s was clearly unable to afford tuition for any of its wards. The only explanation that Tom could come up with was that it must have been a school of magic of some sort, that his own people had found him before he had through some arcane means, and that perhaps some form of scholarship had been set up. “What is the name of this ‘school’?”

“Hogwarts, I believe. I didn’t really catch it; any reprieve from his constant presence was more than welcome.”

Getting his son away from this hellhole as soon as possible was the first thing on his mind, but showing up at the train station to collect him likely wouldn’t be the best course of action. They’d never seen each other before. Would be meeting for the first time. Better it be done in an otherwise familiar territory, no matter how poor of a state it was in.

“I’ll be here to collect him before dinner.” He said. “And I’d like to fill out whatever paperwork is necessary now, if possible. Better it not be a bother when we’re leaving.”

The Matron looked as if she still couldn’t believe that Tom would be leaving, torn between resuming her dire warnings of misfortune and paying him whatever money might be left in Wool’s coffers to take the boy and never return. She ended up nodding and walking out. “Of course. We’ll go back down into my office and do that now.”

He spared the bleak room a final glance before following her out.
The candy red engine huffed like an impatient horse in a stall as young Tom Riddle stepped off the Hogwarts Express, the woolen sleeves of the uniform all of Wool’s Wards were forced to wear scratching at his scrawny arms and second hand trunk bumping along at his heels. He kept a mask of cold uncaring carefully in place but inside his heart had shattered like an egg fallen from its nest and now lay crushed upon the station’s dirty floor. The twelve year old had decided he would leave it there; maybe if he did, if he ignored it for long enough, it would grow coarse hair like in the story and he wouldn’t be able to feel anything at all anymore.

He’d thought that he’d grown tough, grown strong, in the orphanage where he was attacked from all sides by the awful Matron and the stupid Muggle children. Where he was taught by the dark of night and sung to sleep by snakes. But he’d been wrong. If he really had grown strong there he’d have known better than to open himself up to the world of magic. Would have been prepared for the reality that even amongst his own kind he was ostracized as something different and unclean.

What difference was there, really, between ‘freak’ and ‘Mudblood’?

Many years ago, when he was only five, he’d been told a story by one of the families who had attempted to adopt him. A story about a broken porcelain doll that had been salvaged from the bin by a kind old doll maker who had taken him home and repaired him, treating the doll like the son he’d never had, and that after he was finished he’d become the prettiest and most valued doll in all the land. It had stuck with him for a long time. Wedged in his subconscious like a thorn. The cruel hope that, out there somewhere, there was a doll maker for him too.

But there wasn’t, and he knew that now.

Stories were for the children fortunate enough to have a light ahead to look to. Who had parents who loved them. He didn’t. He was the broken doll that wouldn’t be saved. Would be thrown into the furnace with all the rest of the garbage of the world unless he found a way to save himself.

And maybe he would. After the truth stopped hurting.

Tom tried not to look around him as he left Platform 9 ¾ and began to make his way out of King’s Cross Station. At the Purebloods with their cold public promise of private affection to come. At the Muggle-borns and Half-bloods whose parents smothered them in hugs and questions and promises of their favorite meal. At the other children, laughing and smiling and surrounded by the friends that he would never have.

Freak. Freak! Monster. Evil!

When he was still very young and couldn’t spell much beyond his name, when he hadn’t even begun to be able to control what he now knew to be his magic, he’d dreamed of having a family of his own. That his own parents would find him, that he was only there because they’d lost him and were desperately looking, or that new parents would adopt him. When he could find paper and something to draw with he’d make pictures of a house and of the family he wanted. Dreamed of. A beautiful mother who would sing to him at night. A kind and handsome father who would play ball with him in the yard, whom he could look up to and emulate. Maybe a pet of some kind, like a dog.

After the second time he’d been returned to Wool’s Tom had stopped drawing.

When he arrived back at the depressing building after trekking his way through half the city Mrs.
Cole stared at him as if he’d returned holding a bloodied knife rather than an old trunk but said nothing. He made his way up the stairs and into his room, shutting the door behind him and collapsing onto the bed.

The rusty metal skeleton of the cot creaked beneath his weight. He curled up atop his poor excuse for a mattress without even attempting to remove his shoes and let everything that he’d been keeping at bay wash over him. He had no intention to go down to dinner that night and knew that no one would bother to come looking for him. He could have died up there and no one would have cared. His time was much better served building the hardest shell he could about himself before the next year started than attempting to chew through days stale bread anyway if he was going to do more than barely survive in Slytherin House but in order to do that he needed to first get rid of all the pent up emotion.

Biting the sleeve of his shirt to keep himself from making too much noise he allowed himself to cry. Choking on the shame of doing so even behind closed doors as the tears burned his eyes and he shook like a leaf caught in a winter gale. He was a child, weak and worthless, and he hated himself for it. Tom wanted to be strong so badly, was determined to make himself strong quickly, yet he’d never felt more vulnerable in his life than he did in that moment.

Maybe he’d dozed off, or maybe he’d descended into some sort of bizarre delusion, because the next thing he knew he was being held in someone’s lap. Rocked in someone’s arms. A man, from the smell of shoe polish and expensive cologne and the dark sound of a voice which hummed a senseless comfort. Steady heartbeat ticking in his ear. He was warm.

A dream. It must have been. No one cared for him in the orphanage and even if that hadn’t been the case men didn’t work there. And it couldn’t be someone come to adopt a child; on the off chance they were of the rare breed looking for someone older than three the Matron would have done everything in her power to make him seem like the Devil.

The Devil that she’d forced him to become.

If this was a dream then he was going to get as much out of it as he could-he didn’t get much in the way of comfort in his life, even from his own sub-conscious-because it didn’t matter. Didn’t affect anything in the grand scheme of things. None of it was real. He wrapped his arms around the man’s tapered waist and buried his face in the side of his neck. Breathing in his smell and slowly bringing his tears to a sniffling conclusion, enjoying the gentle touch of long fingers in his hair.

They were clumsy, as if unfamiliar with giving such gestures, but that didn’t matter. It was one of the only times he could remember having experienced a touch that was kind and he leaned into it. Despite the burning desire to know what this strange man looked like he resisted the urge to open his eyes because he was certain that, if he looked, he would disappear and he didn’t want that. Not yet.

“You’re alright, Junior.” His voice was a smooth baritone and rumbled through his ear where it pressed against his shoulder. “You’re alright.”

“M-Mr. Riddle, I’m afraid I can’t allow you to linger in the orphanage now that your business is concluded!”

The Matron’s broken record screech of a voice shattered the almost surreal calm of the room and Tom’s eyes popped open, his body going abruptly stiff. He pulled back, the arms around him loosening to let him do so, and looked at the man who was kneeling in front of him; the same dark curls, aquiline nose and cut jaw and cheekbones he would gain once the lingering baby fat-what little he’d managed to accumulate between the war’s rationing and Wool’s less than stellar funds—finally left him. The only thing clearly discernable as different between them aside from his age were that the other man’s eyes, narrowed into a glare that could cut through glass, were a stormy grey.
“I don’t intend to linger but for God’s sake did you expect me to simply drag him out of here? How can you call yourself a Matron, sober or not, when you haven’t even the barest instinct to comfort a crying child?”

His father! This was his father! His father had come back for him! He was here! He was…a Muggle?

His father was a Muggle. How could he be a Muggle; he was supposed to be a Wizard! He had to have been. His mother couldn’t have been a witch because if she’d had magic then she wouldn’t have died! Wouldn’t have left him. But he’d spent almost all year searching for some mention of the name Riddle in the Hogwart’s library. Had gone through every book the castle had had that was even remotely related to Blood Lines. Had found nothing.

“Spending the orphanage’s funds on Vodka instead of the necessary resources and repairs! Drunk in the middle of the day! And yet Child Protective Services still considers you fit to oversee an orphanage?” he rose abruptly, stooped to clear the dust from his knees, and then drew himself up to his full height. He radiated a level of command that Tom had thought only the Pureblood Lords of Ancient and Noble Houses could possess. “You’re lucky that my concern is only with taking my son home, not with reparations for his no doubt beyond lack luster treatment, because by the time I’d be through with you, you wouldn’t be seen as fit to run a dog pound!”

The bint withered before him like a weed before the fiery breath of an infuriated dragon. Tom watched with interest, a stubborn seed of hope managing to burrow into his chest. Maybe the man wouldn’t be so bad after all. The awful woman set her lips into a thin pale line but said nothing. His father turned to him and pointed to his beaten trunk.

“This is yours?” he nodded, the frog in his throat still too large for him to trust his voice not to break. He’d already cried all over the man and didn’t need to embarrass himself any further. “Is there anything else that you want to take with you?”

The only things he had to his name were already in his trunk or on his person, and most of those were second hand. Tom shook his head as he pushed himself up onto his feet; a hand on his shoulder stopped his effort to lift the trunk by the handle.

“We’ve the help for such things, Junior.” His father looked passed Mrs. Cole into the hallway at an older man he hadn’t noticed before. “Take his trunk, Philip.”

“Of course, Master.” As the man lifted his trunk with white gloved hands Tom stared. From the way that his father dressed and acted it was plain that he was wealthy, but to have servants? The Muggle equivalent of House Elves?

The same blood he’d spent months cursing for the suffering that it caused him at the hands of his fellow Slytherins, the same blood that had made him ‘filthy’, might be the thing which made him something in at least one of the worlds in which he held unsteady footing. Though perhaps not the one he wanted.

He’d have to see how everything went. If there was anything that Tom’s life, his most recent experiences especially, had taught him it was not to trust. People or opportunities.

The man had quite a lot to answer for, after all. Twelve year’s worth, to be exact. Most obviously where in the bloody hell he’d been, and whether or not he’d have to stomach to keep him.

Tom didn’t spare the Matron a glance as he walked passed her and neither did his father. The man led him down the stairs, passed the staring eyes of the other wards-he sneered at Billy Stubbs as they
passed-and out of Wools. Philip had placed his belongings in the trunk of the black Rolls Royce waiting on the street and was now holding the back door open for them.

His father motioned for him to get in first and Tom clambered in on all four of his still short limbs. Settling into one of the rows of seats and looking around in discrete curiosity. The interior of the sport’s car smelled like well-kept leather and more of his father’s cologne; the older man closed the back door and rolled down the window to let in the cooling evening air and then, without much fanfare but with great excitement on Tom’s account, the sleek car growled to life. Pulling away from the curb and onto the London streets.
The car rocked gently to and fro as it made its way up the street, the grey city flashing by outside the windows. The glass partition separating them from the driver was raised and the windows had been drawn up again now that the heat which had accumulated in the car had been released. The only sound in the dim interior was the dull thrum of the engine.

His father hadn’t spoken in the ten minutes they’d been driving, though whether that was because he was waiting for him to speak first or simply didn’t have anything to say Tom wasn’t certain. The man sat opposite him on the leather bench which lined the left side of the car—it could have fit six people comfortably instead of just two but what did wasted space matter when you were rich—watching him without trying to be obvious and failing at it. His eyebrows had drawn together and his eyes appeared closer to silver than grey in the low light but he couldn’t make out if it was an expression of disappointment or concern.

He didn’t know enough about this man to be able to read him, and that more than anything left Tom on edge. And what of his take on magic. What would he do when he learned he was a wizard, if he didn’t know already? Would he not be allowed to return to Hogwarts for his second year; awful as his House was, his magical education was paramount! Tom didn’t want to live his life as a Muggle, even as a rich Muggle.

“Have you eaten, Junior?”

He started, looking up quickly. His father’s eyes lingered on his thin arms, no doubt noticing how his clothing hung off of him. Tom shifted subconsciously and pulled his sleeve down further; he’d gained weight over the school year, when he could be bothered to suffer the presence of his House mates at the table, but no matter how much treacle tart and steak and kidney pie he ate it couldn’t undo a life of malnourishment that easily. “This morning.” Some toast. All that he could grab and run with quickly.

“This morning?” he repeated. “They didn’t feed on you on the train back to London?”

Another uncomfortable fidget. “I didn’t have the money to buy anything from the trolley.”

His father pulled down the partition. “Pull over at the nearest open eatery.”

The man made no protest and they soon slowed to a stop at a small but obviously upscale diner in Vintry. After bidding their driver wait for their return his father got out and led him through the front door; they were seated quickly on a private patio overlooking the brown waters of the River Thames.

The menu consisted of a laundry list of foods he’d never heard of, and no prices were listed. When the waitress came around his father ordered a pot of coffee for the both of them—Tom noticed that he seemed to recoil as if she were an Acromantula rather than a perfectly ordinary woman—and then looked to him expectantly. He listed the first dish his eyes fell on, not knowing what else to do.

He’d never been out for food before, and at Hogwarts you took what you wanted from what appeared.

His father didn’t speak again until the woman had returned with the coffee and Tom’s food.

“I’m sorry.” The twelve year old looked up from his meal, dark eyes prompting the man to elaborate
further. “I’m sorry that I didn’t take you from that awful place sooner, Junior. That I wasn’t there when you needed me. My greatest regret…I’ve failed you. I should have been there.”

“Then why weren’t you?” it came out harsh, abrasive as sand against an open wound, but the man didn’t so much as flinch. Clearly he’d been expecting such a reaction. Knew, on some level, that he deserved it. “Why weren’t you there, if that’s really true? Why did my mother die birthing me alone? Why did I have to grow up being treated like a monster just for being better than the rest of them?”

His magic began to twitch and tremble, like a stirring serpent, and the coffee pot rattled. Rather than shrink away like all the other Muggles had his father calmly reached out and steadied it. Maybe it was the shock of the lack of reaction, maybe it was the emotional exhaustion finally getting to him, but with that one simple gesture he’d managed to take all the wind from his anger’s sails.

He’d acted as if his outbursts, his magic, was normal. He wasn’t normal, damn it! He was special! _He was special!_ And it should have made him furious, but it didn’t. He doubted the man had even known what he was doing at the time, that it had been meant as anything more than a passing sign of bravery, yet he hadn’t seized on the opportunity to ridicule him or call him a freak. Silently and without words he’d afforded him acceptance, something that he hadn’t known was worth more to him than gold was to Goblins until that very moment, and it made Tom want to cry all over again.

He clenched his hands into fists and resisted the urge to crawl into the man’s lap again. No matter how he treated him he couldn’t be trusted. Not yet.

Tom couldn’t let his guard down if there was even the slightest chance he’d end up back in Wool’s.

“I’m going to be honest with you, Junior. I wanted to hate you. And I spent years trying, but I couldn’t. You shouldn’t have to pay for what your mother did.” His eyes had dimmed from lunar silver to the same dull color as the woolen coat Tom still had on and his expression now displayed clear signs of someone about to speak of a subject they’d much rather leave buried. “I’m sure that you know by now that you’re a Wizard, and perhaps that your mother was a Witch?”

Of course he knew he was a Wizard! And he’d managed to work out the fact that his mother was a Witch earlier that day, thank you very much! “I do.”

“We both came from the same town, a small town in the countryside called Little Hangleton. The same town that we’ll be going back to tonight. But where my family is highly affluent and lives in a grand manor your mother’s was very poor and lived three to a rotting one room hut; your grandfather, your uncle and your mother: Merope Gaunt.”

Gaunt? He was a Gaunt? The Gaunts were a Sacred Bloodline; a Noble and Ancient House descended directly from…the Sorting Hat’s reaction, his ability to speak to snakes, of course! It all made so much sense.

“I don’t know what led to them ending up in such a situation, if they were always poor or if they had a fortune once that was squandered, but…I do know that their otherness terrified me. Terrified most everyone in Little Hangleton. They were inbred to the point of barely looking human. All of them could speak to snakes, like you, and someone in the house had a nasty habit of nailing the poor creatures to the door.” His shudder was oddly delicate for a man. “Between that, Merope’s constant staring and the fact that your uncle attacked me once as I rode passed…I had good reason to fear their family. But things didn’t truly go bad until after your uncle and grandfather were arrested, though for what I can’t say.”

“For attacking you, most likely. Using magic in the presence of Muggles who don’t need to know about it-those being the parents of Muggle-borns or Half-bloods-violates the Statute of Secrecy. The
Ministry of Magic doesn’t take much seriously but the Statute is one thing that they do.”

Incompetence run amok if ever there was an example of such.

“…Yes, that’s right. You have…your own government.” His father cleared his throat and picked up his mug of coffee. It was plain that he was extremely uncomfortable with magic yet was trying not to let it show; it should have vindicated Tom of his earlier feelings yet somehow it made what he’d done all the more valuable. Parents were supposed to sacrifice for their children, after all. “After they were gone I felt a bit safer riding that trail as I thought your mother would have gone as well, moved on now that her family was no longer there, but I was wrong. She ambushed me one day while I was out. Offered me a glass of water. With the heat I didn’t think to object…that’s the last thing which I remember in any sort of clarity.”

He dropped his face into his hands for a moment before straightening up and resuming his story.

“When I came to it was month’s later and I was in London with her and she was begging me to stay. Telling me that she was with child. But she’d bewitched me already, so what was there to stop her from lying to me? I didn’t believe her and left. Returned home a broken man, the mockery of the town, yet I could never quite forget what she’d said.” He shook his head. “I tried to hate you, tried to convince myself that I wanted nothing to do with you, but I ended up loving you instead. The Doctors all said I’d never recover from the trauma, but the thought of her raising you pushed me to bounce back. Three years ago I started looking, determined to raise you ‘correctly’ away from magic but…I see that it’s too late for that now.”

Tom stiffened in his chair, his magic sparking again as he prepared for the split second decision of ‘attack’ or ‘bolt’.

“And that it would be cruel of me to try. I’ve already done enough to hurt you, Junior, and as much as I’d like to keep you out of her world I realized now that doing so would only ruin you. I want to be able to call myself your father; holding you back would strip me of that right.”

Just like this man was repeated by stripping him of any malice that he might have wanted to put as a wedge between them. Morgana! Merlin! Hecate! Hell, whoever the bloody hell else might be able to help him! He didn’t know how to navigate a situation where he was unable to scrape up the barest excuse to distance himself from another person.

Because as much as he wanted to cry out for that closeness, giving in to the desire was too dangerous.

“I have as many reasons to hate your people as you do to hate mine.” Even reminding himself repeatedly that this man was a Muggle, and that associating with him would likely only make his standing within Slytherin even worse, was an empty platitude at this point. “You just finished your first year of magical school, didn’t you? Maybe I could read the books you don’t need any more and we can learn about each other’s worlds together.”

This was either a very elaborate ruse or the man had lost his mind. Given the likelihood of long term exposure to a love potion his story had revealed, Tom was leaning toward the later option. “You need a mind healer!” He snapped, picking up his fork.

It would take a lot more than that to pull the wool over his eyes!
Why So Bloody Surprised?

It had taken a lot longer for the boy to close off from him than Tom Riddle Senior had expected, and he supposed that he would consider the fact a minor victory on his account. They’d left the diner at a quarter to seven and it was now well passed eleven at night. They were just under an hour out from Riddle Manor and Little Hangleton and Tom had fallen asleep some time before; he lay coiled up like a snake in the seat opposite him, the soft sound of his even breathing vaguely audible over the car’s engine. He seemed to have settled into a state of calm now that whatever had led him to tears had passed; he strongly suspected that it had something to do with something that had happened at his school but didn’t want to press him on the matter.

It was clear that, for the time being, his son didn’t have much intention of speaking with him beyond what he already had.

He squinted through the darkness of the country road on which they drove, taking in what he could see of his son’s face. He’d envisioned a handsome child, had hoped that he would take more after him than he would his mother, but his expectations had been more realistic. Generations of inbreeding would have to leave their mark somehow, wouldn’t they? Yet he’d been amazed to discover that, against all odds, the boy didn’t have so much as a Habsburg Jaw. He seemed to be high functioning and intelligent as well.

Only time would tell if the paranoia he displayed was a result of his bloodline or his circumstances, but even then his outlook over all was incredibly good. Not just from a genetic standpoint but a social one as well: non-magical law didn’t recognize ‘bewitchment’ in any general or specific terms as illegal, or even as an existing phenomenon, which meant that his marriage to Merope had been legitimate and made his son the Riddle Heir by rite. He was a bit peaky and scrawny now but if the wealth of similar features between them spoke to anything he’d cut quite a striking figure once puberty was through with him, and once he’d been schooled in proper manners the boy would become an easy fixture in the high society of both worlds.

If the Wizarding World had schools and law enforcement then it stood to reason that they weren’t all savages.

Tom Riddle Senior knew that he was a disappointment. A disgrace to the family name, after what had happened. And though his parents still doted on him, didn’t truly blame him, he knew that they’d never believed his tales of ‘magic’ were anything but a product of his advanced state of stress induced delusion but now they’d see. Now they’d see and now he’d be able to look back on his life when he was grey and dying and at least say he’d managed something of value in raising his son.

And his father, ever the businessman, would be more than pleased to have access to a new market through exclusive channels. Provided that the non-magical world had anything that the magical world would want or need, of course. If there was anyone who could shoe horn something workable it was him.

And maybe he’d be able to fashion Junior into the heir that he himself never really was; he’d taken more after his mother in that regard.

He knew that he was far from the best man who had ever walked the earth, knew that he wasn’t a saint and really did know that he had a lot to make up for, knew that his son would be a difficult creature to get through to but the effort would be worth it. Like conditioning a horse that had been badly abused to become comfortable in the presence of humans again it was simply a matter of taking the time. And contrary to popular belief he was capable enough of patience when he needed
to be.

They’d be a family soon enough. It might take months, it might take years, but it would happen! They’d celebrate birthdays as a family, and Christmas and Easter…and the Wizarding holidays too of course. They’d celebrate all of those…

If there were any.

There were…weren’t there?

Like…for example…the Summer Solstice?

He wasn’t stereotyping. Not at all! Just a little bit of left over insanity.

So maybe he wasn’t completely over what had happened.

Tom Riddle Senior was also very much aware that his parents didn’t really believe there was a proverbial ‘pot of gold’ at the end of his ‘I am looking for my child’ rainbow. And that the servants chattered like mid-summer cicadas. Said that he was ‘functioning’ but not ‘healed’ and never would be. That he was chasing a boy that didn’t even exist. That his parents were becoming more and more concerned for his mental state with every ‘doomed’ expedition that he set out on.

His mother would smile indulgently and tell him ‘I’m sure you’ll find him next time’ though there was a shadow of pity in her eyes. His father hadn’t spoken to him in just over two months. They discussed the possibility of having him committed when they thought he couldn’t hear. But his son was real! Junior was fast asleep in the car with him that very moment! The room that he had had set up for him three years ago-sparsely furnished to make room for customization in the future-would be filled at last and he’d be vindicated!

Of course he’d be lying if he were to attempt to claim that he wasn’t nervous about making good on the proposal he’d made his son about learning to coexist with magic, but it was just another culture right? All be it a separate, secretive, alien and potentially hostile one which was fully capable of doing considerable harm to people like him if they wanted to. But there were laws against that sort of thing, weren’t there?

Nothing could possibly go wrong, surely!

The car rolled to a stop at the mouth of the stone trail which led across the expansive lawn to the door of Riddle Manor. “We’ve arrived back at the Manor, Master.”

He nodded stiffly to the man, gathered his sleeping son into his arms and stepped out of the car. Junior’s head lolled against his chest and he nuzzled into his shirt, eyelids fluttering.

Queen’s mercy, he really is quite a bit smaller than he should be.

He shifted the boy in his arms as the car drove off towards the garage, careful not to wake him, and started towards the front door. Off in the distance, in the town below the hill atop which the manor sat, the church bells tolled the midnight hour. Their thunderous clamor was echoed by the softer voice of the grandfather clock which stood tick tick ticking away at the bottom of the grand staircase. The hallway’s wooden floors creaked beneath his step as he shouldered open the door of his son’s room, laying Junior in the bed and, after carefully removing his coat and shoes, tucking him in.

“Good night, Tom.” He softly closed the door behind him.

“Darling. You’re back.” Tom turned his head to see his mother standing halfway down the hallway,
the same half-uneasy smile he’d grown used to seeing once more plastered to her face. “Your father and I would like to speak with you in the den. If you’re up to it tonight.”

“Mother.”

“We just think that…maybe you should resume seeing Dr. Eralt. He helped you get over what that awful woman did, so maybe he can help you get over this obsession with finding a son that doesn’t actually…exist.”

He sighed and spoke again, slightly louder and a great deal more exasperated than before. “Mother!”

“I know that this is hard for you to except, darling, but-.”

“Mother, he’s asleep. Could we perhaps move this conversation a bit further away before we wake him?”

“Tom-!” It was quite obvious in that moment that his mother believed he’d detached from reality completely. As abruptly as he could without risking allowing the door to bang off the opposite wall and wake the boy he swung it open; a chink of light fell across his face and he flinched, burrowing deeper into the pillow with a disgruntled grumble. “Oh!” Shaking fingers, knotted with the first signs of arthritis, covered her mouth as she looked up at him with surprised dark eyes. “I…he looks just like…I have a grandson?”

Why so bloody surprised? He pulled the door closed again.

“What’s his name? And wherever did you find him?”

“Junior.” He said. “I found him in a disgrace of an orphanage in London called Wool’s. His mother died not long after he was born; he grew up there.”

“London? And an Orphanage! With all of the bombing going on? The poor dear!” Tom thought back to the destroyed building just up the street from Wool’s and frowned. “Is he alright?”

“No, but he will be once he settles in.” He said. “Don’t smother him, mother. He isn’t used to affection and I doubt he’d take well to being rushed.”

“Oh, I’m not going to ‘smother’ him but I will spoil him. As I’m sure you already have plans to.” She swatted at him gently. “We have twelve years to make up for after all.”

“I’m aware.”

“They probably didn’t celebrate Christmas properly, and birthdays at all. Do you know when his is?”

“The 31st of December, I believe. I’ll have to confirm with him.”

“Make sure that you do because the last thing that we want is to miss it!” She said. “We’ll be meeting him at breakfast?”

“Lunch.” He told her. “Let him sleep.”
The Serpent's Table

Tom awoke to a rhythmic thumping and hot breath on the back of his neck. Annoyed, still very much groggy and not quite certain where it was he’d ended up beyond the fact that it wasn’t his room in Wool’s he rolled over and froze. The door to the room he was lying in had been shouldered open by brute force and he now found himself face to face with the biggest dog that he had ever seen in his life!

The thing was the size of a show pony and, apparently, the source of both the hot breath and the thumping as its sapling –trunk tail repeatedly bumped up against the foot of his bed. Small, watery amber eyes stared at him over the top of a greying muzzle and hanging drool dewed jowls. He barely had the time to sit up before the behemoth’s tongue shot out, covering his face in a thick layer of foul smelling slime.

“Uck!” He recoiled from the animal in an effort to shield himself from the assault, but his hopes were thwarted when the beast leapt up onto his bed like it owned the place and all but pinned him down. “Get off me! Stop it! No!” Swatting at and pressing against the great lug did nothing and attempting to influence it went nowhere. His magic felt sluggish, drained of its normal reactive swiftness by the sense of unwelcome safety that had not been earned yet was somehow still there, and dog-zilla was a bit too thick headed to realize that his ‘affections’ were very much not appreciated.

So this was how he was going to die? Crushed to death by a smelly mutt, drowning in its drool? How ignoble. How mundane. He was supposed to change the world! Make the Wizarding World better! To make something awe inspiring of himself and prove the Purebloods wrong! This wasn’t even a memorable demise beyond, perhaps, the sheer stupidity of it all!

“Rogan, down boy!”

The mastiff ceased its efforts to crush him with its giant head in much the same manner as would an angry elephant and, with a wheezing huff, jumped off of him and the bed. Clothing badly rumpled and with a case of bed head made all the worse by the ‘organic hair gel’ practically dripping off of him Tom cautiously sat up. Eyeing the brindle buffoon for any signs of the old dog would accost him again. The servant in the doorway, a Muggle woman, tried and failed not to laugh.

“I’m sorry, young Master. Philip must have left your door slightly ajar when he brought in your things. I don’t know how else Rogan could have gotten in.” She reached down to grab the dog by his leather collar and began dragging him towards the door. “It’s just passed noon and lunch is about to be served; your father has requested your presence at the table. You may wish to wash up in the wash room in the hall.

As if he’d ever go toddling off covered head to toe in slobber! Tom huffed and set his attention on salvaging his shirt as much as he could from its advanced state of wrinkles. More than used to such behavior, apparently, the woman—with mutt in tow—bowed out and closed the door behind her.

Tom swung his legs off of the bed that he’d been lying in and looked around; the furniture—a dresser, wardrobe, and desk—were all well made from dark stained wood, the floor was carpeted and the sheets and walls were a neutral white. Impersonal and generic, as if waiting to be changed to suit his tastes.

So it had been real. Undeniably, now, it hadn’t been a dream. Being taken from the orphanage, told the truth about his parentage, carried from the car and tucked in by his father. All real.
Unable to stand being covered in slime for another second longer he hurried to the washroom and turned on the sink. Once certain that he’d done all he could for his state and aware that he needed to make an appearance in the dining room-if he could find it-Tom fixed himself up as much as possible and headed out.

The hallway on the other side of his bedroom was a long and gilded one, hung with countless family portraits-of the unmoving Muggle variety, of course-and adorned with the occasional antique shelf or table full of a collection of valuable trinkets. The handsome wooden floor was mostly covered by a somewhat dusty throw rug of ruby and gold which matched the chintz curtains hung astride the windows.

Gryffindor colors. Marvelous.

Tom spent maybe five minutes opening every door he came to before finally finding the dining room; a large and respectable room with a sturdy table in the center and a beautiful view of the grounds through the windows. His father sat in a high backed chair beside an older couple whom he assumed to be his grandparents; a severe looking man and a woman who appeared to be physically holding herself back from pouncing on him.

The devil hound was lying calmly at his father’s feet; he shot it a warning glare when it looked up with droopy eyes.

“I heard that Rogan woke you up before Adele could.” He said, flashing a smile which Tom himself had only once worn. “He can be a little bit too friendly at times.”

“Friendly.” He repeated sourly as he took the empty seat and cautiously edged it towards the table. “Right.”

The woman chuckled softly. The older man observed him in silence, as if trying to pick out some fault with him. Tom met his eye and stared back until the other was forced to look away.

“Did you sleep well, Junior?”

“I did.” If the man expected him to immediately start addressing him as ‘father’ he was very wrong. He’d be cordial, of course, until prompted otherwise but anything more than that would need to be earned. “Yesterday was a long day. It left me…exhausted in many ways.”

“I can imagine that it was; the Matron didn’t tell me much but the train ride back from your boarding school must have been a long one for you to have only arrived back in London at four in the evening. And then to have everything change for you.”

“Hogwarts is in Scotland. The train ride was about seven hours.”

His father’s face fell slightly at his monotone response and Tom felt a vindictive surge of glee.

“I remember my own schooling; your grandparents brought in private tutors for me so I never actually had to go anywhere. Sometimes I wish that I’d gone away to a boarding school like you; I feel like I missed a lot.”

“You didn’t.” Not in his experience, at least.

“But a magical boarding school. It must really be something.”
“That’s quite enough, Tom!” It was the first time that he’d heard his grandfather speak. His tone was sharp, like his eyes, and if he were asked he’d have to admit that he’d jumped slightly. “It’s tragic enough that that woman left you disturbed. You don’t need to go filling his head with nonsense as well!”

Nonsense? Magic wasn’t nonsense! Magic was incredible! It was everything to Tom and something that this Muggle would never understand! How dare he say such a thing!

Apparently his father was thinking along much the same lines if his glare was anything to go by. “It isn’t ‘nonsense’, father, and with Junior’s help I’ll prove as much.” Normally Tom wouldn’t have jumped to answer the pleading look that man shot him but given that this would be to his own benefit as well-magic denial would only piss him off needlessly in the long run—he’d make an exception just this once. “The Matron said that you could speak to snakes. Like your mother.”

“Tom-.”

“They’d find me. At the Orphanage. On trips. Whisper things.” He said. “Even in the magical world it’s rare; was a trait held by one of the founders of my school, who I’m related to on mother’s side. They fear it because they believe it’s a sign of Dark Magic.”

A little bit of fear never did him anything but good and the mix of relief and exasperation on his father’s face was something that he couldn’t help but find incredibly amusing. The man cleared his throat and shook his head. “Well, I had the grounds keeper capture this,” he lifted a badly tarnished bird cage and set it on the table; inside was a furiously hissing green snake, “for you to use to demonstrate.”

“I’ll kill you! Every single one of you! And fat fingers, too! All of you bi-peds responsible for putting me in this thing are going to die!”

The serpent was about the length of his arm and had rounded scales in a beautiful shade of acid green. She reminded him in many ways of Shiva, the first snake he’d ever spoken to.

Tom tried not to let himself think of what had happened to his first friend.

“You’re not venomous.” He propped his chin up on his hand and watched the snake spin around in surprise. “And you’re not going to kill anyone, not even ‘fat fingers’.” Tom assumed that meant the grounds keeper. “Even if you were venomous I couldn’t let you hurt them. I don’t know what I’m going to do with them yet.”

“Speaker!” She squawked, immediately deflating from her puffed up stance and shifting closer to get a better look at him. “You don’t look like the other ones did. And what are you doing in a place like this with these magicless monkeys?” Her tongue flicked out, forked and black. “You’re not going to nail me to a door are you?”

“No, I’m not going to nail you to a door.” Entirely disregarding his audience, he opened the door of the cage and held out his hand. “I’ll take you back out into the garden after lunch; my father was attempting to prove a point.”

“What point would that be?”

“That he’s not crazy.” Her cool scales settled calmly around his neck. “That I really am a Wizard.” Tom switched back to English and reported “she says your groundskeeper has fat fingers,” before reaching for an apple.

His father hadn’t done a damn thing and looked a great deal more smug than Tom thought he really
should. He clearly thought he’d proved something with that little display.

Apparently his grandfather was quite a good-deal harder headed then that. “Anyone can tame an animal, Tom. You have a way with horses. That isn’t magic.”

Snakes weren’t horses, thank you very much. Clearly he’d rather write off the hissing rasps which he knew Parseltongue sounded like to non-speakers as a mix of ‘childish fantasy’ and ‘a want to please his long lost father’.

He’d need something more overt. Perhaps something decried as impossible outside an act of a higher power, either good or evil. The cup of water sitting in front of the man afforded him the perfect opportunity.

Tom had called on his magic a thousand times before, even back before Hogwarts, and it had always sprang to his fingertips without pause. This time he sensed a lethargy to it. Like a cat stretching before jumping to its feet. Again that damned unearned feeling of safety gnawed at him; his subconscious self, his magic, had fully disembarked from the SS Suspicion Is Necessary while his conscious self had been unaware and it would take quite a bit of work to drag it back on board but he’d worry over that matter later.

What mattered in that moment was that his core had, eventually, responded as normal and now sat poised to obey whatever command he might give it. Magic fizzing at his fingertips in a way a wand could never hope to mimic.

Wine. He recalled, distinctly, a long winded lecture from his least favorite Professor discussing the limits of magic at some point in the middle of the year. The laws. The rules which weren’t supposed to be able to be broken outside of extreme alchemical exceptions such as the Philosopher’s Stone. Transfiguring something like a cat into a tea cozy or a needle into a match was possible. Simply done. But Transfiguring a stone into edible bread, or in this case Transfiguring water into wine, wasn’t supposed to be.

But the twinkle eyed bastard was wrong. Tom knew as much because he’d done it before. It was difficult, yes. Extremely so. But not impossible.

Not for him.

Wine! Dark red, almost purple in color. Scent sweet and sharp with grapes and alcohol. Wine! Tom stared at the cup, willing the liquid beyond the glass to change. To cloud. To color. And it did. Slowly, at first-deep violet suffusing in odd patterns like a drop of blood in a pool-and then faster. Faster until the color was so dark that it was nearly black and it felt as if he was about to have an aneurism.

His magic snapped back like a stressed rubber band and Tom slumped in his chair, the table rattling at he caught himself against the edge.

“Junior!”

He flinched away when his father moved to help him upright, glaring. “I don’t need your help!”

The man’s response was drowned out by his parent’s exclamations of shock over what he’d done, but he didn’t stick around to listen to them. His legs were wobbling, knees slightly unsteady, as he bolted through the door with the intent of escaping into the garden.

“Speaker!” He ignored the serpent around his shoulders, taking the stairs two at a time and charging out the back door. Tom finally stopped under a large oak tree and collapsed against the trunk, trying
to catch his breath and make himself stop shaking.

He didn’t need the man’s help, had done perfectly bloody fine without it for twelve years and would continue to do so now. Stupid Muggles with their stupid denial and their stupid reactions of surprise! He hoped that knowing that he wasn’t just a little boy with a hand of parlor tricks was frightening on some degree. He was better than they were. They ought to know as much!

“That was reckless of you speaker.” The snake slithered down his chest and into his lap. “You are very powerful but you’re still young and your core is small. Doing things like that will only hurt you in the long run.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“So you say.” She replied with the snake equivalent of a put upon sigh. “Your nest is dysfunctional. I would like you to take me back to mine now.”

Tom nodded, her body coiling around his wrist. “I will. Just let me rest a while first.”

He sat under that tree for another half hour before he felt up to moving again, then pushed himself onto his feet. The serpent gave him directions to a hole burrowed beneath a stand of roses and he watched her slither off into the dark. Then he made his way back inside with the intent to organize his things in lack of anything else to do.

He heard voices from behind the door of the library as he passed and paused to listen at the crack.

“-might be dangerous after the Matron brought up what he’d been driven to in the past. No, before that. Since I first learned about him, realized the likelihood that he would be a Wizard and have magic like his mother but…I don’t care. I won’t abandon Junior again; never, never!” His father’s pacing shadow flickered across the doorway. “He could kill me. I don’t care; he’s my son!”

“Darling.”

“If you would prefer it that I move out, that he not be here, I will. I understand.”

“Unnerving as what he can do is, we aren’t going to ask you to move out, Tom. You’re family. So is he. Your mother and I just want to make sure you’re certain.”

“Completely. This isn’t something I’m going to run away from.”

*What sentimental drivel!* Tom thought as he resumed making his way back to his room. He couldn’t help but wonder which would last longer: his father’s will, or his sanity.
“Woof!”

The great beast had beaten him back to his bedroom and was now treating his bed like its own luxury doggy pillow. Tom wasn’t entirely too bothered by this since it kept the brute away from him.

“Woof!” And then again “Woof!” followed by the *Thump! Thump! Thump!* of its tail.

Tom pushed the corner of his tattered second hand copy of *The Standard Book of Spells: Year 1* into a more symmetrical alignment with the edge of the shelf then turned to face the witless giant. “Would you stop that? The constant barking is annoying!”

Rogan stopped panting and his ears perked up. For a moment he thought that the dog might obey him, but then “brrruff!” and the tail thumping resumed alongside the creaking of springs.

The very frustrated twelve year old wizard rubbed the bridge of his nose and tromped back to his open trunk, dragging out a handful of clothing—both Muggle and Magical and all second hand, though he’d cared for them well as he did with all his things—and heading over to the beautiful wardrobe in the corner of the room. The wood was a deep red brown in color, the grain forming an intricate swirl of black, and polished to a shine. The hinges sighed when he opened the door but they didn’t shriek like the ones at Wool’s had. There was a full length mirror on the inside of the door which reflected his image back at him.

Scrawny. A bit short for his age. Still wearing the same rumpled white button down, woolen shorts and long socks and loafers which he’d exchanged for his school robes as the Hogwarts Express had pulled into the station. His skin was an unhealthy shade of white and his knees were nubby, legs thin and rather like those of the birds he’d often seen on the streets of London. Even still, he was almost painfully aware of the shadows of his father in his face.

He leaned closer to the mirror. Dark eyes squinting over shadowed rims. Seeking anything in his features that did *not* belong to Tom Riddle Senior. Surely there must have been something more than the color of his eyes. He needed to find it. Didn’t want to just be a carbon copy of the Muggle.

He was his own person. Would become great on his own. Didn’t need anyone.

His strong jaw, wide brow and sharp nose were undeniably his father’s but his lips were fuller and darker in color—more pink than pale—his eyes were slightly more upturned and deeper set and his neck was longer and more slender.

Not to mention the persistent, annoying little cow lick. That one rebellious little curl which, against all laws of physics and magic, refused to be budged from its place hung dead center of his forehead. Right between his eyes.

Already more than aware that the effort was one doomed to failure, Tom reached up to push the lock of hair back from his brow. The moment he released it, it flopped back into place.

He let out an annoyed puff of breath and began hanging his clothing on the metal hangers inside the wardrobe.

A soft knock came on the door to his room and he looked up to find his father standing in the doorway, one shoulder leaned against the doorway, one shoulder leaned against the doorframe in a clear effort to put up an image of the man comfortable both within his own skin and the situation but
his thoughts scattered like nervous deer behind his eyes. He was dressed well, as usual, and a clearly old but well-kept book was held under his arm.

“You looked like you pushed yourself a little bit too far earlier. Are you alright?”

Tom grumbled a noncommittal reply. He still felt a bit weak and it would probably be best that he didn’t use his magic again for the rest of the day but he didn’t need to admit as much to the man and make him think he needed to hover.

The man ran a hand through his hair, a nervous tick that Tom was sure to catalogue for later reference.

“I’m sorry about him. Your Grandfather, he’s…rather scientifically minded. I was imprudent, didn’t think that using magic could hurt you if you pushed yourself too far-.”

“I’m fine!” He snapped, turning his back on him and returning to his trunk. There was nothing left inside it now but for a couple of broken quills but it gave him an excuse to pretend to be busy.

His outburst kept Tom Senior quiet for a while. The floor creaked as his weight shifted. “May I come in?”

Tom grunted in response; it was an inelegant gesture but at this point he didn’t really care. He heard his footsteps moving across the floor but didn’t turn to look.

“I meant what I said, Junior. About wanting to bridge the gap between our worlds. To learn what I need to, more than that, to be there.” He tilted his head enough to glare; his father was holding out a book on Natural History towards him in much the same way that a child would a trinket when hoping for praise. “This is a fairly interesting place to-.”

“I’ve no interest in ‘bridging the gap’.” He turned away again. “I don’t care what you’re interested in. I don’t want to be a part of your world. And I don’t need you.”

Tom could tell himself that all he wanted but the pain he’d felt for almost twelve years, the hole in his heart which wanted to heal-and was now desperately clawing at the offered chance to do so-said otherwise.

There was a quiet thud as the man softly set the book atop his shelf; Tom didn’t want the bloody thing there but wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of even negative acknowledgement. Another sigh of hinges as he looked into the wardrobe at Tom’s clothes, and then the click of claws as the dog jumped off the bed.

“You need new clothes, don’t you? And we ought to make your surroundings a bit more personal, don’t you think? It doesn’t really feel like a ‘room’.”

Of course it ‘felt like a room’! A room felt like a room because that was exactly what a room, regardless of its function, was! A room! That was the most absurd thing he’d ever heard!

“Why don’t we go into town? Get some paint and sheets in whatever colors that you’d like. And get you fitted for some new clothes.”

He desperately needed clothes-Tom hated the uniform which Wool’s had forced him to wear and didn’t currently have anything that he could change into-and had to admit that he was curious about Little Hangleton. From what he’d seen of it through the windows it was a small town, much like Hogsmead which they passed through to get to and from the Hogwarts Express and students in their third year and up were allowed to visit on day trips. Obviously it wouldn’t be anywhere near as
impressive as Hogsmead, but still…

“Clothing would be appreciated.” He closed his trunk carefully and turned to face the man. “When will we be leaving?”

“Immediately if you’re ready, Junior.”

“I am.”

It seemed like the man was beginning to become used to his short, sharp answers. They didn’t leave him quite so stricken anymore.

It was a shame.

His father led him down the stairs and out around the corner of the house towards the garage as the Rolls Royce was pulled out onto the driveway. Heat rose in shivering waves from the pavement. A dry wind rattled its way through the trees, carrying with it the smell of green leaves sunbaked earth and horses; Tom turned his head to look down the eastern slope of the hill and saw a stable and pasture at the bottom.

The older man seemed to have noticed the direction of his stare because he said “horses are a passion of mine. I can teach you to ride, if you’d like?”

Tom didn’t extend the offer the slightest notice and it fell like a stone between them. They entered from and sat on opposite sides of the car and he rolled down the window on his side, sticking his head out to find some relief from the heat as they rolled slowly down the hill. He could feel the man’s eyes on his back but the message that no small talk would be engaged with seemed to have been made clear as he didn’t try to speak again until they’d driven into the town.

“It isn’t too impressive, especially compared to London, but almost ninety percent of it will be yours one day.” Little Hangleton truly was small, nestled between the hill on which Riddle Manor sat and another steeper one across the way; the most notable features, to him, were a one steeple church and the plainly visible graveyard sprawled behind it. The houses were nothing impressive and four of them likely could have fit comfortably within the Manor while still leaving ample room to move about. “The Riddle line is an old one, dating back to around the 1500s; there were numerous branches once but most of them, including the main branch, have since died off. In the past our money came from mercantile enterprises but the majority of our modern fortune comes from your grandfather’s business ventures in stock and technology. We’ve owned most of this town for generations and for this, among many other reasons, the people who live here…aren’t fond of us.”

The citizens of Little Hangleton didn’t appear to be the most well off of people and he doubted that being confronted constantly with the looming specter of wealth would serve to warm their hearts towards the Riddle name. That combined with the way the family members no doubt treated them, judging from the way in which they conducted business with their servants, meant that Tom could understand why.

It would have rubbed him wrong as well.

“But what others might have to say about us is of no consequence; pay them no mind, Junior. The opinion of the world means nothing when one has enough pride in themselves.”

I don’t need to be lectured about this!

The car finally rolled to a stop outside of a clothing store. Across the way was a squat and rickety old pub called The Hanged Man; the people who milled outside all stopped what they were doing to
“Look there. One of the Riddles, come down from their ‘Olympus’ up on the hill.”

“It’s him; the mad one. Tried to cover his insanity by saying he was taken in by that trash bint, he did.”

“Who’s the child?”

“Dunno. Don’t care. A Riddle brat is a Riddle brat.”

“He’s hers: has to be. Is about the same age.”

“Taken in’ indeed.”

“Don’t look, Junior.” Like he had at the orphanage his father laid a hand on his shoulder and steered him toward the store. “It isn’t worth it.”

After over a decade at Wool’s and a year in Slytherin House Tom was well used to having vitriol lobbed at him. At pretending to let it roll off his shoulders while bleeding inside. He’d thought that he’d known what pride was. What it meant to hold his head high and persevere. But he’d never fully been able to shrug it off completely.

Not like his father was.

For him there’d always been some give away that it had hurt. Some scent of blood for the predators to prey upon. Be it a slight dip of his chin or a curl of his shoulders or a curve in his back. Something. But Tom Riddle Senior held his head high and his shoulders back and he couldn’t help but envy the man in that moment.

A Muggle with only the vaguest sense of magic, who still in many ways feared it, and yet he the Heir of Slytherin wanted to be him for even a fleeting second. For his ability to project self-assurity against all odds if nothing else.

Tom resisted the urge to slap himself—effective as it might have been to return him to his good senses it was a plebian gesture very much below him—and ducked through the entrance of the store. The little bell hung over the door tinkled a merry greeting which seemed rather out of place and a short, rotund man wielding a measuring tape all but rolled out of a back room.

He seemed torn between a deep dislike for his family and glee over being able to charge an exorbitant price as his father informed him of their business and arranged for a full wardrobe to be delivered as soon as possible. Tom was then instructed to select three sets of clothing from what had already been made in the meantime.

Tom chose a number of neutral colors along with Slytherin green and silver. His father didn’t comment. He wouldn’t have listened to him anyway. The grumbling whispers followed them like ghosts all the way back out of town.

“‘Well Junior,’” his father said as the car rolled once more to a stop, “are you ready to decorate your room?”
‘Ever seen an Aristocrat with a paintbrush trying to balance on a stool?’ should have been the punch line of a joke, not a question which Tom Riddle Senior should have ever been able to answer with “yes, in a mirror.” Apparently his son was thinking something along the same lines if the look that he was giving him was any indication.

“Come on, Junior,” it wasn’t quite on the danger level of standing on a wheeled chair but the stool was still far from stable,” grab a paint brush.”

The boy looked at the white wall and then at the brush resting beside the open can of emerald paint in much the same way as one would look at an unnamed substance smeared across the bottom of their shoe. “Shouldn’t this be something that a servant would do?”

“Normally it would be but this is something that you and I can do together; it doesn’t take any special skill to paint a wall.” His son didn’t look anything close to thrilled at the prospect of his proposed ‘bonding experience’. “Working together this should only take a couple of hours. Come on.”

The bed had already been redressed in the new bed clothes-silver sheets and pillow cases and an emerald comforter with a patterning similar to the scales of a snake. The smell of paint was sharp and chemical. A breeze from the open window rustled the pages of the books on his son’s shelf. The door of the room had been firmly shut to prevent Rogan from ruining the new bedspread with his fur or spilling the paint.

Junior sighed heavily and picked it up, dipping the brush into the paint and stepping up to the wall.

“I’ll get the higher points on the walls; I don’t want you to get hurt by falling off this stool or others like it.” He said. “Have you ever painted anything before?”

From the look of Wool’s no one had come within shooting distance of the place with a bucket of paint since it had been built but they could have had some…magical house design class or something at Hogwarts for all that he knew and he knew better than to risk repeating information of which Junior was already aware. Being a Riddle himself, he knew exactly how that would go.

“No.”

“Well, it’s not a difficult process.” He carefully dragged the brush in his hand along the line of the crown molding. “I’ve never painted a room before but I like to run the stables myself and that includes touching up on paint and repairs as well. Always paint in the same direction so it doesn’t streak and make sure that the coloring is thick; you don’t want to be able to see through to the white underneath.”

A disinterested sound was the only reply that he received but, when he looked down from his precarious perch, he could see that Junior was meticulously guiding the brush in a series of precise strokes. He wasn’t getting anywhere; at least so far as he could tell, but he’d keep trying. He wouldn’t give up on getting through to his son until the boy reached legal majority and ran away screaming. Even still, he couldn’t help the small sad smile which tugged at his lips.

Junior was real. And he was home. And he wouldn’t be going anywhere in any permanent capacity any time soon. Having him go away back to Hogwarts would be hard for him, though at this rate Tom had the distinct feeling that it would be a relief on Junior’s part.

His son must have felt his lingering stare because he looked up from what he was doing; Junior’s
face scrunched adorably into what was likely meant to be an expression of annoyance. “Your brush is dripping.” He half-whined; it was the most inflection he’d heard from him in quite a while. “You’re going to get paint on my carpet!”

He turned back to the wall and Tom Senior did the same, narrowly avoiding losing his balance on the stool.

“This is going to be quite the chore if it’s done in silence.” He said after another twenty minutes had passed. “Tell me a bit about yourself. Maybe what you want to do after school: What kind of jobs are there in the Wizarding world?”

His son went to dip his brush back into the can-his paint job thus far had been delicate and apt-and for a moment Tom didn’t think that he was going to answer. But then he said “I’m going to conquer death and be the greatest wizard that ever lived.” Blue eyes, as dark and dangerous as the north sky, narrowed as the brush in his hand glided along the outer frame of the door. “I’m going to become better, more powerful, than all of them and prove them all wrong! Prove to them that just because I have your dirty blood it doesn’t make me any less!”

Dirty blood?

A hot, bright evening; the sun’s red rays blinding as it began to dip below the horizon. The horse beneath him and Cecilia beside him, her golden hair shimmering as it fell about her shoulders. That damned shack with the snake, dead and dried, swinging from the door; its withered tail bouncing a clattering scratch against the dried wood. Morfin as he came barreling out with a butcher’s knife in one hand and a stick-a wand-in the other. The jet of light that had come flying at him. The hives. “Not so pretty now are you, you dirty Muggle!”

Junior, curled up and crying on the orphanage’s rusted cot.

Has he been mistreated because of me? Because they recognized Riddle as a non-Magical-a Muggle-name? What mental state had being ostracized for all his life left his son in? “How do you plan to go about that, Junior? Getting into politics and taking over the ‘Ministry of Magic’?”

“I’m going to be Britain’s first magical monarch since before the 1600s! I’m going to overturn the Statute of Secrecy and put Wizards and Witches back where they belong: the top of society!” He said fiercely. “We’ve had to hide for far too long already, but that will all be over soon! Once I’m King, Britain will set the example for the entire world and the terror left over from the Witch Trials will finally end!”

So Junior had aspirations of world domination? Not entirely unusual for their family line, but he was the first with the potential to actually be capable of such a thing.

Hopefully he’d grow out of it.

“Why would you want to conquer death?”

“Because death is a pathetic human weakness! A horrible flaw and a cosmic joke!” He spat. “Unnecessary!”

“Are you certain that death is unnecessary?” Tom could feel the mixture of disbelief at such a seemingly ridiculous question and anger at being questioned at all rolling off his son in waves. “No one wants to die, Junior, but death is natural. And where would we be without it?”

“You mean aside from alive?”
“Is it not a human trait-or human flaw-to put things off? To say ‘I’ll do it tomorrow’ until whatever time limit they’re working under at the time no longer allows them to do so.” He said. “And what is death if not the greatest time limit of all? Do you really expect to still get things done if you ever were to become immortal?”

“Of course I’d still get things done! I’m the Heir to the founder of the House of Ambition! Defined by getting things done!” But the little pout that Junior couldn’t quite stop himself from making told him all that he really needed to know.

His son refused to speak to him further for the remainder of the time that it took to paint his room and buried himself in a copy of what he guessed was the Wizarding newspaper dated about a month before the moment they finished; the largest headline proclaimed Grindlewald moves forward under cover of chaos caused by Muggle Third Reich and all of the pictures were moving as if small television screens had been installed into the paper. When one of the occupants of said pictures caught his stare and waved Tom quickly vacated the room.

He found his parents just sitting down to tea in the den.

“You’ve finished painting little Tommy’s room?” he could hear the smile in his mother’s voice as she eyed the splattering of deep green along his hands and on the cuff of his sleeve. “Will he be coming to tea?”

He shook his head, dropping into an armchair and accepting the cup she handed him. “No, I think Junior has met his limit for human interaction for the day.” He said. “He’s reading an old copy of the Wizarding paper; the Daily Prophet, I think it was called.”

“Something seems to be bothering you, Tom.” His father said. “What is it?”

“A simple concern.” He told them, staring into the amber liquid in his cup as it wobbled gently back and forth. “He said something that led me to a bit of concern that he may have been treated badly while at his school on account of having ‘dirty blood’.”

“Having non-magical relatives to them is like having common relatives to us, then? Hrmph!”

“Do you think he might need to speak with someone, Darling?”

“I think that taking him to Dr. Eralt or anyone else wouldn’t turn out well for a number of reasons.” He said. “Junior just needs time. All that we can do is give him that.”
“The smelly fur beast is eating dirt, speaker.”

“Brainless creatures. And to think that sort of animal is what the magicless bi-peds prefer to keep their company.”

“Muggles value fur and cuteness over intelligence and nobility.” Tom scratched in another line of his infuriating Transfiguration homework. Only about a third of the information that he needed was actually contained in the first year copy of the text book, much to his annoyance. Black ink had smeared the pads of his fingers despite his best efforts, leaving prints along the body of the fraying grey quill. “One of their many glaring faults.”

June had since transitioned into August and little change had occurred in his relationship with his father despite great effort on both their parts: Tom Senior’s to prove himself and Tom’s to resist his doing so. Despite the mid-summer heat the young Wizard found the shade offered by the elaborate gardens behind the manor to be quite pleasant and had been out there, attempting to make a dent in his summer assignments, ever since breakfast had concluded. Two snakes-the green female that he’d first met when ‘fat fingers’ had caged her and since learned was named Monai and a brown male named Zahhak-were coiled up to the left and right of his ink, parchment and open text book and Rogan, covered in mud and petals, lay a few yards away eating a hole in a bed of Petunias.

“I really, really hate Albus Dumbledore!” He finally hissed, tossing the quill down in disgust and defeat. “Who the bloody hell assigns summer homework where the majority of it comes from a book that no one will have until the supply list comes and we get around to shopping in Diagon Alley, during the last few weeks of break? When does he want us to do this, on the bloody train?”

“Bi-ped problems, speaker.” Zahhak said. “You’re a Wizard, aren’t you? Just turn yourself into one of us. You’ll never have to concern yourself with such things again.”

“Don’t listen to him. Zahhak is an idiot.”

“I am not an idiot!”

“Clearly you are because if you weren’t then you’d never have suggested something so ridiculous!”

“There are too many things that I want to change in this word to just turn myself into a snake.” The metal lid of the ink well clicked closed. He wiped the writing point of the quill clean on the grass, rolled up the partially completed parchment and flipped A Beginner’s Guide to Transfiguration closed. “And a self-entitled Professor and his stupid little assignments, no matter how petty or bothersome, isn’t enough to tempt me away from that. Let the ‘great’ Albus Dumbledore do as he wishes while he can; every slight against me will be paid back tenfold one day.”

“You’ve not only a forked tongue, but venom in your teeth speaker.” Monai uncoiled herself and slithered up his arm. “It’s been a long time since there’s been a young Basilisk loose in Britain. You’ll go far and do much with an attitude like that.”

“I’m aware.” He gently stroked his fingers down her scaly back. “And I have every intention of doing so. Of realizing the dream that my greatest ancestor is known for in a way which he never could. By the next century, Britain will be a magical empire under the banner of the snake.”

“And what of the magicless ones?” Zahhak coiled himself tighter in a puddle of dappled sunlight.
“Like your father, the horse man?”

“What of them?”

If either serpent planned to reply they never got the chance; their window of opportunity to do so was shattered when a man that Tom had never seen before came tearing around the corner of a hedgerow.

“Are you just going to let that damned mutt destroy my garden!”

His garden? This was his family’s manor, thank you not that of this strange middle aged lune who was now tromping towards them. He looked a great deal older than he likely was, his face wrinkled and beaten hard with wind and sun and his back hunched as if by the weight of many years. He walked with a stiff limp and the assistance of a cane and wore a tweed meat-pie hat atop his grey hair, the strands of which seemed to be mid-way through making a determined retreat from his brow.

He didn’t really think that he was in any danger but the sight of the raised cane was still enough to make his magic spark and coil. Zahhak had unwound himself and vanished back into the lush greenery. Rogan, apparently aware of the trouble he was in, leapt from the flower bed and went tearing off towards the safety of the manor. Some small part of Tom was apt to follow, but he stamped it down with a sharp ferocity.

Monai hissed furiously, showing the black lining of her mouth and the sharp fangs inside. “Fat fingers!”

So this was the grounds keeper. Tom blinked calmly up at the furious man from behind his long, dark lashes as he gathered up his things.

“I apologize, sir, but father’s dog is twice my size and as likely to obey my demands as is a cinder block. I’m no more able than you to keep him from ruining things.” He scratched beneath the green snake’s chin to quiet her. “I’d offer to repair it but I’m only just going into my second year. We haven’t learned an applicable spell.”

He man huffed at him, annoyed, eyeing the young Riddle and the snake on his arm as he rose to his feet. Well used to such scrutiny, Tom blinked innocently back at him.

“So you’re the snake boy.” He finally grunted, the squint persisting as he leaned heavy on his cane. Looking him up and down in much the same way as his grandfather had when he’d first gotten to the manor. As if measuring him. Searching for some fault. It reminded him far too much of both Mrs. Cole and Dumbledore and Tom frowned, tightening his grip on his things. “Certainly look like a Riddle, don’t you? Not just a product of Tom’s delusion, then.”

“Not a product of delusion, no.” He said tartly. “I’m very real. Now, are you going to get around to replanting the Petunias that the sodding dog dug up so he could eat the dirt that they were buried in? Because I’ll happily leave you to it if you are.”

“Can be done later.” He said, shifting his grip and turning around. “Come on, boy. It’s not often old Frank has company for tea.” The grounds keeper began thumping away on his bandied cane and bad leg.

“Will you be following him, speaker?”

Tom debated simply heading off in the opposite direction and going back to the manor but decided against it with a sigh. “It isn’t worth the trouble not to.” He said. “Would you like me to leave you in the garden or do you wish to accompany me?”
“If it doesn’t matter to you either way, speaker, I’d prefer to remain here. It’s about the time that I should be hunting again.”

“Good luck, then.” Tom let her down in the grass before hurrying after the older man.

He was led to a small, squared off cottage set onto the far edge of the gardens; from this angle, individual head stones could be picked out from the graveyard in the distance by size and shape with a fair amount of ease. Inside was Spartan and dim and spoke to a man who appreciated neither people nor loud noises: it was dingy and poorly lit and everything that could be knocked off of shelves or bumped into had been in some way bolted down.

It was, to say the least, quite odd.

“Sit, boy.” He growled, hanging a kettle over the fire place.

“My name,” he hissed, perching on a rickety seat, “is Tom.”

“You and almost every other man on the Riddle Tree. There are a lot of ‘Tom’s.”

He sneered, fingers fidgeting against the lip of the wood. “I’m aware.”

The grounds keeper just grunted at him, prodding the fire with the foot of his cane.

“We all thought that he’d gone mad, your father.” He poured tea from the kettle into a pair of dirty mugs, his shaking hands spilling some over onto the table. Tom had no intention of drinking, or even touching, the mug intended for him. “First running off, eloping with that woman from that strange family—your mother—then coming back months later and claiming magic and bewitchment and other such things. And a son, a child: you. You were all that he could focus on: he was like a man obsessed, possessed. All the fancy professionals his parents had brought in said he’d never recover, but he did. For you. And here you are, and you’re actually a wizard.”

He motioned flippantly at the Transfiguration book Tom still held; he pulled it closer protectively.

“He’s been making a fool of himself ever since you got here. More so than normal.”

Making a fool of himself indeed; that was a light description of it in Tom’s opinion. But what did this man, the grounds keeper, know about anything? He was just an outsider looking in.

“Oh, Young Master, there you are! Your father is looking for you.” The same woman who had first saved him from Rogan had appeared in the doorway of the hut, looking flustered as she smoothed down her skirt. “Frank, what are you doing?”

“A man can’t have a spot of tea, Adele?”

“You’re plenty welcome to ‘have a spot of tea’ all you wish, but holding the Young Master captive is going too far!”

As if a Muggle could ever hold me captive. Tom snorted to himself and slid off the chair in which he’d been sitting. Just to prove how not captive he was he walked out the door without sparing either of them another word.

He found his father and grandfather both standing on the front porch, the car idling on the drive just beyond.

“Ah, Junior, there you are.” The man pulled him into a one arm hug which died on Tom’s end when
no move to reciprocate was made. “Where have you been? The servants have been running ragged looking for you for almost half an hour.”

“I was out in the garden working on my summer assignments.” He said. “You were looking for me?”

“I was. Your grandfather must see to a business deal of sorts in London and has asked that I accompany him to help. We won’t be returning until early tomorrow morning at the soonest and I wanted to make sure you were aware.” He said. “Behave for your grandmother.”

“I will.” As if he ever ‘misbehaved’ without provocation.

The man released him with a nod and followed his grandfather off the steps and towards the car. Tom took a few steps after him, pausing on the top of the steps down from the porch and watching as the car pulled away. Unable to explain the clenching feeling in his stomach which the prospect of his father’s departure left behind.

“There the horse man and his father go, back towards the grey place where fire falls from the sky.” Zahhak coiled his way up the supporting pillar beside him. “You’re afraid, speaker. Afraid of being abandoned again. Afraid of allowing yourself to become attached. Afraid of acknowledging the fact that you already have.” His forked tongue flicked out to taste the hot air. “But what do I know, really? I’m just a garden snake.”

As the car disappeared from his sight completely, Tom turned on his heel and fled back into the manor.
Nightmares

The baleful wailing of the air raid sirens echoed through the city's darkened streets, the sky behind the towering buildings stained red with the sunset. People surrounded him on all sides, running towards and away from him and jostling his small body left and right seemingly without a care. The sharp staccato of hurried footsteps forming a syncopated rhythm of panic beneath the steady rise and fall of the unmistakable sound. The unmistakable warning. Tom had heard it many times before, ringing loudly in the streets as the wards of Wool's had traveled to safety and then dimly through the thick concrete walls of the buried bunker they'd piled inside. The cry which carried the promise of impending death. Of something which even the strongest magic couldn’t protect him from.

German bombs.

His heart was racing as it leapt into his throat, clogging his airway with its galloping palpitation and making it nearly impossible to breathe. Fear wrapping itself around his body like a serpent deaf to his commands, tying a noose of Devil’s Snare around his neck. Tasting of iron and sickly sweet rot, like death.

How had he gotten here? Hadn’t he just been in Little Hangleton? In Riddle Manor, out in the countryside where his father had assured him the Focke-wulf 190s and Messenschmitt 109s wouldn’t stray. So how had he gotten all the way back to London? And his father…shouldn’t he be there?

Where was he?

Tom felt cold and very small, lost amidst a forest of grey buildings and running people and red sky. His father. Where was his father? He wouldn’t have abandoned him out there on the street to die, would he?

“Father?” Tom looked around with urgency, hoping to catch sight of the man or hear his voice calling out to him through the crowd. Finding only a sea of dark hair and dour clothes and unfamiliar faces. “Father!” Where was he? Where? Hadn’t he promised to be there for him? So where was he now? When he really needed him? When he was in danger? When he was scared? “Fa-!”

Someone slammed into him from behind, knocking Tom off his feet. He hit the pavement, hard. Spilling over onto his hands and face. Skinning his palms. Drawing blood over his temple, dripping down into his eyes and staining his vision red. Feet rained down around him like a deadly storm of hail; with no other course of action clearly available to him Tom curled up into a ball and made himself as small as possible as the sirens reached a deafening crescendo.

He was going to die. This wasn’t an exaggeration like it had been when Rogan had leapt into bed with him, he was actually going to die. Trampled. Or blown up.

Where was his father? Why wasn’t he there? Why wasn’t he coming to save him? Why? Why?

The sounds of the thudding footsteps died away, replaced by the roar of plane engines and the shriek of something falling from the sky.

Tom jerked awake with a yowl, his body shaking and lathered in a frigid sweat and his blood
thumping loudly in his ears. A dream. A nightmare. His eyes darted around at the dark room around him and his throat began to close off, swelling and aching with the onset of stubborn terrified tears.

It had been a long time since he’d had a dream that bad. A dream so deeply shaking to him that he couldn’t handle it himself. That he had to seek comfort or forgo further sheep. And never before had he been in any position to actually receive that comfort.

But he wasn’t in the orphanage anymore. He was home. At his home. And he had a family. Someone he could run to and cling to until the crying stopped. Who would hold him and calm him and make the lingering effects of the dream pass over like the spent clouds of a destructive storm.

The carpet was cold against his bare feet as he swung his legs over the side of his bed, poking into the arches of his soles like blades of summer grass. Pulling his night clothes tighter about him, fingers spasming in the fabric, he scurried from his room and down the hallway to his father’s. Going inside without knocking.

“Father?” it was the first time that he’d actually used the word to refer to him directly and between that and the fact that his voice was so hoarse that he sounded like a frog he expected the man to jump up immediately and rush to his side. Nothing happened. His tears made his vision swim. He squinted through the darkness, stepping further into the room. Still nothing.

The room was empty.

That was right. His father wasn’t home and wouldn’t come back for another few hours at least. Was, at the moment, in London.

Still…

Tom sniffled, scrubbed at his face with his sleeve in an effort to clear his vision, and crossed to the bed. Casting a brief glance to the clock on the bedside table: midnight. He scrabbled up onto the bed and threw himself atop the sheets, grabbing a pillow and burying his face in it. Strangling the thing with both his arms and his legs. He could smell his father’s after shave and cologne faintly on the fabric. He sniffled and hiccuped, his racing heart beat finally beginning to slow.

The door opened again and light from the hallway flooded the room. A thin, feminine hand came to rest gently on his shoulder; he raised his head to look and found his grandmother standing there. Her fingers were cold but gentle as they brushed the tears from his cheeks.

“Oh Tommy,” she said softly; he must have woken her up when he’d yelped just after jerking back to reality. He hated her little nick name for him but he was too exhausted and wrung out to be in any state to contend it. “Did you have a night mare, dear?”

He nodded and sat up; what was the point of denying it? None that he could see, at least for the time being. He was tired of constantly pretending to be stronger than he was. Tired of resisting the one thing he really wanted; his one most glaring weakness. He was tired. He just wanted his father to come back home.

“H-Has there been another bombing? In London?”

“A bombing? I don’t think so. There’s a radio in the den; we can use that to check if you’d like?”

Feeling more like a child than he ever had before, Tom nodded and hopped out of bed before taking the hand she offered him. His heart beat picked up again, fluttering against his ribs like the feathered wings of a frightened bird. Was it really just a nightmare, or did it mean something? Had there been another bombing? Was his father in danger?
Was he going to lose him so soon after getting him back?

Tom was practically hyperventilating as he sat curled up on one of the couches as his grandmother fiddled with the dials of the wood-faced radio. Twenty separate stations ticked passed. Soft music. Discussions of the many unexpected uses of some obscure product. No news about further bombings in London, or even about the war with the Germans at all.

“Hear that, dear? No bombings in London or anywhere else.” She said. “Would you like some hot chocolate? It might help you to calm down.”

He nodded silently, fingers still twisted up in his nightclothes. His grandmother rang a small hand bell and when a servant answered the call she ordered both the drinks and for them to bring her ‘the book’.

Tom didn’t know what ‘the book’ was but didn’t bother to ask. When the servant returned they had a tray with them which was set on the table before they vacated the room. Two mugs of hot chocolate sat on it, astride a large Victorian style leather bound book. His grandmother moved over to the seat beside him and handed him one of the two mugs before she opened the book and set it between them.

A photo album, filled with black and white photographs. His grandmother turned to one of the pages and pointed to one in particular: a young boy astride a horse almost three times his size.

“This was Tom when he was your age; always had an affinity for horses. Got along better with them then he did with people sometimes, though that’s not to say he wasn’t personable. Alternated between wanting to be an equestrian and wanting to be a politician depending on the day of the week.” She tilted her head slightly to the left, running her fingers gently over the picture. “He really did look almost identical to you at that age. A bit taller. A little less thin, but identical.”

His grandmother continued flipping through the pages at a slow pace. Picture after picture. Tom stared at them all with rapt attention.

“He might have done one or both of those things had life gone as we’d expected but then, out of nowhere, he disappeared. And he didn’t come back the same. He’d shut down and shut himself away. For two years he refused to come out of his room. For another four after that he didn’t leave the house. Everyone we spoke to said he’d never recover. Then, suddenly, he was moving ahead by leaps and bounds so much so that he left the doctors quite alarmed.” She said. “He began to talk about you. About finding you. Three years later he’d regained the confidence necessary to go outside and talk immediately turned to action. He tore through libraries worth of records. Hired every private detective that could be troubled to bend an ear. Answered every lead they came up with himself. Came back empty handed and terribly distraught every time. We were afraid for him, but didn’t want to attempt an intervention right away. It’s likely he’d have refused to listen even if we’d tried; would have run himself dead in the effort without a care. And now that you’re here…” her face broke into a watery smile, “it’s been a long time since I’ve seen my son this vibrant. He really does love you. You know that, don’t you Tommy?”

He nodded and buried himself in his mug. Continuing to watch and listen in silence as she kept showing him pictures and telling him about his father. Once the mugs were empty and the album had run out of pictures to show his grandmother smoothed down his hair and dismissed him back to bed.

She didn’t follow him out and, rather than going to his own room, he slipped back into his father’s to wait for his return.
The door closed behind them with the soft snap of the latch and Tom Senior fell back against it with a sigh, undoing his tie to free his collar and allow himself a better avenue through which to breathe.

“A nightcap, son?”

He glanced over at his father, already half-way up the stairs, and shook his head. “No, thank you. I’m just going to head to bed after checking in with mother about how Junior behaved.”

“Very well, then. Good night.”

In honesty he was just glad that the business deal was done and over with. He never had been very good with that manner of thing: not nervous, per say, just never good. Lacking the ‘flare’ for it. He’d essentially played shadow man as his father had talked, putting in a few words edgewise only when he had no other choice but to do so. Undoing the first two buttons of his shirt and toing off his shoes, he headed up the stairs.

His mother was sitting in the den with the album full of pictures from his youth sitting open in her lap.

“Mother,” he said, “how was Junior while father and I were away?”

“Well behaved, as always. Stayed shut up in his room most of the day but we had a nice conversation about two hours ago.” She said. “I showed him your baby pictures after he calmed down.”

“Calmed down?”

“He had a nightmare, darling. I found him in your room; I think he may have gone back to wait for you instead of returning to his own room.” She closed the album and set it aside on the couch. “The poor dear was in quite a state; in tears and shaking something terrible. Had me go through every station on the radio to check for news about London. Something about another bombing. I think he was afraid that you’d been hurt.”

Junior had had a nightmare? Had been worried for him?

“How did he take to being made to sit and look at my baby pictures?”

“He didn’t contribute much to the conversation, seemed more concerned with drinking his hot chocolate than speaking, but he stared at every picture I showed him.” His mother said. “He really is a sweet heart when he lets his mask slip. How was your father’s meeting?”

“Things went well enough, at least so far as I could tell. But you know me; I’m almost useless with that sort of thing.” He carded his fingers through his hair. “I’ll go put Junior back to bed. Good night, mother.”

“Good night, darling.”

He left the den and headed back to his room; the dim light from the hallway spilled in through the door and illuminated the gentle curve of his son’s back. The child was fast asleep and didn’t stir at the sound of his approaching footsteps; he was coiled around one of his pillows like one of the garden snakes which were often seen accompanying him and his little face was half buried in the
cotton sheets.

Trying his best not to wake him, Tom lifted his son into his arms like he had when he’d carried him in from the car on the first night he’d brought him to the manor. The boy shifted with a soft grumble and nuzzled into the crook of his neck and shoulder. Sleepy fingers gripped the back of his shirt. Tom ran the hand he wasn’t using to bear his son’s weight along the length of his back as he carried him down the hall and back into his own bedroom.

As he had before, he pulled back the sheets and lay his son down in his bed. Tucking him in. Brushing back his hair and kissing his brow.

A small hand caught at his as he turned to leave, and when he looked back a pair of blue eyes had caught him in a sleepy focus.

“The horses.” His voice was so thick with sleep that it was almost impossible to make out what he was trying to say. “You said that you’d teach me to ride.”

He wanted to learn to ride the horses? Tom hadn’t thought that Junior had even acknowledged his offer to share his greatest passion with him. Hadn’t thought that his son would ever have any interest in extending a hand back to him. Yet here he was, doing precisely that.

He smiled. “Later, Junior. It’s almost three in the morning. You need to sleep.”

“After breakfast?”

Tom nodded. “If you’d like to go down to the stables after breakfast then we can do that. Let’s wait and see how we feel about waking up that early.”

Junior grumbled another response, this one completely unintelligible. For a moment it seemed as if he might ask him to stay, but then he released his hold on his hand and rolled over. His son was back asleep a moment later.

“Goodnight, Junior.” With his own exhaustion gnawing incessantly at the edges of his awareness, Tom left his son’s room and retired to his own. Waking a few hours later at around seven in the morning, he stepped into the shower and put on clothing which would be comfortable to ride in before heading to the dining room.

His mother and father, each with a strong cup of coffee steaming in front of them, were already there. A copy of the *Evening Standard* was sitting on the table, looking as if it had just finished being read.

“Going out riding today, Tom?” his father asked as he sat down.

“Most likely; if Junior still feels up to it when he wakes up I plan to take him out to ride for a bit. Around the pasture. Maybe even up on the trail; with the whole of the Gaunt family either dead or imprisoned it should be safe to pass by their shack.

“Are you sure that you should take him out onto the trail so soon? Even if you’ll be teaching him out on the pasture first, has he ever ridden anything before?”

“I’ve ridden a broomstick.” Junior pushed open the door of the dining room and headed towards his seat at the table. “All first years at Hogwarts have to take these dreadful flying lessons; if it were flying by our own power somehow then that would be different, I’m not afraid of heights, but the Silver Arrows that our Professor uses are older than our Head Master and aren’t the sort of thing anyone in their right mind would trust to hold them sixty feet off the ground.”
Displaying none of the closed off suspicion that Tom had grown used to seeing on some level, his son selected what he wanted from the spread of food and began assembling his plate.

“I don’t have to hold my hand out and say ‘up’, do I? Because I don’t think I can lift a horse.”

There were faint shadows under his eyes and he seemed to be pushing away the lingering effects of forcing himself to wake up before his body was fully ready to. He smiled at his son and, to his surprise, received something of a smile back.

“I don’t think I can either. Luckily, pleasure riding—at least—doesn’t require such a thing.” He said. “Versailles is an old, calm mare. She won’t be a difficult first mount for you to work with. We’ll be out until around midday and may miss lunch; make sure to eat your food.”

“Yes, father.” Tom sat up so straight in his chair that he almost bumped his knees against the table but his son had already turned away and either didn’t notice or pretended not to.

Breakfast finished quietly and after a cup and a half of coffee each the pair left the dining room and headed for the stairs.

“The best shoes to wear while you’re riding are, of course, riding boots, but they aren’t absolutely mandatory; we can get you a pair of them sometime soon if you decide that you want to do more riding after today.” He said. “For now we’ll just work on trying to get you comfortable in the saddle, alright Junior.”

His son nodded and followed him out the door onto the porch and into the sun. The air smelled like grass and morning. The well-kept lawn rustled underfoot as they made their way towards the stables, the soft sounds of the nickering horses growing louder as they came closer.

The interior of the stable was a handful of degrees hotter than it was outside and smelled of sweet hay and the slightly sour odor unique to horses. Junior eyed the black stallion in the farthest left stall—Zephyr, the wildest horse that he owned and a trouble to ride even for him—as they passed.

“Don’t go near that one. He wasn’t broken properly by the man we bought him from. Bites.” As if to illustrate this point the beast snapped its bricklike teeth in their direction and his son, though clearly trying not to, cringed towards him. Tom rested a hand on his shoulder and steered him over to a greying, painted mare. “This is Versailles; she won’t give you any trouble. Just put your hand out and let her smell you.”

He clearly found the size of the animal intimidating and though he did as he’d been told his hand was shaking as he extended his arm. retracting it on reflex when the mare snorted, and then reaching out again when prompted by a gentle reassurance. Versailles pressed her pink muzzle into his son’s palm and sniffed at his fingers.

“I told you she wouldn’t hurt you.” The glare that Junior shot his way had little effect beyond making him laugh. He frowned, muttered something under his breath, and turned away to hide his blush. Jumping lightly when Versailles tried to eat his hair. Tom pulled down a saddle from a peg nearby. “Step into the stall; I’ll show you the proper way to saddle and bridle a horse.”

He swung open the gate and walked up to Versailles, gently patting her neck before swinging the leather saddle up onto her back. Junior, he noticed, lingered beside the stall’s wooden door. He talked him through the process of situating the saddle and properly tightening the straps, the protocol of slipping a bridle into a horse’s mouth, and then led both the horse and his son out of the stable.

“You’re not going to ride as well?”
Was that a deeply buried twinge of panic that he heard? “If we decide to go up to the trail I will, but it’s better to have someone walk the horse when you’re first learning.” He said, pulling open the gate into the pasture. “Climb up and hold onto the saddle horn. I’ll keep a handle on the reigns until you feel comfortable enough to ride on your own.”

His son gripped the saddlehorn so hard that his knuckles turned white, hoisting himself reluctantly up onto Versailles’ back. Tom smiled to reassure him and clicked his tongue, beginning to guide the horse along at an even pace.

“When you’re riding a horse, the reigns serve the function of stopping the mount more than anything. The best way to steer is to use your legs and the best way to speed up is to use your feet. Just a gentle tap; no need for anything harsh.”

By the time that they’d walked twice around the paddock his son had begun to relax. At five laps, he seemed to be verging on comfortable.

“Ready to take a turn around the pasture on your own?” he received a somewhat unsteady nod and handed over the reins. His son struggled for a moment to get the horse moving, and then proceeded to make another few revolutions on his own. First at a canter. Then at a light gallop. All under Tom’s watchful eye.

It was almost noon, the sun hanging like an orb of white gold in the sky overhead, before his son pulled Versailles to a stop beside him again.

“You said something about a trail.” He said. “Can we go there?”

“Do you think that you’re ready to?”

Junior’s face scrunches up slightly at the suggestion that he might be unable to do something and he nodded. “Yes.”

“Alright then.” He said, pushing himself away from the fence against which he’d been leaning. “Wait for me outside the stable; I’ll saddle Domino and be right out to join you.”
Domino was a beautiful Arabian and astride him his father looked every bit the charming Prince from a Muggle fairy tale; as comfortable in the saddle as a fish was in water, the reigns held loose in his long fingered right hand. Again, Tom found himself viewing the man in a state of mild awe. Found himself wanting to be him. To grow into his tall frame and handsome veneer and to learn to radiate an aura of utter calm and absolute control in the same manner that the sun radiated heat and light. Catching his stare, he smiled.

“It’ll be alright, Junior. Riding a horse isn’t as difficult as it seems. And the trail we’re headed out to isn’t anything too rugged.” He said, turning his mount about. “We can remain in the paddock and continue to ride on the property if you’d prefer.”

He wasn’t nervous about riding or the trail. Wasn’t nervous at all. That hadn’t been why he was staring, but he wasn’t about to voice the real reason. Felt plenty comfortable in the place that he’d reached with this Muggle. No need to go any further. Tom frowned. “I’m fine.” He said. “Was just thinking.”

“Thinking quite hard, from the look of it.” He said. “Care to share what it was about?”

“Not really, no.”

The man shrugged, his expression seeming to say ‘well, at least I tried’, and prodded his horse into motion. The Arabian snorted and started forwards at an even pace. Tom’s horse followed without prompting, as horses were prone to do. They were social creatures, after all, much like humans were. At least, ‘normal’ humans. Herd animals. Wanted to stay close to one another.

“So, when does term pick up again?”

“The first of September.”

“And a supply list will be coming soon?”

Tom nodded, his gaze locked on the ornate saddle horn in front of him. Reins gripped in his pale fingers, hands and wrists nowhere near as relaxed in the action as his fathers were. “Soon.”

“And where does one get supplies for a Wizarding school?”

“London, at a place called Diagon Alley. The entrance out of Muggle London is through an old inn called The Leaky Cauldron.” He said, then added sourly “the young innkeeper’s name is also Tom.”

His father chuckled at his annoyed tone. “You’re not very fond of sharing your name, are you Junior?”

“‘Tom’ is a common name. And I am not common!”

“Not at all. Anyone who’s really met you as well aware of that much. But it’s not a bad name for someone with your goals.”

“And why would that be?” he groused.
“The most commonly known meaning behind the name ‘Tom’ is twin but there’s a lesser known meaning as well.”

“Which is?”

“ Legendary.” A hawk screamed as it passed lazily overhead. Tom very much doubted that that was true, but some small part of him was absurdly pleased by the attempt. “We’ll go back to London the week before the first of September. Stay in The Leaky Cauldron. Handle your school shopping; you’ll need new Wizarding clothes as well, won’t you?”

He nodded. “I will. We’ll have to make a stop by Gringotts: the bank. Wizards use a different system of currency than Muggles do.”

They’d left the manor grounds behind now and were going up along the trail which led along the sloping face of the hill and out around the outskirts of town, shielded from the view of Little Hangleton by a screen of green and leafy trees.

A brief period of relative silence passed as they rode. Hooves clattering on the earth packed hard by the two weeks which had passed since the last rain had fallen. Tom listened to the sounds of twittering birds and blowing leaves. Eventually, his father spoke again.

“How has your summer homework been going, Junior? Have you finished it yet?” he asked.

Again, Tom frowned. He hadn’t needed a reminder of his Transfiguration Professor’s idiocy. “I’m finished with all of it, aside from the portion of my Transfiguration homework that Albus Dumbledore,” the snarl in his voice was clearly evident, “assigned which requires the second year text book.”

“You certainly seem to have quite a bit of animosity towards your Transfiguration Professor.” Wasn’t that the understatement of the bloody century? “ Might I ask why?”

That all depended on how long this ride would last. “He’s the Head of Gryffindor. House of the thick headedly noble and stupid. The House that has had a feud going with Slytherin for generations. He’s prejudiced against snakes, coddles his lions beyond reason and has a bizarre fixation with singling me out even when I haven’t done a damn bloody thing!” He said. “And it started even before I got to school and was sorted into Slytherin House. He came to Wool’s personally to give me my Hogwarts acceptance letter. Believed every terrible thing Mrs. Cole had to say about me. Lit my cupboard on fire with everything I owned inside it and then chided me for ‘stealing’.”

“Were you stealing?”

“They were trophies!” Tom squinted against the bright sunlight; they’d made it to the other side of Little Hangleton and were now starting up the hill on the other side. “I earned every single one of them! They were all taken off the other children after they got what they deserved for tormenting me!”

He expected his father to say at least something to chide him for having engaged in ‘inappropriate’ behavior, but he didn’t. Tom felt more relieved than he’d realized that he would to see that was the case.

“You don’t need to worry about him anymore, at least not as much as you used to. You have me, and your grandparents to support you now.” He said. “I may only be a Muggle but I’m still your father. Even in your world that must mean something.”

“You could be a Pureblood,” he said, “and it still wouldn’t mean more than pennies up against the
‘darling’ of the Wizarding World’s ruling ‘Light’ faction. He hasn’t even done all that much, aside from discovering twelve uses for dragon’s blood!”

“If you can’t do something overt than do something covert. Behave. Play up doing so in front of others. Make him seem mad for having anything against you.” His father ducked in the saddle to clear a low hanging branch. “It’ll be a slow process, but like a drip of water against a boulder it will begin to erode his reputation.”

Yes, they were definitely related. And it wasn’t just looks, now, that made that fact clear.

“Just a bit further now. Let’s take a light gallop, shall we?” he spurred his mount faster, calling out to him playfully as he passed. Tom huffed and urged his own horse forward and they were both riding along the trail at a speed which he found equal parts exhilarating and terrifying. Out of the little copse of trees. Up a small rise. Along a wide bend. Eventually, they slowed to a stop and Tom looked to his father; he was staring at what appeared to him to be a massively overgrown hedgerow with a dark expression.

“Father?” unable to take it anymore he finally voiced his curiosity.

“Look there, Junior. That’s what’s left of the Gaunt shack.” He said, jerking his chin in the direction of the mass of brown and green. “That is where your mother lived.”

Tom squinted and tilted his head and, finally, managed to make out the shape of a building buried deep in the heart of the overgrowth. Lopsided. Built in a way which could only be structurally sound with the help of magic. A snake was nailed to the door, swinging slightly despite the lack of recent breeze.

But something wasn’t right, and a feeling of dread settled over him like a choking blanket. The hairs on the back of his neck and along his arms stood on end and he squinted harder. Leaning forward in the saddle. Trying to figure out what it was about the place which had struck him with such a feeling of danger.

A drop of scarlet blood fell from the serpent’s tail, and the sound of the droplet exploding against the ground below it seemed suddenly deafening in volume as everything clicked.

“We need to-!” There was a flash of light in the corner of his vision and Versailles reared with a deafening shriek. Tom yelped in surprise as he tumbled from the saddle, reigns ripping from his grasp as the massive animal shied away. Everything seemed to move in slow motion as he fell, a hoarse voice yelling what sounded like ‘Muggle’ and ‘damn you’ amidst a torrent of gibberish and his father shouting his name. Then he hit the ground and a heavy weight landed on top of him, shielding his body from the bolting horses, as his vision went momentarily black.

Tom jerked back full consciousness no more than a moment later, his heart racing and something warm and wet dripping down onto his cheek. The weight that he’d felt turned out to be his father, half of his body now lying atop his, engulfing his smaller form with his larger one. He didn’t move when Tom tried to free himself, and once he managed to sit up he realized that what had been dripping onto him was blood.

He’d heard the saying ‘head wounds always bleed a lot, making them look worse than they really are’ almost a thousand times but that was of no use or comfort to him now. Blood was pouring from a gash above the man’s left eye, rapidly covering half of his face in scarlet as the skin below turned pale.

And the yelling was still going on. The man from which it issued still coming towards them, armed
with a crooked wand and a rusted bloody knife. Short, stocky and bent forward with a hunched back. A mass of hair so tangled and filthy that it looked like a wad of moss had been dropped onto his head, hanging a thick curtain of knotted strands over dark eyes which pointed in opposite directions and a mouthful of rotted teeth many of which were missing.

This was his uncle? This was a Pureblood? This was an Heir of Slytherin? So inbred that he looked like a height challenged Mountain Troll which had somehow managed to get ahold of a wand? So deranged that he could, it seemed, barely string an intelligible sentence together in either English or Parseltongue? Blood so thick that it had congealed like motor oil, slaughtering ancestral traits which might otherwise have been there and making it a miracle that he even had the ability to use a wand at all.

This was what he’d been putting on a pedestal as superior? The ultimate fate of the Ancient and Noble Houses’ obsession with keeping their blood ‘pure’?

Against him, this thing was nothing! Insignificant! Less than the dirt beneath his shoes! His mother’s blood might have given him his magic but it was his father’s blood that had spared him. Allowed his power to bloom instead of being strangled by the weed of poor breeding. Allowed him to become great!

It wasn’t the Purebloods that were truly superior, no! It was the ‘mud bloods’ like him. The half-bloods. The Muggle-borns. He could see that now.

“Damn no good Muggle! With your horses and your brat! Shouldn’t have come back here, Riddle; thought even a worthless Muggle was smart enough to learn the lesson that a dog could! Can’t run now, can you? And your little whelp can’t save you.”

Emotions were running through him like electricity through an exposed wire. Fear and worry for his father’s wellbeing. Annoyance and wounded pride that fate would be so cruel as to consign him to sharing blood with an ogre. Anger that he’d attacked them, insulted him and caused his family to be hurt.

Tom rose to his feet and put himself between them, baring his teeth at the man and snarling “back off!” in Parseltongue with as much venom as he could physically manage to muster. His magic crackled, kicking up a wind which began to rip and tear at the brush and trees around them.

His Uncle stopped short for a moment to stare at him before he grunted “so you’re even worse than a Muggle brat, are you? A filthy mud blood swine. Merope’s boy, spawn of a Muggle and a blood traitor whore. A thief! Where’s my locket, boy? Where’s the family heirloom your mother stole! And to have you speaking the sacred tongue! Your kind doesn’t deserve magic!”

“The one who doesn’t ‘deserve’ magic is you.” A brief glance was all it took; Morfin’s wand went up like a sulfur flare, bits of flaming wood and core scattering across the trail. The man let out a pig-like squeal of surprise which quickly turned into a roar of rage and he launched himself at him, knife raised.

“Little bastard! I’ll kill you for that!”

The wind picked up to a shrieking crescendo as Tom prepared to ‘defend’ himself. Red sparks arcing between his fingertips, ready to leave the man writhing on the ground in agony, but before he could satisfy his anger a series of loud cracks resounded through the air and another voice shouted “stupefy!”

The spell struck his uncle square in the chest and he toppled over. With the threat neutralized, Tom
turned his attention to the direction from which it had come; a tall bespectacled man with brown hair and hazel eyes paled near to bloodless when he met his gaze, the red of his Auror robes suddenly seeming to stand out all the more.

Confident in his safety, he quickly returned to his father’s side and muttered an Episky to do what he could for the wound before medical help could come; the bleeding slowly slightly but beyond that nothing happened. He didn’t turn around when footsteps approached from behind him.

“What was he hit with?”

“A horse.” Tom replied dryly; his father had a pulse but all efforts made to rouse him did nothing. “You had a watch on him. Because he’s done this sort of thing before.”

The man didn’t answer him, but that didn’t matter to Tom. It had been meant as a statement, not a question, anyway.

“Where do you live? We can-.”

“I don’t need help from Aurors.” He was perfectly capable of handling this himself. He didn’t want anyone butting into the affairs of his family, especially not the Ministry workers who had gotten in his way. A lightening charm made it possible for him to drag his father up off of the ground and, after summoning the beast back to him with a compulsion, onto Domino’s back. The horse was shaking violently with fear as he pulled himself up onto the saddle as well.

“The other horse-?”

“Versailles is likely trained to return on her own. If not, one of the servants will be sent to retrieve her.” He snapped. “We’re not your concern; deal with him properly this time, because if he comes back I will!”

He didn’t have the time to linger anymore. Needed to get back to the manor so that they could call a doctor to see to him and didn’t trust the Aurors who had shown up any further than he could throw them to be of any real help. Despite continued reservations in the saddle and with a firm grip on the reigns Tom prodded his father’s horse into a run.
“Talk about a bad day at work; just our luck that we were the ones on duty when Gaunt decided to lose it again.” Sirius pulled the blood red robes of the Auror Division up over his head, upsetting his hair into a mass of ebony curls. He shook them back into a somewhat more manageable state in much the same way as a dog would shake out its fur and reached for his civilian robes. “At this rate he shouldn’t make it out of government custody again, so we’ll never have to worry about being called out to another scene. At least, no one caused by him, which comes as a bit of a relief don’t you think, Prongs?” No response. “Prongs?”

He looked up in a mixture of confusion and concern, of half a mind to think that his best friend and partner on the job had left him in their office and that he hadn’t heard him walk out. That he’d been talking to himself, and an otherwise empty room, this entire time. It wouldn’t be the first time something similar had happened.

But that wasn’t the case; the other man was sitting behind his desk with his head propped up on one of his hands, glasses askew on his nose and hazel eyes glazed distant behind them. Sirius hadn’t seen that look on his friend since History of Magic class with Binns back when they’d still been in school.

Smirking slightly at the memory-James either staring off into empty space willing class to go faster or assisting him in lobbing things as Snivellus who sat across the room from them, Peter out cold on the desk and Remus shooting glares at them while simultaneously attempting to take notes and keep himself from laughing-Sirius crossed the office in a few short strides and waved his hand in front of the other man’s face. No response. Raising an eyebrow, he leaned down and shouted “James!”

The brunet left both his chair and the ground and nearly toppled head first over his desk. Laughing hysterically and more than prepared for the Stinging Hex he shot at him, Sirius grinned at his now glaring friend. Still in his work robes, despite their shift having ended almost twenty minutes before.

“Bloody hell, Padfoot!” He groused, reaching up to straighten his glasses as he lowered his wand. “What was that for?”

“For checking out on me mentally; that you’d insinuate with your actions that I’m anywhere near as boring as ‘Dusty’ Binns is quite hurtful Prongs.” He said. “You completely zoned out on me.”

“Did I?” he looked down at the watch on his right wrist and gave a mild start when he realized that the stars and planets decorating its face were in an entirely different place than they had been last that he remembered. “Shite! Lily is going to skin me alive if I’m late for dinner! What were you saying?”

Sirius leaned back against the edge of the other man’s desk, watching him scramble about gathering his things and changing out of his work clothes.

“I was just saying that it’s a relief that this is most likely the last time we’ll have to deal with Morfin.” He said, running a hand through his hair in an effort to tame it back from the grip of the static which changing his clothing had caused. “Since he’s already been exposed to Dementors for a number of years before now, and given that he’s attacked the same Muggle as he did the last time again he’ll definitely be sent back for at least a short while, by the time he gets out, if he’s still alive, he’ll be so bloody barmy that he’ll be sent to Janus Thickey for a permanent stay.”

“Morfin isn’t the reason that I’m glad we’ll probably never have to see that town-what was it even called again? Little Hangleton?-again.”
“Little Hangleton, yeah. I think.” He said. “Why? It isn’t that much smaller than Godric’s Hollow; sure it seems completely Muggle but I didn’t think you, or I for that matter, were the type of Purebloods who really cared about that sort of thing. Of course, it did look a little bit run down.”

“It has nothing to do with the town, Padfoot.” With everything that he needed to take with him gathered, his cloak on and his wand in its sheath James picked up his bag and started towards the door of their office. Sirius fell into step with him after a brief moment. “The town was fine. Quaint, even. Muggle, rundown and quaint. I’m talking about that kid!”

“What about him?” he asked, shrugging as the lift trundled loudly to a stop in front of them; the brass grate swung open and they both stepped inside. “He was a little odd, sure, and had quite a bit of potent accidental magic but that’s not entirely unusual, with his age and the stress of the situation.”

It wasn’t often that Sirius got the chance to play the ‘voice of reason’ in their group dynamic and felt rather proud of himself for coming to such a rational conclusion. He thought that Moony would be proud of him as well as it seemed to be just the sort of conclusion that he himself would come to.

James just shuddered and shook his head, briefly appearing as if he’d just come face to face with a Dementor. “You didn’t see it, Sirius?”

“See what?”

“His eyes.”


“What about his eyes?”

That same hollow look passed over his face once again as they stepped out of the lift and into the Atrium, joining the throng of people heading both home and in to work for the night shift. The peacock blue ceiling pulsed with alternating golden symbols as they made their way towards the Floo chimneys.

“You didn’t see their color?”

“…Blue?” he couldn’t manage to work out what, exactly, had terrified his friend so badly no matter how hard he tried.

“They weren’t blue. At least, not at first.” The woosh of the Floos whisking Witches and Wizards away to their respective homes rose and fell beneath their conversation like the swell of the ocean tide. They shuffled steadily forward with the progression of the line. “When we first got there, when he first looked at me, his eyes were red, Sirius. Red and slit pupiled like a snake’s. That was not a normal child.”

Sirius shuddered as well. “Well, let’s hope that the kid abides by the law; that way we’ll never have to see him again. I do pity his father, though; poor bastard, to be stuck with a child that’s that…stone cold and to be a Muggle on top of it…” he frowned. “Reminds me of my parents, actually. He’s probably in Slytherin just like they were too, though Merlin knows he’d be eaten alive for having even a drop of Muggle blood in him. But hey, at least Harry isn’t like that right?”

At least. “Small mercies.” James sighed. Only two people were in front of them, now.

“I’ve neglected to ask before now: you and Lily are going to be sending him to Hogwarts, aren’t you?” he asked. “I know that there was some consideration to homeschooling made, but that wasn’t
“We didn’t really want to, no, but it was still an option for Harry in case he didn’t want to go off to Scotland. You know how he can be a bit shy at times, especially with new people, and Lily was worried about how he’d hold up. But once he realized that Ron would be going, and that Fred George and Percy would all still be there, he decided that he wanted to go.”

“And how has Gabriel been?” he asked. “Has he stopped demanding to go to school early? Or to get a wand before he’s eleven?”

James shook his head with a slight smile. “No, he hasn’t yet. And I doubt that he will.” He said. “If he’s anything like I am we’ll never hear the end of it. Not until he gets his own acceptance letter, at least.”

Both men chuckled and stepped into the fire. Green flames licked up around them and the Ministry’s Atrium spun out of view. James stepped out of the hearth into the sitting room of his home in Godric’s Hollow, Sirius just a step behind, and bent to brush soot from the tails of his cloak. The entire house was filled with the delicious smell of his wife’s cooking and sunset had begun to stain the world outside a pale violet.

“Welcome home, darling.” Lily said as she stepped into the room, drying her hands on a towel. Her long red hair was tied behind her back. “Hello, Sirius. Staying for dinner?”

“If you wouldn’t mind having me, Lily.”

“Never a problem; our boys both love it when their Godfather comes to visit.” Her smile dimmed slightly into an expression of mild concern. “Could you go and speak to Harry before dinner, James? Dumbledore came to visit earlier and he spoke to him about the Houses; I think…he may be having reservations again.”

James sighed as he put down his bag. “He’s worried about what will happen if he isn’t sorted into Gryffindor, isn’t he?”

“Yes, I think so.”

He nodded. “When will dinner be ready?”

“Ten minutes.”

“Right. We’ll both be down in five.” James left the room, heading up the stairs to the second floor and knocking quietly on the door. “Harry, are you in there?” no response aside from a quiet shuffling. He opened the door and walked in. His son was sitting with his knees against his chest and his back against the head board of his bed, gripping his ankles and staring out the window of his room. His wire framed glasses, so like his own, were sitting sideways on his button nose and formed a thin barrier between his unruly dark brown hair and his mother’s emerald eyes. His son didn’t look at him as he sat down on the edge of his bed. “Harry, your mother sent me up here to talk to you about the Houses: she said that you went over them with Dumbledore today.”

Harry nodded, shifting his weight slightly to one side. “He told me about them, yes.”

“You know that it’s alright if you aren’t in Gryffindor, don’t you? Sure, that’s practically our family’s House, but plenty of great Witches and Wizards have come out of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw as well.” He said. “There’s nothing wrong with wit or loyalty.”

“I’m not worried about not ending up in Gryffindor. I’m worried about ending up in Slytherin!” He
turned large green eyes onto him, glistening brightly with unshed tears. “I don’t want to be a Dark Wizard, dad!”

“Who told you that you were going to be a Dark Wizard?”

“Dumbledore said that no one ever came out of Slytherin who wasn’t a Dark Wizard! What am I going to do if I’m put there? I don’t want to be evil!” He curled up even tighter, his knuckles turning white as his fingers dug into his narrow ankles. “I don’t want to be evil.”

This wasn’t the sort of thing that James was the best at handling. He reached out and gently squeezed his son’s shoulder. “The House you’re sorted into doesn’t dictate who you are.” He told him. Did he like Slytherin? No. Did he want Harry to end up in that House? He’d prefer that he didn’t. Would he do anything ridiculous, like disown him, if he did? Of course not! “Look at Sni, I mean, Severus. He’s a Dark Wizard, and he was in Slytherin, but he’s one of your mother’s closest friends. He isn’t evil, is he?”

“No, but he’s mean! That’s basically the same thing!”

James snorted. “You know that there are two types of ‘Dark Wizards’ don’t you? There’s the type like Grindlewald, that your Godfather and I hunt, and then there are people who simply have a dark oriented core. It’s true that people who go to Slytherin are more prone to having dark cores than those who go to Gryffindor, but the same thing can be said about Ravenclaw too. Hufflepuff is the only House that can claim with any truth to never have had a Dark Wizard of any kind come out of it. And even if you do end up in Snake House, you’re not in completely terrible company.”

“I’d certainly call Snape ‘terrible company’!”

*Better not let your mother hear you say that.* He thought, struggling not to laugh. “The Head of Slytherin, the Potion’s Master, Horace Slughorn isn’t too bad. Wasn’t the fondest of me but he loved your mother. And then, of course, there’s Slytherin’s most famous member.”

“Who?”

“Merlin.” Lying to your child was something all parents did, right? It wasn’t considered misconduct when it was done to make them feel better, surely. Either way, it seemed to work. Harry blinked at him in owlish surprise, then scrubbed tears from his eyes. “Feeling better?” he nodded. “Come on, then, and help me drag your brother out of his room. Dinners almost ready.”
The instant that the doctor emerged from the room Tom leapt from the restraining hands of his grandmother and fell on the man like an infuriated cat.

“What happened to him?” he demanded. “Has he woken up yet? Will my father be alright?” The words fell from his mouth at a break neck speed, a slew of almost incomprehensive jumbled letter which flew like bullets fired from a gun. “Will he be alright? **Tell me!**”

He’d been pacing for over two hours up until then, non-stop since they’d arrived back at the manor and he’d dragged his father back inside amidst a flurry of panic from the servants, and the adrenaline hadn’t had a chance to die down and burn itself out of his blood. His heart was still racing at speed which certainly weren’t healthy and it was a miracle that he hadn’t lost his grip on his already agitated magic and destroyed the entire house.

He probably looked near as deranged as his Uncle had when he’d first come running at them, looked as if he’d been possessed by Satan himself, and the look that the Doctor sent him in that moment-half startled and half bewildered, as if confronted by something unfathomably horrible that he’d never seen before and couldn’t hope to explain-seemed to support that conclusion as a fairly accurate one. The physician stared at him for a few moments, as if concerned that Tom would suddenly pounce on him and chew his face off. Then he cleared his throat and spoke.

His voice was nasal and grating. “Your father is fine, son. Mildly concussed and suffering from a bit of blood loss but with rest he’ll recover.” The relief which flooded through him was so intense that Tom’s knees almost gave out and he barely noticed when the man dismissed him as if he were just another stupid child. Turning his attention instead to his grandparents to address them on the matter in more detail. He pushed his way passed the man and through the doorway into his father’s room.

The dim light of the setting sun left the room draped in a pall of lacy shadows and the only sound was his father’s quiet breathing. Despite being well aware that he was still unconscious and likely would remain so for a while yet he approached slowly, careful to keep his footsteps quiet to avoid disturbing the man. Tom Senior lay in his bed, rumpled and dust spattered shirt unbuttoned over his chest where the doctor had checked his vitals. One hand lay on the sheets beside him, the other resting across his stomach; the only motion detectable from him was the steady rise and fall of his chest.

A thin bandage had been wrapped around his brow.

Tom tugged the chair away from the desk and over to the bedside and sat down, reaching out to take his father’s hand. His long graceful fingers hung limp and the skin of his lightly calloused palm was cold but the pulse in his wrist was persistent. Reassuring.

The shadows outside deepened from grey to black and night fell.

“Tommy?” he looked up and back towards the door as his grandmother entered the room, walking up to him with a look of tired worry in her eyes. “Come to dinner, love.”

He shook his head and turned away, looking back to his father. He hadn’t moved since Tom had first sat down, and was still just lying there in silence. “I’m not hungry.” His stomach immediately voiced a raucous complaint but he ignored it. His grandmother, however, had heard. Gently, she squeezed his shoulders.
“Come eat, Tommy. Your father will still be here after dinner and you can come right back when you’re done. Tom wouldn’t want you to starve yourself over him.”

He didn’t want to leave but he knew that she was right. Sitting there and forcing down his hunger wouldn’t help anything, as much as he’d have preferred to remain there until his father had regained consciousness. He’d just have to eat quickly and come back.

With a sigh, he released his father’s hand and stood up. His grandmother gently pushed Tom Senior’s hair back from his brow before following him out.

Tom took his seat at the table in the dining room, glancing over at the chair in which his father would normally sit and finding it incredibly troubling that it stood empty. That there was no plate sitting in front of it. His father hadn’t gotten hurt because of his uncle. He’d gotten hurt because he’d pushed him out of the path of being trampled and had been struck instead. He’d gotten hurt because of him.

Tom Marvolo Riddle had never once in living memory ever felt guilty for anything that he had done. Not for breaking the arm of the priest that Mrs. Cole had called in to ‘save’ the soul that he knew she didn’t really think he had. Not for hanging Billy Stubbs’ stupid rabid from the rafters. Not for luring Dennis and Amy into that cave on their trip to the sea and breaking their mind beyond all repair. But that was, undeniably, the acidic falling sensation he was now suffering under.

His father could have died. And I would have been his fault.

“You brought him home and to help. Don’t blame yourself for my son protecting you.” Tom dropped his spoon into the bowl of stew in front of him and looked up. His grandfather was staring at him from the other end of the table. “His injuries, luckily, were minor but even if they hadn’t been he’d much rather it have been him then you. Him that was hurt. Him that died. Losing you would have destroyed your father.”

Tom fidgeted and looked back down at his food, forcing himself to continue eating.

“Everything is going to be alright, Tommy.” His grandmother soothed. “Your father is going to be fine; you heard what the doctor said. He’ll be awake by noon tomorrow at the latest and shouldn’t suffer any lasting injuries or memory loss. And you said that the brute responsible was arrested so he won’t be able to hurt anyone again.”

He nodded. “Yes, a pair of Aurors—they usually hunt Dark Wizards but also act as law enforcement for the magical community—came and dragged him off. Had some sort of watch on him, I think, because of everything that he’d already done. I doubt that he’ll ever return to Little Hangleton.” Tom set his spoon down beside his now empty bowl and stood up. “If he does return it won’t be the authorities that deal with him. And I won’t be foolish enough to leave any traces behind that would lead to me being caught. I’m going to go back to father’s room, now. Good night.”

He left the dining room quickly and slipped back into the bedroom where he’d left his father lying. He hadn’t moved an inch since Tom had left. Closing the door behind him and resuming his perch.

At some point, without him even realizing it, Tom dropped off the cliff of awareness into an exhausted sleep. He woke again suddenly, blinking blearily and blind in the darkness of what was either very late night or very early morning. Unsure of what it was that had disturbed him he lay still and waited. Soon hearing the soft rustle of fabric again.

A dark figure rose up from the sheets, discernable only as a black silhouette. Fingers found him moments later and began running through his hair. Gently combing through his curls.
“Father.” He wrapped his arms around him and buried his face in his chest; the man seemed to be taken by surprise by the action but recovered quickly and returned the embrace. “I’m sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for, Junior?” Tom Senior had rested his cheek in his hair, radiating a sense of both exhaustion and wakefulness which shouldn’t have been possible. Tom could feel his breath on the back of his neck and burrowed closer.

“For what I said.” He said. “About your blood.”

“Few understand the reason for looking down on those weaker or poorer than you as lesser better than a man raised as I have been, viewing those who are ‘common’ as less. I’m a Muggle, Junior. In many ways, I am less than you are.”

“That doesn’t matter; the Purebloods are wrong! They’ll all look like him in a few more generations. And it’ll be people like me who inherit the magical world, because they have relatives like you.” He leapt up with a sudden jolt, freeing himself from his father’s arms and landing with a quiet thump on stockinged feet. “Wait here.”

Before his father could call out to him Tom had rushed out of his bedroom and back to his, skidding slightly as wood transitioned into carpet and then diving for the bookshelf. Grabbing both A History of Magic and the box which held his wand before bolting from the room again.

During the time that he’d been away his father had turned on the light and the bedroom was now flooded with the yellow tone unique to artificial light. His father had propped himself up against the pillows of his bed, his head tilted back towards the ceiling and his eyes closed. He looked towards him when the door shut and Tom climbed back into the bed, pushing himself under the man’s arm like a needy cat and setting the book on his chest.

“What’s this?” he lifted the heavy tome and looked at its cover. “A History of Magic by Bathilda Bagshot?”

“You said that you wanted to bridge the gap.” Tom hid his face in his father’s neck to avoid seeing his expression but he still felt him briefly go stiff. “I’ll start reading the Natural History book tomorrow. I’m too tired to read right now. Just…don’t blame me if it’s mostly about Goblin Wars.”

“Goblin Wars are that large a part of Magical History?”

“It if is the barmy ghost that we have as a Professor for the class is to be believed.” He grumbled, fiddling with the box in his hand. “Rumor has it that Binns hasn’t the slightest clue that he’s dead. That he died during a staff meeting one day and left his body at the table. Either way, he never changes his class layout and is so bloody boring that even I have trouble staying awake!”

His father chuckled, resuming the attention that he’d been paying to his hair with one hand as he flipped open the book with the other. “Etiquette was the worst subject for me; terribly dull, and the woman your grandparents hired to teach me would have fit right in with the mad dogs in Germany.” He said. “What’s in the box, Junior?”

“My wand.” The wooden lid of the box clattered slightly as Tom pulled it off. The length of bone white wood gleamed in the light and his father cringed slightly at the sight of it. “Being able to use wandless magic is now a rare trait; it used to be something that was taught but that was a long time ago. Before the Ministry realized how much easier trapping people into using wands made regulating Magic. Especially when minors were concerned: underage magic is illegal for use outside of school, baring life threatening situations, for the risk of violating the International Statute of Secrecy and the lack of control that normal children have.”
“But you’re no ‘normal’ child, are you Junior?” fondness was clear in his voice and Tom puffed up proudly.

“Very few adult Wizards are strong enough to perform wandless magic on the scale that I can. Wands are supposed to focus and multiply the magical energies of a core, to make spells stronger and more affective, but for me it seems to make the effects weaker; maybe that will change when I become more used to using one. Either way, I’m stuck doing so while at school.” He lifted the wand from the box’s satin interior. The wood warmed beneath his fingers and began to vibrate gently; using it was comfortable but still paled greatly in comparison to what it felt like to have his magic sizzling against his bare skin. “Yew, 13 ½ inches, Phoenix Feather core, unyielding. But harmless on its own baring an unfortunate eye gouging. Rather similar to…well, I believe the turn of phrase is ‘guns don’t kill people’.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Tom turned the wand around in his hand and offered the handle to his father. The man reacted at first as if he’d tried to hand him a less than pleased and highly venomous snake, recoiling and wide eyed, but then he gathered himself and took it.

His father still looked rather pale, he noticed, and Tom could feel his body shaking lightly. He held the length of Yew loosely as if expecting it to bite. “So they aren’t just sticks taken from any tree you happen to come across?”

“No.” Tom said. “I don’t know much about wand craft but I believe that only certain trees are used. Specialized Witches and Wizards called Wand Makers are the only ones able to build and supply them, and every wand has some base form of sentience, having the ability to choose their partners.”

“And is there any particular way in which you’re meant to wave them or does one just…?” his father flicked his wrist without thinking and the lightbulb in the bedside lamp exploded, bits of glass clattering to the floor and the filament inside briefly glowing red before going out. Tom’s hand had reflexively fist in his father’s shirt and he could feel the man’s heart thudding against his palm. What had just happened? Could the wand have acted on its own? Was that possible? It couldn’t have been…? No, of course not! The man was a Muggle! A coincidence, it had to be.

A beat of silence passed between them before Tom Senior cleared his throat and spoke. “Power surge.” He supplied by way of explanation. “They happen from time to time, though it’s been a number of years since one that powerful has happened here; I’ll have the servants check the manor’s wiring later today, once the sun comes up.” Leaning over and pulling a book of matches from the drawer, he lit a small wax candle and propped it up in a brass holder. “Now that we have a bit of light back,” he said, passing him back his wand, “why don’t you tell me more about these ‘Goblin Wars’.”
His father’s recovery had proceeded as expected, much to Tom’s quiet relief, and it had come at last to be the final Sunday before Term resumed for another year. Tom hadn’t taken his wand out again since the incident with the lamp—the servants had failed to find anything wrong with the wiring of the manor but they must have missed something as there was simply no other rational explanation for what had happened outside of a one in a million coincidence—and both father and son had taken large bites out of their respective unofficial reading assignments. Tom had finished the book on Natural History and moved on to an account of the Roman Empire and his father had made it half way through A History of Magic and was now a good third into Magical Drafts and Potions.

“Moondew: a flowering plant found in Scotland and possibly parts of Ireland. Its magical properties were discovered during the Middle Ages by a Druidess named Cliodra and its liquid form has uses in the Wiggenweld Potion, the Draught of Living Death and an Antidote to Common Poisons.” He smirked at him over his cup of coffee. “Good morning, Junior.”

“Good morning, In 75 BCE Pirates captured a Roman Prisoner who they ransomed for 12 talents despite his insistence that he was worth far more than that. They thought him eccentric and his promises to return and slaughter them all were ignored; it turned out that the man was in fact Julius Caesar, who soon after his released caught up with them along with the majority of the Roman fleet and had all of them crucified for piracy.” Not the most pleasant breakfast conversation but what could one do? “May I open one of the windows, father? The supply list should be arriving this morning.”

“You’re welcome to open as many windows as you’d like, it is a bit stuffy in here.” His father said. “You'll see.”

The look that he received was one of bemused exasperation but he didn’t say anything further on the matter and Tom took his usual seat at the table, calmly beginning to enjoy his breakfast while waiting for the fireworks to start.

When the bird arrived, the young Wizard wasn’t disappointed.

His grandmother shrieked in surprise, his grandfather let loose a string of swear words that would have made a sailor blush and, after catching on a brass dish and sending apples and oranges sailing in all directions, the exhausted barn owl face planted in a bowl of porridge with a muffled hoot. Righting itself quickly with globs of milled oats sticking to its feathers and an expression on its face usually reserved for felines that had failed to land on their feet it hopped the last few feet to Tom and promptly stuck out its leg.

“No wonder it came in for a crash landing,” he glanced at the address on the letter as he untied it; rather than being filled out in typical fashion by the register, it was addressed to Tom Riddle: Wool’s Orphanage in Dumbledore’s unmistakable hand. “It went to the Orphanage first and then had to fly all the way here from London, no doubt after pecking the matron until she gave up my new location.”

He set a cup of water in front of the wilting bird and watched it dip its curved beak in to drink as he slit the envelope open with his finger.
“Owls?” all three of them were staring at the owl in some degree of shock as it acted as if drinking from a cup was something perfectly natural for it to do. “Wizards use owls for the Post?”

“Most commonly.” Tom wasn’t about to reach out and stroke the feathers of an owl that he didn’t know; he’d learned that hard lesson after the first time he’d ended up with a hole in his hand. “Though they’re usually competent enough that they don’t take out half the table.”

The barn owl sent him a look which was really quite evil but Tom refused to be intimidated by a bird and ignored it, pulling the two pieces of folded parchment contained within the envelope out and unfolding them. He glossed over the unremarkable ‘Dear Mr. Riddle, we are pleased to extend to you the invitation to return to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for your second year of magical schooling’ without really taking in the words and turned his attention to the second instead.

“Is that your supply list, Tommy?” his grandmother asked, watching the owl peck at a plate of bacon with an expression of distaste; oatmeal and egg yolk footprints had been left across every dish in the bird’s path. They certainly seemed to have been sent the most uncouth owl that he’d ever seen, so he couldn’t fully fault her for doing so.


“All of the other supplies that were needed for our magical education-pewter brewing cauldrons, dragon hide gloves etcetera-were included in the first year supply list. As were pets.”

“And you bought all of that second hand with a scholarship fund of some form, I presume?”

Tom nodded. “Everything except my wand, yes.”

“Make a list of all of it; we’ll be replacing everything that’s second hand aside from the books you no longer need.”

“Yes, father.”

“You didn’t buy a pet when you got your supplies for first year; why don’t you take Monai and Zahhak to school with you?”

“The listed ‘allowed’ pets are cats, owls and toads.” Tom ducked in his seat to avoid being cuffed by the owl’s left wing as it flew back out the window. “Where there isn’t really any set rules about bringing something else as long as it isn’t dangerous to the other students, snakes aren’t viewed well by the magical community. Nor are Parselmouths, really. And I don’t want to give Dumbledore anymore ammunition to throw at me.”

At the mention of the older Wizard his father’s lips thinned to a hard line, his eyes taking on the hue of an arctic sky. “Yes, that would likely be the wisest course of action.” He said. “We’ll get you an owl.”

Cats might have been the most ‘normal’ pet on the list but owls were by far the most useful for their ability to act as a messenger; Tom couldn’t help but feel pride that his father had come to such a conclusion so quickly despite being a Muggle.

“I’ll get one for us as well; it’ll be best that we both have a method close at hand of staying in touch
while you’re in Scotland.” Tom Senior took another drink of his coffee. “We’ll leave at around noon tomorrow, check into The Leaky Cauldron that night and then start shopping the next day.”

“There’s a faster way to get to London.” He said, finishing up the last bites of his meal. “We can take the bus.”

“Tommy, dear, no buses stop in Little Hangleton.”

“The Knight Bus stops everywhere; I’ve never ridden it myself but from what I’ve overheard it only takes around twenty to thirty minutes to reach London from anywhere in the British Isles if you catch it.”

“You could make millions with a service like that.” His grandfather said. “I assume that this ‘Knight Bus’ is a method of magical transport.”

“It is. Supposedly all ‘stranded’ Witches and Wizards-adults can Apparate by their own power so I don’t see how a Witch or Wizard could ever be stranded in the first place but I digress-has to do to call the bus is to hold out their wand arm. And it shouldn’t cost more than seventeen Sickles to get to London, which is the equivalent of about five pounds in Muggle currency.”

“Only five pounds?”

“More like four ninety seven to be painfully exact but yes.”

His grandfather huffed. “Rates like that, and that efficient? Would revolutionize commuting. A shame that it’s inaccessible to non-magical people. What a business opportunity that would be.”

“Yes, well, while your grandfather holds out a conversation with his newspaper about the merits of a wide spread and fully accessible line of magical buses why don’t you and I have a walk in the garden, Junior?”

His father had risen from his seat at the table; Tom looked up at him and nodded before rising as well.

“So we’ll be taking the Knight Bus then, father?”

“There’s no reason not to if it’s really so much faster; taking the car would just be wasting a day.” He said. “Do they take Muggle currency?”

“I don’t see why they shouldn’t.” Zahhak was stretched out on a flat stone and hissed a lazy greeting as they emerged into the garden. Rogan was asleep under a box wood bush, only his tail visible outside the glossy dark green leaves. Tom fidgeted with the cuff of his sleeve and averted his gaze to the sweet smelling butterfly bush they were passing by. “Father, I’ve been meaning to ask: since we’re going to be going to Gringotts to exchange money regardless, I was wondering if you could, if it’s possible for you to do so, become my legal guarding in the Magical world as well? I think it’s currently Dumbledore since he’s the one who ‘introduced me to the community’ but I’d really rather it be you.”

“If that’s what you want, Junior, and they allow me I’d be glad to.” Over the course of his stay at his family’s manor Tom had slowly been getting used to the casual affectionate touches that he’d often receive, and now found it difficult not to subconsciously lean into the hand his father used to comb imaginary tangles out of his hair. “They don’t mistreat you at Hogwarts, do they?”

Blue eyes peered up at him questioningly, meeting with a concerned grey gaze; Tom Senior had come to a stop beneath the shade of a drooping willow tree about halfway between the manor and
the far edge of the garden. Tom’s head only came up to about halfway up his father’s chest.

“When we first met, you were in tears and I know from what the Matron told me that you’d just returned from school. I didn’t want to ask before because I felt you weren’t comfortable enough to answer at the time but I was hoping that now you’d be more willing to discuss it."

He knew that his father was only asking out of genuine concern, that nothing he said would be taken as weakness or something to be used against him in the future, but it was still difficult for Tom to make himself speak. “Aside from Dumbledore, the Professors all treat me professionally. Many are quite fond of me, actually.”

“And the other students?”

Tom shook his head and shifted closer. “I’m in a…uniquely unfortunate position.” He spoke delicately, as if the words were formed from broken glass. “Like I said, serpents and Parselmouths—like my ancestor, the founder of my House—are looked down as Dark and evil and are heavily mistrusted by the Magical community at large. So are the members of Snake House in general. And many of those within Slytherin—over ninety five percent of them—are either descended of Pureblood families or have a magical name to protect them from too much scrutiny: they’re Pureblood supremacists in many cases. The other three Houses—Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw—are prejudiced against Slytherin and either refuse to associate with or go out of their way to attack its members. And if you’re like me—the ‘Mudblood’ of Slytherin; poor, formerly orphaned and with a blatantly Muggle name—you’re attacked from all sides, day after day without the slightest reprieve. And it was made all the worse for me by the fact that I’d actually allowed myself to think I might have been accepted by them…so when I was treated the same as I had been at the Orphanage…”

He didn’t resist when his father pulled him close, resting his head against his chest and focusing on his breathing in an effort to prevent the burn in his eyes from evolving into tears.

“Are there other Magical schools that you could go to?”

“Two: Durmstrang, in Norway, and Beauxbatons, in France. But Hogwarts is in my blood; if I can revive and take the title of Lord Slytherin upon my majority I’ll own a fourth of the school by birthright. I will not allow a gaggle of buffoons who will lose their magic entirely in another few generations to drive me away from my ancestral grounds! I refuse to show such weakness; by the end of my seventh year I’ll have made them respect me.”

Tom felt, more than he heard, his father sigh. “If that’s really the course of action you feel is best, Junior, I won’t try to stop you.” He said. “Now, how about we head back inside and see about putting together that list?”
“You have the lists, Junior?”

“You, father.”

“And your homework, as well? We won’t be returning to the manor before you go back to Hogwarts.”

“Yes, father.” His son was beginning to sound a little bit exasperated now, clutching a small stack of very thick parchments in his arms as he headed down the stairs towards him. Over one of the many well-heeled and specially fitted outfits that he’d bought him when he’d first arrived in Little Hangleton he now wore a mildly faded and somewhat tattered black robe which could only be described as unflattering. Seeing him in the drab and depressing uniform from Wool’s had been bad, but this was terrible.

His wand was clutched in his left hand.

Tom pulled him under his arm as he reached the bottom of the stairs and ran his fingers through his hair; his son made a mildly annoyed huff but didn’t move away. “We’ll handle your wardrobe first, as soon as we’re done exchanging currency and seeing to the legality of switching your guardianship away from Dumbledore and over to me, if possible. You’re certain that you have everything you need?”

He was answered with a very annoyed huff in reply.

“I only want to make sure there isn’t something you’ve forgotten that you might need later, Junior. It’s a parent thing.”

“I’d appreciate it if that ‘parent thing’ was something you could stop.”

Tom snickered and allowed his son to slip away. “Your grandparents will join us in London in time to see you off at King’s Cross, but until then we’ll be on our own. Just you and me for the last week of break; you’ll have to show me around Diagon Alley.”

“I will.” He tried to cover up the eagerness in his voice but failed to do so completely. Junior all but trotted across the front room and yanked open the door. “Come on, father. Just because the trip to London won’t take more than half an hour doesn’t mean that we should tarry here! We don’t have all day!”

With that said he was out of the door and all but galloping towards the road.

Tom smiled to himself and followed him out, softly closing the front door behind him. While his back was turned a loud crack echoed across the manor’s sloping lawn, followed soon after by the hiss of exhaust and the creak of a badly oiled hinge. When he looked back towards the road he was met with the sight of Junior gazing up in mild surprise at what could only be the Knight Bus that he’d spoken of.

He’d never seen a bus like the one which was now sitting outside of the manor on the narrow country lane. It was towering three levels high, and seemed to sit lopsided on its chassee. Its windows were tinted to a degree which couldn’t possibly have been legal and its metal skin was painted a deep, dark violet; the color of liquid nightshade and dark winter nights.
As he dismounted the porch and hurried across the emerald carpet of the lawn the black sign plastered to the vehicle’s mighty side came into view: **ALL DISTINATIONS(NOTHING UNDERWATER)**.

He was nervous, Tom could never deny that, but he also felt the beginnings of a similar eagerness to what he could see plainly etched across his son’s young features. It was plain that Junior loved the magical world despite how he’d been treated by its other inhabitants, that it—his mother’s world—was the one to which he really belonged. To which he’d always belong.

Reading about it was one thing. Being around only one Wizard, his son, his family, was one thing. Daring to set foot into the Wizarding World at large, to jump feet first into the river of the unknown in the hopes that he could swim, and step into a situation where he’d be surrounded on all sides by people who, by Junior’s account, didn’t much like Muggles was entirely another. And a very daunting prospect indeed.

But he’d accepted this, and everything else, as part of his duty to his son when he’d first realized that he’d inherited Merope’s magic and had taken him in regardless. He couldn’t keep Junior from the other world, he knew that, and he also knew that without him taking this final step they could never be as close as he would have wanted.

As he reached where his son stood a man, reed thin scruffy looking and dressed in a uniform that was the same color as the bus that he worked on, came bounding down the steps to greet them. Tawny hair protruded haphazardly from beneath his cap and very large ears jutted from the sides of his head at an angle which seemed almost asymmetrical. His face was long and decorated with peach fudge and a star map of pimples.

“Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded Witch or Wizard. Just stick out your wand hand, step on board and we can take you anywhere you want to go. My name is Stan Shunpike and I will be your conductor this fine morning.”

“If we weren’t aware of how to flag down the bus do you think that you’d be parked here?”

“Now Junior,” he tried and failed to suppress a smirk, “be nice. Riddle: Tom. Both of us.”

Stan seemed surprised and looked between them. “Both of you are Tom?”

“I just said that.”

“Now father, be nice.”

He squeezed his son’s shoulder gently but didn’t otherwise acknowledge his mimicry. “You’re able to get us to London, then? To *The Leaky Cauldron*?”

*The Leaky Cauldron, you said?”* he tapped the side of the growling vehicle just under the sign that Tom had seen earlier. “That’s easy. We go anywhere in Great Britain. Anywhere without water, we do. Any luggage with you?” he leaned a bit further forward and looked down at their feet. Seeing nothing, he rocked back on the heels of his scuffed and dusty shoes. “Climb aboard, then.”

“One final thing, Mr. Shunpike—”

“Mr. Shunpike is my father; I don’t look old enough for that, do I?”

“Do you take Muggle currency or not?”

“For a bit of a higher fee, yeah. Conversion costs, you know? Goblins don’t like ‘useless’ paper, see.
They like metal: gold and silver especially.” He said. “Hard to think that you’re a Muggle, though. With how you’re acting I’d have painted you a Pureblood in Muggle clothes. Not that we get many of those on here. That’ll be twenty sickles…er, five pounds eighty five pence.”

He pulled six pounds from his wallet and shoved them into the younger man’s somewhat sweaty hand. “Keep the change. Now, are you going to move so that we can get on the bus or do we have to walk to London?”

“Well, you could walk if you want but why would you do that when you’ve already paid?” he sidled slightly to the left and out of their way. “Hope aboard.”

Junior was up the stairs before he could even blink, likely in a desperate bid to get away from the man, and Tom couldn’t blame him for it. Grumbling under his breath about the pervasive impertinence of public transportation workers which seemed to be one of the few things spanning both sides of the gap between worlds, he followed.

The interior of the bus was much larger than the exterior would suggest and was filled with a number of unsecured brass benches which, oddly, looked as if they’d been tossed around like toy furniture in a doll house which someone had tossed down a flight of stairs. Heavy velvet curtains hung across the windows, pinned back to either side to let in the light of the late morning sun. Junior had seated himself in one of the benches near the back and was sending the slightly younger boy of the red headed family that were the only other passengers at the time the evil eye.

Unfortunately the conductor trailed behind him as he walked down the aisle to sit beside his son.

“The Knight Bus also offers a few other odds and ends; a copy of the latest Daily Prophet, a toothbrush in any color of your choice(usually for the nocturnal passengers but I always ask during the day just to be sure; we do get some odd ones: clean freaks, see?) a hot water bottle or a cup of hot chocolate.”

“Don’t order anything that you don’t want to end up covered in.” The red headed young man in a pair of horn-rimmed glasses called to them from across the bus. “Travel by the Knight Bus is a little bit…rough.”

“Oh, come off it Percy, you’re no fun. Tom and Tom here ought to have the right proper Knight Bus experience.”

“I want no part of being covered in any hot liquids; burns and stains don’t strike me as a pleasant time.” He growled. “And neither my son nor I have any immediate need for a tooth brush!”

“Right then; you’re both headed to the same place so, as long as no one else flags us down, there shouldn’t be any more intervening stops.” Stan went back to the front of the bus and sat back down in the second empty armchair beside the driver, an old man wearing a very thick pair of glasses and said “take her away, Ern.”

Tom turned his head to look out of the window beside them, expecting to see the familiar countryside slowly roll away as they proceeded forward down the road. Instead, there was an enormous BANG! and he landed hard on the floor, the benches-both occupied and not-shrieking against the ground as they moved and clattering loudly together with a sound like metal thunder.

Fighting against the inertia of the wild ride he peeled himself off of the floor, clawing his way back up onto the bench where they’d been sitting. Junior was clinging on to one of the curtains like a life line, pale and horrified as an entirely different rain swept street sailed passed outside.
What was happening? Where were they? Had they really just…teleported with a bus?

“So you’re a Muggle, then?” he looked over at the sound of the voice emanating from his left; the father of the other family was looking at him with an almost obsessive interest in his eyes. “I’d love it if you and I could speak in depth some time; I really find it fascinating, how the lot of you manage to get by without any magic at all. And your technology! I’m trying to finagle a car into having the ability to fly but haven’t gotten it to quite work right.” Seeming to realize he hadn’t introduced himself yet the man stuck out his hand, nearly hitting him in the nose. “Arthur Weasley.”

BANG!

Tom was torn from the bench yet again and almost toppled over. They were above the snowline now, rushing through the narrow, curving streets of a mountainous village, and everything was white. People were walking about on the street as if not in imminent danger of being rundown by a giant purple bus and entire buildings, covered in snow, were leaping out of the way.

BANG!

Tom’s feet left the ground. His back collided hard with the back of the bus. Junior, perched haphazardly on one of the benches with the boy-pale beneath his freckles and shock of red hair-and a girl who must have been his sister and all three looking like refugees hiding in a boat from some terrible storm slammed to a stop beside him with a resonant clang! It was bright again outside but from his current position he couldn’t see much more than that.

BANG!

He was at the front of the bus on all fours, the conductor peering curiously down at him from his seat.

“Are you certain this is safe?” he demanded, terrified they’d crash at any moment and beginning to feel sick. They were driving along a sheer cliff, the ocean crashing hundreds of feet below.

“Safe? Of course it’s safe! Haven’t had a single accident in about a week.”

“What?”

BANG!

On his back, again, but on a bench this time. The red headed man was still talking to him as if they weren’t being thrown about like ragdolls. Something about a toaster? He didn’t really know or care to listen.

They were in London, now. Barreling through the city’s crowded streets at breakneck speeds. Racing between pedestrians. Flying over curves and around corners. Cars, light posts, telephone booths and trash cans all throwing themselves out of the way.

Up ahead, blocking the road, were two cherry red double deckers. They were going to hit them. There was no way they could avoid it now. No time left to turn. The other two adults and their three older boys didn’t react to the impending threat at all but Tom raced to grab his son, to protect him the best he could, before the impact.

“Tight squeeze, Ern!”

As if the bus were made of elastic or gelatin it compressed around them. Crumpling inward until it was barely wide enough for him to sit facing towards the front, one shoulder brushing each of the
wings. Time seemed to slow as they squeezed passed the other buses. And then...

**BANG!** Followed swiftly by a high shriek of breaks. The bench that they were on flew to the front of the bus, caught on another bench and tipped both father and son bodily onto the sidewalk outside.

*The Leaky Cauldron.* Shunpike said brightly, leaping down the stairs after them. “Ey, Tom and Tom, you wouldn’t mind saying hello to Tom for me while you’re in there?”

“Now, Stan, I don’t think they’re in any mood to be doing you any favors after you’ve dropped them on their heads.” A woman’s voice, followed by a woman’s hand which hauled him to his feet. She was taller and thinner than the woman on the bus, her hair longer and sleeker and closer to ruby than orange in color. A young bespectacled boy of maybe eleven clung shyly to the green robes she wore.

Tom cringed away, quickly wiping the dirt and bits of rock from his front. The woman’s attention was drawn by the movement of his recoil and there was offence, as well as something sharper, in her eyes.

“My father is a bit skittish of women.” Junior supplied quickly, stepping in. “It isn’t anything about you in particular, aside from your gender, that led him to do that.”

He cleared his throat quickly and straightened his collar. “I apologize, Miss, if I’ve offended you. It’s simply that…thank you for helping us.”

Much to his relief her green eyes warmed and she no longer resembled a lioness poised on the cusp of clawing off his face. She smiled at him and nodded as her son shuffled a bit further behind her. “Of course. Neither of you are hurt?”

He looked down at his son; he hid his scraped hand behind his back and shook his head but the woman caught sight of that movement as well and pulled a small glass vial from her robes.

“May I see your hand, dear?”

His son glanced away but he nudged him gently. “Go on, Junior. No point in leaving it alone, even if it is only a small cut.”

Junior frowned but slowly extended his hand, allowing the woman to gently take it and pour a few drops onto the wound; it fizzled and smoked as it closed.

“There you are.”

“Thank you.”

“Yes, thank you for helping my son.” He wasn’t hiding behind Junior, he just happened to now be standing behind him.

The raven boy released his mother’s robes as the other family emerged from the bus and rushed towards the freckled red-head. “Ron!”

“Have a good day and please excuse me.” With a final cordial smile she went to join her son in greeting the other group. “How was the trip? James and Sirius are already inside; Remus will be joining us later.”

“Well, Junior, shall we head inside?” he asked him, motioning towards the building. His son nodded and they began to walk towards it; at first their destination appeared to be nothing more than an abandoned shop front, but then his vision shimmered and the pub revealed itself. Its rusted out sign
“Creaked in the wind.

“The Purebloods boycott the Knight Bus for being ‘Muggle-esque’ when they should be boycotting it because it’s a bloody death trap!” Junior hissed as the bus screeched away behind them. “I never want to ride that thing again!”

With one hand on his son’s shoulder and the other reaching for the door Tom nodded; he didn’t think he’d ever been able to so wholeheartedly agree with anything else in his life. “Neither do I.”
The Leaky Cauldron, Diagon Alley and Gringotts

According to Bathilda Bagshot and the passage he’d read on it in the first volume of *A History of Magic* ‘any Wizard would tell you that the oldest pub in London was *The Leaky Cauldron* on Charing Cross Road’. He didn’t really know quite what he’d expected the place to look like-Bright colors? Flashing lights? Odd animals? Indoor weather, perhaps?-but it certainly wasn’t this.

For a supposedly famous establishment it was very dark and shabby, even from the point of view of a common man, but had a sort of rustic warmth to it as well. Despite having to crush the knee jerk aristocratic reaction to check his shoes for grime there was something oddly welcoming about the place.

The windows were paned, small and placed high on the walls and the sunlight which flooded through them from outside cut prismatic shafts of white through the dust and wood smoke hung thick in the air. The interior was warmed by the low burning fire in the hearth and smelled of tobacco, rich bodied whiskey and good English pub food. The large room was packed wall to wall with people-all Witches and Wizards dressed either in robes or bizarre ensembles no doubt meant to allow them to blend in on the streets outside-and buzzed with the low drone of laughter and pleasant conversation. The group from outside brushed passed them, walking over to a table where two men sat with another younger and far more rambunctious boy.

Despite the tense cloud of war time hanging over the city outside and the near constant threat of another round of German bombs the atmosphere here was light and cheerful. He strongly suspected that they had some way to keep themselves separate from what they doubtlessly considered to be a strictly Muggle war.

But hadn’t their paper mentioned something about a ‘Dark Wizard causing chaos’? Yet there was no concern? Perhaps he wasn’t as big of a threat as first would seem? Reported on only for want of anything else to cover?

“Hello, you two. The names Tom; I’m the innkeeper and land lord.” A dirty blonde man with dark eyes walked up to them, a cloth-busily wiping out a set of glasses-floating along behind him. “Welcome to *The Leaky Cauldron*.”

“My son and I are here to do his school shopping and were hoping to speed the last week of his break staying here before heading to King’s Cross.” He said. “Would you happen to have a room open for two?”

“One room for two won’t be difficult; even when the pub is this busy the inn tends to have a bit of space open at all times.” The innkeeper pulled an ancient looking registry book out from under the small desk which stood beside the door, looking rather out of place surrounded by a pub. “Name?”

“Riddle.”

“Riddle: room for two. That’ll be twenty two galleons four sickles and twenty six knuts a night for a total of one hundred and fifty six galleons and eleven knuts at the end of the week.” He said. “Will that be paid now or on check out?”

“It would be best for us to pay on check out; you must understand, I’m Muggle, and we still need to stop by Gringotts to exchange pounds for Wizarding Currency.”

“To be paid at check out.” The innkeeper noted that down beside his name and set the quill beside
the book. “Right then, follow me. Yours will be room thirteen.”

They followed the blonde innkeeper-minus the glass and cloth, now-up the stairs and onto the first floor. They stopped at a door which was halfway down the hall.

“Here you are.” The man handed him the key with a smile. “Maid service comes once a day just after noon. Board isn’t included in the cost of the room, nor are any drinks you may have down at the bar. Entrance to the Alley is through the courtyard out back; will you be needing assistance?”

“No.” Junior said, the politeness in his voice edged by annoyance. “I’ve been in to the Alley before and know the pattern to open the gate.”

“Alright, then. I’ll leave the two of you to it, unless there’s anything else that you need…”?

“I don’t believe that we do.” He told him. “Thank you.”

The innkeeper nodded at them and shuffled back down the stairs. Tom slid the key that he’d been given into the door and pushed it open, allowing his son to walk in ahead of him.

Unlike the dingy pub on the floor below them might suggest the room in which they now found themselves was very clean and well cared for and smelled of cloves and fresh laundry. Two very comfortable looking beds dominated the space, accompanied by highly polished oak furniture. The window was cracked open, allowing in the occasional summer breeze and the boisterous sounds of the Alley below into the room.

All in all it didn’t look all that different from what Tom would have expected in a Muggle hotel, baring the lack of even the barest traces of a telephone or television. His son had claimed the bed closest to the window as his own and now knelt atop the comforter with his feet sticking off the edge, arranging the papers he’d brought with them.

He moved to the window and, after pushing it the rest of the way open, leaned out. Directly below them was a small and chilly looking courtyard; beyond the wall that ringed it in sprawled the riot of color that was Diagon Alley.

“Well, Junior,” he ducked back in through the window, “shall we be going?”

Snatching up both his wand and the two lists which outlined the supplies he would need for the coming year his son leapt to his feet and rushed excitedly from the room without bothering to answer. Smiling to himself and fondly shaking his head, Tom followed him out and back down the stairs.

The little courtyard actually looked worse up close than it had from a distance, if such a thing were even possible. The only things which occupied the area in any semblance of permanence were a trashcan and a number of sad looking weeds. He watched as Junior used his wand to tap the bricks. With a low grumbling rumble the wall gave way into a massive arching gate.

They stepped into the alley at large, the sea of people parting around them like water around a large stone dropped into a gushing river. Junior had brightened considerably, his dark eyes shining like a pair of precious stones as he turned back to look at him.

“Welcome to Diagon Alley, father.”

A stack of cauldrons of all sorts towered haphazardly outside the nearest storefront, sunlight glinting off copper and brass and pewter and silver and illuminating the different signs which hung from them, reading such things as ‘self-stirring’ and ‘collapsible’.
People were running about in all directions, crowding windows and pointing at things. Talking and laughing. Discussing the merits of different models of broomsticks and Quidditch teams—whatever Quidditch was—and haggling over the listed prices of such things as Murtlap tentacles and Dragon liver. An orchestral symphony of strange sounds ranging from hoots to howls clambered out through the open door of a shop called The Magical Menagerie. There were shops selling recognizable things, such as telescopes and robes and old fashioned measuring scales, and shops selling things that he’d never seen before and couldn’t name such as a variety of spindly silver instruments and an artifact that looked like the bastard child of a bird spider and a pair of pruning shears.

Gringotts was, by far, the tallest building in the alley and gleamed snowy white in the late summer sun. Goblins stood astride the burnished bronze doors, holding spears and dressed in uniforms of scarlet and gold. They were about three heads shorter than he was with clever pointed faces and unnaturally long hands and feet and bowed as they passed, coming face to face with another set of doors.

These were solid silver and had words engraved upon them in an elegant hand:

\[
\text{Enter, stranger, but take heed} \\
\text{Of what awaits the sin of greed,} \\
\text{For those who take, but do not earn,} \\
\text{Must pay most dearly in their turn.} \\
\text{So if you seek beneath our floors} \\
\text{A treasure that was never yours,} \\
\text{Thief, you have been warned, beware} \\
\text{Of finding more than treasure there.}
\]

Clearly they took security quite seriously here. A good quality to have in a bank. Respectable.

Beyond the silver doors was a cavernous marble hall filled with hundreds more Goblins hard at work managing the bank’s daily routine. Junior made for the counter without missing a beat and he followed.

The Goblin sitting behind the first free teller’s station leaned forward in its chair, long taloned fingers clenching around the lip of the desk with a concerning clicking sound.

“My father and I are here for the transfer of my magical guardianship, if such is possible, and for a currency exchange.” He said. “We would prefer to handle the legal matter first.”

“My well.” The Goblin said, motioning to another guard. “Follow Koggrat; he’ll take you to the office of one of the account managers.”

Koggrat led them both across the bank and opened the door of one of the offices for them, barking a gruff command to “wait here” before promptly bowing out. The office, like the larger room outside, was high ceilinged and upholstered entirely in white marble. The desk was made of solid gold.

The aristocrat and his son sat down in the chairs opposite the garish piece of furniture to wait. After fifteen minutes had passed another door opened and a third Goblin, this one entirely bald and dressed in silver, entered.
"I am Barghast.” His tone was clipped and cold. “It’s my understanding that the two of you are here for the transfer of magical guardianship away from the current guardian and to…?"

“Me,” he said. “I’m his father.”

The Goblin grunted and looked to his son. “Name?”

“Riddle.” Junior said. “Tom, Marvolo.”

Barghast snapped his fingers and, with a popping sound and a bright flash of light, a scroll of parchment appeared. The Goblin unrolled it and quickly read over the contents.

“The current magical guardian of Tom Marvolo Riddle is Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Deputy Headmaster and Transfiguration Professor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He petitioned it be so as he was the inductor of Tom Marvolo Riddle into the British Magical community.” He read off. “A Blood Lock was placed upon it.”

“A Blood Lock?” Tom repeated, looking to his son for any hints of recognition and, when none came, looking back to Barghast. “What does that mean?”

“It means that the transfer of the guardianship of Tom Marvolo Riddle can only occur if blood relation is proved.” The Goblin lowered the parchment. “For a small fee Gringotts is able to perform a Line Test in house. If the results are supportive of your claim then the paperwork for change of guardianship can be filed with the Ministry of Magic by close of business today.”

“Is there any way to ensure that Dumbledore doesn’t hear of this?” his son demanded.

“A note of discretion can be attached, for another small fee.”

“The fact that I’m a Muggle doesn’t present a problem?”

Barghast looked at him for a long while, seeming to measure him, before he spoke. “It isn’t ideal but there is no strict legal precedent against it. And such things are of no concern to Gringotts or the Goblin Nation. Will you pay the fees?”

“If the Line Test can be done immediately I’m willing to pay whatever you want.”

The glint in the Goblin’s eye at that was really quite frightening. Another flash of light and fizzle of magic and two more pieces of blank parchment and a dagger appeared on the desk.

“Both of you will prick your ring fingers and put eight droplets of blood onto one of these parchments. If you are blood related, this test will reveal it beyond any dispute and the Blood Lock will be unable to withstand your claim.”

Again Tom glanced at his son; Junior was staring at the dagger in clear concern. He reached out and gently squeezed his shoulder, lifting the blade with his other hand.

“It’s alright. We’ll do this together.” The blade was so sharp that he almost didn’t feel it break the skin. Blood instantly welled up on the tip of his finger. He passed the blade to his son, who bit his lip but did the same.

Both held their hands out over the separate parchments. With each drop absorbed into the scrolls ink spread and letters spiraled outwards. Once no more words could form, the Goblin picked up both parchments to examine them. Though most of his attention was focused on helping Junior stop the bleeding, he noticed Barghast stiffen and put the parchments down.
“I’m afraid that the filing of paperwork with the Ministry of Magic will have to wait; please excuse me for a moment.” He said as he rose from his chair behind the golden desk. “I must arrange for you an immediate audience with the Goblin King.”
The Dragon's Long Shadow

Chapter Notes

This took forever; sorry for the delay.

“I take it that receiving an audience with the Goblin King isn’t a normal occurrence.”

“No.” Tom said. “I don’t believe it is, though I’ve only ever been here once before.”

Not content with waiting for Barghest to return and take them to the Goblin King to receive answers, Tom leaned forward and pulled the parchment labeled with his name over. Quickly glancing down the list of information which had come up, searching for anything which possibly could have set the Goblin off.

It couldn’t have been his status as the Heir of Slytherin. Sure, it was startling to a Wizard but the fact that whatever fortune they might have had was long since gone meant that it wouldn’t have meant all that much to a Goblin.

So why?

Name: Tom Marvolo Riddle Jr.

Parents: Merope Riddle nee Gaunt (mother)

Tom Edward Riddle (father)

Grandparents: Marvolo Gaunt (mother’s side)

Bavmorda Gaunt (mother’s side)

Thomas Garwin Riddle (father’s side)

Marie Ellen Riddle (father’s side)

Immediate Relatives: Morfin Gaunt (mother’s side)

Hereditary Abilities: Parseltongue

Drachenzauberei (Runic translation)
What? Tom almost dropped the paper as well. Lefay? Heir Lefay? From his father’s side? But how? His father was a Muggle; his grandparents were both Muggles; they’d never had so much as a drop of magical blood in their entire family tree before him. And the Lefay Line had died out centuries before. He’d studied them briefly during his search for his own familial relations and had easily memorized their tree; simple to do when there were only three members.

He was beginning to understand why Barghast had felt the need to involve the Goblin King.

“What do you mean?”

Tom glanced at his father and shook his head, setting both papers back down on top of the desk. “It’s better we let them explain. I’m not completely certain what’s happening either.”

The door through which Barghast had originally entered opened again and the Goblin re-emerged, accompanied by another pair of guards. Given that Goblins were typically inexpressive creatures— their faces set into grimaces of varying severity according to their mood. Tom couldn’t hope to interpret anything from him.

“I understand, now, why we’re going to be speaking with the Goblin King. Though I’m not certain if this is going to be a pleasant experience.”

The door through which Barghast had originally entered opened again and the Goblin re-emerged, accompanied by another pair of guards. Given that Goblins were typically inexpressive creatures—their faces set into grimaces of varying severity according to their mood. Tom couldn’t hope to interpret anything from him.

“Ranlok and Agrakk will show you to the cart; you’ll be given the great privileges of setting foot in the Goblin Nation’s city, down far below the bank, and speaking with his High Majesty.” He informed them, tone noticeably less clipped then before. “I will remain here and shall handle the filing of the appropriate paperwork for Tom Marvolo Riddle’s change in guardianship to his father, Tom Edward Riddle.” Barghast all but shoved them out the door the very instant that they rose from their chairs. “Swiftly, both of you. Do not keep the High Majesty waiting!”

The door of the office which they were pushed through clicked shut behind them. They now stood in a dim, sloping hallway with the two guards.

“Come with us.” One said; Tom couldn’t tell if it was Ranlok or Agrakk. “The cart is this way.”

Their footsteps echoed off the walls and ceiling of the narrow tunnel. They walked for what felt like an eternity, going down far lower than any of the mine carts which went down to the vaults of Gringotts.
Unlike the tracks above, which Tom had taken before, these were made of gold and silver and the carts were studded with a heavy skin of precious gems. One of the guards clambered into the cart ahead of them. Tom followed. His father, after peering cautiously into the gaping maw of darkness ahead, climbed in as well.

A lever was pulled, releasing the breaks, and with a low shriek of the metal wheels the cart began to move forward. Creeping, slowly, down the rails and into darkness.

And then the ground dropped out from beneath them and they were falling. Wet, frigid air rushing passed so quickly that it drowned out all other sound. There was no maze of twisting passageways this time. No jerking left and right and left again. No hills and forks. No torches or fire breathing guardians or massive underground lakes.

Just an endless, nearly vertical fall.

And then the rails straightened out abruptly, throwing them together like ragdolls as they shot from the darkness and into the well-lighted streets of an underground city. Blinking water from his streaming eyes Tom attempted to look around but between the dryness of his eyes the flickering light and the glare of gold and jewels he didn’t catch sight of much in any detail.

The cart finally came to a stop outside of a towering castle, its jagged spires and sharply vaulted arches looking high out of the subterranean shadows; reaching up and away into the dark. Their escort, unbothered by the wild ride they’d just endured, hopped out of the cart and started up the stairs. Legs wobbling and hearts thudding, both father and son clambered out as well and followed.

Marble frosted the castle’s floor like ice. Glowing crystals dripped from overhead in geological chandeliers. The palace guards held spears of gold and swords of silver and the liveries slung around their necks were formed from emeralds and diamonds the size of a baby’s fist.

The Goblin King himself, dressed in lavish fabrics and gleaming metal, lounged on a throne of onyx and opal. His long spindly fingers were weighed down with rings bearing jewels the size of sparrow eggs and his long dark hair was plaited with gold.

“I’d begun to wonder just how long it would be before I heard the name ‘Riddle’ spoken in my halls again.” He said, rising from his throne and spreading his arms with the flap of heavy silk and satin. “Welcome, Dragon Heart and Serpent Tongue, to the Capital City of the Goblin Nation. The Fey are long lived creatures, waiting is something we know well, but I’ll admit I’ve grown impatient awaiting the offered chance of the inevitable reintroduction of dear Morgan’s line into the Magical World. And having both a potential Lord and a potential Heir at once is even better than I had dared to hope.”

From the corner of his eye Tom could see his father peering around them, almost as if expecting to catch sight of someone else lurking behind one of the pillars that the Goblin King might have been talking about. “I’m afraid I don’t understand what you mean, Sir. I’m a Muggle.”

“Yes.” The Goblin King practically purred the word. He was taller than the others, taller than most men, and stood at a willowy eight feet. “And no. You are a Muggle of their creation, robbed of the power you could have had by a now abolished practice of punishment. Yet you still have a form of magic, partially awakened due to,” the papers reappeared with a loud pop and he quickly scanned them “the meddling of the Witch Merope Gaunt and resultant long term contact with the Magical Community. You’ll wish to see a Mind Healer, as well; exposure like what you’ve had to Amortentia is hardly a laughing matter.” He tossed the pages carelessly to one side of the throne and they drifted to the floor with a limp flopping sound. “But it isn’t Human Magic. Drachenzauberei. Dragon Magic. Carried by the Dragon blood in your veins, long dormant and passed down through
your Line by the ancestor who stole it for himself.”

He smiled, revealing rows of sharp yellow teeth, and bounced on his heels. It was a disturbing sight which Tom dearly hoped he’d never see again.

“You will cause great changes, Dragon Heart. Both you and your son. I can feel them beginning to reverberate already, starting with the foiling of a meddlesome Wizard and the reopening of the oldest and largest vault Gringotts has ever tendered. So many tomes, so many artifacts, so much gold thought lost to time. There’s nothing that my people love more than gold!” His long hands clasped excitedly together as he bounded towards them; Tom resisted the urge to take cover behind his father. “Come. We shall head up to the Lefay Vault and get things moving again. On the way, I’ll tell you the story of your magical ancestor whose name was stricken from the public historical records on account of his many crimes.”

As they followed the madly cackling Goblin King back out of the castle and into yet another cart, Tom couldn’t help but feel grateful for the comforting pressure of his father’s hand on his shoulder.

“The great grandson of Morgan Lefay was named Kieran, and from a young age he was a child obsessed with power and control; he didn’t care if it was over Muggles or Magicals. He dreamed of being King as Arthur had been in Merlin’s time and turned to Dark Magic to achieve his ends. He studied and slaved for many years under the tutelage of Morgan herself, until she died, and various Dark Creatures who could be bothered to bend an ear to a young Wizard and when he reached the age of twenty five he believed that he was strong enough to enact his goals. To gain command of first the Magical and then the Muggle communities. With numerous followers driven mad by promises of power and an army of Dark Creatures behind him Kieran rebelled. And failed.”

Traveling uphill wasn’t nearly as terrifying as going downhill was. The cart rattled loudly beneath them but Tom was too focused on the tale that they were being told to notice.

“With his army of zealots and monsters scattered Kieran, wounded and with his wand broken, was captured and brought before his peers for trial. Found guilty and to be too much of a threat to the order of their world as they understood it he was condemned to a punishment so cruelly severe that it has since been abolished the world over; all traces of the necessary ritual to preform it erased. His core was torn from his body and destroyed and he was abandoned in the forests of the North, reduced to a Muggle and barely alive. But not all of his supporters had abandoned him: he was rescued by the Unseelie Court and nursed back to health by their Queen.”

The cart leveled out and swiftly zoomed around a corner before coming to a stop at the bottom of a stone staircase. They disembarked and began to trudge upwards.

“Furious over what had been done to him and swearing revenge against the Witches and Wizards of Britain, Kieran slowly recovered and, when his strength had fully returned, set out to somehow regain his power. He sought a method, any method, and the Unseelie Queen was happy to provide him just such an avenue. During this time there was a breed of Dragon known as the Hebridean Fiendclaw which lived in the area; over the course of the decade which followed they were driven to extinction by Keiran, who drank their blood in a series of dark rituals and transformed himself into something no longer recognizable as human. He used his stolen power and warped appearance to trick the Muggles into warfare with the Magicals, instigating the period now known as the Witch Trials.”

They had reached the top of the stairs now and started across a large open room hemmed in by a ring of pillars. The stone floor was scorched in places and covered in claw marks and something growled in the far darkness.
“Muggle religion is a strange thing and their relationship with the imagined beings they call ‘Demons’ is an odd and complicated one. They were viewed both as instruments of purest evil and as assistants, at times, to Humanity. This was something which Kieran preyed upon, convincing the Muggles that the Witches and Wizards were in league with their ‘Devil’. Offering himself and his services to lead them, posing before the eyes of the public as a Magister and taking the false surname of ‘Riddle’. The direct fighting claimed many lives on both sides, and the suspicion and farce trials claimed even more, and though in the end Kieran was killed the damage had been done. The Statue of Secrecy was drawn up and the two worlds separated from one another. Kieran had had a child before his death with a Muggle woman and to that child passed his stolen magic; they attempted to seal the boy’s powers away for fear of him becoming what his father was but only succeeded in forcing his magic into a state of…hibernation. One which lasted generations. In the wake of what happened, Kieran Lefay and any mention of the Riddle Line were redacted from public knowledge.”

They’d reached another narrow passageway. Lit by torches, the damp walls shimmering with the beads of water sweated from the stone, it led to a massive metal door etched with glowing runes.

“You’re human and un-afflicted by such things as Lycanthropy so you can’t legally be considered a creature, but you don’t have a hard magical core like your son does so you can’t be considered a Wizard either. Your magic is loose, in your blood and in your bones and in your flesh; you don’t fit any known parameter for them. So, by default, you’re a Muggle. A complicated explanation for what can almost be considered a paradox of sorts. And we can’t know how much power you’ll have until your magic has fully ‘bloomed’; you may experience small changes in appearance during this time. Nothing too overt. And a partnership with us is highly recommended: you’ll need aid in time, as it’s inevitable that some in power today will see you as a threat.”

The Goblin King rested his right hand against the door and the Runes flashed brightly. A loud clank and the whir of a lock swiftly followed before the great metal bulwark swung open with a low and eerie groan. A snap of his fingers sent flames racing along the torches inside, revealing the towering mountains of coins and precious stones contained inside. Tom had never seen so many riches and even his father, who’d grown up around money, looked entirely shocked by the sight of it all. There were shelves full of ancient tomes and scrolls. Tables of dusty potion phials filled with multicolored liquids. Artifacts of all kinds, almost all of them surely Dark in nature and many no doubt Goblin made surrounded them on all sides. Hung high on the wall was a charred black shield emblazed with the crest of a rampant dragon.

“An audit can be performed on all vaults and assets attached to your names and all artifacts of Goblin make will be given license for use to both you and your son, but any heirs he might produce will have to buy them back. Such a thing is quite generous of me; consider it a…gift to you as friends of the Goblin Nation.” He said. “Such will be acceptable to you?”

He nodded to his father in encouragement when he glanced down at him. Tom didn’t know what, exactly, the Goblin King hoped to gain from them but having the title ‘friend of the Goblins’ could only be useful. And denying him would only bring trouble. “Very acceptable. Thank you.”

“Marvelous!” His many rings flashed as he clapped his hands together. “Now, let’s see about the two of you claiming your respective Heir and Lordships. Muggles don’t have rings, do they?”

“We do have coat of arms rings but it’s a trend that’s begun going out of fashion.” He said. “Ours hasn’t left the safe in the manor in almost four generations. Is it needed?”

“Seems not.” Rather flippant. The Goblin King pulled a box from within the folds of his clothing. “First: the father. The Lordship ring of House Lefay. Upon claiming your Lordship you’ll be known in the Wizarding World as Lord Riddle-Lefay, and as the head of the revived branch of Britain’s
“I’m a Dragon.”

The lid of the box opened with a harsh snap. “Be a Dragon.”

The ring which sat inside of the box’s satin interior was a heavy thing of burnished silver inset with a Pidgeon blood ruby the size of his thumb nail. The Lefay Crest, the same as had been etched onto the shield, was embossed across it in white gold. His father pulled it free of the box and slipped it onto his finger; the band resized itself to fit snugly below his second knuckle.

“Congratulations, Lord Riddle-Lefay, on your return to the Magical World. Once the damage caused by your exposure to Amortentia has been dealt with the Goblin Nation will happily teach you how to ‘breathe fire’.” Dark eyes fixed on Tom and a shiver ran up his spine. Another box was pulled seemingly from nowhere and flipped open, revealing four separate small rings. “And now the son. The Heir to four Most Ancient and Noble Houses. The Serpent-Tongue.”

Just how, exactly, was he supposed to wear four Heir rings? Wasn’t there a strict code about which finger and which hand they were supposed to be on; everyone always seemed to be wearing the things the same way? Maybe he was meant to alternate them every four days? Or was he meant to simply choose one?

“Oh, yes, four Heir rings would present a mild difficulty. Allow me to help.”

Another snap of fingers and bright flash of light. By this point Tom would be very much glad to never encounter Goblin Magic again, but at least now the four Heir rings had been reduced to only one: the onyx, emerald, ruby and marble had combined into a black opal, the respective crests replaced with an ouroborus. As his father’s had, it adjusted itself to a proper fit promptly upon being worn.

“The corresponding crests will appear as you need them; while you do not, your ring will appear as is current. There are certain protections inherent in wearing such a ring as well; I’m sure you’ll find them quite useful.” That feral grin again. “Now, I believe the two of you have other business in Diagon Alley? Take as much of your money as you need; the rest is safe with us.”
The paperwork was on its way to being filed at the Ministry, the audit of the Lefay Vault and small handful of other assets attached to their names was underway and the Goblin King had sent them on their merry way with a magically expanded Moke skin bag filled with nearly the full contents of the United States’ Fort Nox jingling at his father’s belt like children sent to the corner store with their weekly allowance gained from doing chores. Had Tom not still been feeling rather blindsided by the revelation that he was descended from Morgan Lefay, that much of what he could do which was beyond the scope of Magical Law was because of dragon’s blood, he might have actually felt a bit offended by such a treatment.

Never mind the fact that, compared to the Goblin King, even Merlin was almost the equivalent of a toddler. It was small wonder that they’d been treated like children; he was an immortal!
Immortality. Living forever was still something which held appeal for Tom, though it had been considerably dampened by his father’s words on the matter. He had to admit, even in his desire that they’d been wise. Too much so for his liking.

“Dragon’s blood.” Tom heard his father mutter under his breath as they began heading down the stairs of the bank. “Dragon’s blood! Bloody hell, if that isn’t a surprise. And the only reason that any of it even came to light was the love potion. Merope…” He edged closer to him and pressed himself discreetly into his side, pulling his father back to reality. Tom Senior started slightly, then reached over and gently smoothed down his hair. “You and I will have to come up with some way by which to explain this to your grandparents, but we’ve all week to worry about such things. Shall we get started on your shopping, Junior?”

“Yes, father.” He said. “We should handle the matter of our wardrobes first; its best that we head to Twillfit and Tatting’s rather than Madam Malkin’s given your…mild but persistent Gynophobia.”

“You’re right, of course, Junior. That maybe the best course of action.” He cleared his throat. “And it is probably wisest of me to have at least a few sets of Wizarding clothing as I am a Lord now, isn’t it? Lead the way.”

Madam Malkin’s Robes For All Occasions would have made for a much shorter trip, as it was located in the North end of the alley way only a few storefronts down from Gringotts, but as it was the pair walked back down the length of the Alleyway and into the South End.

The storefront of Twillfit and Tatting’s was much less whimsical and brightly colored than its competitor, not doubt attempting to cut a more elegant and sophisticated image for the sake of the customer base they were attempting to play to: snobbish traditionalist Purebloods. Hopefully there wouldn’t be any of his fellow Slytherin year mates lurking inside, though on a day as busy as this one and this close to the start of new term that was highly unlikely. But enduring an attack on his blood status or parentage was worth avoiding having to explain to Madam Malkin precisely why one of the customers she was expected to size had backed himself into a corner and begun attempting to fend her off with a stool.

Hopefully the man wouldn’t go into too explosive a protective rage when the inevitable happened.

The small bell hanging over the entryway tinkled merrily, mirroring the tone of the one hung over the door of the Muggle clothing store back in Little Hangleton. Immediately inside the door, positioned so that they would be fully visible through the front window of the shop, was a wide array of designer witches hats in multiple colors. The interior of the shop was hot and dry, smelling of warm spices and various fabric care products.

They were approached by a man in a pair of deep blue robes. He was dark haired and had the sort of face which could be found on anyone between the ages of thirty and sixty. “Welcome to Twillfit and Tatting’s.” He said, sounding rather bored. “What can I do for you today?”

“I’d like a full wardrobe for both myself and my son, and new school robes for him as well.”

“Here at Twillfit and Tatting’s we’re committed to clothing excellence and we offer the latest trends in fashion in a variety of high end fabrics including silk, Egyptian cotton, and Dragon hide.” He flicked his rosewood wand with each word and a swatch of the corresponding fabric appeared in the air before them. “Which would you like?”

“All three.”

If you have money why not spend it? Still, Tom couldn’t fully stop himself from widening his eyes
in alarm. Dragon hide was incredibly expensive, even second hand.

“Would boots and gloves be included in this order? These would be Dragon hide by default.”

“Of course.”

“We have a number of different hides to choose from; Swedish Short Snout and Hungarian Horntail are best for boots, gloves and dueling robes. For more fashionable wear, Antipodean Opal Eye, Chinese Fireball and Welsh Green are preferred. If you’re looking for something more neutral, we recommend Hebridean Black or Norwegian Ridgeback.”

“I think a little bit of everything, for both of us, would be most called for.” He said. “Neutral colors, for me, with some reds and greens. As for my son, his wardrobe should be based largely around Slytherin colors.”

Another flick of his wand had a quill leaping up from the desk to attack an order form with ink. “Will you also be requiring any premade robes which can be refitted in the meantime?”

Well aware that his father would answer in the affirmative, Tom fiddled with one of the loose threads hanging from the threadbare sleeve of his robe. “A robe for my son. I’ll wait until the full wardrobe has been finished for myself.”

“Right then; why don’t you come with me, Sir, and allow me to take the necessary measurements while your son selects the robe that he wants?”

His father smiled at him in what was no doubt meant to be encouragement. “Choose whatever you’d like. I’ll be right over here.”

Despite his continued misgivings about exactly what being cornered by one of his year mates would lead to, Tom nodded and watched his father walk away. He cautiously surveyed his surroundings, noted the pale blonde hair of the family entering the store and quickly ducked between two of the aisles. Losing himself between folds of fabric and belling sleeves.

Once relatively certain that he couldn’t be easily stumbled upon Tom began examining the different cuts and colors surrounding him. He’d been there for almost fifteen minutes and had finally settled on a simple smoke grey robe when he felt a presence approaching from behind.

“Well, would you look at that; I told you that I smelled something, Draco.” The snide drawl was as instantly recognizable a trademark of the Malfoy family as their flowing manes of white blonde hair. Standing at the end of the aisle, maybe five feet away from him, was his year mate Abraxas and his younger brother Draco who’s long pointed face and scrunched expression made him look remarkably similar to a white ferret. “What are you doing here, Riddle? Twillfit and Tatting’s caters exclusively to the higher class; to real Wizards like me and my family. Orphaned Mudblood scum like you couldn’t even afford the scraps from Second Hand Robes.”

“What did you just call my son?” the hiss his father made very much sounded like it could have come from a Dragon. There was the shadow of a beast in his grey eyes as he prowled towards them down the aisle, anger radiating off him like waves of heat, and though with the light and the angle he couldn’t be sure the pupils of his eyes seemed to have sharpened from their usual rounded shape into partial slits. Dracon paled and scurried behind his brother but Abraxxas stood his ground and bared his teeth in a venomous sneer.

“I called him orphaned Mudblood scum, though it seems I was wrong about the orphaned part.” He said. “A shame, too. It was bad enough when he hadn’t been exposed to the influence of a filthy
Muggle. And for you to come storming over here as if your indignation means a bloody thing; the pair of you are nothing in my world!"

The older Malfoy brother really didn’t know when to shut his mouth and Tom didn’t think he’d ever seen his father so angry. The man looked about ready to spit a fireball that would put a Horntail to shame, on the verge of either verbally tearing the boy a new one or jumping on him physically, but before he could do either the silver head of a snake-tipped cane came down on his shoulder. The metal fangs pressing into him with near enough force to pierce fabric and skin.

“What is going on here?” Lucius Malfoy drew his words out into a lazy drone, his silver eyes as unforgiving as a harsh winter: the ice to his father’s protective fire. “How many times must I tell the pair not to associate with such…people? We’ve finished our business here and will return later to pick up Draco’s school robes; come along now.”

Both boys dipped their heads and went to their father’s side. The Malfoy patriarch pulled his cane back and made a show of not touching any of the portions which had come into contact with his clothes. Tom Senior quickly pulled him in and checked him over and, before the other family could move away, snarled “mind your children, or I’ll teach them the manners you neglected to.”

Lucius stopped and turned back, his frosted eyebrows raised into a mask of threatening surprise and his gloved hand resting on the handle of what Tom now realized was his wand. “I’m sorry. Was that a threat?”

“No.” He hissed. “That was a warning.”

“Very well. I’ll ‘mind my children’, as you’ve asked, if you take yours and go back to the world where you belong rather than invading ours.” With his final point made the Malfoy Head turned with the snap of his long hair and flounced back out the door with his sons in pursuit.

His father’s hands shook with the prompt retreat of adrenaline as he gently squeezed him. “Are you alright, Junior?” Tom just nodded and took comfort from the contact. He hadn’t realized it but his hand was still fisted in the sleeve of the robe that he’d been looking at. “Is this the one that you want?” Another nod. At the moment he wasn’t much in the mood for words. The man pulled the robe from the hanger, removed the one that he was wearing and then tenderly wrapped him in the new one. The silk felt soft against his skin and alternated between smoke grey and dark silver dependent on how the light fell across it. They had it sized appropriately to fit him within the span of another few moments and were told to return the next day for their wardrobes.

Sticking close to his father’s side, Tom stepped back out onto the streets of Diagon.

“Are you up to finish a bit of our shopping today or would you rather we retire back to our room in The Leaky Cauldron, Junior?” he asked.

“I’m up to finishing a bit of the shopping; we should handle my potion’s necessities, books and our owls today.” Tom said.

“And which stores should we patronize to find these?”

“Eeylop’s Owl Emporium would be the place to go for the owls, as A Magical Menagerie is more for…exotic pets. We can get all of the books at Flourish and Blott’s or Obscurus Books and the Potions necessities at Slug and Jigger’s Apothecary and Potage’s Cauldron Shop which we passed on our way in.” He said. “I’m not quite certain where most of them are, though. I got all of my supplies before now at Second Hand Books and Equipment.”
There was a brief tightening of his father’s features on mention of second hand supplies. “Well, we’ll just walk up and down the Alley until we find them.”

That was exactly what they ended up doing and, aside from a small incident in which he was jumped by a bushy haired to-be first year that bombarded him with questions at the speed of a flak gun, they made it to their final stop of the day without any real problems.

_Eeylop’s Owl Emporium_ was a small dark building on the North side of the Alley, filled with the sounds of hoots and screeches and the clamor of large feathered wings butting up against the metal bars of wise cages. Owls and their associated supplies surrounded them on all sides, Barred Owls in cages and Horned Owls on stands and an open bag of owl treats spilling onto the floor. The raven haired boy from earlier was also there, accompanied this time by his father and younger brother who was currently busying himself chasing a terrified and madly tweeting Scops Owl around the shop.

“Welcome to _Eeylop’s Owl Emporium_,” the witch working there chirped as she came out of the back, her arms laden with boxes and an owlet nesting in her hair. “Is there anything that I can help you with?”

Maybe it was the overall ridiculous nature of her appearance or the perpetually shocked expression of the ball of fluff perched on her head but for whatever reason his father didn’t seem particularly frightened of her. “My son and I are looking to purchase a pair of owls.”

“Is there any particular kind of owl that the two of you are looking for?”

“Yes: the mail delivery kind.”

“…Sir, they’re all the mail delivery kind.”

Tom sighed, rubbed the bridge of his nose and walked off to look at the owls for himself, taking care to avoid the eight year old terror and the poor bird that it had chosen as its victim. By this point his father had started to chase him in an effort to separate boy and bird before a disaster could occur; Tom only spared him enough of a glance to notice that he was the bespectacled Auror whom had been one of the two that had shown up to arrest his Uncle.

He was considering an alert-looking Spotted Owl when he noticed the shy raven standing nearby, staring transfixed at a female Snowy Owl with intelligent amber eyes. Tom could tell that the boy wanted to call the owl down to him but was too afraid to, though for what reason he couldn’t understand; the unfriendly ones on offer were labeled with tags which read ‘I bite’. He also noticed the skittish dart of green eyes in his direction.

With a sigh Tom raised his arm and clicked his tongue; the Snowy Owl looked rather affronted that he’d call her down in such a manner but lifted off her perch regardless and fluttered slightly onto his arm.

Not quite certain why it was that he was doing this, he walked up to the slightly smaller boy and held the owl out to him. He stared at him in what looked like utter shock, then slowly extended his arm and accepted the bird. She seemed much happier to perch on him then on Tom, and pivoted her head around on its axis to send him an upside down and thoroughly annoyed glare.

“Thank you.” He said it to Tom’s feet.

He sneered at him in answer, called the Spotted Owl down onto his shoulder and headed back towards where his father stood in front of the counter.
Darkness had descended outside the windows a little over an hour before and only the flicker of the softly crackling fire was now left to illuminate their room in *The Leaky Cauldron*. The embossed leather and silver trunk, equipped with the largest legally possible extension charms and full range of hidden shelves and compartments now secured with an array of Parseltongue passwords. All of Junior’s supplies—books, school robes, an array of selections from both his Muggle and Magical wardrobes, his homework, his wand and the wand sheath he’d gotten for him, potions ingredients, phial set (all crystal) a pewter cauldron, a set of copper scales, Dragon hide Herbology gloves and a large bag of coins which he could use as he saw fit—were safely packed inside. Aries and Archimedes, the Barred and Spotted owls they’d purchased on their first day there, were secured in their cages ready to be taken along to each of their respective destinations. His son had completed all of his homework and now stood at the widow, looking out on the streets below. Tom watched him silently from where he lay on his own bed, arms behind him and head pillowed amidst a loose tangle of arms and the belled sleeves of the black robe that he’d worn over his clothes that day.

Their time in Diagon Alley had come to a close. Tomorrow was the first of September. The start of the new term. He’d be meeting his parents at King’s Cross Station and sending Junior off on the Hogwarts Express. Back to his boarding school with Witchcraft and Wizardry. Back into the very jaws of the beast without him there to protect him.

This was how parents always felt, wasn’t it, when they first had to go through the process of sending their children away. It was normal. Of course, normally, said parents weren’t knowingly shipping their son or daughter off to be attacked for matters which they couldn’t control.

‘Yes I’ll mind my children, as you said, if you take yours and go back to your world instead of trying to invade ours.’ The parting words of Lucius Malfoy had never left his mind. Not when they’d been selecting Potions ingredients. Not when they’d been picking up the wardrobes that they’d ordered. Not when they’d eaten meals together or paused in the midst of their shopping to have ice cream at *Florian Fortescue’s*; Junior had been beyond pleased to be given a bowl overflowing with one of the strange flavors on offer—chocolate and acid pops—so much so that Tom had soon concluded a rather obvious reality that that had been the first time he’d ever had ice cream.

In many ways Lucius Malfoy had been right. Bloodline and magic aside, Lordships and ancestry and riches notwithstanding, this was no more his world then the Muggle world was Junior’s. He didn’t belong here, hadn’t been raised here, and no matter how much or how little magic he may turn out to have, how much he might study and how he might pose that would never change.

Tom Riddle Senior removed the hand which bore the Lordship ring of the Lefay Line from behind his head and examined it as it hung above his head. The massive ruby caught the light of the fire, red as a droplet of fresh blood but with hints of blue and violet intermixed as well. The Dragon etched across it seemed to snarl down at him and rustle its wings.

This wasn’t his world and never would be but it was Junior’s, and he would stand firm and hold a place for him until he reached his majority within the Wizarding World.

Seventeen, wasn’t it? Five more years, or a little under that. He could hold out for that long, certainly. Especially already used to ridicule as he was. And maybe, at some point in the not so distant future, he could use some of the influence while he had it to make things that little bit easier on his son.
Junior seemed to feel his eyes on him as he removed his gaze from whatever he’d been staring at down below and turned to look. Dark blue met grey and, despite being well aware that his son was powerful and more than capable of being dangerous, he couldn’t help but think that Junior’s expression made him look like a very grumpy kitten which had just been subjected to a very much unwanted bath.

“You’ll be returning to school tomorrow, Junior.” He said. Junior lingered at the window for a moment further before beginning to approach. “Are you certain about continuing your schooling at Hogwarts; I’m aware of what you said and my stance in supporting whatever you choose hasn’t changed but having seen some of what you’re subjected to I can’t help but find myself leery.” The bed dipped slightly as his son climbed up beside him. “I know that it’s too late to send a note of transfer to either of the other schools, but tutors for this year could be hired from the Ministry. You could attend Durmstrang or Beauxbatons the next year.”

“I haven’t changed my mind, father.” By this point Junior had rested his head on his chest and stretched out beside him; though Tom already knew that there wasn’t even so much as a snowflake’s chance in hell that his son would admit as much, it was clear that he was taking advantage of the physical contact while he had the chance. “Hogwarts was my first home. Even with as badly as the other students treated me, the castle knew from whom I was descended. I felt happier there then I ever had anywhere else, before you came for me.”

Hearing this, Tom found himself wondering not for the first time just how bad his son’s childhood had been. Nothing could be done about the past, no matter how much he might wish that such weren’t true. He pushed such thoughts out of his mind, one hand finding its way into his son’s curls.

“The new term starts tomorrow.” He repeated. “You’ll be off in Scotland until Mid-December. And just when I’ve gotten so used to having you around. What am I going to do with myself?”

“You’ll be kept plenty busy father.” Junior told him. “You’ve all of the books you bought at *Flourish and Blotts* to read through, Rogan and the horses to take care of, the Goblin King to entertain, your treatment at St. Mungo’s to attend to and, once all of that is through with, your first public appearance to make and a set of duties to attend to as a Lord. You won’t even notice that I’m away before I return.”

“And what about you, my dearest snakeling?”

“I’ll have plenty of school work to concern me.”

“And friends?”

“I don’t need friends.”

Tom sighed. “Junior-.”

“I don’t need friends.”

“That’s funny,” he gently smoothed his hand down along the back of his son’s neck, “I recall you saying something similar about me: look how that turned out.”

Junior buried his face in his chest and refused to dignify that comment with a response. “We’ll write to each other?”

“Of course: what do you think we bought Aries and Archimedes for?” he asked. “We’ll send letters daily. Something new learned that day, if nothing else. But we should get some sleep: it’ll be a busy day for you tomorrow.” No attempt to move was made. Tom nudged at him gently. “Junior.”
The boy made a protesting grumble and looked over at the second bed but didn’t otherwise move. “Too far.”

“Junior, it can’t be more than three feet.”

“Three feet too far. Carry me.”

“I’m not going to carry you three feet.”

“Then I’m not moving.” He was under the covers before anything could be done to stop him. “You can stay or you can take the other bed. Your choice.”

His son was a little bit old to be pulling something like this, but given the fact that it was the last night before school resumed and that Junior had never had the chance to do what other children had growing up Tom figured that it wouldn’t be considered spoiling him to allow the matter to slide unaddressed just that once. He reached over across his son’s body to turn off the light and slipped beneath the sheets as well.

“Goodnight, Junior.”

Already more than half asleep, the young Wizard tucked himself closer into his side.
Harry had been nervous, at first, of going all the way off to Hogwarts, up in Scotland, to have his schooling but when he’d realized that Ron would be going that nervousness had briefly transitioned into excitement. Sure, he’d be further away from his parents than he ever had been before and would be embarking on the first steps of the journey to becoming an adult, but even within the Wizarding World Hogwarts was considered to be a magical place! It would be a world full of adventure, he’d be surrounded by friends and, just maybe, it would encourage him to finally come out of what his parents had termed his ‘shell’.

But then Dumbledore had come and told him of the Houses. Of how there’d never been a Potter by birth who hadn’t been in Lion House. That Gryffindor was the best, the only House of truly useful Light Wizards, and of Slytherin. That Snake House was evil and Dark and that he would be, too, if he was put there. The nervousness had returned abruptly, and evolved into fear.

But then his father had talked to him about the Houses himself and had told him very different things from what Dumbledore had. Seemed somewhat angry at the man for saying what he had. Harry hadn’t known quite what to think about the now conflicting accounts, but it certainly made him feel better and allowed him to regain enough confidence to carry through with going to Hogwarts.

But now, as he pushed his cart of supplies through King’s Cross Station, surrounded by his and Ron’s families, Harry couldn’t help but feel the same nervous fluttering returning. Flooding over him like a wave of cold water. Butterflies and hornets hatching in his stomach as he was battered from side to side by the ebb and flow of foot traffic within the train station.

Hedwig whistled in irritation, swiveling her head about to glare at the rushing Muggles who would dare to jostle her. Gabriel bounced about at his parent’s feet, chattering like a motor and begging to be sent to Hogwarts early and whipping Ginny up into a similar frenzy.

“Just when I thought that our siblings could become any more bloody annoying.” Ron grumbled, the owl Sirius had bought him twittering wildly as it tried to fly about within the confines of its cage. “At this rate Pigwidgeon will lose the crown on ‘most irritating member of the Weasley family’.”

Harry smirked. “That’s true, but I suppose it could be worse.”

“How could it possibly be worse?”

“It could be Ginny that you were forced to take with us in an owl cage.”

“My my, Harrykins,” one of the twins snickered from behind them; Harry never could quite tell the two of them apart, but neither could anyone else aside from the twins themselves so he never felt too bad about it, “I never would have thought that that would be something to come out of your mouth. Did you, Fred?”

“Not at all, George.” Fred said. “I’d thought that our little Harry Potter was an innocent soul; unicorn bait, you know the type. And I’d thought that he looked at Ginny like a sister. Not that he was so, well, what’s the word?”

“Kinky, Fred. The word is kinky. And to think that he’s only eleven: devious!” George shook his head. “They grow up so fast.”

“I do consider Ginny as sister, why would you think that I don’t?” Harry turned confused green eyes on them. Hedwig hid her face under one wing. “What does ‘kinky’ mean?”
“That is something that I’m sure the twins would be happy to explain to you when you’re…forty.” His father cleared his throat and, with one large hand on his shoulder and the other on Ron’s, started steering them away from the laughing older boys. “We need to be heading onto the platform now, or we’ll risk the Express leaving without you. You two don’t want to be left behind, do you?”

“No way; I don’t want to be stuck with them for another year!” Ron threw a glare over his shoulder at his older brothers and then rushed through the hidden gateway in the pillar between Platforms 9 and 10 ahead of them.

“Well,” Percy huffed, pushing his horn-rimmed glasses further up the bridge of his nose, “it’s like he’s forgotten that we’re still in school ourselves.”

“It is Ron that we’re talking about, Percy.”

“He’s slow like that.”

The three older Weasleys proceeded through the gateway, followed by the rest of their group. Harry was left outside with his father.

James smiled down at him and gently squeezed his shoulder. “So, off to Hogwarts. I remember the first time that I rode the Express. I met your Godfather that day. And your mother as well.” His smile became somewhat embarrassed. “We didn’t get off to the greatest start in the world, she and I. Yet here we are, sending one of our two beautiful sons off to the greatest Magical school on earth. If that’s not a display of how well even ‘unlikely’ relationships can work out in the end.”

Harry scrunched up his face. “Dad, can we not talk about babies right now.”

His father chuckled, amused by the slight blush now dusting his son’s features. “Alright. I didn’t mean to make you ‘uncomfortable’, Har-bear.” The slightly playful tone of his voice hinted otherwise but Harry was too concerned with his annoyance about the nickname that his parents insisted on using for him to really notice.

“Dad, don’t call me that!”

“Don’t call you what? ‘Har-bear’?” the blush had intensified from pink to red and stretched up to his ears. “I thought that you liked it when your mother and I called you ‘Har-bear’.”

“Yeah, when I was like…five!” Harry locked his eyes on his boots as Hedwig rustled about in her cage. “I’m eleven now, Dad! I’m not a baby anymore!”

“No, you’re not.” James agreed, gently pushing his son towards the barrier. “You’re not, Harry. You’re almost an adult now.”

They picked up their pace to almost a run and barreled through the hidden gateway. Passing through the wall was like passing through a curtain of cold water; as they emerged from the shadows and onto Platform 9 ¾ Harry couldn’t help but look down at himself to check and see if the clothing that he had on-his generic school robes(their lining black, at current, for lack of any solid House affiliation) over a button down shirt and pair of slacks-so that he wouldn’t have to change while on the train to see if they were wet. Of course, they weren’t.

“Oh, Harry, James, there you are!” His mother pulled him in tightly for a one armed hug while she used the other to restrain his brother from taking a flying leap onto the train. “Hurry, dear, you need to get onto the train; the warning whistle sounded a moment ago. Ron’s already waiting for you on board. James, if you could help him with his trunk please?”
A quick flick of his father’s wand lightened his school trunk to the point where, even short and scrawny as he was, he could lift it without much trouble. Bidding a quick farewell to his family, hugging all three of them and then prying Gabriel from his shoulders Harry rushed onto the train, Hedwig’s cage precariously balanced atop the trunk in his arms.

“Where were you, mate?” Ron asked as soon as Harry caught up with him in the crowded aisle between the compartments. Before they all fill up.”

Lugging their trunks and owls behind them, the pair started down the length of the train in search of an open compartment. Full and door closed. Full and door closed. Half-full of undesirable company.

“Look; there’s an open door up there. Might be-.”

Before Ron could finish speaking a bushy haired witch with a smoosh-faced cat held under one arm stepped back out of the same compartment, looking very much annoyed. “There’s no space in this one either, if the two of you are looking. At this rate we’re going to have to go all the way down to the far end of the train.”

“I hope not.” Ron groaned.

“What’s wrong with the other end of the train?” Harry asked his friend. “There are doors every few hundred feet along the train, so it’s not as if we’ll have to walk any further than we would otherwise once we get to the station.”

“Mate, that’s the Slytherin end of the train. I don’t know about the pair of you, but I’d rather not spend seven hours stuck in a compartment with the likes of Draco Malfoy.”

“Would you rather stand?” the witch asked. Both boys shook their heads. “Then, this is your option. Come on.”

They continued onwards, passed full compartment after full compartment, until they came to one three fourths of the way down from the engine of the train. The door was closed but inside it was empty aside from one boy who appeared to be either their age or a bit older. He was dressed in fine Muggle clothing and his face was obscured from their view by an ancient book seeming to detail Dark Creatures.

“Here we are; we’ll all be able to fit in here.” But when an attempt was made to open the door the three were met with the clattering protest of a lock. The boy inside-the one from Eeylop’s and who had gotten off of the Knight Bus at the same time as Ron-looked up at them and stared for a moment with dark eyes before making a curt shooing motion in their direction and returning to his book. “Oh, honestly!” The cat under her arm made a low meow as she adjusted her grip and pulled out her wand, pointing it at the lock. “Alohomora!”

The lock clicked and she slid the door open.

“The Hogwarts Express is too crowded for you to be trying to keep a whole compartment to yourself!”

Again the boy glared at her and then went back to his book.

“I thought we weren’t supposed to do any magic before we reached the school.” Harry said as they began putting their things away. “How do you already know the Unlocking Charm? Did your parents teach it to you?”

“No: my parents are dentists. But I’ve spent most of the last week reading up on the material; chapter
seven of *The Standard Book of Spells* talks all about it.” She closed the door of the compartment, released her cat and stuck out her hand towards them. “Hermione Granger.”

“Harry Potter.” He told her. “And this is my best mate, Ron Weasley.”

“What’s a dentist?” Ron demanded. Harry had to admit that he was rather confused about the term as well.

The sullen boy let out an odd chuffing sound that might possibly have translated to a strangled laugh.

“It’s a Muggle profession focusing on oral care. To take care of teeth.” Her brown eyes fell on the only one of them who hadn’t spoken. “And you are?”

“Not interested.” He didn’t even look up from the book. From where he stood Harry could see that the section he was reading was dedicated to Chimaera and seemed to be written in a heavily out dated dialect of English. On the opposite page a detailed picture of a snarling beast was displayed.

“I knew that, if we kept going, we’d end up sitting with a Git.” Ron grumbled as he flopped down onto one of the benches. “He was a Git on the Knight Bus too.”

“He also wasn’t the friendliest at *Flourish and Blott’s*”

The boy had helped Harry at *Eeylop’s* and, though he kept quiet regarding that fact, Harry didn’t think as poorly of him as the other two seemed to.

“My parents were really rather shocked to learn I was a witch. We hadn’t thought that magic was something that actually existed.” Hermione said, scratching her cat behind its ears. “What about the two of you?”

“We both grew up with magic.” Ron said, wasting no time unwrapping the sandwiches that his mother had packed for him. “My family may be considered ‘Blood Traitors’ but we’re still Purebloods.”

“I’m a Half-blood.” Harry couldn’t stop his eyes from once more gravitating to the fourth presence in the compartment. “My father is a Pureblood but my mother is a Muggleborn. From what I understand her experience was similar to yours: my aunt was the only one who didn’t take it well.”

“A terrible thing, really. Magic is such a wonderful thing; that much is clear, even from having only seen Diagon Alley. It would make the lives of everyone the world over so much better, yet the fear of difference forces us to hide.” She shook her head. “Maybe one day we’ll be able to safely abolish the Statute of Secrecy. We wouldn’t have to hide anymore, then, would we?”

“No, we wouldn’t.” Harry hedged nervously. “But you may not want to…talk about that so openly. People might…get the wrong idea.”

“Why ever would they get the wrong idea?”

“Gellert Grindlewald, that’s why.” Ron told her through a mouthful of bread and meat, sending crumbs flying in all directions. Hermione looked rather disgusted by the display but Harry, long since used to it, just sighed. “He’s a Dark Wizard, a crazy bloke, over on the mainland. He wants the Statute to be abolished too and he’s been killing people by the hundreds in an attempt to make that happen.”

“Oh, how horrible!”
“As far as he’s concerned,” Harry said, “it’s for the ‘greater good’. ” He saw the other boy stiffen behind his book, the hiss that he made almost inaudible.

“Let’s talk about something else: this is too depressing.” She said quickly. “What do you two think about the Houses? I read about all four of them in *Hogwarts: A History*. Which one do you think you’ll be put in?” Before either of them could draw the breath to speak Hermione continued “Gryffindor, to me, sounds like the best,” another hiss form their otherwise silent companion, “I heard that the Deputy Headmaster was in it, that he’s the Head of it now. He’s a great Wizard, you know? Of course, Ravenclaw wouldn’t be terrible either as I do love to read.”

“I want to be in Gryffindor, and so does Harry. There’s never been a member of either of our families that were put anywhere else.”

“I’d rather be in Gryffindor,” Harry said, “but I really wouldn’t mind being put in one of the other three Houses.”

“Other three?” Ron spluttered, sitting up abruptly. “Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff are well enough, I suppose, but Slytherin? Are you mad, Harry?”

The book that he’d been reading closed with a sharp snap and the fourth boy stood abruptly, going to replace it in his trunk and pull out another; a Muggle book, from the look of it, on ancient civilizations of the world. “If you’ve a problem with Slytherin, you can sit elsewhere!”

“So you’re a slimy snake, are you?” Ron snapped. “That figures.”

The other boy showed his teeth and opened the book. Aside from another incident when Ron went after him for buying the entire contents of the trolley ‘because he could’ the rest of their ride passed peacefully. The moment they pulled into the station the sullen boy put on his emerald lined school robes, silently shrank his belongings with a wave of his hand, shoved them into his pockets and flounced out of the compartment with a manner that reminded him terribly of Snape. Harry couldn’t help but watch him go.

“Come on mate,” Ron said, drawing his attention back from the now vanished figure, “grab your things. We don’t want to miss the boats.”

With a final glance over his shoulder and into the hall, Harry stepped forward and reached for his trunk.
After depositing his belongings in the designated area and bidding farewell to Hedwig, Harry joined Ron and Hermione in looking around at Hogsmead Station. The Hogwarts Express hissed behind them and belched steam towards the star speckled night, its deep red length glinting dully like the scaly body of a massive serpent. The floor of the open air platform was tiled in gray stone which was really rather dour looking. Students of all heights, ages and Houses passed by them, all collectively headed in the same direction; away from the lake.

Any efforts made to relocate the boy from Slytherin were met with failure, understandably. Despite being at least in his second year, as evidenced by the fact that he’d already been sorted into a House, he wasn’t that much taller than Harry himself (and he wasn’t very tall at all) and could have stood five feet away from him and yet still gone entirely unnoticed.

“How are we going to get to the lake?” Harry asked, looking to Ron in expectation of answers. He was the one with five older brothers, after all. Surely they’d told him something.

“Dunno.” The red head replied most unhelpfully. “Percy said that the groundskeeper, a bloke named Ogg, should be collecting the first years and taking us down to the boats across the Black Lake. He’s a Prefect and is a lot more uptight than Fred and George-born with a stick up his arse, you know how he is Harry-so his information can probably be trusted.”

“Don’t you think that that’s a bit harsh of a thing to say about your brother, Ron?”

Ron sent Hermione a rather withering look, and in complete honesty Harry couldn’t entirely blame him for it. “You’ve known the two of us for seven hours, Hermione. And you’ve never met my brothers.” He said. “Once you’re sorted into Gryffindor, if that is where you end up, you’ll know exactly what I mean. And you’ll agree with me.”

“I don’t know, Ron.” Harry said, giving the effort of locating the Slytherin up for lost. “They might get along.”

“ Bloody hell, mate, don’t jinx it!”

He snickered and gave his friend a playful shove. Hermione huffed at them and pushed her hair back behind her shoulder.

“First years! All first years, this way please!” The loud male voice barked from the far end of the platform, echoing to them over the top of the seething crowd. “All first years over here, please! The boats will be leaving soon!”

“Come on.” Hermione grabbed each of them by the wrist and began carting them through the throng of people. “We don’t want to be left behind.”

Harry stumbled briefly before he picked up his pace enough to match hers. Ron just allowed himself to be dragged. They skirted around a loudly snickering group of Gryffindor seventh years and through a trio of Hufflepuff third years and then the crowd broke and revealed the massive figure of the Hogwarts Grounds Keeper.

Ogg truly was a huge man, standing nearly seven feet tall with wind tanned skin and arms as thick as the trunks of young trees. A lantern hung from one giant fist like a glowing cudgel. He tried, and mostly succeeded, in keeping his jaw from hanging open.
“Oh my,” Hermione said, “he looks like a lumberjack.”

Not knowing what, exactly, a ‘lumberjack’ was but not wanting to ask in case he was missing something obvious he looked over at Ron only to be met with a mirrored expression of confusion. Must have been another Muggle thing, like the ‘dentists’ that Hermione had mentioned earlier. What her parents were, apparently.

Maybe the Slytherin boy, who had laughed at them, would know.

Why was he thinking about him again? What was it about the sullen boy who’d dismounted the Knight Bus with the robes of a pauper but the arrogance of a prince, who despite his aloof façade had helped him with his owl, who had spent all train ride reading in near silence, that captivated him so much?

“First years, this way. The boats are waiting at the bank of the Black Lake.” Ogg looked over the group that had gathered around him, nodded to himself on coming to the conclusion that the entire population of the new class had made it off the train and through the crowds, and then started off towards a short staircase at a plodding pace.

At the bottom of the staircase was a narrow footpath, the hard packed dirt uneven and broken in places with rocks and gnarled roots. Their footsteps echoed through the night around them like a herd of horses, a cloud of dust kicked up by their passing.

“Do either of you know what, exactly, the Sorting process amounts to?” Hermione asked, for the first time looking nervous. “Hogwarts: A History says that the House in which one belongs is determined by the Sorting but it didn’t go into any further detail.”

“My father told me that we had to steal an egg from a Horntail’s nest, but mom yelled at him about it so I’m assuming that it was a lie.”

“Charlie told me that we had to get through a Dementor.”

“That can’t be right. Uncle Remus specializes in Dark Creatures: only a Patronus can fend off a Dementor and most adults can’t even cast that spell. There’s no way that it’s a Dementor.”

“A Boggart, maybe? They’re not dangerous, right?”

“Well…that depends on what you’re afraid of, doesn’t it?” Harry said. “Do you really want to fight with a giant spider?”

Ron immediately turned pale and shuddered.

“I’ll take that as a no.” Hermione snickered.

The trail came to a head moments later and Harry saw the Black Lake for the first time. A slopping rocky shore gave way into a mirrored expanse of black water, its depths seeming to reflect the stars overhead. Numerous, long canoes baring hanging lanterns floated in the shallows, clattering together on occasion with a sound like hollow blocks of wood. Hogwarts castle rose high above them across the lake’s still surface, a mass of black spires and glowing amber windows the mere sight of which was enough to take his breath away.

 Truly the most magical place on earth.

Harry Ron and Hermione all piled into the same canoes, along with another boy named Neville who, despite leaving his trunk at the station like everyone else, was still tightly gripping a large and very
warty toad. The ride across the lake passed in relative silence beyond a mild scare at the sight of an overly friendly squid the size of a city bus which, apparently, was named Mitchel.

Who had named it Harry neither knew nor cared to.

Luckily Ogg was able to beat it off with a baguette.

They dismounted the canoes at the base of the hill on which the castle sat. To the left of them was a thick forest, the trees standing grimly at attention and steeped in thick shadows. Something about them was …ominous. Foreboding. Like Ron had earlier, when he’d mentioned spiders, Harry shuddered.

Their group was met outside the towering doors into the Great Hall by Dumbledore, dressed in a respectable set of robes in Gryffindor colors. The man gave him a small smile and nod when Harry caught his eye.

“Welcome, first years, to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.” He said. “I’m sure that the long ride up from London has left you all a bit peckish; the start of term feast will begin shortly but first you must all undergo the Sorting. The Sorting is a very important ceremony at Hogwarts as it determines the House, the family away from your families, to which each of you best belong.”

A quiet murmuring went up around them but Harry ignored most of what was being said.

“There are four Houses into which you could be sorted: Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, Gryffindor and Slytherin. Each with its own noble history and achievements, each producing outstanding Witches and Wizards in their own right. Though some more than…others.”

“Like Slytherin.” Ron muttered.

“My dad told me that Merlin was in Slytherin.” Harry said.

“No he wasn’t.” Hermione told him. “Merlin wasn’t in Slytherin, Harry. He wasn’t in any of the Houses. He didn’t even go to Hogwarts: the timing is all wrong.”

“But…why would my father have said that if it wasn’t true?” he couldn’t help but feel confused.

Ron patted him on the shoulder. “He was probably trying to make you feel better, mate. It’s a parent thing, I think.”

“While here at Hogwarts,” Dumbledore continued, “your triumphs will earn your House points while the breaking of rules will lose them; the House with the most points at the end of the year will win the House cup. Regardless of who comes to take that horror this year, I expect each and every one of you to prove a credit to whichever House becomes yours. Now,” he turned and threw open the doors, “follow me, all of you. Single file.”

Once more that sickening nervousness had returned and his legs felt like molds filled with molten lead: heavy and hard to move. With Ron and Hermione beside him and looking just as uncertain, Harry shuffled forward into the hall.

Thousands of candles, each adorned with flickering flames, hovered beneath the massive dome of the ceiling which had been bewitched to display the night sky outside. The four tables which filled the cavernous room, each stretched beneath banners baring the colors and mascots of the Houses, were laid with glistening plates and goblets formed from gold. A fifth table was positioned at the far end of the hall, occupied by the assorted members of the staff.
The clatter of wood against a stone floor drew Harry’s attention back to Dumbledore, who had set a rickety stool and a badly patched hat down at the front of the hall. Every one, student and staff, were staring at it.

Harry almost dropped dead from surprise when a rip at the bottom opened like a mouth and it began to—of all things—sing! The surprise was so bad that he didn’t catch a word of what it said.

“All of this nonsense about dragons and Dementors and all we have to do is wear a bloody hat?” Ron huffed. “I’m going to kill Charlie!”

Dumbledore now had a large roll of parchment in his hands and began to call out names. “Abott, Hannah!”

The first girl, Hannah, was pronounced “Hufflepuff” as was the second, Susan.

Next up was a boy named Terry Boot who was determined to belong to “Ravenclaw!”

After another handful of names Hermione was called up and sent to “Gryffindor!” as was Neville, the boy with the toad.

Draco Malfoy, recognizable by his smug ferret-like face and nearly white hair, was naturally sent to “Slytherin!”

And then it was Harry’s turn. He stumbled up to the front of the room and sat down on the stool, the hat dropping down over his eyes and obscuring all view of the Great Hall around him. He nearly jumped out of his skin when a small voice spoke into his ear.

“Well, well, well, another Potter. Though you’re a good deal more interesting than your father or grandfather were.” Said the hat. “Just when I thought that I would never see the trait again I’m worn by two Adder Tongues in the span of as many years. Though you’ve much less baggage to carry than poor Tom Riddle.”

Harry didn’t know what ‘Adder Tongue’ meant. How did the hat even know about his mild ‘birth defect’, that his parents ever called it that? His tongue was slightly split at the tip, so what? No one could see his deformity and it amounted to nothing so why did it matter?

The hat tutted quietly.

“A bit too fearful a disposition for a Gryffindor, despite your Lion blood, though you’ve definitely the stubbornness inherent in Godric’s House. You’ve loyalty, which could fit you in amidst the Badgers. But that wouldn’t be quite right. And you haven’t the wings to fly with the Eagles.” It said. “Better be…Slytherin!”

Slytherin? Slytherin? Sure he’d told Ron that he’d be fine with any of the Houses but he hadn’t really believed that he could actually end up in Snake House. And what about his parents? They’d told him that it was fine but…they’d be disappointed, surely.

He was so flabbergasted that he almost didn’t catch the hat’s final words to him. “Good luck with Riddle. You’ll need it.”

Dumbledore’s face was kept carefully neutral as he lifted the hat from Harry’s head but there was something in his blue eyes that made him look…angry. Ron, for his part, appeared to be as shocked as Harry himself was. He stumbled from the raised platform and teetered in the direction of the green and silver draped table, dropping into the first empty space that he could find.
The Sorting came to a conclusion not long after and, by the time he recovered enough to look around, the Headmaster had already rose from his place at the staff table and begun to speak. The boy from the train sat at the far end of the table, alone; he was looking off into the far distance with an odd expression which looked almost traumatized.

Harry was about to move to sit with him when someone dropped into the bench beside him.

“Evening, Potter.” Draco drawled. “Never fancied I’d see one of you end up here; welcome to Snake House. Let’s be friends.”

Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise; his eyes darted towards the Gryffindor table, where Ron and Hermione were now sitting with the twins, and dearly wished that he was with them. “Why would you want to be friends with me? I’m a Half-blood.”

“You may be a Half-blood but at least you’re of the respectable sort, unlike the Mudblood over there.” He sent a caustic glare in the direction of the boy from the train. “Bot of your parents are magical, even if your mother is a Mudblood herself.”

A spark of anger flashed through him and the nearest goblets around them toppled to the floor with a metallic clatter. Harry leapt to his feet and, had the bench not been occupied, his sudden movement would have toppled it over onto the ground. “I have no interest in befriending a Git like you, Draco!” He snapped, only just restraining himself from drawing his wand. “Insult my mother, or any other member of my family, again and I will Hex you!”

Just as soon as he learned how to.

Regardless he turned on his heel and stormed to the far end of the table, sitting down beside the other boy. No reaction was engendered by this development from his new companions, much to Harry’s disappointment. He could feel the eyes of both Malfoy boys, and the majority of the rest of the table, burning into his back.

This was shaping up to be a long seven years.
Snake in the Grass (Watch Out for Tom Riddle)

Despite the lingering nerves over his parent’s reactions to the disastrous reality of his Sorting gone awry and his classmates’ continued glares Harry had managed to eat quite a lot before the start of term feast had come to an end. He wouldn’t be kept awake that night by hunger, at least, provided that he could keep down the food that he’d had through the vindictive squirming of his stomach. He hadn’t been able to go five minutes without hearing one of the other Slytherins, especially his fellow first years and usually Draco, raising their voices to a level he could hear and saying something disparaging; usually about him or about Gryffindor House in general.

The boy beside him didn’t once move aside from the mechanical motions of his arm as he moved the fork in his hand from his plate to his mouth and back again; sometimes Harry got the distinct feeling that he was watching him, evaluating him where he hadn’t really bothered doing so on the train, but he must have been doing it through his peripheral vision because whenever Harry tried to determine where the feeling of being watched was coming from and he didn’t appear to have pulled his gaze away from the same spot that he had been staring at when he’d first sat down.

After what seemed like a near eternity the start of term feast came to an end and staff and students from all Houses began getting to their feet. The sounds of laughing voices, ringing footsteps and stools being pushed back against the castle’s flagstone floor filled the room. The boy who’d remained sedate over the course of the entire meal leapt up with an alacrity that struck Harry as surprising and, just as he had on the Express, melted into the crowd making its way out of the Great Hall like a garden snake into towering grass.

The first years had begun to coalesce at the front of the Great Hall, waiting for one of their House’s six Prefects to lead them away from the Hall, through the corridors and to their common room but when Harry moved to join them he was stopped by a familiar hand landing on his shoulder.

Turning around, he cringed at the sight of Dumbledore staring down at him from beneath thick auburn eyebrows. Remembering everything that the man had said about Snake House and its members with the keen sharpness of a blade, he took a small step back. Blinking up at him behind the lenses of his glasses with green eyes suddenly wide with a mild breed of fear.

He didn’t know precisely what it was that he expected the man to do-reprimand him for ending up in the ‘wrong House’ or for disappointing his family? Drag him aside and demand he be resorted, presumably to end up in Gryffindor? Decry him as a Dark Wizard for turning out as a Snake?-but a warning wasn’t it. ‘Mind yourself in Slytherin, my boy. The serpents are not kind to those who are not like them. And above all else, be wary of Tom Riddle.’ ‘Tom Riddle’; the second time that he’d heard that name, the first having been from the Sorting Hat itself. But who was he? And why was he being warned so fervently against him? Surely he couldn’t be that dangerous, could he? The Deputy Head Master didn’t wait for him to reply or to question him and simply pushed him gently towards the klatch of black and emerald first years. “Run along, now. You don’t want to be left behind by the Prefect, do you?”

“No, Sir.” And he really didn’t. From the stories his family had told him he knew everything there
was to know about Gryffindor House except for that year’s working password, but Slytherin? If he was separated from the larger group he felt certain that he’d never find it. “Thank you for the warning.”

“Of course, my boy. Now run along.”

Harry was more than pleased to do just that; something about the way that Dumbledore had acted recently, especially over the course of that night, left him feeling quite off-kilter regarding the man. He scrambled up to the assembled group of snakelings just as they were whisked away by a fierce-looking blonde haired Prefect. Not a Malfoy, he could tell as much from the shade of her hair, but beyond that he hadn’t the slightest clue to which family she belonged to.

They moved through the castle’s halls in what almost amounted to lock step well after the first years from every other House had long since disappeared from sight. For their part they headed towards the dungeons, down staircase after sleek stone staircase deep into the castle’s very depths.

His mother and father had both told him stories of the portrait of the Fat Lady behind which the entrance to Gryffindor’s common room could be found. According to Hermione, *Hogwarts: A History* had connected the entrance to Ravenclaw to a door knocker that spoke in riddles and the entrance to Hufflepuff to a pattern of barrels somewhere in the kitchens. Harry had, naturally, come to expect something equally grand from Slytherin. Perhaps some sort of puzzle through which they could show the cunning which their House was known for—though, looking around him, if that were the case quite a number of them would be forever incapable of getting inside—or a serpent guardian that he could talk to—never mind that it flew in the face of everything his parents had ever told him about the use of the ability afforded by his deformity in public—but it wasn’t to be.

The entrance to the House of Snakes was little more than a stone wall which was frankly underwhelming. Harry would have called it disappointing, even, but figured it was best to reserve judgement until he saw what lay inside.

“Pay attention now, all of you!” The Prefect barked from the head of their group. Not that there’d really been much talking between them to begin with. Almost twenty pairs of eager eyes turned to her. “This wall, and remember that it’s specifically *this wall*, bars the entrance to the common room of our House. In order to get in you’ll need to both know and remember the password, which changes every fortnight. The current password is cerastes; when that changes it will be posted on the House notice board.”

She turned and spoke the password again and much like the wall behind *The Leaky Cauldron* had the bricks moved aside and revealed a long narrow passageway with a murky green light on the other side. They shuffled down it quickly and out the other side and Harry couldn’t help but stare around himself in surprise.

Despite its drab outward appearance the interior of the Slytherin common room did not disappoint. Gothic windows, bound with ornate traceries of dark grey granite, were set into the stone walls at intervals letting in the moonlight which filtered through what he now realized was the waters of the Black Lake. The furniture was handsome, made of leather and seemed to scream ‘tradition’ and ‘high society’. Above the mantel piece adorned with an assortment of serpent skulls was a painting of the House’s Founder, Salazar Slytherin, and below it an aged apple wood fire blazed in a rainbow of colors.

Stood in the middle of the room, his massive stomach straining against the golden buttons of the red satin waist coat he wore over a pair of lilac silk pajamas and with his straw blonde hairline in the midst of a determined and very swift retreat, was a man who from the description he’d been given by his mother Harry knew was Horace Slughorn; their Head of House and the current Potion’s Master.
“Welcome, welcome all of you to the noble House of Slytherin, home to the cunning ambitious and shrewd. House of those who value tradition and seek to honor it while striving to bring glory to themselves and their families. But I’m certain that most, if not all of you, are already aware of that much. Houses do, I tend to see, run in the blood after all.” He paused long enough to chuckle, no doubt an attempt to appear congenial. Harry didn’t know what to make of him. “What you may not have known is that here in Slytherin we have certain rules. We are more often than not, sadly, viewed through a lens of prejudice by the other Houses. Seen as ruthless and even Dark. Outside of this common room you will be targeted, and though staff members such as myself will do all in our power to protect you, you must learn to protect yourselves and each other as well. And that means that any and all grievances are left in the common room; outside we stand united.”

Sensible enough, he supposed, if what he’d said was true. And he didn’t doubt it was.

“Another important rule is, of course, that every one of you is to focus on making at least a passing grade in each of your classes so as not to reflect badly on the House.” He said. “But, Merlin’s beard, look at me. I’ve forgotten to introduce myself; it must be the old age. I’m the Head of Slytherin House and the current Potion’s Master, Professor Horace Eugene Flaccus Slughorn. Now, I’m going to read off your names in sets of two; these will be the people with whom you’ll be spending the year as roommates. If you wish to continue doing so after this year you may request to do so as well.”

Assigned roommates? He didn’t get to choose? Not that anyone here would have really been a cup of tea to end up with but at least then he could guarantee it wouldn’t be Draco Malfoy.

The more the day went on the less sure he became that he’d survive the week, let alone the year.

He stood on eggshells as the man read through the list, waiting for his name to show up and his doom to be assigned.

It wasn’t. As the other students shuffled off towards the door leading to the dorms, Harry was left alone in the common room with the older man who had now fixed him in a watery gooseberry gaze.

“I’d heard it said, of course, but hadn’t known for sure if it was true: you really do have your mother’s eyes, Mr. Potter. I’m pleased, more than pleased, truly, to have the extraordinary if rather surprising opportunity to have you in my House. Both of your parents were in Gryffindor, though I’m sure that you knew as much by now.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Brilliant at Potions, your mother was. At magic in general, really. Subtle, though, not showy. Hard to believe, given that she was Muggleborn.” Harry twitched in annoyance but the man didn’t seem to notice and plowed onwards. “Your father was...less than impressive in my subject. He passed, of course, he is an Auror now after all, but from what I understand his was a forte more oriented towards Transfiguration. Albus tells me he was quite a shining star in his class. I hope to see you excelling in your own right, Mr. Potter, as you come from good stock.”

“I understand, Sir, but...you didn’t mention my name so...where am I going to be staying?” Was there a room left for him? What would he do if there wasn’t? Where would he sleep? On one of the couches in the common room?

“I’ve a special room set aside for you, my boy, never you worry. I figured it would be best to separate you from the others, given your blood status and the fact that you come from a Gryffindor Line.” He said, beginning to walk-or, more accurately, waddle-towards the same staircase that he’d seen the others take. In all honest Harry couldn’t see how the man intended to actually fit through the doorway but somehow he managed. “And it’s not only for your sake, of course. It’s for Tom’s as
well. Tom being Tom Riddle: A Muggleborn, I think, and an orphan who…well, they do say there’s an exception to every rule, I suppose.”

Harry wasn’t certain what he meant, but doubted it had anything to do with the fact that ‘Tom’ was Muggleborn. ‘Tom’ as in Tom Riddle, who Dumbledore had gone out of his way to warn him was dangerous, and was now going to be his roommate. A cold trickle of dread dripped down his spine. “He’s an exceedingly brilliant boy, Tom, if a bit prickly. Quite closed off and rather cold, but polite. If you’re anything like your mother was in her school days, you’ll be good for him.”

He stopped in front of a door at the end of the hallway of second year dorm rooms and knocked once on the door, soon answered by a most disinterested command to “enter.”

The door was opened, revealing a cozy dorm room patterned in varying shades of green and silver. At the foot of one of the beds was Harry’s trunk, new but standard and nothing that would stick out amidst a crowd, and at the foot of the other was a black and silver trunk with a Dragon Crest etched into the latch. Sitting up in that bed, curled around the same book like a Kneazle around a litter of kittens and with an Heir ring bearing the same crest as the trunk on his finger, was the boy from the train.

The boy from the train who hadn’t really done much more than read.

The boy from the Great Hall who he’d sat beside and who hadn’t once looked at him directly.

The boy that Dumbledore had warned him away from and would not be his roommate for the next year at least and whom he couldn’t stop thinking about for some reason.

So this was Tom Riddle.

Their Head of House had called him a likely Muggleborn yet he wore an Heir Ring, all be it one with a crest he didn’t recognize. Had called him an orphan, yet he’d seen his father when the pair had tumbled from the Knight Bus and onto Charing Cross Road.

He couldn’t help but wonder who this boy really was and, by consequence of his distraction, didn’t realized they’d been left alone until he was addressed directly.

“Keep your things orderly and on your side of the room. Don’t speak to me unless I speak to you first. Touch my things without permission and you’ll regret it. Understand?”

Blindsided by the sudden avalanche of vindictive demands, Harry could only blink at him in surprise. Sure he’d never been the kindest person in their few encounters before then but he couldn’t for the life of him understand why he was suddenly being so defensive. “That’s hardly any way to go about making friends.”

Those dark blue eyes gave him the coldest stare that Harry thought he’d ever seen. “Good. Because I’ve no need for friends nor any intention of making them.” He closed the book, turned his back on him and switched off the lights with a flick of his wrist leaving Harry to beat his own bed in the dark.

The raven couldn’t help but mentally reiterate the assumption that this was going to be a very long year.
The first thing that Harry had ever learned about his new roommate was that he liked his room to be kept tidy at all times.

The second thing that Harry had ever learned about his new roommate was that he liked it to be kept quiet, presumably so that he could read work and concentrate in peace, at all times.

The third thing that Harry had ever learned about his new roommate was that he was violently possessive over his things, which he could honestly understand. Everything he had was of the highest order of quality, the sort of thing one would expect to find in the possession of the Heirs of only the richest of the Most Ancient and Noble Pureblood Houses and must thereby have cost at least a small fortune. And, surely, if what Professor Slughorn had said about his being or having at one point been an orphan keeping what he had close and jealously protected against all who might seek to harm or meddle with it was something that he’d have developed as a survival mechanism. As was, he felt sure, his sub-zero exterior.

The fourth thing that Harry came to learn about his new roommate was discovered as he slowly roused from a night of somewhat unsettled sleep: Tom Riddle was a very early riser. As Harry raised his head from the pillow that he’d slept-and, to his embarrassment, drooled-on and stretched his jaw with a cavernous yawn it was revealed that the bed beside him was empty and no doubt cold, the once rumpled sheets since fixed by one of the House Elves who kept the castle clean and running. Where he’d gone and how long ago Harry hadn’t the slightest clue and knew well enough that it wasn’t really his business, but he couldn’t help but be concerned for the older boy as much as he was nervous around him.

Dumbledore’s spreading the rumor that he was dangerous, regardless of whether or not it was true. The, at least, ostracization by the entire House and at worst…well, Harry wasn’t quite certain what Slughorn had meant by saying that there was an ‘exception to every rule’ but he thought that he could do well enough at guessing.

Rummaging around in his trunk for the clock that he’d brought with him to check the time and seeing that he had more than enough time to stop by the owlry before he had to head down to breakfast and collect his class schedule he gathered his toiletries and day clothes and headed into the bathroom to get ready.

The letter that he ended up scratching out was somewhat rushed and admittedly very basic, detailing only the House that he’d been Sorted into and the fact that his roommate was in second year, but much more detail couldn’t reasonably be expected of him given that he hadn’t yet attended even a single class.

Shoving the letter unceremoniously into an envelope, Harry made certain that his holly wand was secured in its sheath at his wrist before he left the dorm and hurried out of the common room; on account of the early hour the other Slytherins were likely still sleeping, leaving no one there to attempt to ruffle his feathers and prevent his exit.

Finding his way to the owlry presented quite a bit more of a challenge than he’d, perhaps unwisely, expected. He spent another ten or fifteen minutes blindly stumbling through the hallways and up moving staircases before finally happening to run across the Slytherin House ghost, the Bloody
Baron, who—despite his more than ghastly appearance—was perfectly happy to point him in the right
direction, along with wishing him a good day and luck with the school year.

At least the *House ghost* of Slytherin was polite. Too bad the rest of the House couldn’t be bothered
to follow his example. Maybe if they did then they’d have a better reputation amongst the student
body at large.

But he wasn’t about to suggest it to them or anything; it was all but a lost cause at this point and he
wanted no part of getting ripped to pieces.

Harry turned the corner and started up the owlry stairs but had barely made it three steps when there
was a flash of colored light from the top of the tower which he recognized from some of the pranks
that his father and Godfather would play as the Tripping Jinx and a dark blur came shooting passed
him before skidding to a stop against the wall at the base of the stairs with a sickening thud. He
turned towards it in surprise, eyes wide, in time to see the tangle of black and emerald robes twitch
before lifting itself painfully up onto all fours.

Tom’s blue eyes were shadowed and fixed on the wall in front of him with enough intensity to burn
a hole straight through the stone. A trickle of something dark red threaded its way down from one
corner of his mouth; blood, Harry realized with mounting shock and more than just a touch of horror,
likely from having bitten his tongue or lip during the tumble down.

At least he’d gone down the stairs instead of off the side of the tower.

As Harry managed to unfreeze his limbs Tom raised his left arm and wiped away the blood with the
back of his hand. When the raven took a step towards him with the intention of helping him up the
older Slytherin bared his teeth and hissed at him, suddenly sounding like the wounded Smooth Snake
that he’d found in their garden five years before.

“*Don’t touch me; I don’t need your help!*”

His eyes seemed to flash red, but that could have been a trick of the light when Harry jerked back
and fell against the wall. Either way, by the time he righted himself and looked back the glaring eyes
had returned to blue.

“Still conscious, Riddle? Shame.” Abraxas sneered down at them from the staircase, flanked on
either side by Mulciber and Knott. “I bet you can taste your Muggle father in your blood; does it taste
filthy? Maybe like *mud*?”

Tom’s snarl was feral, the dark ruby color outlining his teeth making him look almost like a rabid
werewolf; Harry shrank away further and pressed himself against the flagstone wall. “I am *proud*
of my father’s blood; would sooner call myself a Riddle than a Gaunt!”

“You shouldn’t even be in our world, Mudblood, let alone our House.” Mulciber spat in his
direction, falling short but only barely. It was probably a good thing that he hadn’t hit his target.
Harry would prefer not to be a witness to a murder, and though Tom—surprisingly—gave no outward
reaction a chill was still sent racing down his spine.

There was a palpable malice in the air, and it wasn’t coming from Abraxas and his guard. Harry felt
like he was trapped very close to a very dangerous creature. At least, for the time being, Tom wasn’t
focused on him and for that small mercy the raven couldn’t help but feel relieved.

As the three older boys approached like a circling pack of dogs Tom slowly pushed himself onto his
feet.
“You’ll never be accepted as a part of this world; it isn’t yours and that is never going to change. If you’re really so proud of the Muggle’s dirty blood why don’t you emulate him instead of playing at being a Wizard?”

Seemingly ignorant of Tom’s clearly hissed curses and promises of vengeance, they brushed passed them and walked away.

Cautiously, Harry edged towards him half expecting the older boy to leap on him like a wild animal. He wobbled slightly, curled in on himself and clearly in pain, and leaned his weight against the wall.

“Tom,” the gaze that he was given was hollow and made him want to bolt but, somehow, he resisted the instinct to flee. Maybe there was a bit of Gryffindor House in him after all. “You’re hurt. You need to go to-.”

“I’m fine!” He spat another mouthful of blood out onto the ground at his feet and turned his back on him. “I don’t need your help, Potter. Yours or anyone else’s. I’m more than capable of taking care of myself.”

Harry was left standing at the bottom of the owlry stairs; determining that he could send his mail later he rushed after the other boy though was sure to maintain a safe distance. If he fell over or otherwise proved impaired in some way that might indicate head trauma he’d drag him to the Hospital Wing himself, protests aside and shyness be damned.

“I thought I told you not to follow me!”

“I’m not ‘following you’, Riddle. I’m heading to breakfast in the Great Hall. If you just so happen to be headed the same way then it’s hardly down to me.” Well, it wasn’t entirely true but it wasn’t entirely a lie either.

Tom huffed and walked faster.

When they finally arrived in the Great Hall and Harry attempted to sit down beside the other boy he received two very stern warning glares, one from the direction of the staff table and the other from the very irate second year himself.

Harry compromised by sitting about half a bench down from him. Tom didn’t stop glaring until the post arrived, at which point he was distracted by the smug looking barred owl that landed in front of him with a letter and a package. After untying his mail and feeding the bird a few strips of bacon, he made off with his belongings and a couple pieces of plain toast.

No wonder he was nearly as small as Harry was, if this was how he ate at every meal.

Tom would doubtlessly be less than pleased with him, but perhaps he should consider writing to his mother and asking her to send some food for him to give to him. If he wasn’t comfortable eating in the Great Hall, then maybe he could eat in their room and—at least so far as Harry was concerned—his mother’s cooking was so good that it was impossible that the other boy wouldn’t like what he was given.

Determining to return to his room in the dorm and amend his letter to do just that Harry quickly scarfed down his own meal and, after receiving his schedule, got up from the bench.

He was half way out of the Great Hall when a familiar voice called him back.

“Harry? Do you have a moment, my boy?”
He turned, cringing slightly, to see Dumbledore coming towards him. Luckily he didn’t seem to be too upset with him. “Yes, Sir?”

“I saw that you came in with Mr. Riddle?”

“We both came from the same place, Sir.”

“Ah, yes. Horace did tell me of his unwise decision to have you room together. You haven’t been harmed?”

Harmed? Did he look like the type of person who would attempt to sit by a boy who had hurt him in some way? There was a word for people like that which he couldn’t remember, but he wasn’t one of them! “No, Sir. He snapped at me, a few times actually, but that’s all.”

“That’s quite a relief to hear; you must be careful, my boy. Mr. Riddle is quite dangerous, even now.”

“He doesn’t seem all that dangerous to me.” The only time he’d seen anything to warrant the older man’s apparent paranoia was earlier that morning, at the owlry, but that was more than justifiable in the raven’s mind. He’d just been attacked, after all. “I think he’s just lonely, though he won’t admit it. That he only needs a friend.”

“A friend? You have a good heart, Harry, but there are some things that you don’t yet understand. It is an unfortunate reality in this world that there are some people who are beyond saving. Mr. Riddle is one of them. Attempting to change that will simply drag you down with him; will only bring you pain.” He said. “I don’t want to see you hurt, Harry. That’s why I’m doing all that I can to prevent you from falling into a position you’ll regret. It is better that you simply stay away from him as much as you can.”

“I understand, Sir.” But he really didn’t.

Dumbledore might claim that Tom was dangerous all that he liked, but all that Harry could see was the look of pain he’d worn-if only briefly—as he’d picked himself up off the owlry steps.

Chapter End Notes

'I thought I told you not to follow me' is essentially most of what Tom ends up saying to Harry for the first three or so chapters of the Killing Instinct, the Claymore AU I'll be putting up once I've finished IHS and at least Argenti Vulpi. If you guys are interested in seeing a preview, the prologue can be found on my Tumblr page (details in my profile)
Rain pelted against the windows of the Rolls Royce as they drove through London’s grey streets; the sunlight which filtered in through the droplet streaked windows taking on a watery, sallow tinge as it shuddered against the parchment which Tom Senior held, resting against his left knee atop the letter Aries had delivered to him that morning.

Short, which was somewhat to be expected given that it was only the first day, detailing what Junior had learned about Chimera in one of the tomes he’d taken with him to read on the Hogwarts Express and containing a mild complaint about the fact that his roommate was a First Year who might potentially make an effort to befriend him.

The horror.

Tom would make it a point to encourage his son to accept the roommate’s advances in his next letter, having already sent Archimedes off with his first before it had arrived. He didn’t doubt that Junior would be less than pleased, and would probably ignore the good hearted paternal advice, but at least he’d have tried. And that was what made a good parent, wasn’t it? Laying the groundwork of suggestions for their child but allowing them to follow whatever path they wished.

Forcing Junior to do something that he didn’t wish to would only lead to his being viewed with resentment, and he didn’t think that he could bear having such a thing happen. Not now that he’d finally gotten to know him.

But there were more immediate concerns than Junior’s lacking desire to socialize with his same or similar aged peers for him to worry about at the moment, as evidenced by the parchment which sat on top of the letter that his son had sent off to him that morning. It contained little more than an address for a location in London and, despite having just gotten in from the city late the night before, all three Riddles had immediately headed back out.

_The entrance to St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries is located at Purge and Dowse, Ltd. Speak to the Mannequin._

Tom knew that his parents had insisted on coming along with him out of concern for his state of health, knew that he would have done the same for Junior had he somehow ended up injured over the course of the summer holidays, but that didn’t stop him from being markedly…concerned. They hadn’t been on the Knight Bus with them. Hadn’t been to Diagon Alley. He still hadn’t even gotten around to admitting the revelation of their bloodline to them yet and now they would be walking into a magical hospital.

He could only guess at how they’d react.

“Where did you say that we were going, darling?” his mother asked from the seat across from him as the car began to slow to a stop. Pulling off to the curb as it did so. “This place looks abandoned.”

“Terrible business sense on the part of the owners, I’m sure. That or no experience running anything on their own prior to taking on more responsibility than they were ready for.” His father eyed the building outside with distaste. “Department stores, particularly, are difficult to handle.”

Tom looked out the window and was met with the sight of an altogether dilapidated building with a front of shabby red bricks. Behind the dirt streaked window and flaking lettering stood a number of chipped mannequins, all wearing clothing that would have been at least five years out of date in
1928. But having been to *The Leaky Cauldron* he knew that looks, as far as the Magical Community went, could be incredible deceiving.

“It’s a façade, nothing more. Clever of them, really, to hide behind the mask of a decrepit building. No one would waste their precious time poking around a place like this.” He opened the door and stepped out onto the curb, followed swiftly by his mother and father. “Let us at least attempt to keep our reactions to whatever we might see here at least somewhat subdued; I’m told that the staff here are familiar with treating Muggles who have had exposure to Magic and Magical Creatures and am sure that they’ll be stellarly professional. The patients and visitors, however…”

“Has something happened, darling?” his mother asked, immediately concerned. “You and Tommy weren’t discriminated against at that Alley that you went to were you?”

“Not at large, mother, no. But there are some in the Magical world—‘Purebloods’ as they call themselves—who believe themselves superior and see those without magic, or even with a drop of non-magical blood, as impure. I intervened when Junior was being antagonized by two other boys and their father informed me that I ought to take him and go back to ‘my world’.”

His father snorted and sneered “well, he won’t be saying that when we own half of their world will he?”

“No,” he said, “he wouldn’t. Though I doubt that Junior would be content to stop at only owning half.”

“He ought not to be; ambition is what makes a Riddle. I wish that you’d had a little more of it, Tom.” He said. “How do we get inside?”

Preferring not to have the ‘I’m plenty ambitious, Father, if in a different way than you’ again, especially in the middle of the city street for anyone who happened to be walking by to see, Tom allowed himself a short but heavy sigh before turning to the window. The letter had said to speak to the mannequin, but he hadn’t any clue which one of them it had meant or, for that matter, exactly what he was supposed to say.

Clearing his throat and shuffling a bit closer, Tom’s grey eyes darted between the multiple scuffed and dusty models-women; why did it have to be women?-and managed to stammer a less than confident “h-hello?” before jumping a mile when the head of the one in the pea-green dress snapped towards him. Fighting the impulse to retreat and hide behind his mother like a child he continued “I’m here to receive treatment for…Potion Damage.”

The mannequin nodded, crooked a finger at them and then resumed its frozen position as if nothing had happened. He heard his parents mutter and shift behind him as he waited for a door or some other form of opening to appear. When nothing did Tom simply decided to treat the entrance to the hospital the same as the entrance to Platform 9 ¾ and simply run the risk of sprinting full tilt into a pane of glass like an idiot.

It seemed like his conclusion had turned out to be the correct one as he ended up standing in a lobby rather than staggering backwards into the street though he did feel distinctly as if he’d been doused in cold water.

It was while he was checking to make sure that he hadn’t actually ended up wet that he was joined in the lobby of the hospital by his parents.

“Oh my!”
Sufficiently convinced of the dry state of his clothing Tom turned his attention to the waiting room in front of them and had to hold back an exclamation of his own. Diagon Alley had been one thing but St. Mungo’s was entirely another, which was to be expected given that this was where the Magical Community went when things in their lives went wrong.

Seated, or rather coiled up, in a nearby chair was a man who looked like he’d been half-transfigured into an eel and then put through a taffy machine. Across the room from him was a woman whose hair had transformed into some sort of vicious plant which was being beaten off repeated attempts to eat anyone who came within ten feet of her. At the front desk was a person—he couldn’t distinguish their gender beneath all of the ridiculous patterns and colors they’d been splattered with—who looked as if they’d been given a total makeover by a rabid clown.

The longer that he was there the more nervous he became; crushing the urge to turn around and leave the mad house immediately and skirting a number of bustling staff in lime green robes, seeing that the clown-person had been directed towards treatment, Tom approached the front desk.

He didn’t acknowledge the giant portrait of a silver haired witch beyond what it took to walk past it at a slightly faster pace and made a beeline for the only man that was currently behind the desk.

He looked up from what he was doing as he was approached; there was an odd copper ring surrounding the pupils of his otherwise black eyes. “Hello. What can I do for you today, Sir?”

“I’ve been advised to come here to receive treatment for lingering damage caused by being illegally dosed with a potion. And to see a Mind Healer.”

“Right.” The man made a note on a clip board, which he’d excavated from beneath a teetering mountain of other paper work. “Any special requirements?”

He shifted uncomfortably, grey eyes darting around and again reminding him of just how many witches were within five feet of where he stood. His heart rate was up beyond where it probably should have been and he’d broken out into a cold sweat. “Due to trauma surrounding the incident I’d appreciate being seen by a man, if at all possible.”

“We’ll see what we can do.” Pulling the sheet that he’d been writing on free of the clipboard with a smile, he handed it over. “You’ll want the third floor: Potion and Plant Poisonings. Give that to them.”

“Thank you.” Tom took the parchment and, with his parents on his heels, bolted for the stairs.

They were deserted, thank God—or ‘thank Merlin’ as he should probably get used to saying—and he collapsed against the wall to gather his breath. His heart hammered against the palm of the hand that he’d pressed to his chest, his ribs feeling much tighter than they should have.

At least they were already in a hospital in the event that he did have a heart attack.

“Tom.” His father’s hand rested heavy on his shoulder, squeezing gently and drawing his son’s grey eyes up to him. Tom didn’t think he’d ever seen concern displayed so obviously on his weathered features. “Are you alright?”

He nodded, gasping a few times before he managed to speak. “Yes. I’m fine.” Slowly, his pulse rate was beginning to return to normal. His fringe of dark curls clung to his forehead, plastered to his now near ashen skin by the sheen of cold sweat which he had broken out in from head to toe. “I was fine in Diagon Alley, even going into the crowded stores. Maybe it’s the atmosphere here. Maybe there were just more of them or I noticed them more, I don’t know. I just…”
“I know, darling, that it’s hard for you. But maybe this ‘Mind Healer’ that you’re going to see will be able to help you with your traumatic fear as well.”

“I hope so.” Deeming it worth the risk of trusting his legs, Tom pushed himself back off of the wall. He wobbled, seized the banister and narrowly saved himself from toppling over and hitting his head on the stairs. “Even if it can’t be fixed if it can at least be lessened, even slightly, it would make my life much easier.”

They started up the stairs towards the third floor; though his knees remained weak, he managed to successfully keep his feet.

The Potions and Plant Poisonings ward was much less loud and crowded than the lobby had been but was by no means any less colorful or…interesting. Not wanting to put himself back into the near earth orbit of a panic attack Tom kept his eyes on the nearest staff member—as indicated by their heinously hued green robes—and handed the parchment over.

“Ah, yes. This should be fairly simple, at least in part. Follow me.”

The room they ended up in looked exactly like what one would expect from a hospital room and Tom, still feeling a bit unsteady, couldn’t help but receive the distinct impression that this was the most normal thing he’d seen all day.

“Have a seat please, Mr…?”

“Riddle.” He settled himself in the indicated chair.

“Riddle? So a Muggle with trauma related to contact with Magic, or else a Muggle born Wizard?”

“Er…not exactly either of those, really. But getting into the details would take all day.” He sent a half-sheepish half-guilty glance at his parents who were now both regarding him with looks of confusion. “For the sake of your medical records I suppose ‘Muggle born’ is close enough.”

“Right, then.” The scratch of a quill as a notation was made; it was then that Tom realized that the man was wearing his wand behind his ear. “What brings you in today, Mr. Riddle?”

“About twelve years ago I was drugged with a Love Potion by the Witch that would become the mother to my son. She later died in labor after I recovered my faculties and left her; I’ve since found and taken in my child, who is innocent in all of this, but am told I likely suffered some manner of mental damage from both the trauma and the prolonged exposure to the Potion. I want to be able to be a competent and fit guardian for Junior so, naturally, I’d like to fix as much of the damage that Merope did to me as possible. So I came here. To see a Mind Healer.”

“A Love Potion? Would you, by any chance, happen to know which one? There are hundreds of the things, thousands even, and though we’ll be able to treat you to some degree regardless the most effective treatment would only come from a proper identification.”

“Can’t you figure that out somehow? With your magic or even a blood test?” his father demanded harshly.

“I’m afraid that after twelve years the only thing left behind would be the damage, Sir.”

“I was told, in passing, the name but…it’s slipped my mind.” Tom put his head into his hands and massaged his temples; he could feel the beginnings of a headache creeping up on him. “And I don’t have any concrete memory of the time that I was under the Potion’s effect. All that I know is that the water she used to first slip it to me smelled…strange.”
“How so?” the Healer prodded.

“It was all together quite bizarre. It didn’t smell bad, it…like fresh hay. New leather. Summer rain. I never knew that anything could smell like that, especially not food or drink.” Realizing that the other man’s expression had now become quite dark, Tom stiffened. “Is something wrong? Do you recognize it from that description?”

“I believe so.” He said. “This ward has a set of samples meant for use in identification and study. Excuse me for a moment.”

The Healer was gone for maybe three minutes before he returned, holding a vial the size of his thumb; the liquid inside was only slightly thicker than water and had an odd mother of pearl sheen. He pulled the cork out with a small pop and held it out to him.

“Is this what you smelled?”

“Yes.” He grit his teeth, pushing back against the flash back which wanted to overwhelm him through sheer force of will. “That’s exactly what I smelled.”

The far too attractive scent lingered in the room even after the little vial had once again been corked. “What it smells like to me is hickory smoke and fall leaves, but that’s part of what makes this potion in particular so dangerous. It smells different to every person according to what attracts them the most.” He slipped the vial back into his robes. “You, Mr. Riddle, were dosed with Amortentia. The strongest Love Potion in the world, as well as the most expensive and difficult to brew. As a mind altering substance, prolonged exposure to it will lead to damage. Even more so if brewed incorrectly. And considering that it’s highly involved to make and impractical to buy from a Potion’s Master, not to mention illegal to sell in retail, what you were given likely was brewed incorrectly.”

“What can I do to begin taking steps towards recovery? Is there anything?”

“You’ll need a particular prescription for a rather obscure potion and will most definitely have to see a Mind Healer. That being said, I have both good news and bad news.”

Naturally. “I would assume you’d like me to choose which I wish to hear first?” he nodded. Tom sighed. “Bad news first.”

“I’m afraid that all of the qualified Mind Healers currently employed by St. Mungos are Witches.”

“And the good news?”

“There are only two Potion’s Masters in all of England capable of brewing the potion that you’ll need and one of them just so happens to be a master of the Mind Arts, and given that Potion’s Masters cannot become Potion’s Masters without receiving a Medi-Wizardry license he’ll be qualified to treat you. Though his fee will likely be high, given that it’s not a service which he usually provides.” Another parchment was pulled from the clipboard and held it out to him. “You can contact him by owl at this address.”

“Thank you.”

“No need; it’s my job.” He said. “You’re able to show yourselves out?” Tom nodded. “Have a good night.”

“You as well.” The Healer walked out, leaving him alone in the room with his parents.

“Oh, darling,” his mother wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his head down onto her
shoulder. “I’m so sorry that we didn’t believe you when you first told us what happened to you. What that woman put you through must have been so horrible.”

“It’s alright, mother.” He said. “How were you and father supposed to know? ‘Magic’ wasn’t something real to you, then, and I know I sounded crazy.”

“Who have you been told to contact, Tom?” his father once again squeezed his shoulder. He pulled back from his mother enough to look down at the parchment he’d been handed.

“Severus Tobias Snape.”
Harry knew that he was supposed to be studying for the upcoming potions test but…it was hard. Making himself focus and read was extremely difficult to do, and the subject itself wasn’t exactly ‘up his alley’. That’s not to say it was boring, exactly, but it wasn’t the most interesting thing in the world either, at least in his mind. And, Professor Slughorn’s propensity to play the ‘favorites game’ wasn’t a virtue in the little raven’s eyes, especially in a Professor. He was also slightly biased towards his House.

As much as Harry wanted to begrudge him that, given the fact that the adults responsible for teaching them should be impartial and would be in an ideal world, he couldn’t. Why? Because all of the teachers did it! If it wasn’t the House they were the Head of it was the House they’d been a part of. And if it wasn’t slipping in a few extra points for mundane things like sitting in the front row of their class it was taking them for stupid things like ‘sneezing out of turn’.

He wasn’t aware that it was now, apparently, a requirement to ask permission to sneeze.

That being said, the man-though incredibly arrogant in a fairly unique way and altogether too loud to be teaching in a place with acoustics like the dungeon’s-Horace Slughorn was still a better teacher than his ‘Uncle’ Severus would ever be. At least he didn’t hate Harry for the stupid things that his father and his friends had done to him while they were in school.

In fact, he rather liked Harry. Though he’d lost interest in him fairly quickly after realizing that, outside of Defense Against the Dark Arts, he was an altogether average student.

He’d never be anything like Hermione, the girl that he’d met on the Express who was currently top of their class-or his roommate Tom-who was currently the top of the entire bloody school and on his way to setting record scores-but if he had a want to apply himself he could have probably made it into the upper half of their class.

Maybe later on in his school career, once he’d actually gotten used to this whole ‘school’ thing, he’d try for that.

Or when his parents got around to jumping on him about his grades and his future career.

For now he was perfectly happy with running on near autopilot, scrapping at least a passing grade and enjoying the Hogwarts experience of House bonds and lasting friendships.

But, of course, nothing in his life ever turned out the way that Harry hoped it would and being thrown into the snake pit had put a considerable wrench in his plans.

Had things proceeded as expected he’d have gone into Gryffindor like every other blood Potter before him. Would be warm and happy high in the tower of red and gold, rooming with Ron and most probably a handful of others and spending nights and break periods socializing in the cozy common room with the other Lions.

Instead he was stuck in a double dorm with a taciturn to the point of being antisocial super genius second year who would most likely grow up to be a prolific serial murderer and he, Harry, probably wouldn’t survive the year. Would likely meet his end either by being strangled to death in his sleep for accidentally touching his things or would be tossed off the owlry tower when his persistent attempts to befriend him became too much for his patience to bare.

It seemed like all Tom ever did when he wasn’t studying or in class was read tomes of suspicious
origin and mutter darkly to himself.

Harry’s efforts to help him had gone over about as well as had been expected; though Tom eventually accepted the food Harry’s mother sent for him, begrudgingly, he showed his thanks with a merciless round of Stinging Hexes.

He’d probably have had an easier time force-feeding a very angry Nargle milk.

Harry had been too afraid, with the stigma attached to being a snake and the red head’s own sentiments about Slytherin House, to approach Ron—or any of this other friends for that matter—and could practically feel himself wilting like an un-watered flower. Yet Tom seemed perfectly fine despite having no friends and being constantly hounded and bullied. Whenever he was jeered at he held his head high and his shoulders set back. Whenever he was assaulted he walked away, but Harry never missed the flash of malice that lingered in his dark eyes for hours afterwards.

He felt sorry for Tom, he really did, but knew better than to voice it. Or to think about it when Tom was around because he was beginning to suspect that his roommate was capable of reading his mind and would rather not have his eyes gouged out with an Herbology trowel, thank you.

He’d tried to study in their dorm room but the aura of ruffled annoyance radiating from his roommate and the temptation of the sunlight spilling through the green water had made it impossible to sit inside. So he’d taken his textbook and gone to sit outside on the bank of the lake in the hopes that it would make the process of studying easier.

It hadn’t.

In fact, it had made him even more distracted.

The forbidden forest hissed and sighed in the cool wind. The distant green mountains and fluffy white clouds reflected against the rippling surface of the long dark lake. Tilting his head up towards the sun the little raven closed his eyes to bask in the warmth.

He didn’t notice the sound of approaching figures but a gentle push which nearly sent him toppling off of the rock he’d perched on.

Clutching onto his text book to keep from dropping it, Harry resettled himself on his perch and turned his head to come face to face with Ron.

“Mind explaining why you’ve been avoiding us, mate?” despite currently being a scrawny first year the red head was able to cut a considerably intimidating figure when he was perturbed. Hermione and Neville had come down with him and were now watching the pair with mild interest.

“Avoiding you?” Harry repeated, not really knowing what else he could say. “I haven’t been.”

“Well, what would you call what you’ve been doing then?”

Harry stared at his long time best friend for a moment and then shifted uncomfortably on the rock. “I didn’t…I thought that you wouldn’t want to have anything to do with me now.”

“Bloody hell, mate! Why? Because that barmy hat put you in Slytherin? Don’t be stupid.”

“But you hate Slytherin. You’ve always made that clear. And the hat—”

“The hat made a mistake, that’s all it was. Scoot over.”
“Ronald, he’s studying; we shouldn’t disturb him.”

Ron and Neville both sent her rather indignant looks and Harry probably would have done the same if he hadn’t been so busy smiling.

“Oh, no. I’m not.” He quickly hid the book behind his back. “I already finished all my studying.”

The bushy brunet didn’t appear convinced by his excuse but was clearly not about to bother attempting to argue the matter any further. She and Neville, who was once again clinging on to Trevor in the hopes of preventing his familiar from taking a flying leap into the Black Lake, went to join them on the rock.

“Careful, Harry,” the pudgy faced blonde adjusted his grip on the struggling toad, “if you smile any wider your face will freeze like that.”

If that were to happen Harry was sure that Tom wouldn’t be impressed.

Though his reaction might still have been an interesting thing to see.

Provided that said reaction was anything more than a judgmental stare that would have looked well at home on Hedwig.

“I can’t help it,” he said, shuffling to the side to make more room on top of the rock. “It’s been a really long time since I’ve been able to talk to anyone. The Professors don’t count.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have hidden from us every time we tried to get near enough to talk to you.” Hermione pushed her hair out of her face. “Just because you were put into a House that has a bad reputation doesn’t mean that everyone around you is irrational enough to attach that reputation to you without reason.”

“She can be an annoying know it all but she’s not at the top of our class for no reason.” Ron grumbled, slumping slightly against the raven’s shoulder to make his own position on the rock a bit more comfortable. “She corrected me the other day on my pronunciation of Wingardium Leviosa!”

“Well pardon me Ron; next time I’ll just let you end up singed like Finnigan!”

“A mispronunciation isn’t going to automatically make me end up like Seamus, Hermione!”

The blonde and the raven both snickered. Harry pulled off his glasses to clean them on his robes.

“Did you go to the try outs for the Slytherin team, Harry?” Ron asked, clearly grasping at straws in an attempt to change the subject. “The Gryffindor team looks pretty good this year.”

“No, I didn’t go.” He resituated his glasses on his face. “Being in Slytherin is…complicated. I’m not ‘hated’ by House but I’m not loved by them either. They’re too focused on my roommate to really notice me. Maybe that would change if that wasn’t the case. I’d rather not put myself in that situation.”

“Is Draco still a prat?”

“It’s in his nature, isn’t it? But I don’t really see him that often.”

The red head made of a dismissive sound and turned his head in the direction of the Quidditch pitch. The goal posts were visible, gleaming golden in the sun. “It’s a shame we can’t play until our second year.”
“I think it’s perfectly reasonable.” Hermione said. “We’re first years; flying class is mandatory for a reason! I’ve read about Quidditch; the last thing someone who doesn’t know how to fly in a proper capacity needs is to have to worry about scoring or defending goals, avoiding bludgers and finding a snitch! Not to mention that the time commitment being on a House team would require would only cut in to study time and have a detrimental effect on academic performance.”

“Academic performance?” Ron sounded absolutely horrified. “Blimey Hermione! Not all of us are harboring dreams of finding a career as a walking library after we graduate from school!”

“So you think that you’ll try out for the Slytherin team once we’re in our second year?” Neville asked him. Trevor croaked loudly in a demand for freedom which went entirely ignored. “I’ve seen you in our flying classes. We all have. You’re a natural! And wasn’t your dad a Seeker?”

“He was. For Gryffindor. And I grew up flying so being good at the class isn’t some glorious achievement; my Godfather Sirius got me my first toy broom when I was barely one.” He said. “And I love Quidditch but…I don’t know. My parents say that they’re fine with the House I’ve been sorted into but I’m not certain my dad would be pleased to have his oldest son playing Seeker for the rival team.”

“That’s hardly a reason not to play. Especially in your position, Harry. It might give your House reason to respect you if you win a few games for Slytherin’s team.” Hermione said diplomatically, flipping open the book that she’d brought out with her. “It’s actually rather smart.”

“I thought you said-!”

“Those were reasons that I wouldn’t want to play but, like you said, not everyone has plans of ‘becoming a walking library’.” She sniffed. Off in the distance across the lake dark clouds had begun to gather on the horizon. “It looks like it’s going to start raining soon; we should head inside before it comes down. I’m sure that we’ll be able to find plenty of space to finish this conversation in the library.”

Ron and Neville both groaned at the mere thought of going to the library, especially with Hermione, but Harry hadn’t been in contact with her for long enough to know any better and didn’t much like the thought of being rained on. He quickly got up from the rock.

“Hermione’s right. We should go inside before it starts to rain.” The two other boys shot him looks of betrayal as the bushy brunet jumped off the rock as well, but they followed them regardless. Somewhat reluctantly. “Do any of you have plans for Samhain or are you staying at the castle.”

“Halloween, you mean? I’m just going to stay at the castle; my parents are Muggles and getting home and back to school in only a weekend is a bit too much.” She said. “I read about Samhain; the rituals illegal now, isn’t it?”

“Well…on paper.” Harry said. “But most people who are Pureblood or Halfblood still practice it; meaning all of the holiday rituals: Samhain, Beltane, Yule and Midsummer. My dad’s an Auror, he works for the Ministry, so that should tell you how mainstream it really is.”

“But aren’t they Dark Magic?”

“No, not at all. They’re just…old. A lot of the traditional celebrations involve small blood sacrifices. Blood Magic. It doesn’t look good for a ‘Light’ country like Britain to openly condone.”

“I’ve been doing it for years with my parents and Gran.” Neville said, falling into step on Harry’s other side. “There are a lot of different variations of the ritual and yeah, there are some really Dark
ones that involve human sacrifice and deserve to be banned, but most of what’s practiced now involves throwing apples into a fire. Are you two going home?”

“I’m staying for the Halloween feast; I’ve heard the food is amazing.”

Typical Ron.

“My family always makes the holidays a big ‘thing’.” Harry said as they headed up the front steps of the castle. “My parents friends all come over and we have a little party after the ritual in question. Sirius always causes some calamity with mistletoe if it’s Yule. There’s a lot of awkward tension because my ‘Uncle’ is really really good friends with my Mum but hates my father and his friends and can’t really stand to be in the same room together for more than five minutes so…”

“Snipes a git; I sympathize with you, mate. I do. But I’d rather not be the one to have to deal with him, so better you than me.”

The other two snickered. Harry sighed. “Thanks, Ron.”

The four of them claimed a table as far from the watchful eyes and ears of the ferocious librarian; Harry spied Tom sitting kitty corner to them, his back faced their direction as he hunched over a book like a wolf atop a fresh kill.

“What are you looking at?” Hermione turned her head to follow her gaze. When her eyes landed on Tom her expression set into one of disapproval. “Oh. It’s that rude boy from the Express.”

“That’s Tom.” Harry said. “My roommate.”

“Your roommate?” Ron repeated, voice verging on dangerously loud. “You mean to say that all the weeks you’ve been avoiding us over your Sorting you’ve had no one but that git for company?”

“He’s not that bad.” Not true. “I feel sorry for him, really.” Very true. “They call him the ‘Mudblood of Slytherin’ even though he’s a Halfblood and he’s dog-piled constantly. And Dumbledore seems to have something against him.” It was strange, really. Teachers weren’t supposed to be so antagonistic towards their students. Adults weren’t supposed to say that children were beyond saving. “He’s been acting really strange for a while now.”

“Well, he is starting to get up in years.” Neville said. “And he’s known to be eccentric.”

This went far beyond ‘eccentric’ but the raven didn’t currently feel up to pressing the matter further.

His attention was pulled to the two snickering fifth years that had crept up behind Tom and now crouched behind a shelf, wands drawn. The one of the right, grinning maliciously, summoned a long tawny snake and set it slithering towards him spitting furiously. They darted off before the fall out could take place.

“Stupid two legs with their stupid sparking sticks! Take me from my burrow, will they? I’ll show them! That young two-legs there looks good for biting; his ankles bare beneath his robe!”

Harry was about to call out a warning when Tom pulled up his feet as if he’s also understood the serpent’s words—a Puff Adder most likely; he’d seem one at the Muggle Zoo before but couldn’t quite be sure-and turned his head towards it.

“I’m sorry for those buffoons having disturbed you, Serpent. May I ask your name?”

Had the snake been able to make human expressions it would have probably worn the same one as
Harry currently was, its thick body rearing back in surprise. “Speaker!”

Tom could speak to snakes, like him! Was his tongue forked, too? Was that what the Sorting Hat had meant by ‘Adder Tongue’?

“I am.” He said calmly, then repeated “do you have a name?” and offered his arm.

“I am Kumasi, Speaker. What is your name; I should know it, now that you’re to be my two-legs.”

He saw the other boy come within a hair’s breadth of cracking a smile. “I am Tom.”

“A Parselmouth.” Ron said sourly, leveling a glare at the second year and the snake as Tom went about packing his things. “No wonder Dumbledore has something against that little bleeder! He’s a Dark Wizard; that’s what it means to have the ability to speak to snakes! Salazar Slytherin could do it too.”

Just when Harry thought he’d dodged a bullet another one was fired from the barrel. The little raven curled his tongue further back into his mouth and sank a bit further down in his chair.
A Confession to Make

Chapter Summary

Tom tells his parents what was uncovered at Gringotts. We get to see a bit of what he ultimately has plans to change in the Magical World.

Chapter Notes

It's a little early but I went on a crazy all nighter writing binge last night because what is sleep and finished like two months worth of weekly updates. I've also realized that I'm probably going to have to make this a series instead of a stand alone as the story is meant to cover all six of Tom's remaining years at Hogwarts and quite a bit of time afterwards and I've already reached chapter 40 in the planning stages at not even halfway through Tom's second year. So for the sake of not have a couple thousand chapter story that will terrify anyone new trying to read it I'll probably break it into years. We'll see when we actually get to that point.

Ok, I'm not sure why but Wolfsong by Danny Schneidemesser seems to be my go to song for writing this fic. If you guys want to listen to it definitely check it out just don't watch the animation that it goes with unless you want to be emotionally destroyed. Fair warning.

Also, I do have what Tom's Patronus form is in mind when we finally get around to the point where Lupin teaches him and Harry to use it but I'd like to see what all of you think it might be. Put any ideas you might have down in the comments and we'll see if anyone comes up with the same one I have in mind.

Lots of notes for this one, sorry all.

Tom Riddle had grown up loving many things, chief among them books and horses. He’d learned to read—at least in some capacity—before he’d learned to walk and by the time that he was seventeen he’d read nearly every book of any interest to him held within the manor’s library. By the time he was twenty one, just a month before everything he knew had been turned on its head by a glass of water spiked with the strongest Love Potion in the world, he’d begun to build a small library of his own within the two massive bookshelves he’d had built into the walls of his bedroom. He’d collected, by mail order mostly, books on everything from animal husbandry to business—in an honest if half-hearted attempt to be able to at least make some sense of his father’s work; of the empire to which he owed the silver spoon that he’d been born with in his mouth and the fortune he’d inherit when the time came—to the politics that he’d always had the intention of at the very least dipping his feet into if not making a career of but after everything that had happened with the Witch the shelves had been left all but empty for the twelve years that it had taken him to recover: get back on his feet and find his son.

That had since been remedied and between their trip to Diagon Alley and the old school books that Junior no longer needed Tom now had more than enough reading material to last him well into the next decade. The titles including:
The Olde Ways, A Complete Series by Dandrenor Foozaraw, including such titles as Samhain: the Rituals of the Witch’s New Year, Yule: the Sun’s Rebirth, Beltane: the Fires of Midsummer, and Imbolc: Divinative Rites and the Festival of Dolls.

Wizarding Law in the House of Lords by Loquacious Greengrass

The Pureblood Directory by Cantankerous Nott

Customs and Etiquette by Shebah Malfoy

Classifying Creatures and Nonhumans and their Struggles for Basic Rites in our World both by Bartholomew Cattermole

And Runes of the Elder Futhark: The Full Lexicon for Ritual and Translation Twenty Sixth Addition by Anonymous

There were several other texts as well, most of these taken from the vault of Lefay. Junior had taken many of the more savory among them with him to school, leaving his father to hold on to a number of the more interesting tomes. Most were written entirely in Runes—hence his need for *Runes of the Elder Futhark: The Full Lexicon for Ritual and Translation Twenty Sixth Addition*—but some of them were a good deal more…reactive. A number of them requiring blood to unlock. Another few either screaming or biting when opened.

Tom had spent most of his time reading up on law and etiquette and the lacking rites of Magical Creatures, piecing together a plan for improvement he could attempt to put forward once he’d officially joined the House of Lords, but the approach of October had led him to crack open *Samhain: the Rituals of the Witch’s New Year* and read it through from cover to cover once before going back through. Selecting the best ritual to preform when the holiday came and Junior returned for that weekend. Making note of the necessary materials as he did so with the feather quill that he was attempting to learn to use; he didn’t doubt that it would look bad for a Lord to be using a non-magical writing utensil while at work, and he was just that little bit too prideful to admit defeat and purchase a Quik-Quotes quill for himself.

The smell of parchment and ink which seemed to hang about all of the books that he’d recently acquired—most strongly with the ancient tomes, most of which he’d spent far more time translating into modern English than actually reading thus far—was something that had taken quite a bit of getting used to, but he had now begun to take comfort from. The pages of the books, regardless of whether they were incredibly old or brand new, were slightly yellowed and soft to the touch and every aspect of their creation seemed to be charged with a faint trace of magic that prickled against his fingertips like static electricity.

It made the reading experience, over all, a somewhat distracting one.

With his notes finished, Tom wiped the tip of the quill he’d been using carefully with a small swatch of cloth before closing up the ink well with the click of metal on glass. Setting all three aside on his bedside table and flipping the book closed with the careless flick of his wrist, he picked up the parchment to evaluate his hand writing.

There were splotches of black splattered across his palm and fingers and the lettering was far from his best but it was legible and, ultimately, that was all that mattered. After all, it was only a list of required items and not an official document or anything that he’d be turning in for others to review.

The list of items that he would need to collect for the ritual prior to the night of Samhain would be one silver candle to leave lit in a Western facing door or window, a Rune inscribed bowl in which to
put out an offering of honeyed milk mixed with blood on the porch, dried sweet grass or some other similar incense, Yew wood to burn in a bonfire, a bushel of apples and an athame.

Given that the only thing that entire list that could be found in Little Hangleton was the bushel of apples, another trip to Diagon Alley seemed to be in order.

But something else was in order first. He’d left the matter far too long, and for all that Tom didn’t really know how it was that he’d go about breaking the news to his parents he knew that an explanation was quite overdue.

He rose from his bed and stretched, his joints popping; the springs of the mattress whined as Rogan leapt off after him, the mastiff leaning its massive body against the back of his legs and almost knocking over. He chuckled quietly, dropped his hand onto the old dog’s head and patted him gently before heading towards the door of his room.

“Come on, Rogan. This should at least be…interesting.”

If their visit to St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries had taught him anything it was that if his parents were going to react negatively to the revelations that had been had at Gringotts it would have nothing to do with the content of the revelations themselves and everything to do with the fact that Tom had waited so long to tell them. Which was a frightening enough prospect that it made him want to put off telling them even longer.

But that would only make things worse.

He hadn’t felt this way since he was thirteen and had to inform his parents of precisely where he’d told his etiquette tutor to shove her lessons for all the use he’d thought they were. He’d spent about the same amount of time staring at the closed door of the study with an ever mounting sense of dread back then too.

Rogan made an annoyed sounding grumble and used one of his paws to prod at his leg, staring up at him expectantly in a manner which almost seemed to say ‘you knock or I will’.

“Oh, fine you bloody dog!” Tom grumbled, only half annoyed, and raised his hand to deliver three sharp knocks to the door.

“Come in.”

Nothing for it now; Tom turned the knob and pushed open the door. His original plan had been to carry out the conversation from the hallway, where he’d be in a prime position to immediately bolt without any doors or furniture in his way, but that plan was simultaneously ruined by the realization that the absence of his mother from the room meant he’d have to tell the story twice and Rogan pushing him forward into the door and trotting over his legs only to promptly cross the study and drop his massive head into his father’s lap.

He was now, quite belatedly, beginning to see why the decision to own a dog the size of small horse might not have been the best idea he ever could have had.

“Something you need, Tom?” his father asked without looking up from the report on fiscal earnings that he’d likely been going over all morning, allowing his son the chance to scramble back upright into a more dignified position than could be provided by hanging off a doorknob.

“Um, yes actually. There’s something that I need to…tell you. And it’s kind of important so mother should probably…”
“I’ll have one of the servants collect her.” After summoning the nearest member of the help and ordering them to collect his mother his father set aside the reports and looked up at him. “I take it that this has to do with the matter you mentioned at that hospital which would ‘take all day to explain’? There’s no need to look ashen, Tom, you’re a bit too old to be grounded.”

He attempted to shift his expression into something more neutral than what it likely was but no doubt ended up pulling something pained instead. His mother’s arrival spared him from having to respond, though he couldn’t quite find it in himself to feel relieved.

“There’s something you needed to tell us, darling?” she asked, seating herself in one of the chairs positioned around the room. “Come sit down.”

It was probably better that he did; would better help him keep his nerve. Somewhat unsteadily, Tom made his way over to the nearest empty chair and lowered himself into it.

“I’ve been neglecting saying this because I didn’t know exactly how to tell you but…I’ve known since the beginning of the week that Junior and I spent in Diagon Alley shopping for his school supplies.” With a deep breath, he quickly forced out “Junior may not have gotten all of his magic from Merope. In fact the reason that he’s so extraordinary, that he can do things that other Wizards can’t, is because not all of his magic comes from blood that’s even remotely human and because of that it’s not beholden to the same conventions and laws. And he got that blood through me; through the Riddle line.”

There was silence for a drawn out moment before his father urged him to continue in a surprisingly calm tone.

“While we were taking a walk in the garden after the supply list had arrived Junior asked me to take over as his legal Magical Guardian as well as his legal Guardian in the Non-Magical world as he suspected that Albus Dumbledore, a man who has proven himself out to get him for some reason or another, was his standing Guardian at the time. We learned at Gringotts that he’d been correct; not only that, but the bloody plonker had put a Blood Lock on any transition of Guardianship. A Blood Lock! If I hadn’t been the one to save him from that orphanage, to take over his legal affairs and act in his true best interests, that bastard would have retained complete control! He could have even voided the adoption and had Junior sent right back to that hellhole!”

The window rattled in its pane but didn’t crack; though both of his parents eyed the glass warily Tom ignored it.

“We had to undergo a blood test to prove that I was his biological father, allowing for the Blood Lock to be broken, and the results turned up some results that were…unexpected. So much so that we were immediately taken to see the Goblin King—the Goblins are the ones that run their bank, you see—and he told me about our ancestor. Kieran. The Great-grandson of Morgan Lefay.”

“Lefay? You don’t mean the same Lefay from the King Arthur legends, do you?”

“I do. I’m now considered the Head, or ‘Lord’, of the oldest Dark Affiliated bloodline in Britain, with Junior as my Heir. Once I’ve finished with my treatment and have sat through at least basic training for what little magic I have I’ll finally have that political career I always wanted.” Though it would be fairly short lived. “Kieran was a Dark Lord that tried to take over the British Isles; after he was defeated they deemed him too dangerous to simply imprison so they turned him into a Muggle by ripping out his magical core and left him for dead. But he was rescued and nursed back to health and did a number of terrible things which lead him to have Dragon Magic. Dragon blood. He took the false surname Riddle and instigated the Witch Trials. He had a son before he was eventually stopped, and the stolen magic went dormant. Until Merope drugged me.” Tom fiddled with the ring
on his finger. “I suppose that what I’m trying to tell you is that I’ll be in London quite a lot from this point forwards.”

“So you’re a Wizard, Tom?”

“Darling, if that’s true than why did you never get a letter? Shouldn’t you have gone to Hogwarts like Tommy is?”

He shook his head, relaxing against the back of his chair. “No. I have a bit of magic but I don’t meet the requirements to be classified as a ‘Wizard’. The explanation I was given was rather… complicated.”

Over all, they’d taken it rather well. Probably because he’d explained his reasoning for not immediately telling them at the outset. Or because they still viewed him as being in a relatively fragile place. Tom could still tell they weren’t exactly pleased with the matter, but that was entirely to be expected. And completely reasonable.

“So you’re a Lord then, Tom?” his father picked the documents he’d been going over earlier back up and resumed his work. “Don’t let them walk all over you.”

He couldn’t keep a small smile off his face as he got to his feet. “I won’t, father. There’s a lot I already have in mind that could do with changing, and though abolishing the Statute of Secrecy will be a long running project—as will bringing proper rites to Werewolves and other similar creatures—are we Riddles defined by our ambition?”

Rogan decided his was perfectly comfortable remaining where he was and didn’t bother to lug himself off the floor of his father’s study to follow him out into the hall. He headed back towards his room with the intention in mind to draw up the permission letter to allow Junior to leave Hogwarts for the weekend of the upcoming holiday.

What he found sitting on the outside sill of his bedroom window derailed that intention for a slightly later time; a highly upset eagle owl glared at him over top of the letter clamped in its beak. Tom pulled a small handful of owl nuts from the bag sitting beside Archimedes’ perch before he pulled open the window to allow the bird inside, not trusting his prospects of keeping all his fingers without them. The owl permitted him to exchange the letter for the treats before booting his smaller bird off its perch and raiding the water bowl.

Archimedes fluttered over to rest on his shoulder with a disgruntled hoot. Tom stroked the raptor’s ruffled feathers a few times before he opened the envelope and pulled out the letter inside.

‘Mr. Riddle,

I am capable of providing for you the potions which have been prescribed by the healers at St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries for a reasonable market price. Regarding the other services you have requested I think it best to evaluate your motives for such in person, though I suggest you start the process of finding another to assist you now as it’s unlikely I will do so.

Send my owl back with the most convenient time for a house call enclosed.

Severus Tobias Snape,

Potion’s Master

Picking up the nearest fountain pen—the Muggle kind, not the feather quill he’d been using earlier as now was not the time to appear as if he’d only recently reached the age of five—Tom quickly wrote
out a response. Once that was finished he folded it up, slipped it into a sturdy envelope and labeled it accordingly before handing it back to the owl.

The raptor immediately took flight and winged its way out of the still open window, leaving a single black feather behind to drift to the floor. Tom watched its progress as it rapidly disappeared into the distance.
Pillars of Salt

Chapter Summary

And now we go over Dumbledore's motivations and his first move.

Chapter Notes

Why are there two updates this week? Two reasons
1) I recall there was one week I missed an update so I'm making up for that now
2) When I get excited about things I have trouble controlling myself, hence why I have so many different fics running at once despite not having finished the first Series I ever wrote for this fandom.

Either way, enjoy.

Ever since he’d peeled himself free of Gellert Grindlewald’s terrible influence things had been going entirely according to plan. The German had been rebuffed, forced to leave the British Isles alone and empty handed with his horrendous ideology dragging behind him and his tail between his legs. Though he hadn’t been discouraged for long and had resumed both the mad pursuit of the mythical Deathly Hallows—the Elder Wand, the Resurrection Stone and the Cloak of Invisibility—and the effort of collecting followers—everything from disgruntled Pureblood Witches and Wizards to Dark Creatures of all flavors—almost immediately that didn’t really mean much of anything in the end. Not as far as he was concerned.

The ‘Dark Lord’s’ forces were slowly but steadily tearing their way across mainland Europe. Inching ever closer back towards the British Isles like a cloud of poisonous miasma. Preparing for destruction.

All according to plan.

He was ready, now, to stand against his former friend as he should have before. Knew, now, that he would be the one to win. He would beat back the Dark Lord as the Allied Forces would, surely, beat back the Third Reich he used for cover. He would attend his trial and ensure that Gellert Grindlewald was rightfully pronounced guilty of all the crimes he had committed and would be prevented from committing those he still had planned. And he would plead for mercy instead of death; for captivity within the dread prison that the ‘Dark Lord’ himself had built to house the enemies he didn’t deign to kill: Nuremgard.

Because of his strength, because of his mercy, because of the fact that he had saved their nation—if not all the world—from domination by a tyrant he, Albus Dumbledore, would be hailed a hero. And he would be one step closer to his goals.

But to ensure that he wouldn’t be impeded by others, that what was truly best for both their world and the world they lived alongside wouldn’t be challenged by those who didn’t understand, couldn’t see the truth that he could—that two halves of the whole belonged together; would flourish together or
die alone—the defeat of one Dark Lord wouldn’t be enough.

He needed two.

But he, Albus Dumbledore, was not a fool and he knew that such things didn’t happen with the immediacy that his plans for the world—Muggle and Magical—demanded. Not naturally, at least. Not organically. He had neither the time nor the patience to wait the decades, the centuries quite possibly, that it would take for another Dark Lord to be birth purely by circumstance.

So he’d taken it upon himself to forge one.

That had been twenty years before the day he’d left his office at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to pay a visit to London and deliver an acceptance letter to an orphan child. The moment that he’d spoken to the Matron about the boy he’d begun to consider his prospects. The moment that he’d laid eyes on the young Wizard himself he’d known that he was perfect.

Looking as worn and broken down as the furnishings of the cramped and dusty room around them he perched on the edge of a cot which more closely resembled a table from a morgue than anything fit to be slept on. Oddly delicate, like a porcelain doll set upon a high shelf and left to gather dust and cobwebs.

His eyes were large and dark, the hue a sooty mix of galena and sapphire, almond shaped and hemmed in by long lashes. His face was cherubic, a thin veil of baby fat—far less than should have been found on a child his age, but still there—rounding out a face which would be sculpted and handsome when he grew. Skin like alabaster, bordering on sallow, and hair a careful nest of dark shiny curls. He spoke with a vocabulary and coldness that no child should have had and regarded those around him with the callous apathy of a psychopath. When he’d told him, as he left, that he could speak with serpents the boy had inadvertently sealed his own fate.

Tom Marvolo Riddle would be sacrificed on the altar of the Greater Good.

And everything had proceeded better from there than Albus ever could have hoped. He’d been Sorted into Slytherin where his secondhand belongings and Muggle surname had made him a pariah; the House which the inhabitants of the other three wouldn’t touch with a ten foot pole. He’d taken a stance against the boy, instigating Lion House to join Tom’s Slytherin peers in eating him alive, and had cultivated his underlying hatred for everything Non-Magical even further until the embers of a bitter anger smoldered beneath the boy’s pale skin. Waiting for the proper moment to explode into a ravenous inferno of hatred for everyone and everything around him and to burn the entire world down. When he’d left on the Express at the edge of his First Year on the edge of tears, held back only by the tattered remains of his pride, Albus had felt secure in the progress which had been made towards his future goals.

But over the summer something had gone wrong.

In order for his plans to succeed it was paramount for the boy to be cut off from any network of support until his ability to connect with others was destroyed. He couldn’t be allowed to have friends. Let alone a family. He’d expected that, between his age and the Matron’s willingness to pain him like a Devil, his prospects for adoption were nonexistent.

Yet Tom had returned for his second year happy and dressed in the same fine school robes as the children of the oldest Pureblood families, wearing an Heir ring on his hand. And Harry, Sorted into Slytherin through some flaw in the Founder’s System that he didn’t understand, had been placed as Tom’s roommate. Despite repeated warnings to the contrary the good-hearted fool of a boy had determined it was his life’s purpose and one true desire to befriend the nascent Dark Lord.
At first Albus had simply assumed-hoped-that Tom had simply used his Machiavellian intelligence to leave the orphanage at some point in the intervening months and lay claim to the Heirships left to him by his mother, perhaps finding a forgotten vault deep within the bowls of Gringotts that still had money in it, and that nothing more than that had occurred. That his plans were still, ultimately, uncompromised as that everything would return to normal once Harry was bitten for his trouble.

But then the morning post had come that first day and amongst the storm of birds had been a Barred Owl carrying a letter for Tom. And it kept coming back. Every day. With another letter and, on the oft occasion, small packages. The boy had, somehow, been adopted! And just like that, all because he hadn’t though it necessary to take precautions against such a thing all of his progress, all of his plans, had been reduced to pillars of salt.

But it wasn’t unsalvageable. Not yet. He could still drag everything back onto its proper course, if only through measures that were classifiable as nothing short of drastic.

First he needed to know if the family which had adopted Tom were Muggle or Magical, and exactly what Heirships the blasted child may have gained from such a process that could potentially complicate matters.

He had two stops to make that Saturday, the first of them being Gringotts bank.

Diagon Alley was just as loud and crowded as it always was, and though he was afforded the courtesy of a number of polite greetings no one out shopping that day paid him any particular mind. That suited his being there just fine.

One never knew if someone might seek to go digging into Tom’s past at some point in the distant future, or how far back they might go. It wouldn’t do for any shades of suspicion to fall on him.

Gringotts rose above the rest of the buildings in the Alley, an imposing structure made entirely of white marble. The guards astride the entrance gave him hard looks and clutched their spears tighter; it was odd behavior but he didn’t pay it too much mind.

After waiting patiently in line and informing the Goblin behind the desk of why he was there he was promptly taken into the private office of a Goblin by name of Barghast. Particularly ugly even for a Goblin, the sallow faced creature glared up at him with what almost amounted to resignation; as if he’d been expecting a visit at some point.

“I take it, Albus Dumbledore, that you are here regarding the matter of young Tom Riddle?”

“I am.” He said, aware that any attempt at his normal congenial façade would be fruitless here. “I’d like to inquire as to his Heirships.”

“Are you of any blood relation to young Mr. Riddle?”

“No.”

“Then that is information that I cannot give you. Under treatise XVIII of Goblin Law, only the Lord or Heir themselves or their direct blood relatives are entitled to a full disclosure of inheritances and titles by Gringotts bank.”

“Young Mr. Riddle is an orphan. I am his Magical-.”

“The law is the law. And if you’re truly his ‘Magical Guardian’,” the smugness in his tone made him think the squat little creature knew something he didn’t and was highly amused by that fact, “then I suggest that you attempt to illegally charm such information out of the Census and Registration
Bureau of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement! If that concludes your business here today, Albus Dumbledore, the Goblin Nation wishes you a pleasant day.”

They were never the most accommodating creatures, even amongst the Fae, but this was just plain unusual.

No matter. He’d planned to stop by that Department of the Ministry anyway. It wouldn’t be too difficult to get the information that he needed there.

Still, it was with a feeling of sharp annoyance that he left the bank and traveled instead to the Ministry of Magic. After explaining his reason for being there and receiving the according visitor’s badge which he pinned to the front of his chest Dumbledore proceeded to the necessary floor.

It was with some disappointment that he found the desk staffed by a man; getting the information that he wanted would be just that much more difficult to do.

No matter. What was life without the occasional challenge?

“How can I help you today?” the young man behind the counter asked, not bothering with pleasantries. His voice was somewhat strained. He looked rather overworked.

“I’ve come to inquire after the identity of the new adoptive family of one Tom Marvolo Riddle as well as any Heirships that he might hold. I’m both one of his teachers and his Magical Guardian and want to make certain that he’s in good hands.”

“Riddle, Tom Marvolo? Give me a moment, please. For some Merlin forsaken reason the file cabinets we store the records in are charmed against Summoning.” Grumbling to himself about ‘bureaucracy’ and ‘menial jobs made all the worse by having to work like a Muggle’ the man shuffled away into the back. He returned fifteen minutes later without the file in his hands. “I’m sorry, Sir, but an injunction against sharing that information has been placed on the records that you’re looking to access. Not only that, but his Heirships is a closed file even to the Ministry; for some reason I can’t fathom the Goblin Nation is currently withholding it from the public record.”

“Surely you can tell me something? This is truly out of honest concern for one of my favorite students.” He turned up the ‘warm twinkle’ as far as it would go.

The expression on the Wizard’s face clearly stated ‘I don’t get paid enough to deal with this shit’. “You could be doing it by mandate of the Muggle Queen herself, or Merlin for that matter, and I still wouldn’t be able to tell you anything. I’d only be allowed to share that information with his legal Magical Guardian and that isn’t you; Guardianship of Tom Marvolo Riddle changed hands in the last week of August.”

What? That wasn’t possible! He’d had a Blood Lock placed on the boy, sealing his legal Guardianship under his name unless blood family stepped in. Both the boy’s mother and grandfather were dead. His Uncle was a Muggle-hating lunatic who had just recently been released and then sent back once again to Azkaban and would have sooner strangled his nephew to death than taken him in.

But perhaps a visit to Morfin Gaunt was in order. If nothing else, the mad man may know of another living relative that might have been sane-and altruistic-enough to take Tom in despite his blood. The mad tended not to know how to hold their tongues, after all.

“Thank you. I apologize for wasting your time; I received no notification of the shift in his legal guardianship and thereby hadn’t realized it had taken place.”
The only explanation was that whoever was trying to steal the boy from underneath him didn’t want him to catch on until there was nothing left that he could do to stop them. Clever.

It had almost worked.

Almost.

It was a lucky thing that it was a Saturday and he didn’t have any classes that he needed to teach. Otherwise he would have had to leave the matter festering for another day or more; however long it took for him to arrive at another block of time where he was free.

The island on which Azkaban Prison was situated was describable as three things-cold dark and wet-and even the Aurors stationed in the guard house appeared uniformly miserable.

“It’s not often that the prisoners here get visitors, Albus.” One of them said, speaking in a gravelly voice. He wasn’t certain that he’d seen the Auror before and couldn’t put a name to the face. “Why are you here?”

“I’m here to see a relative of a favorite student of mine.” He said. “I’d like to know, from the man himself, why he felt the need to attack his nephew. It will be a brief visit and I am fully capable of casting a Patronus. Would you happen to be able to spare an Auror?”

The other man stared at him for a moment before he grunted “Auror Proudfoot.”

Likely on account of the constantly crashing waves, the middle aged Wizard tasked with being his guide bore a very close resemblance to a drowned rat. “Follow me, please.”

Patronuses stood guard outside the guard cabin like shining sentinels, their warmth and light fending off the cold of the Dementor but doing nothing for the wind and spray. A silver mountain lion prowled towards them as they headed towards the shadow of the looming prison, keeping close at Auror Proudfoot’s heels. The Phoenix summoned from his own wand was three times as bright as the great cat and sent Dementors scattering even from a couple hundred feet above them.

The lower levels of Azkaban held the least serious offenders; the higher up one went the worse the offenders became. Morfin Gaunt was held on the fifth floor, disheveled as ever and sitting on the floor in the far corner of the room.

How he could possibly see anything with the curtain of moss-grown matted hair hanging in his eyes Dumbledore had no idea, but he turned his head in their direction at the approach of the Patronus’ light.

“What do you Mudbloods want? Muggle loving blood traitors, all of you!”

Pleasant. “Hello Morfin. My name is Albus Dumbledore and I’m here to ask you a few questions about your nephew.”

“What about the half-breed? Did his filthy Sire send you here, you Muggle-loving idiot? Riddle can’t do anything but get run over by his own bloody horse so he sends you to do his dirty work for him; great taste my slut sister had, isn’t it?” he grunted. “Bad enough that you lot let half-breeds live. Now you’re giving them back to the Muggles to raise too?”

“Your Nephew was…with Tom Senior?”

“Damn right he was! The half-breed looks like his worthless Sire in miniature; Riddle paraded passed the house as if he owned it, as if he were royalty, but I set him straight I did. Would have
given our world one less half-breed to have to worry about had those Aurors not shown up.”

His father. The relative of Tom’s who had so cleverly evaded his notice thus far, who had come so close to utterly ruining his plans, was his father. The man who had been drugged and raped by Merope Gaunt, left traumatized and broken in the aftermath. The last person he ever would have thought would even spare a thought for the boy. Tom Riddle Senior.

A Muggle.

“Thank you, Morfin. You’ve given me all the information that I need.” He turned to the Auror and said pleasantly. “I’m finished here.”

Everything was going to be just fine. Filing a complaint regarding the precedent set by having a Muggle registered as the legal Guardian of a Magical child was a simple recourse through which he could have Tom’s legal Guardianship returned to his name. Once that was done it would be simple enough to use that power to void the adoption and have the boy returned to Wool’s Orphanage.

And perhaps, just for good measure and to prevent any further complications, he could use a few choice spells to turn the father against the son. It would destroy the boy’s ability to trust forever. Would make it certain that he would harbor a hatred for Muggles that could never be cured.

There’d truly be no saving him, then.

But before he did anything Albus needed to know exactly what it was that he was up against. Tom Riddle Senior was, for the moment, an unknown element and his carefully laid plans couldn’t abide by such things. Luckily for him the approaching holiday provided him with the perfect opportunity to do just that.

Headmaster Dippet would be more than pleased to put him down as a volunteer to take the young boy home.
Eavesdropping

Chapter Notes

Ok, so I'm fairly far ahead of where I need to be for weekly updates so instead of saying 'I'm going to post once a week on Wednesday and that's it' I'm going to just say 'I'm going to post at least once a week on Wednesday' because if I go much further without doing that I won't be able to find the chapter I need to post next in my word document any more because it's gotten so long.

The Giant Squid squinted through the glass wall of the common room of Slytherin House, one of its massive tentacles delicately tracing the same patterns that Harry’s fingertips made against the clear glass. Outside, bioluminescent fields of water grass swayed gently to and fro in the current of the lake and flooded the large room with a faint glow which mixed well with the ambient light of the half-burned-down fire that crackled below the skull-lined mantle over the hearth. Far above, barely visible from his position reclined on his back on a leather daybed, he could make out the surface of the lake as it rippled beneath the pouring rain which had scoured the castle’s grounds for the majority of the day.

His original plans had been to meet up with Ron and the others for a Wizarding Chess tournament out on the sweeping grounds but that had only lasted about an hour before yet another storm had rolled in. Not wanting to be dragged into another endless spiral of homework and text books that a trip to the library with Hermione would mean their group had broken up and headed back to their respective common rooms.

Ron, Hermione, Neville and the twins—who had joined in on the fun rather than doing a Curse Chart for Defense Against the Dark Arts-back to their tower. Harry back to the dungeons, alone.

Not for the first time the little raven wished that he’d been Sorted into Gryffindor because at least then he could have been with his friends, or at the very least that he had someone to talk to. He smiled at the Squid, grateful that at least the massive cephalopod was willing to spend time with him. But everything had to end eventually, of course, and after about an hour of helping the raven to entertain himself the Giant Squid motioned what might have been a wave with one of its arms and propelled away into the murky water.

After it left Harry made an honest effort at continuing to find something to occupy his mind with in the waters of the lake but mostly failed until he caught sight of an incredibly ugly creature bobbing up and down around the outskirts of the glowing water grass.

He’d kind of been hoping that he might see one of the Merfolk that were rumored to inhabit the deeper reaches of the Black Lake if he looked through the window for long enough but he supposed that beggars couldn’t be choosers in any real capacity. And whatever this butt-ugly thing was it would have to do for company.

It looked rather like a squid itself, or at the very least a squid-related creature; a terrible net of tentacles and sharp fins, its almost formless body topped with a set of curving horns and teeth that
would have looked at home in the mouth of a shark. Its eyes were massive bulbous and yellow with barred pupils.

It didn’t look like the most pleasant being in the world, but outward appearances didn’t always mean anything. Maybe it was nice. Maybe it just wanted a companion. Harry tapped on the window, not sharply—he didn’t want to frighten off a potential aquatic friend—but loud enough to get its attention, and waved.

The thing flew at him like a bat out of hell and attempted to bite his hand off through the glass. Harry let out a yelp of surprise and toppled backwards off the couch.

“No, not friendly.” He muttered, sitting up and rubbing the back of his head where he’d bumped it on the floor. “Not friendly, at all.”

“Of course it isn’t friendly; that’s a Grindelow you idiot!” Tom stood a few paces away from him with his bag under his arm, likely having returned from another round of studying at the library; with the common room currently empty but for Harry the older boy clearly didn’t feel the need to immediately retreat into their room. Harry hadn’t heard him come in. “Stop messing around with the wild life; you’re not a Druid and nature doesn’t want to be your bloody friend!”

Clearly something had happened, yet again. The raven couldn’t help but wonder that it was that was responsible this time.

“I know that ‘nature doesn’t want to be my friend’ and I’m also aware that I’m not a Druid. That sort of magic is hereditary and there’s no one in my family line that has that trait.” He was starting to become a little bit annoyed. Harry didn’t want to start snapping at Tom, the older boy was attacked enough as it was and he didn’t want to set himself further back in the effort of befriending him, but was the way that he was being treated really warranted? “Do you really need to be so snappish with me all of the time? Is civility really too much to ask?”

“Give that you talk both incessantly and out of turn, yes. It is too much to ask. Do you not remember the specifications of my allowing you to be my roommate in the first place?”

He flounced off in a huff before Harry could even make an effort to reply. He collapsed back onto the couch with a heavy sigh, reaching up to run his fingers through his already wild hair making it even messier than it had been before.

What is wrong with him? How can anyone possibly be that…that…argh! I don’t understand!

Dealing with Tom Marvolo Riddle was worse than dealing with Gabriel when he was having an apocalyptic temper tantrum! Harry hadn’t thought that such a thing was even possible!

Huffing out another sigh the little raven let his arms drop onto the leather couch with a dull thump. Dinner wasn’t for another two hours. Should he go up to the owlry and hang out with Hedwig? Was it worth making the hike up the exposed stair case of the tower, getting soaked through to the bone in the effort, and possibly developing a life threatening case of hypothermia that would send him to St. Mungo’s for a month?

Probably not.

Was attempting to hold out a meaningful conversation with his already obviously perturbed roommate worth potentially getting his head bitten off.

Once again, probably not but what the hell? He didn’t come from purely Gryffindor stock for no reason.
Taking a brief moment to steel himself, Harry pushed himself up off the couch that he’d been sitting on and headed up the stairs to their dorm room. Kumasi had strung his long body between the spokes of the older boy’s headboard like a string of Muggle Christmas lights, his tongue flicking out on occasion to search for new scents. Tom was sitting cross-legged on his bed, propped against the pillows, with an essay on the moons of Jupiter and Saturn half completed in front of him and a beautifully detailed star chart in his lap. He didn’t look up when Harry entered the room, doubtlessly content to write him off as an annoyance unworthy of his attention.

The little raven crossed the room and sat down on his own bed, bouncing on the springs and causing the mattress below him to creak and shift loudly while he gathered his courage to do what he was about to attempt. Irritated by the sound, the older boy shot him a pointed glare.

“So,” Harry said, fiddling with his nails, “October, huh? It’s been…rainy.”

Silence.

“Well, I suppose it could be worse.” He continued. “It could be absolutely freezing already.”

“What part of not wanting him to talk to you can that other two legs not get through his tiny thick skull?”

“All of it, apparently.” Tom hissed, dipping his quill into the ink well beside him.

“Do you have any plans for Samhain?” Harry pressed, forcing himself not to react to the Parseltongue and give himself away. “My family usually has a little get together at our home in Godric’s Hollow. I’m sure that my parents would be perfectly happy to let me invite-.”

“I don’t require an invitation to any celebration of yours, Potter.” His roommate informed him rather sharply, adding another line to his essay with an artful flourish. “I will be returning home for Samhain where I will be honoring Magic and the old traditions with my father. He’s informed me through a recent letter sent by owl post that he’s selected the Urram Ritual.”

“T-The Urram Ritual!” Harry yelped. “But that’s borderline Necromancy! I know that all of the Rituals are equally banned but, Hecate, that’s Dark Magic!”

Tom snorted at him, his handsome face twisting into a sneer, and then returned to writing his essay. “Magic is Magic, Potter. Dark Magic and Light Magic are equally capable of death and destruction and both of them exist for a reason.” He said. “Balance is the very axis on which the universe turns. Without Light and Dark, Good and Evil, in equal measure everything would fall apart. Having said that, I’m finished speaking with you for the rest of the next week. Shove it.”

“Fine.” Harry huffed, annoyed, and turned onto his side. Facing his back to the other boy and settling down into his soft mattress.

If Tom wanted to be a complete and total arsehole then Harry would let him. Though he had to admit that he was more than a little bit disappointed. He and Tom were both Parselmouths, not that the other boy knew about that little fact, and were both so very isolated within Slytherin House. All that they had was each other.

He’d been hoping that they could be friends, but even as stubborn as he was Harry was beginning to feel that that wouldn’t be possible.

“Tell me, Tom, why are most of your kin so dumb? It seems to me that having legs makes you stupid.”
“I’m afraid that I can’t answer that question. I’ve wondered much the same. Quite often, actually.”

He hadn’t told Tom that he was a Parselmouth as well because he didn’t trust the other boy to keep his secret. At least, that was what he’d told himself. That was his justification.

It was, of course, a lie.

The simple reality of the fact was that Harry liked Tom’s voice—liked everything about Tom, really—especially when the other boy was speaking the snake language. His voice was…pretty. His face was pretty. Tom was pretty. He didn’t want to tell him that he could understand what he was saying in his little conversations with Kumasi because then he’d stop having them while he was around. Harry didn’t want that to happen because then he wouldn’t hear Tom talk at all.

Wasn’t he a little bit young to be having crushes and feelings that he didn’t understand? And wasn’t he supposed to be having them for girls, not for other older boys? Harry groaned and buried his face in his pillow.

Why did this sort of thing always seem to happen to him?
A Less Than Pleasant Meeting

Chapter Summary

Here we have it. The first meeting

At exactly twelve o clock noon on the fifth of October Severus Snape appeared on the narrow country road with a resounding crack. After nearly a straight week of constant showers scattered across the whole of the British Isles the sky was, at last, a clear and cloudless blue. The sun hung above like a blazing white gold coin, warming the otherwise chilly air to a tolerable degree and hardening the packed ground into the questionable half-way point between dirt and mud. The smells of fallen leaves ozone and rain hung in the air like a thick cloud of perfume and late summer insects still hummed and chirped in the copse of trees surrounding him.

 Summoning a pocket watch with a flick of his wand to ensure that, yes, he was in fact exactly on time and banishing it again just as quickly he strode forward up the path as the letter that he’d gotten back in response had instructed.

Ten paces later the expansive grounds of his potential—though it was still highly unlikely that he would do more for this man than provide the prescribed potions, given that that and not Mind Healing in any capacity was actually in his job description—client’s manor opened up before him, the rolling perfectly tended emerald carpet leading up to a primly grown garden of sweet smelling flowers in declining bloom that hemmed in the front of the house.

Riddle manor was no less luxurious or beautiful than the ancestral homes of the oldest Pureblood families like the Potters—just the passing though of James and his pinhead friends was enough to make him grimace—Malfoys and Blacks but it had a different feel to it. Severus couldn’t quite place what it was—perhaps the lack of veiling wards which charged the air around such manors with Magic, or the absence of the odd and only barely detectable distortions which always seemed to be visible on buildings where interior Enlarging Spells had been used—but it felt different. Perhaps less artificial.

An old, though still surprisingly firm and well dressed, couple were sitting outside at a beautiful cast iron porch table drinking tea from an ancient looking set of china. A servant—not a House Elf but a young woman in a dress and apron, which was quite a strange thing to see at least from his perspective—attended nearby. They looked over at him as he stepped onto the porch, his sweeping black robes no doubt appearing quite out of place against the colorful garden at his back.

“You must be Severus, then.” The man said, rising from his seat and stepping forward to shake his hand. His face was angular and his grip surprisingly strong—even on a much younger man it would have come as a shock—and though he knew it was pointless to feel threatened by an unarmed—or even an armed, in all honesty—Muggle Snape couldn’t help but find him a little bit intimidating.

“I am.” He said, relieved when the man released his crushing grip. “You are?”

“Thomas Riddle.”

Barring any circumstances which happened to involve the Marauders Snape liked to consider himself a Professional but he couldn’t entirely keep a flash of surprise out of his black eyes. “You’re Tom? Forgive me, but I was under the impression that I was to potentially be treating someone younger.”
“You will be. I’m Thomas, not Tom. Tom is my son.”

Ah. Well, that at least made a bit more sense. “And where, if I may ask, is he? I’m sure that you can understand that I’m a rather busy man; I haven’t all day to be here.”

“Darling is down at the stables,” the woman, Tom’s mother he assumed, said as she gently replaced her teacup on its saucer. “He goes down to take care of his horses whenever he’s stressed or idle and tends to forget himself. Loses track of time.”

“Adele will retrieve him.” Thomas sent a firm look at the woman in the apron; she nodded without a word and departed from the porch, heading around the side of the house and down the hill. “You may as well have a seat and a cup of tea while you wait; take Tom’s, as he didn’t come up to join us today.”

“That’s highly un-.”

“Oh, please, we insist.” The woman said; the thin smile on her face could have easily been peeled off of Narcissa Malfoy. Resigned, having nothing better to do while waiting for the man he was actually there to see to arrive on the scene and not wanting to risk that the woman had the Malfoy Lady’s temper as well he accepted the empty chair and cup of tea.

“Darling was left a mess by what that witch did to him. We brought in the help of the best professionals we could find but at the time we thought his insistences of magic were a product of his trauma and Psychiatrists simply aren’t equipped to deal with Love Potions.” She said, stirring another cube of sugar into her tea. “Much of the recovery that he has made is down solely to his own will—for the sake of our grandson, you see; he’s really done a marvelous job of being a father so far—but he’s still not completely well and the whole experience has left him scared out of his mind of women. That’s why we were pointed towards you, Severus. All of the ‘Mind Healers’ at your Wizarding Hospital were women and they’d only have made him worse but you’ll help, won’t you?”

Severus pulled his gaze away from his untouched cup but was saved from having to answer by the rhythmic thunder of approaching hooves. Up over the hill and around the corner of the house came a horse with a pelt in such a shade of silvered white that, from behind, it could easily have been mistaken for a unicorn and astride it was a man. A very beautiful man who held onto the animal with only the aid of handfuls of its mane and the grip of shapely thighs.

His hair, though slightly dusty from the stables and askew with the wind, was a well-tended crown of glossy brown curls and the eyes set into his sculpted face, hemmed with dark lashes and cornered with crow’s feet, were the same liquid grey as the British sky in the midst of a powerful storm.

“I’d told you not to go down to the stables today, Tom, or at the very least to wait until the man had left.” His father called over the rim of his cup. “He’s come all this way to help you, hasn’t he? The least you could have done was be here to greet him.”

“Yes, well, I hadn’t meant to spend three hours down there father.” He dismounted with a practiced motion, unbothered by the absence of stirrups, and sent the horse back towards—presumably—the stables with a quiet click. With that done, he quickly mounted the stairs of the porch and approached Snape with his hand out; the memory of nearly having his hand broken still fresh in his mind, he was rather hesitant in accepting the gesture.

Tom’s hand was warm and dry, his palm and fingers slightly calloused. It struck him as strange; he was an aristocrat, clearly, and they didn’t do their own work.

“Tom Riddle, the one who sent you that letter. Sorry about that.”
“Let’s make this quick, Mr. Riddle.” He simply didn’t know what to make of this man. Snape had come expecting a Muggle and the brunet in front of him dressed like precisely that and lived in a Muggle house to boot yet on his finger was, if he wasn’t mistaken…

Yes, it was! A Lordship ring; he caught a better look at it as the fae-like man retracted his hand. The massive ruby, adorned with a dragon, glinted in the light of the sun which streamed below the eaves of the porch. The gold of the band was pitted with age and blackened in places as if by charring.

It was clearly very old, and the crest was one he didn’t recognize.

What was going on here?

“Mr. Riddle is sitting over there. Please, call me Tom.” His voice was a warm tenor, lacking the false varnish of over-politeness that Snape had grown so used to hearing after all his years spent in Slytherin House. “Shall we step inside?”

The interior of Riddle Manor was equally as clean and beautiful as the outside had been. A massive dog which, at first glance, Snape had mistaken for a miniature pony was laying spread out on a rug fast asleep. Another servant popped out of a hidden corridor in much the same was as a House Elf would pop out of thin air to stand in front of them.

“The sitting room is ready for you, Master.”

A short nod was all that was spared in the man’s direction. Tom gestured for Snape to walk ahead of him. “This way, please.”

The walk was short, ending in a large room filled with expensive antique furniture. He chose the seat which appeared least likely to attempt to eat him and sat down.

With all the self-assurety expected of the super-rich Tom collapsed gracefully onto a nearly couch, draping long arms across the back and crossing graceful legs in front of him. “I’d offer you a drink, Severus, but it would seem that you’ve already had one. Shall we get down to business?”

“Let’s.” He drawled. “What, precisely, is it that you’re hoping to achieve by contacting me?”

“If not being completely healed of my condition, at least to begin taking real strides towards becoming so. But before we get to the matter of me talking you into ‘supplying me with unconventional services’ shall we discuss the ‘market price’ of these potions that I need?” Tom tilted his head to one side to better observe him, much like an owl might. Though, perhaps, a bird of paradise would be a more accurate comparison. The column of his throat was tan and smooth, like a statue cast from gold. It bothered him. “When one commissions an artist for a piece of work they pay for the skill, the supplies and the amount of time it takes to complete. And, often times, they provide a tip of some form as well. Compensation for all their trouble. A competitive price; it is a market after all. A good and a service. I take it that this will be a similar circumstance?”

Black eyes regarded the too-pretty man reclined in front of him cautiously. Outwardly he appeared relaxed, calm, yet there was something about him that was as dangerous as a lounging tiger. Perhaps the danger wasn’t physical, perhaps it was, but it was there either way and it was almost tangible. It coiled around graceful wrists like bangles woven from thorny vines and danced in mercury eyes like fairy lights. Snape squinted at him, half tempted to fling a Revealing Charm in his direction just to make sure it wasn’t Puck himself that sat before him cloaked in the skin of a Muggle man.

His feet weren’t cloven but they may as well have been. The brunet’s face wasn’t the only thing about him which wouldn’t have looked out of place amidst the Sylvan host. After so long spent in
Snake House he knew how to tell a silver tongue from a leaden one, and this man’s dripped with Unseelie nectar.

Riddle. A fitting name for a host of devious reasons.

“You have the idea.” The Fae were treacherous and wily creatures, deceptive by their very nature; the best that one could hope for when encountering one was what they had in mind for you ended in humiliation instead of death or worse. But they couldn’t lie. A human could. And that fact made men, this man in particular, a thousand times more dangerous than the Fair Folk could ever be. “You would be paying for the ingredients that would be used, the brewing time, the skill required, the quality, and the dosage as well as a premium for having it brewed by a certified Potion’s Master.”

Long lashes flicked thin shadows across high cheek bones. “Does this potion have a particular name?”

“The potion that you were prescribed is known as the Lyre Draft, after the instrument of Orpheus. It’s a cousin to the Calming Draft and the Draft of Peace and is meant to make it easier for a Mind Healer to execute the necessary changes needed to push a patient’s mental wounds towards healing. It’s a fairly expensive elixir under the best of circumstances, but especially in the concentration needed to combat the damage left behind by a mind altering substance as powerful as Amortentia.” He said. “The price of a month’s supply is 103 Galleons, 16 Sickles and 7 Knuts; you’ll need approximately a year’s supply and bi-monthly treatment sessions.”

Well-groomed eyebrows shot up towards dark curls. “Quite high for a ‘competitive market price’ Though it won’t be a problem. I’ll send a slip to Gringotts to arrange the necessary monthly payments.” Gringotts? So he did have a vault. “Now, shall we hammer out a price which might convince you to take up my case, Severus?”

“You’re getting a bit ahead of the matter. We still haven’t discussed exactly why it is that I should feel in any way compelled to take so much of my own already occupied time to assist you in such a way Mr. Riddle.”

“My apologies; I hadn’t meant to ‘jump the broomstick’.” He sat forward, clasping his hands between his knees; an innocuous motion, but it set the other further on edge. “Shall we speak about my motivations, then?”

From the onset Severus hadn’t been particularly keen on the idea of playing doctor with some random Muggle-or, perhaps, not-Muggle-who had been fool enough to get himself dosed with Amortentia of all things, had intended to deny him and had made that clear, had only come for the sake of Professionality. But now it was more than simply not wanting to do it for the purpose of devoting that time instead to other pursuits, such as the struggles inherent with gathering together enough gold to purchase a premises and stock for his own potion shop.

It was fear.

Severus Snape may well have been a master of the Mind Arts, accomplished in Occlumency and Legilimency both, but he didn’t want to see what lay behind those calculating eyes. Didn’t want to set even one foot into the Pan’s labyrinth of Tom Riddle’s mind.

For fear that he’d never find his way back out.

Perhaps it was irrational, but instincts were something he tended to heed. Self-preservation was a hallmark of Slytherin House. And tempting the dragon’s jaws was never wise.
But he needed a reason more substantial than ‘I’m busy’ to hide behind, not knowing what the man in front of him—for the moment as placid as a frozen lake in the heart of winter—was capable of it. And the best way for him to find that reason was to let him talk.

“They’re simple, really. I’ve been absent for the first twelve years of my son’s life. The twelve years during which, quite possibly, he needed me the most. But now that I am here I want to be the father that Junior not only needs but deserves. And the only way to truly do that is to come as close to a full recovery as I possibly can.” He said. “What Merope did to me has left me with severe Gynophobia, making my choices for aid limited. My only real hope of reaching that goal is you, Severus. Please.” His eyes were suddenly the color of solid lead, his stare carrying the weight of it. The compulsion bounced harmlessly off his shields but it was still enough of a shot across the bow to make him look away immediately. “Help me.”

Irritation flared through him, both on account of the quite likely unintentional attempt at influencing him into agreement and the old feelings of resentment and anger for his own monster of a father which had been freshly stirred up by the brunet’s testimony, but there was a silver lining to the situation in that fact. All be it a deathly thin one.

Severus rose abruptly and smoothed out the creases of his robes. “If you believe that ‘putting yourself back together’ will somehow undo the years that you weren’t there I’m afraid you’re very wrong. Either way, I’m a very busy man and I haven’t the time to play mediator in repairing your relationship with your son.”

“You misunderstand, Severus. My relationship with Junior requires no ‘repairs’ I simply want to make sure that I’m in the best possible place to protect him from meddling by…outside sources.” Unbothered by his outburst, or perhaps simply refusing to show it, Tom leaned back in his seat once again and said in an almost inaudible voice “name your price.”

All the galleons in the world wouldn’t be enough to go anywhere near that rabbit hole, forget seeing how deep it went! “I will not be purchased like some object.” He snarled, curling his lip at the man like a cornered dog; of half a mind to draw his wand on the man but knowing it was wholly irrational when the brunet, now looking rather bemused, hadn’t moved from the couch.

Tom’s shoulders heaved below the spotless oxford he wore as he let out a small sigh. “I hadn’t meant it to be taken that way. It was simply an offering of whatever sum you felt of equal value to the time required for my treatment. Either way I respect your decision; should I contact another for the Lyre Draft as well?”

Cutting ties completely with trouble immediately was the smartest course of action but he needed the galleons too much. “No. I will send you the Lyre Draft on a monthly basis for the agreed upon amount. Do not attempt to contact me again, for any reason.”

“Very well; I’ll attempt to get into contact with any male Mind Healers whom are available for employ outside of Britain. Thank you for your time, Severus. I’ll call a servant to-.”

“I’ll show myself out!” He didn’t give the other man the chance to insist otherwise, not wanting to spend even another moment in his company.

Severus Snape had never once in all his years come across anyone like Tom Riddle, and he wasn’t in the least bit pleased by the way that knowledge made him feel.
The First Restitution

His planning for revenge hadn’t gone as well as he’d hoped but it was beginning to look like he’d have to move forward with the matter regardless. Originally Tom had hoped to enact, preferably in the middle of Slytherin’s common room during the most crowded hours of the night, a grandiose and multifaceted plan that would humiliate Abraxas and all of his slack-jawed goons in one fell swoop but everything he came up with was either unrealistic in its number of variables or varying degrees of illegal.

He wasn’t about to risk being expelled or worse, sent to prison, over a pack of hyenas. Especially not when the Deputy Headmaster would certainly see to it that he received the worst punishment possible.

Tom had hoped that he’d have more time to work things through. That, perhaps, he could run it past Monai and Zahaak in hopes that they’d be of more assistance to him than Kumasi had been; the Puff Adder’s ever-so-helpful advice to ‘just bite them and be done with it’ was not what Tom was looking for at all.

Yet it was beginning to look like he might have to do just that.

The ever present chill of the dungeons was pervasive and heavy with damp, the water droplets in the air mixing with the lacy steam that spewed from the many cauldrons sitting on tables throughout the class room, their contents bubbling wildly and filling the air with a sharp chemical smell.

A number of the cauldrons on the opposite side of the room were rattling about or spewing copious amounts of thick smoke but Tom, as always, paid the idiots from the tower no mind beyond the occasional peripheral glance to insure there were no lions stalking towards him. Not that they were usually so bold in this class, in Snake territory.

No. He was far more concerned about Black, who had been grinning much too widely for much too long, and Mulciber both of whom hadn’t once taken their eyes off of him for a span of more than the amount of time it took to glance at the instruction board or their respective potions.

Something was going to happen today. They’d make their move at any moment and he knew he needed to stay alert.

Tom could practically feel them breathing down his neck.

He shuffled to the left until his body was between his cauldron and the two smirking boys. The Wiggenweld Potion bubbling in his cauldron was a prim magenta color. The glass hourglass rimmed by emerald serpents, which marked the time left in class was nearly drained of sand. If he lasted ten more minutes everything would be alright. Ten minutes, maybe even less, of making certain that no random ingredients or spells landed in his cauldron, and everything would turn out perfectly fine.

In a perfect world even braindead bullies would know better than to tamper with a potion. Add the wrong ingredient in the wrong concentration to the wrong elixir and the mixture would destabilize, leading to an explosion which could quite possibly take out the entire room and everyone in it!

But expecting sensible thought processes to be something which heavily inbred morons were still capable of was heavily presumptuous on his part.

Flobberworm mucus was the first thing that the idiots lobbed at him; he knew because the thick cold fluid splattered across the back of his robes, flecking the back of his neck and sticking in his hair.
Tom gritted his teeth but didn’t otherwise react, cautiously bending over his cauldron to check the heat of his fire.

At least they’d started with something innocuous. Disgusting as it was to be covered in worm goo, thick slick and foul-smelling as it was, at least it wasn’t in any way poisonous or corrosive.

A hail of other ingredients quickly followed the Flobberworm mucus, thrown not only by Mulciber and Black now but by the whole of Abraxas’ little group of goons and many of those outside it as well. Boomberry Juice. Salamander blood. Horklump bits. Chizpurfle fangs. And then they moved on to ingredients that weren’t a part of the potion they were brewing that day.

It was organized. Preplanned. Thought out.

Of course it was, because he could never catch a break.

Damn them.

He wasn’t going to let them succeed! He refused to! There was only three minutes left now. Three more minutes and class would be over; he could fill his flagon with the potion and turn it in and-.

A Stinging Hex, plainly aimed from the Gryffindor side of the dungeon, lashed across the back of his hand. Tom hissed in pain and turned, instinctually, in the direction of his assailant. By the time he saw the adder’s fork fly over his shoulder it was too late to prevent it from landing in his cauldron.

As if in slow motion the rogue ingredient fell into the potion with a quiet plunk. Green sparks spewed out in all directions, skittering wildly across the table, and before anyone could react the contents of his cauldron exploded. Scalding liquid splattering the left side of his body as the shock knocked him back.

Pain.

Now lying on the floor half-blind, Tom clutched at his face and arm. Writing on the flagstone floor. His vision blurred by involuntary tears and whatever mixture the invasive reagent had transformed his potion into and his ears ringing. He was aware that there were people standing around him but he was unable to make out any of what they were saying.

Tom wasn’t sure exactly when it was that he’d passed out but he must have, at some point. When he woke up he was lying in a cot in the hospital wing, tucked in with thin white sheets beneath the harsh glow of artificial light. His neck and arm were both stiff; he turned his head slowly to look down at himself. His school robes had taken most of the damage and had since been repaired and laundered, left sitting folded up at the foot of his bed, but that didn’t mean that he’d escaped the explosion completely unharmed. His left arm was wrapped in bandages, the right side of his face crusted over with scabs.

At this point he could only hope that it wouldn’t scar; knowing Abraxas and Slughorn’s schmoosing nature, knowing the history of what had already happened Tom knew better than to hope that the matter would be treated as anything more than an accident.

Even in such a short time Tom had gotten used to having the comfort of a parent finally available to him. He wanted his father to be there, but even if he’d been alerted—which he doubted-Tom knew that he wouldn’t have been able to come to Hogwarts.

His father couldn’t apparate to Hogsmeade and Riddle manor wasn’t connected to the Floo network. Tom let out a quiet sob, half angered frustration and half pain.
“Awake, Mr. Riddle? It’s been almost an hour.” The Matron pushed aside the curtains surrounding his bed with the sharp sound of metal on metal, looking down her nose at him. “I hope you’ve learned your lesson regarding toying with potions when you don’t know what you’re doing.”

Tom wanted to ring Abraxas Malfoy’s neck. He bowed his head without a word on the matter. “Yes, Ma’am.” He didn’t want authority involved. He’d take care of this himself. It would be far more satisfying that way. “Am I going to have scars?”

“No, Mr. Riddle, luckily for you. Though you will have to deal with rather unsightly scabbing for about another week.” She said, handing him a small bag. “You will find bandages in that bag as well as a vial of Essence of Murtlap. You will keep your wounds clean and bind them with these bandages, after soaking them in Murtlap Essence, every night. It should be gone by Samhain if you don’t fall behind on tending it; understand?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” He flexed his bandaged hand, taking comfort from the familiar weight of the Heir Ring on his finger. The opalescent Ouroborus reflecting the bright lights.

He looked forward to the day where he could shift it to the bloody ruby and rampant dragon of the Lefay line, a smaller mirror to what weighed down his father’s hand, but he had to wait. He didn’t want to give the game away.

It would all be worth it, though, to see the looks on all their faces.

Dumbledore’s especially.

“Very well, then. I suggest that you put your uniform back in order Mr. Riddle. I won’t have perfectly able-bodied students using my infirmary to skive off their lessons.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Tom grumbled, getting up off the bed and hastening to put on his robes. Picking up his school bag and slipping the smaller bag of bandages and pain reliever inside it he slid the strap over his shoulder and rushed out of the Hospital Wing.

Transfiguration had already started five minutes ago; he knew better than to think that Dumbledore would cut him even an inch of slack. He was tempted to retreat back to Slytherin’s common room and hide in his dorm for the duration of the class but he resisted.

Tom refused to give the ginger bastard the satisfaction.

Dumbledore was mid-lecture about the means and methods of turning a beetle into a button when he walked in, head down, and hurried to the nearest empty seat. As expected, the Head of Gryffindor House, paused in his lesson and pinned him with a displeased glare.

“You’re late, Mr. Riddle.”

“I’m sorry, Sir.” He mumbled, internally seething. “I was in the infirmary for a Potion’s accident earlier this morning.” It was obvious that he’d been injured! Half his face was buggered up!

“Twenty-five points from Slytherin; excuses are not tolerated in my classroom, Mr. Riddle. Unless you are pronounced physically unable to attend my class you are expected to arrive on time.” He turned back to his lecture and, soon enough, the beetles were handed out.

Tom had three perfectly formed ebony buttons sitting in front of him ten minutes later. He spent the rest of the period fantasizing about feeding his Professor to an incredibly large snake.

He skipped dinner and retreated back to his dorm room, heading immediately towards his bed.
Kumasi raised his diamond shaped head from his coils and flicked out his tongue at him.

“What happened to you, Tom? You smell of hurt and anger and look like you’ve sprouted scaling over half your face. And what’s that wrapped around your arm? Is it another snake?” The Puff Adder pulled his upper half of its body further off the pillow he’d been lying on. “If so, it’s very flat and rude for not speaking.”

“My arm is wrapped in bandages, Kumasi, because my face and arm were burned in a Potion’s accident caused by Abraxas and his pack of brainless imbeciles. It will take days, if not weeks, to heal!” Tom wanted nothing more in that moment than to throw his bag down on the floor but, not knowing whether or not the Essence of Murtlap was spelled to be unbreakable and not wanting to rob himself of relief to the pain of his injuries, he resisted.

Tom’s fingers itched for his quill but he held himself back from penning a letter to his father. As much as he wanted comfort now he didn’t want to be coddled over it later. Didn’t want to risk that paternal protective instincts would drive his father to pull him out of Hogwarts.

He’d handle this himself.

“I’m going to send you back to your home today, Kumasi. But I need you to do something for me first.”

“You want me to bite the stupid blonde two legs? The one that harmed you?” he asked. “You are aware that my venom is often fatal?”

“I wouldn’t mourn him if he did die but I can’t risk it being linked back to me. Dumbledore knows that I can speak to snakes. If Abraxas were to die he’d suspect something. Only give him a dry bite, but I want you to make sure you scare him.”

The adder puffed himself up, inflating rapidly like a small balloon. “I will make the blonde two legs make mouse-sounds if that is what you want, Tom. Will you take me to his den? It will be simpler than me having to slither to it from yours.”

Tom used his good hand to lift the heavy snake off his bed and left the room, heading down the hall to the door labeled Abraxas Malfoy/Orion Black and briefly pausing outside of it to listen at the keyhole and make sure no one was inside. Once sure of as much he pushed it open and set the snake down on the floor.

“Hide in his sheets and make sure that he doesn’t see you before you’re ready. Return to me when you’re done and I’ll send you home; I’ll leave the door ajar.”

The adder hissed and slithered away. When Tom straightened up and turned back towards his room he found emerald eyes staring at him in shock.

“What are you staring at, Potter? Either get back into our dorm or scram!”

The little raven took an unsteady step backwards, then quickly ducked into the room. Tom sighed and started back towards their shared dorm as well.

At least the brat was receptive to orders.

Harry had curled up on his bed by the time he came back in and was half leaning over into his trunk, rummaging madly through it as if looking for something.

“Potter!” There was a dull thud as Harry’s head hit the lid; he straightened up to look at him with
suspiciously innocent eyes. “One word of this to anyone and you’ll be on my list as well, understand?”

Harry nodded. “I’m not going to tell anyone. Abraxas has it coming anyway.” He resumed digging through his belongings in which Tom couldn’t help but think was similar to the way that Rogan would go at Frank’s flowers. Annoyed by the need to resist the urge to smile, Tom turned away and went to his bed. Pulling the remainder of the box of homemade muffins that Harry’s mother had sent along for him—he wasn’t ashamed to admit that her cooking was amazing—he settled in to eat. “Could you get the ferret as well?”

“Your troubles aren’t my problem; stand up for yourself.” He opened the box. “We may not be the brave idiots that inhabit Gryffindor but we do still possess spines. Growing one would behoove you.”

He heard a sigh but didn’t bother to look over at him until, fifteen minutes later, he felt a tug at his arm.

The point of his wand was at the raven’s throat an instant later. Rather than cower, the other sent him a disgruntled glare.

“What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing, Potter? Do you not understand what bandages are?”

“I’m well acquainted with bandages, Riddle. I tend to spend more time injured than not.” He drawled. “If you must know, I’m trying to help you.”

“By jerking me about like a doll?”

“By taking your bandages off so that I can treat your injuries with something more effective than Essence of Murtlap and water. That’s what they gave you at the Hospital Wing isn’t it?”

Tom glared instead of answering. Now it was Harry’s turn to let out an annoyed huff.

“How’d you get hurt anyway?”

“That’s none of your concern!”

“Do you really want to end up dealing with those wounds until they go away on their own? And the potential for scars-.”

“The Matron said they wouldn’t!”

“The Matron doesn’t have the same training as a Medi-Witch. It’s very likely she’ll be wrong about the extent of the scarring.” He held up the glass vial in his hand, filled with a translucent brown fluid and approximately the size of his thumb. “Let me help you.”

Scars were the last thing he needed; not only would they be disfiguring but they’d tip his father off that something serious had transpired between him and his peers. “Fine.” He grumbled, thrusting his uninjured hand out towards the raven. “Hand it over.”

“No! I’m not just going to hand over a bottle of Dittany when you’ve never used it before! I don’t care how smart you are, it’s extremely expensive and can be dangerous in doses that are too high!”

One of the small muscles in Tom’s face twitched. “And you know how to use it, do you?”
“Of course I do; my mother is a Potioneer who taught me how, plus I’ve had it used on me…more often than I’d honestly like to admit.” He pushed his glasses back up on the bridge of his nose. “If you’re not comfortable with me taking your bandages off that’s fine. Take them off yourself. But if you want the Dittany I’m putting it on you.”

Remember when he’d told Harry that he ought to grow a spine. He was regretting that now. Growling under her breath, Tom quickly unwound the bandage wrapped around his arm.

It looked about as bad as he’d expected. And it hurt.

Despite how gentle the other’s touch was Tom still flinched and ground his teeth. The stopper of the little vial came free with a small pop; Harry tapped it gently against the side to shake free any excess droplets before he slid it up the length of Tom’s injured arm, a trio of drops of the herbal smelling liquid splashing against his skin.

The pain transformed into a fiery itch, the burns and blisters quickly covered over by new skin which crawled and stretched itself into place and, moments later—with a final wisp of silver steam—the Dittany finished its work. Though not completely gone, the burns now looked almost a week old. Tom stared at his arm in shock.

“At least no one can say it isn’t worth the price with how well it works. Look up.” Harry had carefully placed droplets of Dittany on his fingertips and when Tom looked up at him he wiped them on his burned cheek. The same hot itching feeling let him know that, once again, it was working. “And, luckily, a little goes and long way. Works on everything from papercuts to Curse Scars.”

“A bit of a fallacious sounding claim.” He rubbed his once more smooth cheek. “How could you possibly know if that were true?”

“Because I’ve had personal experience.” He flipped back his wild bangs, allowing the older boy to briefly catch sight of the lightning bolt scar etched into his forehead. “My father’s an Auror; he’s partnered with my Godfather. When I’d just turned one, while our family was celebrating Samhain, a Dark Wizard that they’d arrested before and had recently gotten out of Azkaban broke into our house. I was hit by a stray Curse during the fighting.”

“Which Curse?” it was out before he could contain his curiosity. Not really caring yet at the same time aware that it was an incredibly rude thing to have asked Tom winced.

“I don’t know.” Harry replaced the little bottle carefully in his trunk and sat down on the edge of his bed. “If my parents know they never told me. It wasn’t the Killing Curse or anything impressive like that but I do know that it was Dark and that I almost died. And that…that night is why my parents sheltered me so much. Maybe a bit more than they should have. It’s why I’m a little…skittish.”

“Instead of blaming your past for your short comings you should seek to overcome them. Your becoming skittish may be on your parents but your staying that way is solely on you.” He said, then added a reluctant “thanks.”

The raven’s resultant smile was bright enough to leave him with a severe headache.
Spark Spitter

Chapter Notes

Ok guys, so keep in mind what's said about metal Foci. It will come up a few other times and will become important in the tail end of the story.

Also, in case anyone is confused about the whole 'land of red and black' thing that's mentioned it simply refers to how the land around the Nile (black land) was differentiated from the desert (red land)

As terrible as the experience of the hell ride that he and Junior had taken on the Knight Bus had been it had ultimately still been better than being cooped up in a car for almost seven straight hours. Even if it gave him an excuse by necessity of the late hour of his arrival to spend the night in one of the rooms of The Leaky Cauldron it was far from worth the experience no matter how ‘cozy’ it was.

Hopefully there’d be some solution to that problem to be found either in the Lefay family vault or on offer for purchase from the Goblins. Even if it would only be a means through which he could summon the demon bus it would still be better than Muggle means of travel.

Look at me. One summer around a Wizard and Junior’s world has spoiled me. Tom shook his head and pulled on the dragon hide boots that he’d brought with him, securing the robe he wore more firmly over the crisp oxford and slacks that he wore. With everything in order he turned towards the mirror to look himself over.

His brown curls were perfectly in place, and despite his late night before, there were no noticeable shadows visible beneath his grey eyes. The Swedish Shortsnout hide robe was, as the man at Twilfit and Tatting promised, perfectly tailored to fit him; the small silver-blue scales gleamed in the morning sunlight which streamed in through the window.

His reflection cocked its hip and looked him up and down. “Well put together but I’m not really certain that’s your color.”

“And however would you know? You’re nothing but a mirror.”

His reflection snorted, looking quite affronted. “Rude.” It turned on its heel and flounced off, disappearing beyond the glass’ frame.

Tom sighed, adjusted the lapels of his robe once more and then he headed out the door. Downstairs in the pub-portion of the inn a number of Witches and Wizards had already gathered to drink despite the early hour. None of them paid him any particular mind, deep in their cups as they already were. The barkeep’s question regarding whether he’d want breakfast was answered in the negative; he asked instead for assistance in entering Diagon Alley.

The barkeep nodded and shuffled out from behind the bar, tapping the same pattern that Junior had onto the bricks of the wall.

Tom bid him thanks and strode through the unveiled archway into the bustling alley beyond. All too aware of the Witches around him, ducking and weaving erratically through the narrow street to avoid
them, he made his way towards the towering white form of the bank. Glancing occasionally at the brightly colored window fronts of the stores as he passed, Tom slipped a hand into one of his pockets to make sure that he hadn’t left the list of supplies behind.

Hoping for a smile from the Goblin guards astride the gold and silver doors was expecting far too much out of the dour creatures but they did turn their heads to nod at him as he passed. Receiving the impression that this wasn’t a courtesy extended to most Tom returned the nod and proceeded forward into the bank.

As the letter he’d received back in reply to the inquiry he’d sent along with Archimedes about beginning his training immediately despite having not yet secured the assistance of a Mind Healer or taken even a single dose of the Lyre Draught had promised, Barghast was waiting for him on the other side of the inner door.

“Good morning, Lord Riddle-Lefay. Please, follow me; the King will see you now.” He said, turning and starting back across the bank. Tom followed, expecting that he’d be led into the Goblin’s office and through the hidden door to the lower track leading down into their hidden city.

He was taken instead to another door, down a hallway from the main work floor of Gringotts Bank, labeled with strange characters from a language he didn’t recognize. The Goblin tongue, he assumed.

The room on the other side was massive, the walls and vaulted ceiling made of stone, and lit only by the dim and flickering light of the fires of many oddly shaped ovens which were either kilns or furnaces. It was hot and smelled like flame and stone and molten metal.

A foundry.

The Goblin King stood, grinning, only a few feet away from him his feral visage made even more frightening by the off lighting that cast his sharp teeth in deep shadows and made his black eyes glow like embers.

“So the Dragon Heart has returned.” He flickering light made the Goblin King’s long fingernails look like iron claws as he held his hand out to him; Tom shuddered slightly but reached out to take it, expecting to shake his hand. He was instead yanked roughly forwards so that the other could closely examine the Lordship ring he wore. The Goblin King clicked his tongue. “You’ve been taking good care of the ring. Very good. Very good. They don’t do well cooped up in boxes for eternity, you see; they wilt. It’s happier with you than trapped in that vault.”

In a very strange, almost parental gesture he patted Tom’s hand before releasing him. His pike-toothed smile widening only further.

“You talk about it as if it’s alive, but how can that be? It’s a ring. Metal and stone.”

“Metal and stone? Yes, it is. Alive? Perhaps not. Not in the capacity that a human would understand. Simply better that you pay it no mind, Dragon Heart, after all that’s not why we’re here is it?”

“No.” Tom hedged, still confused both by what had just been said and the nature of their surroundings. “Might I ask why we’re in this particular room, though?”

“Might you? I don’t know; I’m very old and powerful, Dragon Heart, but I am not a being capable of Prophecy. I can point you to a Seer if you truly need be told of what all you ‘might’ do.”

“May I, then?”

“Now there’s a question I can answer, but I’m afraid I must ask a question first. You seemed rather
less surprised than would be expected to learn that you weren’t, in fact, a ‘typical’ Muggle. Something had happened?”

_The lamp shattering with a loud pop, broken glass scattering over the wooden floor and plunging them both into darkness._ “I caused a lightbulb to explode when Junior was showing me his wand.”

“Ah, yes, Adder Tongue. His wand is Yew and Phoenix Feather, is it not? Life and Death together; a contradictory thing. Not seen very often. Particularly powerful in this case, it seems, to have reacted to you.”

“And why would that be?”

“Wands are a weak focus, working only for beings with concentrated, less scattered forms of Magic than yours. They are designed for forming a connection with either a core or a well of Magical energy, and even the most laughably weak of Wizards are capable of using them to some degree. But you do not have a solid core and thus a paltry combination of wood and the body parts of often times butchered creatures will produce, if any results at all, unsatisfactory ones. But there was a time before wands.” He said. “Very long ago indeed, in times such as that of the Pharaohs in the far off lands of red and black, focuses were made from metal runes and stone. Some were so incredibly powerful that the one who wore them found themselves bestowed with fantastical abilities which could make them, arguably, considerable as Gods.”

Something about this statement seemed to be something he found funny, a fit of laughter creating a disturbing echo off the walls.

“Such won’t happen with you, of course, as we’re not building anything that powerful; though the practice of using such foci was never truly banned, there’s no need to attract the attention of the Ministry? I’ll still advise you not to let Adder Tongue ever find himself laying hands on it; the British Isles aren’t quite ready for the ancient myths to return.”

Given his son’s voiced aspirations of world domination that was probably the safest course of action for everyone involved.

“And that is why we’re here, in this room. Its’ usually reserved for repairing items of our make which are on loan but today it’s going to be used to build such a focus as the one that you require; one which can be worn along with your ring. Easier, I think, than having to adapt to the habit of carrying it around.”

A gout of sparks shot out of the nearest furnace, the glowing embers skittering and jumping along the floor towards him. Tom jumped back in alarm before belatedly remembering that his robes, by the very nature of what they’d been made from, were fully fire retardant. Gathering himself and still eyeing the furnace warily, he cleared his throat. “Yes, I think that ultimately would be most convenient.” He said. “I’d assume you’ll need to take measurements?”

“We will. Placing a Resizing Charm on it would only interfere with its function and, as my people pride ourselves in producing only the very best, purposefully causing one of our creations to become defective would be rather counterproductive would it not?”

Tom grumbled something in lee of a positive response and followed the Goblin King as he strode towards a stone table on which sat a bowl of red liquid and a number of odd and frankly frightening looking instruments that would have likely been far more at home in a serial killer’s torture chamber than the shop of a blacksmith or jeweler.

They looked far more likely to break and mutilate his fingers than measure anything and Tom wasn’t
looking forward to having them anywhere near him.

As it turned out, much to his relief, he didn’t have to.

“Ring, please, Dragon Heart.” The Goblin King held out one stretched, spidery hand towards him while sorting through the tools with the other.

Not wanting to have his arm almost yanked off for a second time that day he quickly pulled off the Lordship ring and handed it over.

Apparently a great deal more information could be gleaned from simply examining the ring than he would have ever logically thought possible. Every one of the strange tools were used in the span of about five minutes, none of them yielding results that were in any way discernible to him.

“There’s no need to be bother with inserting any stones into it as the capacity for retaining energy won’t be required. We’ll be using silver; unfortunate as it is that it doesn’t match the band of your ring it’s the best suited metal to conduct and focus magic.

Tom shook his head, watching the molten metal as it was poured into the mold. “That’s hardly necessary.”

“If you’re certain; you’ll be wearing them on the same finger.” A flick of his wrist closed the mold around the metal slurry with a clatter. “Though, I suppose that the band won’t be easily visible. Some simply find conflicting colors to be bothersome and there are many species of Dragon that are very particular about separating their hoards by metal that become quite agitated when they’d mixed. I simply wish to make sure.”

“I may have developed Gynophobia from my trauma but I remain as of yet unaffected by OCD.” The Goblin King’s long fingers carved Runes into the air, pale sparks spewing from the mold at intervals. He thought he recognized the symbols for Ansuz and Kaunon in the mix but the motions were made too quickly for him to be certain.

“With the mold and inscription finished all that’s left to do is to cool the metal down; this will be the stage in which the Magical substance is used, as the hollow metal is too thin to take a core.” The still sparking mold was lowered into the bowl, the liquid inside flowing over the sides in viscous strands. “With the methodical harvesting of their heartstrings it was a simple affair to acquire Dragon’s blood. I felt it more appropriate for you than any other material.”

Tom hadn’t picked up on the heavy smell of iron before over the smoke of the fire and the tang of superheated metal but now that his attention had been brought to the reality of what the bowl contained he couldn’t help but notice. As a matter of fact, it had suddenly become difficult to smell anything else.

He regarded the bowl with a rather disgusted side-eye after that, forced to resist the strong urge to gag. When the mold surfaced from the red slime and settled on the table with a heavy clunk, leaving a sizeable puddle of the stuff to gather around it on the wooden surface, the Goblin King opened it and pulled the object out of the mold with a quiet click, allowing Tom to get a good look at it.

It looked like a metal claw, jointed to allow for free movement when worn and built to enclose the full length of his ring finger. In the flickering glow of the furnaces the silver had an odd, reddish tint to it and the metal appeared incredibly delicate as if it had been folded out of foil and would collapse
at the slightest application of pressure. There were no visible screws, leaving him confused as to the mechanism which allowed for movement, and etched along the joints was an abjad of intricate Runes.

Certainly more eye-catching than any wand would ever be. He’d be the center of a media frenzy soon enough regardless, Tom supposed, so why not go whole-hog?

Despite having just come out of a mold and having been molten only minutes before the focus was only slightly warm to the touch. Tom expected it to crumple under his fingers but, despite being incredibly thin and light weight, it held up as well as solid stone. He slid it on after a moment’s further hesitation.

The jointed talon clicked snuggly into place around the massive ruby set into his Lordship ring. The hinges creaked slightly as he flexed his fingers, opening and closing his fist. Noticing that he was being stared at, Tom looked back up at the Goblin King. “Should there be some sort of…reaction?”

“I had thought, perhaps, there would be but knew better than to expect as much. Here isn’t the best place for us to speak of this.” He turned and started towards another door. “Come. We’ll start your training now.”

Still trying to get used to the sensation of the metal focus attached to his hand, Tom followed. He didn’t know exactly what he expected to find on the other side; a lecture hall? A dueling room? A target ring?

He was met with the sight of a cluttered space that might once have been an office but had now been reduced to a rather disheveled looking storage space.

The Goblin King swept a towering pile of papers from the sagging desk with a broad swipe of his arm, replacing it with a single candle which he’d produced seemingly from thin air.

“Show me what you’re able to do, Dragon Heart. Light the candle.”

Tom’s immediate first instinct was to look for a lighter but, thankfully, he caught himself before he could act on it. “What spell should I be using? And the wand motion—or hand motion in this case—what is it?”

Another shark toothed smile. “In asking that question you reveal yourself to be just like every other human.” He said. “Did you truly believe that motion patterns and Latin phrases—or phrases in any other language for that matter—was all that Magic was?”

“I’ve been reading up on the matter—.”

“Reading? Bah! Books. Laws. Humanity, be it when they deal with Magic or with Nature, are all subject to the same hubris-laced notions; by seeking to understand you limit yourselves. Rob yourselves of your own potential.” He scoffed. “No. You will learn what we, those being truly Magical by nature, have always known. That the forces of this world are not beholden to your conventions. Spells and motions are frame works. Crutches. Wizards of today rely on them too much; you will not learn them. You do not need them. Focus, now, on what you want. Envision the wick as burning and it will be so. Light the candle, Dragon Heart.”

He doubted that it was as simple as willing the candle to light. What had the Goblin King said? Envision the wick as burning? Had that, perhaps, been what Junior had done when he’d turned his father’s water into wine?

Tom had his doubts regarding his ability to pull it off but he firmly pushed them aside and closed his
eyes. Calling to mind an image of the unlit candle in his head and focusing on it. Striking an imaginary match. Seeing the small flash of light as it ignited against the side of the box. Bringing it to the wick. He focused on the woven fibers catching light. The flame growing until it had engulfed the length of the wick, its pale orange body wavering just slightly in the absence of any drafts in the room. He envisioned the faint heat which would come off the tiny flame. The liquefied wax that would gather below it. The smell of wax and sulfur in the air.

A strange sensation, rather like pins and needles, shot down his arm and gathered at his fingertips. The metal focus grew warm and seemed to vibrate for the briefest of moments.

The candle remained resolutely unlit when he opened his eyes again, seeming to taunt him from where it sat on the desk.

“As I suspected. The vast majority of your already weak magic yet remains repressed; you’re unable to control it at will. With proper treatment and observation of the old rites such a thing should be remedied.” The Goblin King offered him the candle, the expectation that he would take it very clear. “Come back when you’re able to light the candle.”

Disappointment as thick and bitter on his tongue as Castor Oil, Tom took the blunted end of the offered stick of wax.

“Do not get your hopes up, Dragon Heart. You’ll never be the fire breather that your son will; a Spark Spitter is the best that you can hope to achieve, but if you play your cards right that will be more than enough for you to achieve your goals. After all, many a forest fire has been started by a single spark in the right place.”
Tom still had business to be attending to in Diagon Alley and most of the day with which to do it, so he pushed the disappointment of his failure with lighting the candle aside for perusal later—it was, clearly, a problem which couldn’t be remedied in any immediate capacity so there was no use dwelling on it when he had more looming concerns—and proceeded to his vault. With the list in his pocket and his vault key in hand he’d intended to both withdraw money and attempt to locate a Rune-Inscribed bowl and an athame from amidst the ancient clutter of his inheritance.

He’d misjudged exactly how big of a job it was that he was undertaking and now, almost four hours later and feeling somewhat dizzy having skipped breakfast and not yet eaten lunch, Tom now stood up to his knees in objects he’d examined and subsequently discarded as not meeting the specifications for the Urram Ritual.

For an old ‘Dark’ family the Lefay vault suffered from an absence of knives-athames or otherwise-and a strange fixation with bowls.

The Runes needed for the bowl which would be used in the Ritual were Uruz, Sowilo, Thaurisaz and Eiwhaz. None of the nearly two hundred bowls had that particular pattern of Runes; many were just a single Rune off, but they couldn’t be used.

Not if he wanted things to go correctly.

Equal parts annoyed and resigned, Tom filled a drawstring purse with Galleons and exited the bank.

The first order of business was to find somewhere to eat; there was no reason to risk making himself sick or risk collapsing in public from hunger as he knew that he’d still be in the Alley for a number of hours more.

He ended up in a high-end café which just happened to be the first restaurant he’d stumbled across, sitting with a complimentary copy of the *Daily Prophet* in a fairly tucked away booth. Tom had ordered tea to drink and had chosen his food fairly at random and had been perusing an article about the most recently released model of broomstick when he felt the table shudder.

He looked up and found that the booth across from him had suddenly become occupied by a straw blonde man in a set of dark blue robes, a golden pocket watch visible poking out from the breast pocket of the jacket that he had on underneath.

“Hi.” He said in lee of explanation.

Tom raised an eyebrow and folded the newspaper, the talon of his metal focus raking along the paper with the quiet rattle of a keen blade. “…Can I help you somehow?”

Was it normal in the Wizarding World to come crashing into the middle of a total stranger’s lunch?

Apparently blind to the brunet’s mild indignation, or perhaps just uncaring of it, he thrust his hand out towards him. “Bartimus Crouch Junior but please, Merlin’s pants, call me Barty.”

“Tom.” In what was, if nothing else, habitual politeness Tom took the offered hand and shook it.

“Riddle.”

“Riddle. Riddle?” The man, Barty’s, brown eyes narrowed slightly. “Sounds somewhat familiar, though I can’t put my finger on why…”
“I’m sorry, but if you don’t mind me asking why did you sit down at my table?”

The other man—he couldn’t have been that much younger than Tom himself was; maybe three years at most-gave an exaggerated start, seeming to only just at that moment realized that he had, in fact, neglected to explain himself. “Oh, I’m sorry, I was simply curious. I noticed your ring; I’m not ‘friends’ with everyone in the House of Lords by any means but I know them enough to recognize them all by their faces. I don’t recognize yours. I wanted to ask if you were maybe visiting from somewhere abroad, but having heard you speak it’s obvious you’re as English as I am. Where’d you come from, Tom?”

Maybe it would have been a better idea to hold off on wearing the ring until after he’d presented himself to the Ministry of Magic.

Oh well. Too late now.

“I’m a bit of an odd and complicated case. The return of a very old, formerly thought lost, bloodline. I’ve yet to go public so…I’d appreciate it if you could keep quiet about the matter.

Tom took a drink from the cup of tea sitting beside his hand.

“Of course, Tom. That’s completely-.” He suddenly went stiff, comprehension dawning on his face as his eyes shot back to the ring on his hand. “I just remembered where I’d heard the surname ‘Riddle’ before. Bloody hell, you’re a Lefay!”

Tom nearly broke the cup in his haste to put it down and hide his hand under the table. “I was told that information wasn’t available on the public record.”

“It isn’t: my dad is pretty high up in the Ministry and I may or may not have gotten in to some of his work files when I was younger. I’m a Ravenclaw; it’s in my nature.”

Ravenclaw; that was the blue and bronze House of wit and wisdom, he recalled. The fall back House for Junior, he felt sure, had he not be put in Slytherin.

“I won’t tell on you if you don’t tell on me, Tom.” He winked at him in a way that was almost alarmingly flirtatious and grinned. “Do we have a deal?”

Tom wasn’t quite certain what to make of the man. “Yes, I think we do.”

“Glad to hear it.” Barty cocked his head to the side like a curious parrot, examining him for a moment before changing the subject completely. “There are people in this world who just seem to embody the House that they were Sorted into; take James Potter for example, a Lion all the way. And I’m an Eagle; everyone who knows me says it. You may not have ever gone to Hogwarts but I can tell that you’re a snake. Well…a Dragon.” He shrugged. “Same difference.”

Aside from the fact that one was winged, fire breathing and considerably larger than the other.

“There’s someone I know that would be relieved to have a fellow snake-minded individual to save him from the Eagle and Lioness that he usually runs around with. I’m supposed to be meeting him here.” As quickly as he’s slid into the bunk across from him he slid back out again and jumped to his feet. “Busy?”

“Not particularly.” Figuring that he could spare a brief moment to meet this person Barty talked about Tom dropped a couple of Galleons down onto the able he’d been sitting at and stood up as well. “Lead the way.”
As it turned out, Barty’s ‘friend’ was someone that he already knew. Seeing the woman that he sat beside—the redhead Witch who had attempted to help him up after he’d tumbled off the Knight Bus—Tom pulled up short of the table, causing the blonde to pause and ask him what was wrong. Dark eyes turned from the conversation they’d been having and widened at the sight of him.

“Riddle? What are you doing here?”

“Well, I was eating lunch but then your friend here decided that he wanted to chat me up. I didn’t seek you out on purpose, Severus; I’ve no reason to with how our last meeting went.”

“Wait,” Barty looked rather surprised, “you know each other?”

“I made an attempt to hire him recently; he ended up deciding, as is fully his right to, to only take half the job.” Tom said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve shopping for Samhain to be doing.”

“Oh, you’re planning to perform a Ritual?” rather than going to sit with his friends, like Tom had expected, the blonde bounded after him like an eager puppy. “Which one?”

“Urram.”

Another, somewhat exaggerated start. “Well, you’re certainly fulfilling the whole ‘Dark family’ business, aren’t you? The Urram Ritual is borderline Necromancy.”

“My son has a fear of death and resultant unhealthy obsession with immortality that I hope this will help cure him of; maybe knowing on some level of certainty that things don’t just end after death will help to cure him of that.” He said. “I’ll admit to not knowing much of magic, but I have the creepy suspicion that allowing him to potentially continue to pursue immortality won’t end well for him or anyone else. Shouldn’t you be with your friends; you did come out to meet them didn’t you?”

“Sev and Lily are used to me becoming distracted. You don’t mind me tagging along?” Tom had the distinct impression that telling him better wouldn’t make him go away.

“Have you purchased anything that you need for it yet, Tom?” Barty chirped as they stepped off the stoop of the restaurant and moved through the crowded alley’s street.

“I have the honey, milk and bushel of apples already, yes. But nothing else was available to me where I live: a small town that my family owns most of, far from any Magical communities.” He said. “I came to Diagon in hopes of finding the remaining materials that my son and I would need to perform the Ritual that we have planned. Considering the age and affiliation of the Line that I come from I’d expected to be able to find an athame and a Rune-inscribed bowl that would be useable but, though I found plenty of bowls in numerous materials in the vault none of them suited my purposes. I also still need a silver candle, dried sweet grass, and Yew logs.”

“You’ll be able to find the candle, the incense and the wood in Diagon but not the rest of it.” He told him. “Athames and Rune-inscribed bowls are only ever used in Dark or Grey-Dark Rituals. Diagon Alley caters Light and, on occasion, Grey-Light.”

Just what he needed, a bizarre division of wares that would leave him without two of the more important pieces of the Ritual and no idea where to go to be able to find them. Maybe it was a good thing that he’d run into the other man after all. “Where can I go to get these things?”

“For those things and all of your other Dark-leaning needs, Knockturn Alley is the place to go.” Barty said. “It isn’t far; I’ll show you to it. But we should pick up the rest of what you need first, since we’re already here.”
Given the fact that his straw blonde companion clearly had a better idea of where they were going than he did, Tom allowed Barty to take the lead. After a brief stop at a stand to buy the wood he needed he was led to a small and rather rickety looking store called Tallows and Tarots that he hadn’t noticed before during his first trip to the alley with his son.

The door opened with the low creak of old, unoiled hinges. Motes of dust swirled thickly through the shafts of sunlight which slanted through the front windows and the tight press of towering shelves stocked with candles of all colors gave the space a hot and claustrophobic feeling. The air was hot, thick and smelled so strongly of spices and incense that breathing it made his eyes water.

Something tickled the back of his throat and his efforts to clear it with a subtle cough were to no avail. Barty grinned and clapped him on the back.

“It’s a bit excessive, isn’t it? You’ll get used to it.” He strode passed him further into the building, swiftly disappearing in amongst the looming shelves. “The candles are here. The dried herbs and incense is stocked further back.”

Wanting to leave the store and get back out into the fresh air as immediately as possible Tom moved forward into the forest of candles. Where the candle that he’d been given to practice on was a simple stick of slender wax the ones which now surrounded him were far from what he considered describable as ‘plain’ in any way.

Colors.

An invariable spectrum of colors that surrounded him in such a dizzying array of shades and hues that he felt as if he’d walked face first into a rainbow. Violet. Red. Blue. Green. Other colors that he couldn’t name. White candles that advertised changing color when lit according to its owner’s mood. Clear candles that burned multicolored fire. Short candles. Thin candles. Cylindrical. Square. Rounded. Scented. Flavored. Some that sang verses, others which recited poetry or political texts and still more that flung curses all of different make. Wax. Tallow. Even the rendered fat of a creature called a Snallygaster, apparently imported from America.

Finally locating a simple silver candle made of tallow, Tom grabbed it off the shelf and started towards where the incense was stocked. Barty was in front of him before he could take more than a few steps, proudly holding up a neatly tied bushel of dried grass held proudly in his hand.

“You said sweet grass, right?”

“Yes, thank you.” Tom took the bushel; it crackled softly as he closed his fingers around it. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many candles in one place before; not even in a church.”

“Church.” His face scrunched up into an expression of distaste. “Muggle religions are such a stupid farce. They claim to fear Magic and label it as ‘Demonic’ yet half of what they practice are mock Rituals. Hypocritical and pathetic; that’s all it really is.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you, Barty.” Tom said as they made their way toward the counter. “My family has never been particularly religious; for all that my ancestor took advantage of faith.”

There was a Witch manning the counter; Tom half hid behind Barty while they paid, much to the other man’s clear but unvoiced confusion.

“You know, you’re not so bad for someone Muggle raised.” He said as they left the stoop of Tallows and Tarots. “And that’s quite a compliment.”

“Is it?” Tom drawled sourly, reminded unpleasantly of his encounter and subsequent conflict with
It really is. I'm sure that it just seems offensive to you but let me explain it from our side; maybe then you’ll at least be able to understand.” He said. “Most of us, even most Blood Supremacists, don’t hate Muggles but we do believe that we’re better than them. And we are. Muggles cannot do what we can and that makes us, by nature, better. We just resent them, rightfully, for our being forced to hide. To either live double lives or be cut off from the majority of the world simply to be able to never be outside of a fully Magical community. And the problem that we have with Muggleborns is their total disregard for our traditions and the prejudices they bring with them from their fake religions.”

“Like the old rituals being labeled illegal?”

Barty nodded. “Yes, exactly. The Muggleborns’ prejudice and the weakness of the Ministry—the Fudge administration especially—is causing our world to decay. It’s made a lot of us bitter. Very bitter to the point where some, like the Malfoys and the Blacks-Sirius being the exception—have come to hate them.” He said. “In recent years the balance of power has been sliding further and further to the Light. Everything Dark has begun to become more and more persecuted. Dark creatures losing what few rites they had, especially Werewolves. Dark families being regarded more and more as evil without cause; as if they’re all about to commit murder and are just waiting for the perfect opportunity. More and more Magic is being banned. Don’t misunderstand, there are somethings that should be banned but the people in power seem to have forgotten the fact that there’s a line between Dark Magic, which isn’t inherently evil, and Black Magic, which is, and that lack of understanding is tearing our world apart. Not all of them are bad, though; Lily, for example, and you. But the ones who make any attempt at assimilation are the very rare minority, and becoming rarer every day.”

“You’re scared for your world and your traditions, I suppose that I can understand that, but the way that you all seem to be trying to go about fixing it is just pouring fuel onto the fire.” Tom said. “Inbreeding doesn’t keep your blood ‘Pure’, it causes deformities and strangles your Magic over time; is the most likely source of the ‘Squibs’ I came across as part of my recent reading. As for the lack of assimilation, ‘go back to your world, filthy Mudblood’ isn’t exactly encouraging them to do so. If you really want to ‘right the ship’, I suggest deepening your gene pools as much as possible and focusing on political changes geared towards creating assimilation and salvaging creature rites rather than lambasting unsuspecting people on the streets for an aspect of their being they can’t control.”

Noticing that Barty was smirking at him he turned his head to glare.

“What?”

“Just thinking about the path of destruction you’re sure to leave once you enter the House of Lords. Dumbledore isn’t going to like you. Not at all.” He chuckled. “Knockturn Alley is right down this way.”

Barty proceeded to lead him past Gringotts Bank; here the happy, laughing crowd broke to reveal the opening of a narrow and dingy looking throughway which terminated into a steep staircase. The first thing he noticed was that the area seemed gloomier and less well kept than Diagon Alley, which they still stood in.

Tom wouldn’t say he was unnerved by it, but the jarring change was somewhat…odd. Barty grinned at him, looking amused.

“Come on, then. No need to be nervous.” He said. “Knockturn Alley may be far from the friendliest of places but you look every bit the part of a Pureblood Lord and you’re with me; act like you belong
there and no one will even think to question it.”

Nodding, Tom drew himself up to his full height and strode purposefully forward.

Knockturn Alley was less inspiring of wonder than Diagon Alley was, giving off the cold forlorn aura of something left to fall to pieces. The stairs that they descended were worn and uneven. The streets all but bald of cobblestones; what few remained were pulverized near to dust. Most of the buildings seemed to be made of brick and leaned unsteadily over the street, their sides and faces overgrown with moss and much of the mortar nearly dissolved.

A pair of shabby looking Wizards watched them pass with deep-set, hungry eyes. Their aged, sallow faces stretched tight over the bones of their faces. The nearest storefront displayed a wide array of shrunken heads, all of which seemed to be involved in a rather animated conversation. A small pack of creatures that resembled extremely warty Witches with long noses and jaundiced skin walked past, holding trays of what looked like whole human fingernails and minced liver; even Barty seemed to be somewhat skittish of them.

“Hags.” He supplied without having to be asked. “Don’t catch their eye; they might come over!”

The straw blonde grabbed his wrist and pulled him forward, the narrowness of the street forcing Tom to pass far closer to the things than he was at all comfortable with.

“We’re headed to the address 13B; it’s the largest shop in Knockturn and the most interesting by far. You’re most likely to find what you’re looking for there.”

13B was, it turned out, the address of a very large shop with a dark door and large windows. The sign which hung above them was made of sturdy wood and read *Borgin and Burke: Established 1863*.

The heavy brass bell hung over the door clanged quite loudly as it was opened, drawing the attention of the man that stood behind the glass counter. He was stooped and sharp-faced, his oily hair slicked back.

“Ah, Bartimus. A pleasure to see you again. I-.”

“I’m not the one who’s shopping today, Borgin.” Barty, clearly annoyed by the other man’s use of his full name, gestured to Tom. “This is Tom. A recently acquired friend.”

“Oh? Well, I’m always thrilled to have new customers. Never anything but a pleasure.” He turned his attention to Tom. “Welcome to *Borgin and Burke*, where we offer exotic wares, curious antiques and confidential evaluation services for unusual and ancient Wizarding artifacts such as may have been inherited by the best Wizarding families. How my I help you today?”

“My son will be returning from Hogwarts for Samhain this weekend and I have found us to be lacking certain items which the Ritual we intend to perform for the holiday requires.” Tom made a subtle point of looking around as he spoke. A large, dark and dirty hearth stood in the far corner. A number of wooden masks carved with chilling expressions glared from where they hung on the walls. A sparse handful of rusted torture instruments hung from the racks astride the rafters. Amongst the wide array of items on display in the glass case were a mummified hand on a velvet cushion, a staring glass eye and a bloodstained deck of playing cards. “I’m looking for an athame and a bowl carved with a specific sequence of Runes. I was informed that this establishment was the best place to go to find those things.”

“Of course, of course. I hope that we prove to have the artifacts to meet your needs.” He flashed an
oily grin. “Athames are both highly valuable and potentially dangerous; for obvious reasons I keep them locked up in the back room. Our selection of bowls can be found on that shelf over there; feel free to look through them while I bring out our collection of athames.”

“Thank you. I’ll be sure to do that.” Tom turned to make his way over towards the indicated shelf as Borgin headed into the back room.

“Watch what you touch.” Barty warned, following him. “A lot of the stuff in here can be dangerous if it isn’t handled correctly.”

“I’m certain that it can.” Tom stepped past a coiled Hangman’s rope and a broken cabinet, pausing briefly to examine another case. Inside of it sat an opal necklace that his mother would have loved; problem was the tag below it read Caution: Do Not Touch. Cursed-Has Claimed the Lives of Nineteen Muggle Owners to Date.

Clearly not the greatest choice for a Christmas gift.

The shelf of bowls was only a few feet taller than he was. It only took him a handful of minutes to locate a bowl crafted from hammered cold iron with the Runes that he needed. After checking the area for warnings and finding none he felt safe enough to take it down and moved back towards the counter.

Borgin had returned from the back by now, twelve open velvet-lined boxes containing ornate knives sitting in front of him adorned with tags displaying prices all in the four digits.

“Here are all of the athames on offer at our establishment. Feel free to take your pick.”

“None of them are Cursed or poisoned?”

“Do you require them to be?”

“No.” Tom set the bowl down on the counter with the click of metal on glass. “I require them not to be.”

“You’re quite in luck, then. All of our current stock are Curse, Hex and poison free. There was a gold and cobalt kukri with suicidal compulsions but we sold that to a collector from the Nordic Countries yesterday for quite a handsome fee.”

Tom was only half paying attention to what was coming out of the other man’s mouth, his eyes drawn to a silver baselard inset with a number of large red-orange stones. It felt balanced in his hand when he picked it up, turning it, examining the sharp point on the blade.

“This one.”

“Silver and fire agate; a good choice. A very good choice.” Borgin took the blade from him and set it back in the box, closing it up. He picked up the bowl as well, examining the price attached. “Will that be all?”

Tom was about to nod in agreement when, by chance, he looked down into the glass case again and froze. There, sitting in a prominent place on a wine colored pillow, was a locket. A heavy golden locket which he’d recognize anywhere, the ornate S of small emeralds gleaming back at him like glaring eyes.

The brunet swallowed down the lump in his throat, forcing thoughts of Merope out of his mind. “That locket,” he croaked, “where did you get it?”

“That locket,” he croaked, “where did you get it?”

“That is the locket of Salazar Slytherin, one of the Founders of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.” He proudly puffed up his chest. “I acquired it about twelve years ago now from a heavily pregnant street rat who falsely claimed to be his Heir; she was a squib dressed in rags barely able to speak a word of understandable English and what she claimed couldn’t possibly be true. I don’t know who she thought she was fooling but she certainly didn’t know what she was holding. I bought it off her for ten Galleons; could have gotten it for Sickles but I felt sorry for her. Said that she wanted money for food.”

That bastard. As much as he despised the woman for what she’d done to him she hadn’t deserved to suffer the way that he knew she must have in her final months. She must have truly been desperate to have been willing to sell the locket at all, and this man had preyed on that desperation. Tom gritted his teeth. “How much?”

“How much? That’s a priceless item that’s simply for display; I won’t be convinced-!” Tom upended the entirety of the coin purse he had with him, sending Galleons rolling across the floor in all directions, and sent Borgin the most evil glare that he could muster just for good measure. After a moment of shock, the man reached into the case to pull out the locket. “…Pleasure doing business with you.”

He snatched it from his hand and stormed out with his purchases, the still stunned blonde close on his heels.

“What the bloody hell was that? And all over a locket? Even if it is a priceless-.”

“It has nothing to do with the locket’s monetary or historical value. The woman who sold it to that snake oil salesman was my wife.” He growled.

“O-Oh.” He seemed shocked.

“I have no love for Merope; I abandoned her with child after she stopped dosing me with Amortentia and, though I won’t say I think that she deserved it, I’m glad she’s dead.” Tom said, fingers spasming around the locket’s clasp. “I reunited with my son only recently. This locket is rightfully his.”

Barty let out a sigh, reaching up to run his fingers through his hair. “Well, let no one say you can’t be terrifying when you want to be. I’ve never seen Borgin look like that.” He said. “You’re finished with your shopping.”

“I am.”

“You’ll be heading back, then?”

“I will.”

“And we’ll run into each other again?”

“At some point, I’m sure. The Wizarding community in Britain isn’t particularly large.” Tom said shortly. “Thank you, Barty, for your assistance.”

He turned on his heel and headed brusquely back towards Diagon Alley.
Tom Riddle was in a very good mood, sitting smugly beside the little raven on one of the claw-foot leather couches in Slytherin Common room smirking at Abraxas and his cabal of goons whenever they looked over at him and gleefully eyeing the numerous bandages visible on the hands, arms, and legs of many of the other boys who had been bitten by the assortment of serpents that he’d snuck into their rooms over the course of October. Though he knew that their war of attrition had only just begun and he was very much aware that none of them would be giving up any time soon, for the moment he was the one possessed of the upper hand. Had taken the higher ground. And he had every intention of keeping it.

Not only that, but the application of Essence of Dittany that Harry had administered to him had successfully vanished all traces of the injuries the potion accident had left him with. It was early evening on the night of Samhain and, in fifteen more minutes, he’d be reporting to the Headmaster’s office to meet the Professor that would take him home.

Home, where his family—where his father—was waiting for him.

Were it not for the fact that he was possessed of so much poise and pride Tom might have been no better than Harry, sitting to his left, who was currently vibrating with excitement like a wind-up toy. Everything that he’d be taking home was packed and ready to go and all he had to do was go back to their dorm to collect it when the time finally came for him to go.

That was the inherently annoying thing about time. The closer that one got to something that they wanted to happen the slower that the clock decided it wanted to go. Seconds became hours. Minutes became days. Hours became months.

But it would all be worth it when he actually got home. The first time he’d ever be coming home from school to a place that he actually considered a home. To a place where there were people who cared about him. How would he be welcomed home? Would he be brought in by a servant and greeted by his father at the top of the stairs? Or would his father meet him outside on the front porch with Rogan at his side? Would he call to him? Ruffle his hair? Pull him in for an embrace?

He hoped for the last object.

Morgana, he’d go so bloody soft. His colder side was quick to remind him of that. Tom was quick to remind it that he was touch starved and that it could bite him if it was really that bothered.

“I was under the impression that the House Elves weren’t permitted to give students coffee.” He had to make a point of forcing his voice to form a disinterest drawl, not wanting to give away just how incredibly excited he was. “Stop that, Potter. You’ll shake the bloody couch apart!”

“Sorry.” At least the raven had the decency to apologize, and to attempt to look contrite, though the shaking didn’t stop. “I’m just a little bit excited, I suppose. I’m sure you are as well; you did say that you were going home, didn’t you?”

“I am going home and yes, I am pleased to be returning home to see my family, but I’m much more mature—and, clearly, more Slytherin—than you as I am able to contain my emotions enough to not become a cymbal-banging monkey-toy every time that I become a little bit ‘excited’.”

Harry’s face scrunched up in confusion, green eyes narrowing slightly behind the thick frames of his
round glasses. “What’s a cymbal-banging monkey-toy?”

“Exactly what it sounds like.” Tom dead panned, settling himself more comfortably against the arm of the couch and turning the page of the book on the Magical society of Ancient Egypt that he’d rented from the school’s library to broaden his pool of leisure reading.

He’d never really spend much time in the common room of the House named for his ancestor before, hounded as he was by Abraxas’ court, but Tom had to admit that it felt nice. The leather comfortable beneath him. The fire warm against his side. Now that he’d discovered his fondness for it Tom wasn’t about to allow himself to be frightened back into his dorm.

This House belonged to him by rite of blood and it was about time that he staked his claim.

Such a thing would take far more impactful attacks upon his assailters than sneaking snakes into their beds. And coming up with such things would take extensive planning.

And, perhaps, a bit of help though the only person available to offer that help was Harry. Tom wasn’t quite certain that the boy would be in any way useful.

It was better, for the moment, that he went about resolving things himself until such was no longer possible.

Tom turned another page, the old parchment creaking as it moved. The tips of his fingers running over the curved lines of the picture etched onto the next page and the caption underneath it.

_Ra: God of the Sun._

A falcon headed man who wore the fires of the sun as a blazing crown. The creator of man. The Lord of Fire who fused with the souls of passed Pharaohs in their journey to the afterlife, passing through the twelve gates of the Underworld by ordering their serpent guards aside.

Had he, perhaps, been passed off of some powerful ancient Parselmouth.

Tom nearly dropped his book in alarm when the portrait hole flew open with a bang, allowing a massive black streak to come bounding through it with a high-pitched yip. A dog, about the size of Rogan by far more wolf-like and with a shaggy black pelt.

Ackie Nott let out a high pitched squeal of “it’s the Grimm!” before falling over into a dead faint.

Tom might have found the matter funny if it weren’t for the fact that he knew full well what the Grimm was. He might have spiraled into a similar panic himself if not for what the supposed ‘Grimm’ did next: with an overly excited bark and its tail motoring at almost a hundred miles an hour it took a flying leap at Harry, pinning the raven to the couch beneath a flurry of licks.

“Witch’s tits, Sirius! We aren’t in Gryffindor tower; we don’t do things that way here in Snake House! You promised you’d behave!” A slight man with wavy black hair and the same haughty features stood just inside the entrance to the common room, glaring at the great beast. “Get down from there and turn back!”

“I don’t know why you’re surprised,” Orion stepped over Nott’s unconscious body as if it wasn’t there and walked towards the man, “you really should have put him on a leash, Regulus. There is a reason the uncouth idiot was kicked out of the family.”

The ‘Grimm’-Sirius-bared his teeth at Orion and growled before leaping down off the couch and transforming into a man. Tom’s eyes widened in surprise; he was an Animorphmagus and he recognized him.
The other Auror that had showed up and hauled his Uncle away.

“I was disowned, yes, but I wasn’t ‘kicked out of the family’. Being ‘kicked out’, Orion, implies I didn’t want to leave!” He snapped, sparing a moment to glare at the two of them before he turned back to Harry. “You’re doing alright in Snake House, Harry?”

“Yes.” Green eyes flickered briefly to Tom as he bent to retrieve the book that he’d dropped and his cheeks colored. “Where are Mum and Dad?”

“Your Mum had some last minute business to sort out and your father has to finish up a bit of paperwork that he’s been neglecting and then collect Moony and Wormtail so they sent me to pick you up.” He said with a grin. “Tonight’s a special night, what with you finally being at Hogwarts and all. On this historic night of ghoulish mischief we figured it was time to pass the torch and induct you into the ranks of the Marauders.”

He winked and Harry flashed an unsteady grin. Given that the conversation between them seemed to have devolved into unintelligible prattle Tom got off the couch and went up to the dorm room to collect his things.

The little coral snake that he had summoned that morning to guard their room while they were away poked its small red and black head out from the inside of his pillowed case to see who he was, flicked its tongue out of him, and then retreated back into the warmth of his case.

She was a considerably quieter snake than any of the others that he’d yet come across. But that was fine. He’d summoned her as a guard-snake not a conversation partner.

“I’m leaving now, Ryukyu.” Tom picked up his rucksack and slid the strap over his shoulder. “You know not to bite Harry, don’t you, in case he gets back before me?”

“The small black-haired noise box will not be bitten unless he persists in making incomprehensible primate noises at me. Everyone else will be bitten.”

“You’re not planning to use your venom I hope. As much as I wouldn’t give a toss to see anyone of them drop dead I’d rather not be expelled.”

“If they threaten me with their spark sticks they get the venom! There is no negotiation, speaker!”

Now I’m beginning to remember why I’m relieved she’s not much of one for words. Tom thought with a sigh. “I’ll send you back to your home after I get back from the holiday. Don’t let anyone make off with anything.”

He only received a thin hiss in reply.

With only about five minutes left to spare before he needed to report to the Headmaster’s office Tom took the steps down from the dorms two at a time. Harry had disappeared by this point and someone had dragged Nott away, either back up to his room or to the Hospital Wing to be brought out of his fainting spells. The common room had mostly cleared out by now and there were very few people left to glare at him as he passed.

Tom ran all the way up to the second floor and bolted down Gargoyle Corridor to give the statue guarding the entrance into the Headmaster’s office. He was out of breath by the time he made it to the top of the staircase but couldn’t care less about the matter if he tried, so shaken with excitement that he could barely bring himself to knock properly.

“Come in, Mr. Riddle.” Dippet’s voice was the thin and wispy thing typically expected of the
incredibly old and filtered through him through the thin wood of the door.

Tom threw it open and all but tumbled inside, almost tripping over his own two feet.

He hadn’t been told who would be taking him home, he just knew that—as his father didn’t have the ability to Apparate and Riddle Manor wasn’t hooked up to the Floo—one of the Professors had volunteered to take him home. With how much of a model student he made sure to be—even more so now that he was making a conscious effort of making the Gryffindor Head of House seem crazy—it could have been anyone; Professor Areolite, Professor Merrythought, quite possibly his own Head of House or anyone other than—.

“You certainly seem to be excited, Tom.”

He might have been hallucinating, but Tom could have sworn that somewhere far off in the distance he heard a record scratch. Standing there, smirking smugly down at him from behind his stupid falsetto twinkle stood the very last creature on the face of the earth that he wanted anywhere near his house.

Albus Dumbledore.

“If you have everything we can head out now. We wouldn’t want you to be so late that you miss the festivities. Muggles ‘trick treat’ if I recall.” He indicated the door that the brunet had just charged through. “Shall we?”

Tom felt his left eye twitch.

I’d rather be mauled by Fenrir Greyback, thanks. He forced himself to say “yes sir” and walk back through the door.

“I hadn’t realized that you’d be adopted, Tom.” Why he was attempting to talk to him Tom didn’t know but he was determined to keep his mouth shut. He didn’t want this man anywhere near his family. Didn’t want him to interfere.

Because he knew he would. He wouldn’t have gone so far as to place a Blood Lock on him if he didn’t have some sort of plan for him.

“How is your father? As I understand it you hadn’t met him until recently, but he seems to be getting quite…involved in your affairs quite quickly.”

That’s right, bastard. He’s shut you out from any means of legal control over me beyond that of a teacher and the only way you’ll get that control back is with a considerable fight.

A fight which Tom could only hope he wouldn’t win.

“He’s treating you well?”

They’d reached the courtyard now, over which the school’s Anti-Apparition wards had been for that night removed. Tom turned cold blue eyes on the man in the same suspicious glare a Nargle would give to an offered bowl of milk.

“The details of my life are none of your concern; you’re no longer my Magical Guardian and, even if I did need help in some capacity the last person I’d ever turn to is you.”

A bit of that stupid little twinkle slipped.

There. Put him in his place; remind him he can’t fool me!
It was probably a dumb move, and one that he would possibly very shortly come to regret, but by this point Tom had had more than enough.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Mr. Riddle.” He said, holding out his arm. “I had hoped that you would know you could trust me.”

I do trust you. To make my life hell.

It seemed like he wasn’t the only one out to play to the public. In the little fiefdom that was his classroom, where Tom was cut off from support on all sides, he didn’t bother to be overly subtle with his antagonism. Out in the public eye he played the perfectly kind and supportive mentor; a man who truly cared about a formerly orphaned child and only wanted the best for him.

The sickening tug of Apparition ripped him away from both the courtyard and his thoughts. Having never had the experience before Tom was unprepared for exactly how terrible it felt. Like being compressed from all sides. His chest crushed. His body forced through a very small hole.

It was a lucky thing he’d been too excited to eat lunch that day because he’d probably have vomited all over the steps of Riddle Manor otherwise. When the ringing in his ears finally subsided the first thing Tom noticed was the deep ferocious sound of Rogan barking on the other side of the front door. Still feeling rather ill but in quite a hurry to get away from the man Tom wobbled up the steps and over to the door. Judging it better to knock and have the beast restrained than open the door himself and risk getting bowled over by the great oaf he reached up and rapped his knuckles against the wood.

Hopefully he’d been loud enough to be heard over the ruckus that the dog was raising.

His knock was answered by Adele a few moments later, looking rather overwhelmed by the effort of holding back the massive snapping dog with her comparatively thin arms. Rogan’s hackles were on end and his ears were pinned back, his watery eyes focused on his unwanted escort.

Tom smirked. Good dog.

“Oh, Young Master, you’re home.” Her voice sounded somewhat strained; with both hands on the mastiff’s leather collar she threw her whole weight into tugging him away from the door far enough for them to enter. “Everything’s almost ready for the holiday and dinner is in another half hour. Your father is in the library and will be thrilled to have you home.” Another tug on his collar reduced the barking to a constant feral growl. His crooked yellow teeth and black gums on full display and his tail pole straight in the air. Tom patted his massive head as he passed, incredibly smug in the fact that the dog didn’t snap at him; he felt sure that, had Dumbledore attempted that, he’d have lost at least a few fingers if not his entire hand. “Why don’t you come in?”

Tom gritted his teeth in annoyance but was sure to keep his features neutral. It was probably for the best that Adele had invited Dumbledore in; the man would likely have barged in otherwise.

“Thank you, Ms.” He stepped lightly over the frame of the door, eyeing the dog as he closed it behind him. “I’d like to speak with your father briefly, if I may, Tom. Could you lead me to the library?”

Oh, why can’t you just leave! Tom thought viciously. He frowned at the man but nodded and started up the stairs.

His father was sitting in a wing backed leather chair beside a large beveled window looking out over the front yard, a novel open in his lap. He looked up when they entered and set the book aside, rising
from his seat with a smile.

“Junior.”

“Father!” Momentarily forgetting the unwanted intruder, Tom bounded across the room and wrapped his arms around his middle. Burying his face in the front of his shirt and breathing in his familiar scent. Senior slid one arm around his shoulders and squeezed him gently in return, his other hand—the one on which Tom knew his father wore his Lordship ring—quickly being hidden behind his back.

He smoothed back Tom’s hair with his free hand then looked up at the other man; though his face displayed only neutral curiosity Tom could feel, with his arms still wrapped around his father, that his body was stiff with suspicion. “Who’s this?”

“Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.” He stepped forward and held out his hand, clearly intending to be greeted with a hand shake. “Your son’s Transfiguration Professor and, up until recently, his Magical Guardian.”

With the fact that his right hand bore the Lefay ring giving him more than the needed excuse to be subtly yet incredibly rude, rather than reciprocating the gesture Senior stared at the hand as if it had personally offended him. Finally, the other allowed it to drop back to his side.

He looked down at Tom and smiled, gently pushing him towards the open library doors. “Why don’t you go say hello to your grandparents, Junior? Your grandmother should have finished putting the finishing touches on your costume by now.” The message of ‘run off somewhere, I’ll take care of this’ was clear behind his eyes. Tom nodded and somewhat reluctantly left the room. “Thank you for bringing my son home. I trust that we’ll be seeing you Sunday evening when it comes time for Junior to return to school?”

“Mr. Riddle,” this was not at all what he had expected to find at Riddle Manor. Tom Senior was supposed to be a traumatized and broken man to the point where he was afraid of his own shadow and could barely stand to step outside. He wasn’t supposed to be this proud figure with a hyena’s grin and the shadow of something reptilian in his gaze. This wouldn’t do. Not one bit. Pulling the boy from his claws would be a bit more difficult than he’d though; still simple, but less so than he’d hoped. “As the rightful Magical Guardian of your son I have concerns that you, as a Muggle—.”

“You, Sir, are the former Magical Guardian of my son, yes, but I will warn you once and only once that I had better not hear you conflating that with being his rightful Guardian ever again. I am his Magical Guardian now and I will remain that until he comes to be the age at which he no longer needs one. Now, I’m sure you have important business that you need to be attending elsewhere.”

“As a Muggle your ability to properly understand the legalities of our world enough to make proper decisions—.”

“My son has told me about you, Albus. I’m going to have to ask both that you immediately cease insulting my intelligence and that you get the bloody hell out of my house.”

“Mr. Riddle—.”

“You can leave by your own power or I can have you thrown out.” Spoken with a sickly, dangerous politeness that reminded him quite unnervingly of Dolores Umbridge.

Less than pleased but not about to suffer the humiliation of being tossed out by a Muggle and having gotten what he wanted—his main reason for coming there—Dumbledore backed down. “Very well. I didn’t mean to upset you.” He said. “I’ll return on Sunday evening to take Tom back to the castle. I
Senior stood in the doorway and watched him make his way down the stairs, then returned to the window to make certain that he left without sticking his nose anywhere it didn’t belong. When the auburn intruder vanished from sight on the lawn he allowed himself to relax. Shoulders sagging forward as he leaned his weight against the window sill.

Alone in the library, he growled under his breath.

Senior looked up when the door creaked, blue eyes peering in around it as if to make certain that the other man was gone.

“He didn’t give you too much trouble, did he?” he asked, turning towards him.

Tom shook his head as he entered back into the room, walking over to him and pushing his way under his arm. Senior squeezed him again and dropped his chin into his curls. “You’re shaking.”

“I’m scared.” His voice was strangled, as if he could barely bring himself to admit it and didn’t want to risk the books overhearing. “I don’t want to be sent back to Wool’s. I want to stay with you.”

“And you will, Junior. No one is going to take you away from me, to send you back to that orphanage or anywhere else. Certainly not a man who claims to have your interest at heart but quite clearly has anything but.” Senior softened his tone and stepped back. “I’ve got everything together for what we’ll be doing tonight. Let’s forget about Dumbledore for now and enjoy our first Samhain together shall we?”

Tom nodded with a somewhat unsteady smile, retaining a firm grip on his father’s sleeve. Senior smoothed his hair down again and led him back out of the library, deciding not to mention it.

He hadn’t noticed before then, but the manor had been decorated accordingly for both fall and the holiday. Numerous elegant vases had been set out on tables filled with brightly colored leaves and a handful of rather tacky Muggle decorations depicting monsters were set about at random. Tom tugged on a length of clearly fake webbing and looked up at the older man in confusion, jumping slightly when confronted with the sight of a rather ferocious looking mask.

Where he’d pulled it from Tom didn’t know but he hadn’t been holding it before; he must have hidden it somewhere in the hall so that he could startle him with it.

In an effort to cover up the fact that he’d jumped Tom scrunched up his expression into one of distaste. “What’s all of this, father? I thought we were doing Samhain not Halloween.”

“We are, Junior, but its Halloween as well. We’re celebrating both so that your grandparents can be involved too.” Senior slid the mask over Tom’s face before he could move away; the brunet huffed and pushed the snarling face aside so that it hung lopsided off him and sent his father a mild glare. “We’ll do the same with Yule and Christmas too.”

“And New Years?” he said sourly. All his life that stupid holiday had overshadowed him and he was sick of it.

“New Years?” Senior crooked his finger and gently tapped Tom’s chin. “What does another year matter when there’s something so much more important we could be commemorating? The night of December 31st belongs to you, Junior, but that’s still a fair ways off. Have you eaten recently?”

Tom shook his head.
“Are you hungry?”

“Yes, a little bit.”

“Good, because we should hurry up and sit in the dining room. Dinner will be served soon. Where did you run off to while I was with Dumbledore?”

“I went back to my bedroom.” He said as they resumed walking down the hallway. “To drop off my things.”

“So you haven’t seen your grandparents yet?” Tom shook his head. “Since we’re not going Trick-or-Treating your Grandmother put something together for you. A number of the servants have added things as well.”

“Trick-or-Treating is when you dress up and go from house to house for candy isn’t it? People in London would walk passed the gates of the orphanage when they did it. When I was little I would watch them from the porch.”

His father squeezed his shoulder gently. “Didn’t you get cold doing that, Junior? It gets quite chilly this time of year, especially at night.”

“I wasn’t too bad.” He said. “I never got sick from it. And it gave me a chance to get away from the other children.”

“That’s all over now.” Senior’s voice was gentle but he spoke with the heavy weight of conviction.

The dining room doors creaked as they were pushed open. His grandparents were both already sitting at the table and looked up when the pair entered.

“Tommy, dear, you’re back from school!” For her advanced age his grandmother could still move quite fast and was across the room before Tom could do much more than blink. The hug that she gave him was very tight.

“Mother,” he heard his father chuckle “don’t crush him to death.”

“Oh, hush, Tom! I am hugging my grandson, no point in being so dramatic.” Tom made a slight gasp for air when she released him but didn’t mention it, much to the amusement of his father. His grandmother held him at arm’s length and looked him over. “Have you not been eating, dear? If anything you seem to have lost some of the weight that you gained over the summer.”

“I noticed that too.” His father said. “Junior, are you still being so badly harried by your year mates that you can’t eat a proper meal?”

Tom focused his gaze on his shoes. “I have the upper hand on them now.”

“Junior-.”

“I can handle it!” He looked back up at him fiercely. “I know you’re worried but I can’t just hide behind you every time something happens. There’s going to come a time where you won’t be there and if I don’t stand on my own against them now it’s never going to stop!”

“The boy’s right, Tom.” His grandfather folded that morning’s copy of the Daily Prophet-when they’d started receiving it Tom hadn’t a clue-and set it down on the table. “I know that you want to protect him but there’s a time and a place to do so. You want him to depend on you, not to become dependent.”
His father made that nervous gesture of running his hand through his curls again and sighed. “You’re right.” He said. “Just…if you have to sneak into the kitchens to steal food or something, do it. Just make sure that you eat properly, Junior. You’ll never hit your growth spurt otherwise.”

Oh, Merlin, he didn’t want to be stuck short and scrawny forever! “I’m not certain where the entrance to the kitchens is, but I’ll try to find out.”

“I suppose that’s the best that I can hope for at the moment.”

He still wasn’t used to it. Having people who were actually worried about him.

That train of thought was derailed when a massive wicker basket filled with candy was held out to him. **Happy Halloween** had been painted along one side in black and orange acrylic paint and it was so heavy that, when it was dropped into his arms, he nearly pitched forwards.

“Make sure to eat your dinner first, Tommy. No spoiling your appetite.”

“Yes, grandmother.”

He set the basket back on the table with a small thud, clambering up onto his chair and settling in at the table.

“We’ll go through your haul of treasure after the Ritual Junior.” His father promised as the servant’s brought out the food. “Though there’s certainly something to be said for the process of dressing up and collecting candy, by far the best part is sorting through the loot afterwards.”

Tom nodded, tucking into his plate as soon as it was set in front of him.

“Is there any celebration going on at school?” his grandfather asked him from across the table. “I’d imagine that there would be; Samhain, I believe your father called it?”

“Yes. There’s a big feast at school with a ridiculous amount of sweets and a number of fake bats enchanted to fly around.” He took a sip of water. “Overall it’s very tacky, and most everyone who can head back to their homes and their families to practice technically illegal things do so.”

“Illegal?” his grandmother sounded more than a little bit shocked. “Darling, you didn’t say that you were going to be breaking any laws in our back yard!”

“It’s only illegal on paper, grandmother. My roommate’s father and Godfather are both Aurors and he’s currently at home doing a ritual.” Tom said. “Though I have heard certain things about Urram. What made you pick that one, father?”

“Our conversation over the summer regarding your view on death.”

Tom sent his father a sidelong glance. “So your solution was Necromancy?”

Senior reached out and ruffled his hair, causing his brown curls to stick up in all directions. Tom made an annoyed mewl and attempted to lean out of reach, nearly falling out of his chair for his trouble.

“You and your cheek.” He sounded fond rather than annoyed. Tom stuck his tongue out playfully. “But on the matter of things being branded illegal, the Wizarding World seems to have become a bit prejudiced against anything ‘Dark’ leaning. I fell in with a man named Barty Crouch when I was last in Diagon Alley and spent the majority of the day shopping with him. We talked quite a bit and a great deal about what I learned has left me…concerned. There’s a lot that needs to be changed.”
Tom could certainly agree with that assessment. He picked up his cup of water and took a drink. “Have you gotten treatment yet, father? You did say something about going to St. Mungo’s and meeting with this ‘Snape’ person in some of your letters.”

His father’s face fell slightly and he cleared his throat. His grandfather huffed. “Well, Junior, um… that’s a little bit complicated.”

“What do you mean?”

“All of the Mind Healers employed by St. Mungo’s are female; for obvious reasons that wouldn’t exactly be the…best solution given my condition. I was also prescribed a potion called a Lyre Draught and put into contact with Severus, who was also qualified to be a Mind Healer though that wasn’t his line of work. He decided that he’d provide the potion but…suggested I get into contact with a Mind Healer outside of the country. I’m currently in the process of doing that.”

“How long do you think that’s going to take?”

“Not too long, I should hope.” He said. “I am trying, Junior. I want to be in the best place possible so as not to give him a leg to stand on if he tries to come after my ability to be a fit parent for you.”

Tom pushed his peas around on his plate, trying not to go back to his earlier pressing concerns about Dumbledore and what his plans might be. “I just want you to get better, father.”

“I will, Junior, don’t worry.” He promised. “If you’re finished with your food you should go and put your candy in your room. It’s about time we started the Ritual.”
Dear lord that took way longer than I wanted it to. So sorry about that everyone. I'll read through it later and correct any mistakes, I just wanted to get this up before I get on the road again.

Tom wasn’t quite certain why his father glared briefly at the candle, but decided that it probably wasn’t the best choice to ask. Whatever reason had caused him to do it aside, the look of sharp annoyance passed quickly and his features settled back into a calm neutral as he reached for the candle and picked it up.

“Did you read about the Urram Ritual at school, Junior? You said you’d heard a bit about it.”

“The books on Samhain and the other holidays which are available in the Hogwarts library are very limited in detail, since celebrating them is technically illegal. They explain the basic purpose and history of the holiday in question but any book that would detail the rituals themselves would be in the Restricted section. I’d need a Professor’s permission to excess them.” He told him. “My roommate had heard of it and explained a bit about what it was. He was a bit shocked, considering how ‘dark’ it was.”

“It seems like Urram is one of the things unnecessarily labeled so. I understand Necromancy being considered ‘dark’, or even ‘black’, Magic in many cases but we’re not going out into the graveyard and raising an undead legion with which to take over the world. Simply, and I’m quoting the text here, ‘inviting our ancestors home for a communion’.”

Noticing that his father was not shooting him the side eye, Tom raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“Just making sure you haven’t gotten any ideas from what I said about raising an undead army.” He grinned. “You’ve mentioned your roommate an awful lot recently for all you claim to dislike him and not want ‘friends’, Junior.”

“I don’t want friends! And we aren’t!” Tom said. “We’re acquaintances.”

His father chuckled, following him down the hall back towards the stairs. “I don’t know, Junior, that sounds like splitting hairs to me.” He said. “We need to put this in a Westward facing window and collect a few items I’ve left in the kitchen before we head out.”

The window in question was already open. His father set the silver candle, positioned in a brass holder, on the sill and lit it. The small flame waivered in the cool wind. Tom watched it wiggle and dance as his father headed away into the kitchen. He came out again with a pair of boxes and a pewter pitcher.

“Shall we?” despite his haste in bounding out the door, Tom still caught his father’s smile.

The sun edged on dipping below the horizon, smearing an ocher stain across the sky as it singed the
earth black. He leaned against the railing of the back porch; amidst the garden tall limbs of yew had been lashed together around a small mountain of sweet grass and tinder. Painted in a circle on the grass were a series of Runes and sitting just outside of it were a couple tin pockets filled with water.

“To put the fire out when we’re finished.” He explained when Tom looked back at him in confusion. “They’re not part of the Ritual but Frank wouldn’t be pleased if his garden were to be singed and no one wants to light the house on fire.” The milk and honey mixture made a metallic rattling sound as it was poured into the bowl. “Come here, Junior. There’s one thing left to do before we light the fire.”

Tom looked back at the wooden skeleton before doing as his father had asked. Senior had opened the second box now-longer and more flat than the first, and pulled out what had been hidden inside.

The graceful tapering blade caught the dying sunlight in a red flashed as it passed across his father’s palm, a crimson trail welling in its wake. To the man’s credit, he didn’t make a sound despite the pain it must have caused him.

“I must say that I find this to be the worst part.” Senior said through clenched teeth, balling his wounded hand into a fist and allowing the blood to drop into the bowl as well before holding out the knife to Tom.

He took a step back on impulse, knowing of course that his father wouldn’t truly make a move to harm him. Tom just couldn’t help it.

“Are you scared?” the older man smiled. Gentle and warm without a hint of anything mocking in it. Blood continued dripping from the shallow cut on his palm, hitting the wood with a steady tock! tock! tock! sound his father didn’t seem to register.

“No!” Tom snarled, baring his teeth and puffing up like a garden snake that had been stepped on. “I’m not scared!”

He was afraid of death but he wasn’t afraid of his father holding a bloody knife or of a little bit of pain. But that didn’t somehow make the pain enjoyable in any way.

There was a long stretch of silence in which both Toms stared at the knife, neither making any move. He knew that he couldn’t prove his lack of fear unless he reached for the knife and cut his palm himself the way his father had, but for some reason he couldn’t get his arm to move.

Dark blue eyes rose to meet grey ones, reflecting a request far too embarrassing to verbally admit. The older man knelt down in front of him. “Give me your hand.” Suddenly his arm could move again; Tom lifted it towards his father. Senior shifted the athame into his injured hand so that he wouldn’t get blood all over Tom and rested the blade against his palm. “On three?”

The brunet nodded, focusing his gaze on his father’s brow instead of the knife.


He cringed back when the blade bit into his skin, hot crimson blood welling up and spilling between his fingers. Mimicking his father’s actions he held his bleeding hand out over the bowl and let his blood fall into it.

“Here.” Senior produced a roll of bandages and tightly wrapped Tom’s wounded hand before tending to his own.

“Thanks.” Tom poked at his wound and winced. “We’re lighting the fire now?”
“Not quite yet.” His father picked up the rune engraved bowl and, after a momentary hesitation which interestingly enough hadn’t been present at the prospect of cutting himself, and took a drink. “Cheers.” Senior’s voice was rough with the effort of swallowing the vile mixture, features contorting into an expression of disgust as he passed the bowl to his son.

“You said that having to cut our hands with the athame was the worst part of the ritual.” He said. “I think you were wrong.”

The flavor—a mixture of milk, honey and the tang of iron—was sickly sweet and foul. Not as bad as some potions could be, at least according to what he’d read, but still bad enough that he was immensely grateful he only had to swallow a mouthful.

Setting the bowl down carefully in the middle of the top step on the back porch, he followed his father towards the unlit skeleton meant for the Ritual fire. With a book of Muggle matches, Senior lit the sweet grass tinder beneath the yew logs. Soon, sweet smelling smoke was rising up towards the ever darkening sky.

Mindful to remain outside the circle of runes, Tom watched his father begin circling the roaring blade in a counter clockwise direction. Listing off the runes painted onto the grass as he passed them and speaking phrases in a language he didn’t recognize but knew wasn’t Latin. It sounded similar to the Gaelic or Welsh of which he’d hear occasional snippets in the Hogwarts halls, but didn’t quite line up. Sounded older.

After seven revolutions his gather returned to his side and handed him one of the apples in his hands. The runes glowed pale against the grass.

“We’ll drop these in the fire when I give the word, alright Junior?”

Nodding, gripping the apple tightly enough that the fruit groaned beneath the unrelenting force of pale fingers, Tom stepped over the ring of glowing runes and followed his father towards the massive flames. It was sweltering so close to the blaze despite the chill of the English October night. Between the fragrant tinder and the toxic wood being burned the fumes the fire gave off were heady, bordering on headache inducing, and made him feel tipsy.

As more lines were delivered in that same language, Tom couldn’t help but marvel at the effort it must have taken the man. To be able to memorize the Ritual so completely as to be able to fluidly speak its verses without the aid of notes, with only a short span of time in contact with magic and everything else on his plate with adjusting to the truth of his lineage and the search for a suitable mind healer to ease his condition. It struck Tom yet again, if perhaps more powerfully than before, how alike they truly were.

Long fingers carding through his hair broke him from his thoughts. Senior’s lips twitched upwards into a small smirk, no doubt fully aware that his son had lost himself in his thoughts. “Ready?” he held the apple in his hands a bit higher, the glossy skin reflecting the dancing light.

“Yes.” Tom held his up as well, dropping it into the flames at the same time.

The fire flared up, once orange flames flashing silver for a brief moment before copious amounts of smoke billowed outwards and obscured it. Covering the garden. The manor. The grounds. Wrapping itself around Tom’s body like a needy cat and blinding him. Deafening him. Transforming almost immediately from smoke, warm and gritty with particles of soot and ash, to gelid mist. Wet glacial fingers running down his neck.

A panic which Tom had never felt before welled up in his chest like a hatching serpent; the only time
he’d ever felt anything similar was in the nightmare he’d had on the night his father had gone back into London with his grandfather to attend to a business deal.

Turning left, then right, then completely around but seeing nothing but white pressing in around him he called out but received no reply. His voice, suffocated by the oppressive icy haze, died away into the near distance. And then he felt them. Presences. Multiple presences lurking in the endless white. Obscured from his vision. Drawing closer. Closer. Reaching out to touch him and then grabbing hold despite his best efforts to escape.

The moment they made contact the fear disappeared, taking the cold with it. Replacing it with a feeling he couldn’t quite describe. Buoyant and warm. Safe, perhaps. There were vague figures in the fog. Ever shifting shapes which Tom could make out for just long enough to be left uncertain of exactly what he’d seen.

An imposing but beautiful woman with hawkish eyes and dark hair. A man, ancient and monkeyish with a long thin beard. A woman with hair lank and dull and eyes pointing in opposite directions. Others he couldn’t quite discern. All spoke together at once, their voices a confused buzz just below his range of audible hearing. And then, all at once everything stopped.

The figures vanished, fleeing back into the mist like frightened ghosts. The cold returning with a powerful gust of wintry wind, the fear creeping back in with it. Not of the unknown, this time, but of the instinctual realization that there was something out there. Circling him like a hunting animal. And it was stalking him.

A low snarl sounded from behind him and Tom whirled around, his heart leaping into his throat to choke him when he saw it. A shadow. Towering, dark and winged with glowing ember eyes. Twisted and utterly inhuman. When it moved it was with a stilted loping unnatural gate and a speed which was only describable as terrifying.

He hadn’t moved as far from the fire as he’d thought, which Tom discovered when half of the bucket of water his father had used to hurriedly douse the fire splashed over him. Soaking his clothing and hair. Starting as he was pulled into the man’s arms, wide eyed as he looked around at the perfectly normal garden and the now only smoldering fire, he realized that the Ritual circle had been broken.

“He’s gone.” Those words were enough to confirm to him that his father had seen the monster too. “Are you alright?”

Left a bit too shaken to speak, he nodded.

“I’m sorry.” Senior seemed paler than normal, though in the dark without the fire it was difficult to tell. “I hadn’t thought it would summon Kieran too.”

“And about splashing me?” Tom hated how it came out weak.

His father smiled, reaching out and leaving his hair in an even less orderly state than before. “And for splashing you, Junior.” He straightened up and held out his hand; Tom liked to think that under normal circumstances he’d have refused the offer, but given his current condition he’d let it slide.

He let go of his father’s hand as soon as they were back inside, not wanting anyone else to see his show of weakness. Senior rolled his eyes with a snort, ruffling his hair yet again and following him up the stairs.

“We’re sorting the candy now?” he asked, dripping onto the carpet in the doorway of his room.

“Change first.” His father said. “I don’t want you catching cold, love.”
"Yes father." Collecting night clothes from the wardrobe, Tom proceeded into the bathroom to dry off change and fix his hair. Once he judged himself to be presentable, he returned to his room to find his father sitting on the edge of the bed. The running leap that the brunet took onto the bed, nearly upsetting the basket of candy as he did so. "How do we do this?"

Senior’s expression flickered briefly into one of sadness. "It's easier to go through it all if you tip the basket over."

It wasn’t orderly and Tom wasn’t certain how he felt about that fact but he did as he was told, up ending the basket. The candy inside it spilled across his sheets in a wild blur of shapes and colors. Bit-O-Honey. Broadway Licorice Wheels. Teaberry Gum. Bun Bars. He didn’t recognize any of it.

Seeming to recognize his son’s confusion, Senior dug through the hoard until he located what he was looking for and held it up. "Long Boys were my favorite when I was your age, though I much preferred the chocolate flavor to the coconut." He unwound the wrapper and took a bite.

That seemed to be the right course of action, as it was enough to prompt Tom to snatch something up at random and open it. He hadn’t really read the yellow wrapper but the treat inside looked concerningly similar to a Cockroach Cluster. Thankfully it was filled with marshmallow and not insects.

Not as good a Honeyduke’s, which he’d only had once and in an incredibly small portion, but still good. Finishing it off, he picked up something else.

"You’ve at least been eating once a day, haven’t you?"

The multicolored wafers tasted like fruit, if fruit had the gritty consistency of chalk. He looked up at his father. Tom Senior had reclined back against the bed and was looking at him with tired concern.

"Yes." He crawled around the mess of sweets, careful not to crush any of them or knock them onto the floor, and pressed himself against his father’s side. Resting his head on his chest. Senior’s arm draped itself around his shoulders. "My roommate’s mother sends me some food every week; he put her up to it." Tom told his father’s shirt. The gentle rumble of light laughter told him the man had still heard him clear as day and the knowledge made him color to his ears. "She’s a really good cook."

"I’ll have to write and thank her." He said, because Merlin knew he wouldn’t be able to do it in person without a couple panes of bullet proof glass between them. "It's late Junior. You should clean up your hoard so you can get to bed."

"Yes father." He sat up. "Will you stay?"

Senior sighed, but Tom could tell from the look in his eyes and everything that had happened that day that he’d won. At least to a point. "For a while."

Grinning, Tom retrieved the basket from the floor where he’d dropped it.
Honeyduke’s plus Gabriel Potter was a yearly equation which always led to trouble. Needless to say, the eleven year old raven was unsurprised to see his brother running mad circles around the house, his hands full of candy and with chocolate smeared across his upper lip. What Tom had said to him about his excitable actions earlier that night popped into his mind as he entered the house?

What had he called him? A cymbal banging monkey toy?

“Smirking, Prongslet?” his Godfather stepped out of the fireplace behind him, shaking ashes from the hem of his robe. “Don’t tell me Snake House has gotten to you already?”

“It was nothing to do with being in Slytherin House.” He assured him. “I was just thinking about something that my roommate said. About some sort of Muggle toy.”

“Who’s your roommate?”

“His name is Tom Riddle. He’s a second year and a Half-blood.” And he can speak to snakes too, but that was something Harry kept quiet about. “He was sitting next to me when you came in. Reading a book on the Magical Society of Ancient Egypt.”

“I’ve met him.”

Harry’s green eyes widened behind his glasses. “You have?”

“Well, not met him met him.” His Godfather’s expression seemed troubled. “We had a call out to a town called Little Hangleton this last summer; Morfin Gaunt flying off the hook again and going after the same Muggle as the last, well, couple times I think it was.” Sirius told him. “The Muggle was in pretty bad shape; unconscious on the ground and bleeding. Had his son with him.”

“Morfin hurt him?”

“The kid said his father was run over by one of the horses they were riding.” He said. “He didn’t want our help and took his father home himself. Probably to the manor house up on the hill. Gaunt should thank us, really; from the look of the red sparks the boy was shedding we may have saved the concussed troll from an accidental Crucio.”

Accidental? He didn’t know Tom terribly well but the raven doubted that the Crucio would have been accidental. Perhaps he didn’t know the spell or its accompanying motion, but it would have only been the result of the brunet’s direct and entirely sentient intent to hurt.

He was probably powerful enough to cast a wandless Unforgiveable.

The only thing about the matter which surprised Harry was that he hadn’t leveraged one against his school yard bullies.

Yet.

Yet being the operative word.

“Toms very strong and very smart. But I don’t think he has any friends.” He said.

“No for your lack of trying?” his Godfather grinned at him.
“I think we’re ‘acquaintances’.” He stepped off the hearth and onto the hardwood floor. The house was decorated for the season and smelled of pumpkin spice and apple cider. “He tolerates me, at least.”

“That’s good.”

“It’s strange, though.” Harry said. “I understand why the other Slytherins don’t like him, they don’t like anyone with Muggle blood—not that it makes it right—and why the Gryffindors also don’t like him—most of them hate Snakes on principle—but I thought that Professors were supposed to act like adults instead of school boys.”

“What do you mean, Harry?” Both watched Gabriel nick a bowl of pumpkin pasties off the copy table and take off running again. “Which Professors are acting like schoolboys?”

“Dumbledore.” Harry admitted after a drawn out moment of silence. “Tom hasn’t done anything deserving of the treatment that he’s gotten. Dumbledore acts like he’s an Azkaban escapee, or maybe some sort of dangerous Dark creature! Kept telling me that I should stay away from him. That he wasn’t ‘good for me’ and I don’t understand why; he’s not any different than I am! Not really!” Huffing, the raven looked away. “I don’t understand why everyone seems to be bent on trying to torture him.”

His Godfather sighed and sat down in the armchair across from him. “You’re just like your mother, you know? She cared a great deal about the feelings of everyone around her while we were in school. Still does to this day. A bit too much, sometimes.”

“Maybe it’s the rest of the world that cares too little.” The raven grumbled, hearing his mother call for his brother to settle down from the kitchen.

Harry rose from the couch and trotted after where he’d last seen Gabriel disappear too and soon found the younger boy vibrating in a seat at the kitchen table. Over excitable as ever and acting much younger than he was.

Was that how he had looked earlier, sitting next to Tom in Snake House’s common room? If so, he could understand why the brunet had taken to him with an edge of blunt annoyance.

Prickly as the older boy acted and as cold a front as he put forth, how far his tolerance of him seemed to extend made Harry quite pleased. He’d managed to wriggle his way firmly up underneath Tom’s scales—he’d likely failed to realize just how stubborn Harry was despite still being very much in his own shell, coming as he did from Gryffindor stock, and maybe that had been his fellow snake’s mistake—and no matter how much the brunet denied the fact he was well aware that they were quite a bit more than merely ‘acquaintances’. Maybe Tom didn’t want to admit it. Maybe he himself simply wasn’t aware.

Either way, Harry was determined to force him to by the end of the school year. Even if that meant taking the risk of dragging a basilisk by the tail.

It’d be worth it. Constantly being alone and closed off wasn’t healthy and Tom had suffered more than enough in his opinion.

“Someone certainly seems to be all smiles tonight.” Lily gently pinched he eldest child’s cheek, hands wet with warm water from cleaning dishes. “I take it that Snake House isn’t the black hole of despair that you expected going in? They’re not giving you too much trouble for being a Potter, are they darling?”
“No, Mum.” Harry mopped at his cheek to wipe away the sudsy water, half distracted by the motion of the large knife rhythmically cutting carrots on the counter behind her. “Draco’s the only one who really pays me any attention, and most of the time all he does is sneer. Everyone seems more focused on making Tom miserable.”

Though she contained the majority of her reaction, he could tell from the way her lips thinned-Harry could see the relation between his mother and his awful Aunt, Petunia, whom he’d only met twice in his life when she did that-that his mother was less than pleased by the account of how his roommate was being systematically tortured by their peers. “Do you need more Dittany, Harry? You wrote saying you used some on Tom after the Potion’s ‘accident’.”

“No. His burns weren’t as bad as they could have been; I still have most of the bottle.” He said.

“Well, if you ever run out write me and I’ll send more.” A flick of her wand dismissed the knife and poured the carrots into a pot of bubbling stew. “Remind me to send you back to Hogwarts with more food. With as small as he is for his age Tom can’t afford to be missing meals as much as you say he has been. How is he otherwise?”

“Friendly as ever.” The raven was well aware of how dry his voice sounded. His mother laughed. “Can you blame him for being closed off with the way the others treat him?”

“I don’t blame him.” And he didn’t. Of course he didn’t. When you were a member of the school’s black listed House and the very people you were supposed to be able to turn to turned on you instead it was probably safer, easier, to just withdraw from everyone and everything. Not to trust. Because that way you could never be hurt as badly. “I just wish he’d realize that he doesn’t have to summon a snake every time he wants someone to talk to!”

Whoops. That had slipped out in a moment of frustration. Lily dropped her wand in surprise, the willow wood clattering quietly against the granite counter. “He’s a parseldough?”

Harry looked at his mother in confusion. “What’s a parseldough?” They’d never given his ability any name, he hadn’t known it had one, and had mostly avoided talking about it at all. Aside from the occasional brief conversation with a serpent on its way passing through, he hadn’t thought much of it.

“People like you, baby. Who can speak to snakes. It’s very rare and not well understood, and because of that and the fact that many people are afraid of snakes…it’s seen as a Dark ability even though there’s nothing inherently bad about it.” Retrieving her wand from where she’d dropped it, Lily ran her fingers through his hair. “It’s reputation mostly comes from its most well known possessor, Salazar Slytherin. But the founder of Ilvermorny was a parseldough as well, as were a number of other witches and wizards who did great things. It doesn’t mean anything and never let anyone tell you differently.”

“That’s why I’m not supposed to use it in public?”

Lily sighed. “We didn’t want it to get out when you were so young. But you’re older now. And you can make your own choice on whether or not you want others to know.” She said. “But I think you should tell Tom that you’ve been eavesdropping on him.”

Harry immediately lit up bright red without the slightest idea how she could possibly have known about the…little habit he’d developed. It wasn’t his fault that he liked to hear Tom talk, especially when he was speaking the snake language, and that the brunet was all but certain to clam up the moment he knew that he could be understood.
The sound of the floo lighting up again saved him from having to answer, much to his relief. Seizing on his opportunity for escape, Harry turned tail and darted out of the kitchen with Gabriel close on his heels.

“Let them know dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes.” Lily called after him.

“I will.” Harry replied, rounding the corner.

Barty bounded from the hearth with a concerning grin on his face, Snape just behind shaking ashes from his robes. Beetle black eyes fixed on him as he looked up, the usual sneer-though slightly less caustic than it was while aimed at other people-appearing on his face.

“Hello, brats.”

Harry had always found the Potion’s Master to be an incredibly intimidating man. And a rather mean man. But most people thought that. Gabriel, much like his mother, was very fond of him for reasons he could only partially understand. Snape wasn’t horrible—was kind of sort of that pseudo Uncle who always seemed to be plotting the best way to go about poisoning his father—but still…

“Hello.” Harry warily observed the still grinning Ravenclaw as his father, with Remus and Peter in tow, stepped from the hearth as well. “Mum said dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes.”

“Let Lily know that we’ll be in after this lot get done with their customary greeting.” Barty seemed more amused than he should have been by the sight of the pair of men squaring off. “I’ll make sure they don’t destroy the house and kill each other.”

Not feeling entirely reassured Harry exited the sitting room and headed back into the kitchen, dragging his brother behind him.

Thankfully dinner and the Ritual both passed without much event and not long afterwards Gabriel passed out on the couch from an overdose of sugar. His father had pulled him aside to the corner of the room, all under Lily’s watchful eye, to where Sirius Remus and Peter were waiting with a piece of parchment and a box.

“Hello, Harry.” Remus smiled down at him, shadows under his amber eyes. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen you.”

“Hello Remus. Hello Peter.” Green eyes moved curiously from the parchment to the box and back again. “What are those?”

“You’ll see.” Sirius, grinning wildly, patted him on the back. “But you should be calling them Moony and Wormtail; you’re one of the Marauders now that you’re in Hogwarts.”

“It will be interesting to see a Slytherin version of our little gang of miscreants.”

Peter let out a high pitched squeak of alarm at Remus’ words, watery eyes going wide. “Slytherin?” He repeated. “You got put in Slytherin, Harry? How do you survive?”

Snape shot a glare at them from across the room.

“It’s not that bad.” Harry admitted, feeling his cheeks begin to heat up. “I can’t exactly say that my roommate and I ‘get along’ but I like Tom. He’s…” a lot of things, “interesting.”

That didn’t do it justice but that was all he had. Harry didn’t understand quite how he felt himself.
“Interesting, is he Prongslet?” Sirius snickered.

“Leave him be, Padfoot.” His father said with a grin. “Now, once Gabriel is in school you’ll have to share these with him but for now they’re all yours. We expect you to make good use of them.” The wink he was sent made it clear that that ‘good use’ was linked to flippantly breaking school rules. Opening the box to reveal the silvery fabric inside, he said “welcome to the Marauders.”

He’d never seen it before, but from all the stories that he’d heard about the days of his schooling from his father and the others Harry knew exactly what it was that he was looking at. The cloth of the invisibility cloak was cold and smooth like silk as it slid through his fingers. And that meant “that parchment isn’t a parchment, is it? It’s the Marauder’s Map!”

“Yes.” Turning it towards him, Remus looked over at Peter. “Care to do the honors, Wormtail?”

Peter’s chestnut wand tightly tapped the paper. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

Ink spread across the paper, forming dark splotches which then coalesced into a familiar phrase. The parchment was unfolded with a dry crackling sound, revealing the halls of Hogwarts and countless unmarked passages, and the labeled footsteps of those who’d remained in the castle.

Looking up at the four widely grinning adults, Harry smiled back as his father set the box aside. “By the time you head back to the castle, we’ll make sure you know how to use it.”

“So the new Marauders will be snakes, will they?” Barty grinned for what had to be the hundredth time that night. “Wish I was still in school. That’d be an interesting sight to see.”

“I’d prefer not to witness the degradation of my House to the level of Gryffindor idiocy.”

Lily rolled her eyes, gently shoving her black haired friend. “This isn’t going to be a ‘degradation of your House to Gryffindor’ anything.” She said. “He might have Lion House traits but the hat put Harry in Slytherin for a reason. What’s more likely to happen is the result of giving venom to a garden snake, especially having grown up around those twins.” The mention of the Weasley twins was enough to make him shudder. Lily sat back against the cushions of the couch. “Hopefully he doesn’t instigate a new reign of terror to rival the one that those four set in motion.”

Snape grunted into his drink.

“That’s been a question that’s been bothering me since that day we were supposed to meet up in Diagon Alley.” The blonde leaned forward far enough to set his cup of Mulled Mead down on the table. “How did you know Tom? Wherever did you manage to come across such a handsome man?”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Crouch?” Lily raised an eyebrow at him. “Is there something about you we don’t know, Barty?”

“I can appreciate the beauty of another man in an entirely non-homosexual way?”

“If that’s what you want to call it.” The red headed witch snorted, then turned to the raven. “But that is a good question. How did you know him? Have you met before?”

“He’s a customer.”

“You treat your customers like that, do you?” the blonde asked. “No wonder you’re having trouble getting together the necessary funds to start up that shop. Riddle alone would be enough to get it off the ground.”
“Isn’t he a Muggle, though?” Lily asked. “The conversion fee from pounds to galleons would decrease the sum considerably.”

“Yes and no. It’s complicated.” Barty shrugged. “The result of old practices. I’m not sure that I can legally say much more, but long story short he’s a Lefay.”

“What? How is that possible; I thought that the Lefay Line was extinct.”

“Like I said, it’s complicated.” He said. “It’ll come out eventually, will have to to explain the Line’s sudden reappearance when he comes out as a Lord. But that’ll be a while off what with the fact that he needs to find someone out of the country to help him since someone turned him down despite being offered the chance to name any price.” The blonde tutted and shook his head. “You shouldn’t have let that chance go.”

“I’m a Potion’s Master, not a Mind Healer! And it’s not on me to repair his relationship with the son that he abandoned for the first twelve years of his life.”

“Tom Junior?” both looked over at Lily in surprise. “I saw him the say we went shopping for Harry’s school supplies; he looks like his father in miniature and is concerningly verbose for his age. He’s also Harry’s roommate and seems to be having a hard time in Slytherin.” She said. “You should help them, Severus.”

“I won’t be paid for something I’m not qualified to do!” He said.

“At least try.”

Under the expectant gazes of blue and green eyes, the raven huffed and slumped. Staring down into the bottom of his cup. “I’ll consider it.”
Reluctant Return

Chapter Notes

A bit of moving plot points, sudden inspiration and cutting one chapter into two let me get this out a lot earlier than I expected. Not a fan of how short it is but it was either 'shorter than normal' or 'no new posts for the next span of forever'. As always, enjoy.

The weekend had passed much too quickly in Tom’s opinion. The horrible man would be returning soon and he didn’t want any part of him. Not his stupid twinkle or the false ‘grandfather’ façade which was so sickeningly saccharine that only the truly soft headed could actually believe it. Not his annoying insistences on acting like he gave a damn about him when he really saw him, at best, as a pawn to be used. Not his subtle efforts to insinuate that his father wasn’t a fit carer nor the looming threat of whatever bloody plot he might have had beginning to blossom in his stupid head. Tom didn’t want him darkening his doorstep-bloody hell, forget his doorstep! He didn’t want the man within a hundred miles of the town!-ever again!

So what if that led to him expressing his emotions through clinging to his father’s legs? It wasn’t infantile! He was very much mature and very much capable of standing on his own even if he had come to depend on the older man to some small-massive-degree. It didn’t make him any less capable or sure of himself and it certainly didn’t make him afraid of Albus Dumbledore.

But for all Tom knew this could be the last time he ever saw his father. If Dumbledore had his way-and he knew his family would never let that happen without one hell of a vicious fight but that didn’t mean they’d win-he’d be ripped from the only real home he’d even known-more so than even Hogwarts had been where he knew love and family and belonging in a way that even finding the Wizarding World and learning he wasn’t a freak-at least not in same way he’d been led to believe-had been able to provide-and dropped right back into that orphanage. Left cold and alone to be torn apart by the other children. Merlin knew that that bint of a matron wouldn’t lift a finger to help him. And the war was still going on. The blackouts. The bombings.

He’d begun to work himself up into a panic and most have made some sort of sound-how mortifying-to give away as much because the next thing Tom knew his father had crouched down to his height and wrapped him in his arms.

“Junior,” the older man said as he buried his face in the side of his neck. The wetness on his lashes flecking his cheeks. Tom wasn’t certain if he was more relieved by the offered comfort or pissed off at himself for crying. “You know I’m not going to let anything happen, don’t you?”

“That won’t stop him from trying something.” He did a good job of preventing that from coming out as a snifflle.

“And if he tries I’ll fight back, love. I may have been raised Muggle and may not have the influence he does but I’m quick on my feet. And more than clever enough to outwit a lion.” He said. “Though the dragon’s foe is usually represented as a tiger I think I’ll do alright in this situation.” His father ruffled his hair and winked. “Everything will be alright.”
“And what if he doesn’t fight fair.” Tom protested, all of the terrible possibilities flooding through his head. Potion spiked water. Laced mail. Bloody hell, even a hand shake! “What if he bewitches you?” He looked away, ashamed of himself to even have to admit this next fear, and spoke in an almost inaudible voice. “What if you don’t want me anymore?”

He didn’t want to be thrown away again. Abandoned, like so much trash on the side of a road.

“Tom.” His father’s voice was gentle but stern. Steely. The dragon was in his eyes. “That bloody bastard can Hex me clear from here to Kingdom Come but I will never stop wanting you. Do you understand me?”

Wide eyed as he wiped at his face with the back of his hand and suddenly feeling very young Tom nodded. That didn’t seem quite good enough of an assurance to the older man that he’d gotten his point across.

“Do you understand me?”

“Yes, father.” He said.

“And you really shouldn’t worry too much.” His ring gleamed vibrant red in the artificial light of the manor’s library. “I’ve written to our friends at Gringotts and have read up on the literature they provided. My Lordship Ring will protect me from everything he could throw at me this side of legal, and a fair bit on the other side as well.” Grey eyes shifted to the door behind him. “It would seem Monai wants a word with you badly enough that she hijacked the dog to do so.”

Riddle manor had become increasingly more tolerant of his two ‘friends’ since his arrival, much to the fright of a number of the servants, to the point that the pair of snakes had all but moved indoors. Still, Tom hadn’t thought he’d ever see the day the green female started using the aging mastiff like a horse.

“You are leaving soon, Speaker?” Monai stretched towards him, then squawked in alarm when Rogan flopped over onto the rug. “Agh! Stupid useless furbeast!” Uncoiling herself from his collar, she slithered the rest of the way across the room towards them.

Unable to stop a smirk from tugging at the corners of his mouth he bent down and allowed her to coil herself around his arm. “Yes, unfortunately. I’ll be leaving in another few minutes.” He said. “How long have you been taking inspiration from father?”

“I needed to get to you quickly so that I could tell you something before you left. The smelly fur beast has legs and can get up the stairs faster than me.” She hissed. “I came across some interesting information while you were away.”

Tom raised an eyebrow. “And that would be?”

“Slytherin’s familiar is still in the school; he left her in the Chamber of Secrets for his Heir to one day find.” She said. “Speak to the serpent in the library; the secret that it holds will point you in the right direction to begin your search.”

Slytherin’s familiar? The Chamber of Secrets? Tom had heard of the Chamber of Secrets before—it was one of Hogwarts’ many legends that he’d read about in passing while engaged in his mad search for answers regarding where he’d come from—but it had been said to contain a ‘monster’ not the Founder’s familiar.

The family pet.
His inheritance.

Well… Tom supposed that it could still be a monster.

Maybe, if he found it, he could set the thing on Abraxas and his ferret brother. Would serve the Malfoy shites right. And maybe afterwards it would be hungry enough that he could feed it his Transfiguration Professor.

Hopefully it wouldn’t lead to the poor beast getting indigestion.

“Interesting.” Tom ran his fingers over her smooth green scales. “I’ll definitely check out this ‘serpent in the library’. The search for the Chamber of Secrets might be just the thing I need to keep my mind occupied when my studies cannot.”

Though he’d still be devoting most of his attention to the effort of taking his rightful place as Slytherin’s undisputed King. And that would all but certainly mean using all resources available.

It seemed like he’d have to stop keeping his roommate so completely at arm’s length. At least until he could come up with a more tenable solution.

“Junior.” He startled slightly when his father’s hand landed on his shoulder, shaking him from his reverie. “That man should be here any minute. It’s best you say goodbye to your grandparents before then.”

“I can find my own way out, Speaker.”

Tom left Monai sitting on the cushion of a leather chair and followed his father out into the hallway.

“You won’t have to worry about dealing with him come future breaks.” Senior assured as they walked towards the den together. “I’ll have the hearth hooked up to the Floo network by then and will see to it that your Transfiguration Professor is locked out so there’s no chance of any unwanted ‘visits’.”

Having the manor hooked up to the Floo network would be amazingly convinent. Though Tom had admittedly never used the Floo before. It couldn’t be that difficult could it? “That will make things easier, I think.”

“I agree.” He pushed open the door, allowing his son through in front of him.

“Tommy, dear! Darling!” His grandmother set her teacup down and hurriedly got up. His grandfather folded the copy of *The Daily Prophet* he’d been annotating and rose as well, all be it in a much calmer and dignified manner. Moments later the youngest Riddle was once more being crushed in a tight hug. “You’re going back to school?”

“Sadly.” He loved the Magical World and knew that his education was paramount for surviving in it but that didn’t make going back to what was basically a hell hole for him-courtesy of Dumbledick and Abraxas Malfoy’s band of marry idiots-any easier. Were it not for his own prideful nature and refusal to be run off ancestral lands he’d have been sorely tempted to ask his father to pull him out and hire tutors.

Senior wouldn’t have asked questions and the Head of Gryffindor would have had kittens.

“You deal with them, Tom.” His grandfather said, squeezing his shoulder firmly.

“I will.” He said. “I’m beginning to come up with a plan that’s sure to work.”
Their conversation was ended by the sound of knocking at the front door. With a grim look exchanged between the three adults, his father followed Tom out the door.

Dumbledore stood in the front doorway, Adele and Philip doing a good job of preventing him from setting even a single foot inside the manor. A low growl from the direction of the library made it clear that Rogan had emerged and was just as displeased by the presence of the other Wizard as he had been the first time he’d ‘visited’. His father, standing at the balustrade with his ring-bearing hand once more hidden behind his back, nodded down at him.

“I’ll see you at Yule, Junior.”

Tom gave the auburn man the silent treatment, refusing to so much as look at him, and bolted from the Head Master’s office the moment that Dippet saw fit to dismiss him. Having already eaten before he’d returned Tom stopped by Slytherin’s Common Room only long enough to drop off his trunk in the dorm-Harry still hadn’t returned and Ryukyu didn’t bother to show herself-before stampeding to the library.

As expected, it was largely empty but for a couple small groups of Ravenclaws and the bushy haired first year Gryffindor he remembered had broken into his compartment on the Express. All of them were far too absorbed in their reading to notice his presence and that was all the better.

He’d neither advertised nor hidden his ability up until that point and wasn’t about to start now but he’d rather avoid having rumors he’d lost the plot start circulating around the school when someone saw him hissing at an inanimate object as Tom had serious doubts that the ‘library’s serpent’ was an actual snake.

It would be either a carving or a statue. On the walls or on the shelves or even on one of the books. And that meant he had a lot of ground to cover.

*If I were Salazar Slytherin and I wanted to put a signal to my Heir somewhere in the library of the school I helped found,* Tom thought as he wandered aimlessly between the shelves, his head on a swivel *where would I leave it?*

He was there for hours, scouring every inch of the wooden shelves, every brick in the walls and every tile on the floor. Then, finally, with only ten minutes left to go before curfew he found it. Carved into the wall of a dark corner near the Restricted Section, almost indecipherable as anything more than your run of the mill age inflicted crack, was the image of a snake.

Allowing himself a moment to revel in the feeling of victory and accomplishment which flooded through him Tom ran his fingers over the little etching. Feeling the grain of the tiny scales rub against his skin. And then he hissed at it to open.

It didn’t split apart and form a gateway or door like the entrance to Diagon Alley did but when he pressed against the wall his hand went through it. The air on the other side was dry and cold. His hand was followed by his arm and then the rest of his body and then he was completely through and standing alone in the dark. It was quiet there, so much so that he could hear his own breathing and the rush of blood in his ears, and smelled of dust and ancient parchment. Pausing a moment longer to insure that wherever it was that he’d ended up he was alone Tom drew his wand.

“Lumos.”
Tom had returned before him, this Harry knew because his trunk was sitting at the end of his bunk, but he wasn’t in their room when the raven arrived back. Exhausted after a full weekend spent with his family he promptly fell into bed and passed out.

Despite how tired he was he didn’t sleep for long. Maybe a few hours at most. But it was past curfew now, he knew that much, and still Tom wasn’t back.

Confused and beginning to become concerned, knowing Abraxas and his pack of thugs could very well have done something to the older boy again, a very bleary Harry retrieved the map he’d been given from his trunk and tapped the old parchment gently with his wand.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

The ink spread into random shapes and then formed words. He didn’t bother to read them and opened the map, hurriedly scanning page after page until he finally settled on the familiar name: Tom Marvolo Riddle Junior.

His roommate was…in a wall.

Bloody hell. He couldn’t just leave him there, no matter how late it was or how unlikely the other boy was to be in the least bit grateful. Never mind the fact that he was only a First Year and had no idea how one went about de-walling another person.

He’d just have to figure something out.

Removing the cloak from where he’d hidden it inside his trunk Harry flung it over his head and shoulders. Once he’d made sure that he was sufficiently covered and with the Marauder’s Map and his wand both in hand, the intrepid raven set off into the dark.
Despite being well aware that he was entirely invisible Harry still kept an eye out for Prefects and Professors that might have been out patrolling in the dark. Could he be seen if he came across one? No. Did the invisibility cloak mean that someone would pass through his body as if he were a ghost? Also no, at least according to his dad, so it was best that he avoided getting discovered via trampling.

Harry didn’t yet know the castle well enough to maneuver in the dark without looking, so he spent the majority of his time switching between squinting through the heavy pall of blackness which hung around him and peering down at the Marauder’s Map to ensure no one was in front of him.

It was so, so incredibly dark. So incredibly silent. The raven struggled to keep his footsteps quiet, edging along the dungeon halls towards the steps leading up onto the first floor. He could hear his breathing and his heart beat pounding over loud in his ears.

Making it to the top of the stairs he paused, leaned forwards and peered down the hallway which had opened up in front of him. Left. Nothing. Right. Nothing. He checked the Marauder’s Map again to ensure he was indeed alone and then struck out towards the library at a clipped pace.

The doors of the library were closed and locked by the time he arrived, but he’d spent enough time around Hermione by now that he’d managed to pick up at least a handful of things. After taking a moment to recall the spell that she’d used while breaking into Tom’s compartment on the Hogwarts Express he tapped the lock with his wand.

“Alohomora.” The faint click of metal in response was all the confirmation he needed to know he’d done it right. Pushing the doors open with just enough where withal to prevent the hinges they were attached to from creaking Harry stepped into the library and allowed them to swing shut behind him.

After ensuring no one with the authority to assign him a detention was lurking amidst the shelves Harry removed the cloak and draped it over his arm. An old lantern sat on a table a handful of feet away, the bronze that it was made from worn in places and tarnished in others. He picked it up and turned the knob; the small flame which sparked to life shed a wide puddle of soft light around him.

Now to locate his roommate and figure out how exactly he was going to go about freeing him. With any luck, Tom would be able to hear him through the rock and could offer some advice on how best to get him out. He was supposed to be smart, even more so than Hermione, so he’d probably know at least something helpful.

Then again, if that were the case, why wouldn’t he have already gotten himself out of the wall? Had they stolen his wand? Maybe he was hurt, or unconscious. Whatever the case was Harry needed to get him out of there and if he had to resort to going to a Professor and revealing his own breach of the rules to do so he would. What did a detention matter if it stopped another person from suffering? His parents would understand.

The flickering glow of the lantern in his hands shed odd shapes across the shelves and caused the shadows between them to twitch like writhing serpents. The gate to the Restricted Section had been left slightly ajar by the last person to use what was inside it; he pushed the curious desire to investigate aside and continued towards the wall where he’d seen his roommate’s name. There’d be plenty of time for him to poke around another night, when he didn’t have such a pressing concern on his mind.
The wall should be just ahead, now.

Harry caught sight of it a moment later; in what would be the darkest corner of the library during the day, just behind the Restricted Section, was a stretch of naked stone. The raven sped his pace to almost a run, raising his lantern a bit higher and preparing to call out to his trapped roommate.

Then he caught something odd against the rock and stopped. Slowing. Tilting his head to the side and peering more closely at the wall. An oddly shaped crack, strangely wavy and rounded in shape. Moving the lantern even closer to the wall, scattering the shadows, Harry discovered that it wasn’t a crack at all.

It was a snake.

A serpent etched in painstaking detail into the stone of the wall, posed into the same stylized S as the silver ones emblazoned on the emerald banners which hung above their House table in the Great Hall. The serpent of Slytherin, of whom Tom-Harry felt all but certain was a distant descendant. Perhaps his roommate hadn’t been interred against his will by Abraxas and his little army of bullies after all. Perhaps he’d ordered the wall to open and had gone on to examine whatever lay on the other side, be it a secret room or a passage of the sort none of the Marauders had any way of accessing or even knowing about in enough of a capacity to be able to add it to the Marauder’s Map. How many were there? Where did they lead to? Why had the ancient Wizard who had helped to found the school make them? What was Tom doing?

All it would take for him to answer at least some of those questions was a single word. ‘Abna’, the word for ‘open’ in the tongue of serpents was all he would have to say and it hung, sharp and potent like beaded venom, on his lips. Bitter on his tongue. Teetering dangerously on the verge of tipping over the edge and voicing the command.

The hiss which escaped instead was not any word at all, but a mere sound of annoyed resignation. Curiosity raged within his chest, eating at the edges of his awareness with acidic fangs, but the little raven knew that he couldn’t give in to the selfish impulse to satisfy it. Tom wasn’t in danger, didn’t need saving from him or anyone else, and wouldn’t appreciate him busting in and forcing his presence into a place which as far as the brunet knew was his and his alone.

Not if he wanted a chance to really get to know the other boy. To convince Tom to accept him as a friend. To let him in.

The raven made a sound in the back of his throat which bore a remarkable similarity to a frustrated cat and dropped the lantern onto the shelf beside him. The clatter of tarnished metal rang through the empty library and dissipated into the muffling of dust and darkness. The light, wan and oddly orange in tinge, juttered like a distressed insect before settling back into a steady circle. Like a giant copper coin. He needed something else to occupy his attention before the temptation of the wall’s secret became too much and he gave in despite the knowledge it would damn any chance he had with Tom.

Harry spread the Marauder’s Map across his lap, green eyes scanning the display it had to offer. Entertainment. That was what he needed. A Prefect was milling about on the fourth floor. Uninteresting. Peeves was lurking atop the Astronomy Tower. Bad idea. Dumbledore’s label pacing back and forth across the stretch of his office.

The Head of Gryffindor hadn’t been acting right, in his mind, for months. Had a strange fixation with making the little boy who had already suffered so much endure even more torment. And something about seeing those tiny footprints of black ink bounce from one side of his office to the other made the near invisible hairs along his arms and the back of his neck to stand on end.
The act of valiantly defending his soon to be friend—and they would be friends eventually, Hecate
help him, if it was the last bloody thing he did—was just the distraction Harry needed. Turning off the
lantern and pulling the invisibility cloak back over his head and shoulders he set a course for the
Transfiguration Professor’s office.

He was a cat. No, he was a serpent. A black snake with green eyes and a mission, silent and deadly
as he crept through the darkness of the castle’s hallways. Just another shadow in the night. No one
would see him. No one would hear him. And whatever it was that he somehow knew the older
Wizard was up to, he wouldn’t let him get away with it.

The door to his office was shut firmly but the dim light of the fire burning in the hearth bled from
beneath it. Periodically flickering as he passed between the door and the source of the glow like the
moon during an eclipse. He was talking, Harry realized, though whether it was to himself or Fawkes
the little raven couldn’t tell. Not without opening that door and giving himself away.

“Riddle!” The man growled, spitting the name like a curse. “Tom Edward Riddle! But how? What
Merope did to the man should have broken him! His mind should be shattered! He should hate the
product of his rape, not want to raise the boy! And he shouldn’t be like that!”

Rape? ‘That’? What did Dumbledore mean, exactly, by ‘that’? And Tom Edward Riddle? Harry had
thought Tom’s middle name was Marvolo. Was the Professor talking about his father? The man he’d
first seen tumble from the Knight Bus steps onto Charring Cross Road, his body curled around his
son; a cage of muscle and bone meant to protect him from the force of the fall.

“I will not stand for my plans being ruined! Will not be bested by a Muggle! The bow has to go Dark
or things can never be changed for the better and if I have to sacrifice the entire Riddle family I will!
Three Muggle aristocrats and a half-blood brat shattered for the Greater Good; small price to pay.”
The phoenix sitting on its perch made an exasperated whistle. “The boy must go back to the
orphanage or everything is ruined; he can’t know love or it won’t work. It may be best to make that
matron harder on him just for good measure, and perhaps an enchantment to remind Riddle of
precisely how his son came about wouldn’t go amiss. To…dissuade him from putting up any sort of
fight when I put before the Ministry the concerning precedent set by allowing a Muggle, who knows
nothing of our world or how it works, to serve as the Magical Guardian of a Wizarding child.”
Fawkes ruffled his feathers and clicked his beak. “Not right away, but soon.”

It was bad enough that Dumbledore facilitated the other boy’s mistreatment by his peers by looking
the other way whenever it happened and attempted to dissuade any efforts at offering friendship
being made but to plan to separate the son from a father who so clearly loved him, ruin both father
and son by using magic for something as wicked as making Riddle Senior hate Tom, all for the sake
of returning him to an orphanage where from the sound of it he’d been mistreated? For what? And
what did he mean by ‘the boy has to go Dark’? Did he want to foster another Grindlewald? Start
another war with another Dark Lord? Why?

That question, Harry supposed, didn’t need to be answered. Any justification the man might be able
to provide wouldn’t matter. Whatever ‘Greater Good’ Dumbledore sought to advance, achieving it
through such means was unconscionable and Harry wouldn’t allow it to happen unopposed. He was
only a first year, Tom only a second year, and if his parents even considered believing him they’d
need proof before they’d act and that would take too much time. There wasn’t much in his power.

But maybe, if he got a warning to Tom’s father in time, that wouldn’t matter.

Need for silence almost forgotten Harry bolted back through the halls. Racing towards the library.
No longer a serpent but a deer. Prongslet. Fleet hooves were what he needed to make it back to the
library in a swift enough time but an adder’s tongue was most important. He shouted at the wall to
open. The brick made no effort to jump aside but he tumbled through it anyway, careening into a
table with the shriek of wood against stone and burying himself beneath an avalanche of musty
books. Tom, awoken by the noise, leapt up spitting in alarm. Blue eyes, reduced to inky pinpoints,
fell on him.

you…what have you-?”

“That’s not important!” Harry leapt back to his feet and almost slipped on one of the fallen books.

“I think, Potter, that I should be-!”

“Shut up and listen to me, Riddle!” He’d end up regretting talking to him like that quite soon, he felt
sure, but that wasn’t of any consequence at the moment. “I overheard Dumbledore in his office! He’s
planning to do something to your father and get you sent back to the orphanage! We have to warn
him!”

A beat of silence passed before Tom lunged across the table, snatching at a parchment and almost
toppling the inkwell sitting nearby. His cobalt eyes caught Harry’s gaze again, sharp and cold but
with a thorn of fear buried deep in the centers. “Talk!”

Harry didn’t need encouragement. The words spilled free of him in a rush like the torrent of a river
and he was surprised that the other could make sense of it at all yet, somehow, the quill kept pace
with him. Words forming across the page in a neat but hasty hand.

Tom attempted to bolt out through the wall once he was finished but Harry grabbed his wrist. Hastily
tossing the cloak over both of them he towed the brunet along the hall and into a hidden passage
which led to the top of the owlry.

“Where’s your owl?” the brunet demanded, trying to hide the fact his hands were shaking. “I sent
mine with a letter earlier to let him know I got back safely.”

“Hedwig!” Harry’s green eyes bounced desperately about the eaves, thick with owls, in an effort to
locate his familiar but it turned out he didn’t have to. The beautiful white owl fluttered down to land
on his shoulder and nipped at his ear. “I’m sorry to ask this of you so late but Tom needs to send a
letter to his father. It’s an emergency.”

Hedwig ruffled her feathers and hooted, glaring at the older boy but allowing him to tie the letter to
her leg. The smaller raven rushed over to the window and stuck his arm out, feeling the owl’s weight
lift off of him and into the air. He didn’t get the chance to watch her fly away into the night.

Tom’s hand came down on the back of his neck and spun him around, pinning him against the stone
wall of the owlry. The point of his bone-white wand dug into the skin under his chin.

“Talk or I’ll make you sing, Potter!” He snarled. “How do you speak Parseltongue? Why didn’t you
have the decency to say anything before? And what have you overheard?”

“I was born with it; I don’t know how. As far as any of us are aware no one in our family tree has
ever had the ability, but the Potter line has relation to the Blacks and the Peverills so maybe it came
from one of them?” The pressure on the wand was painful, the point coming dangerously close to
breaking the skin. He didn’t want Tom to Hex him so he scrambled to tell him everything he could,
tripping over his words as a result. “People are afraid of Parseltongue; they think it’s a sign of Dark
Magic. My parents didn’t want me to suffer with that label so…they told me not to tell anyone.”
“A fellow Parselmouth wouldn’t have been prejudiced against you for that.” Tom rasped. “So why didn’t you tell me?”

Feeling his face start to burn, Harry stared at the taller boy with large emerald eyes.

“Potter, why does your face look like the bloody Gryffindor banner?”

“I…I…I…” he could have cooked an egg on his face. “I didn’t want to say anything because you almost only ever talk to your snakes and not to me and I was worried that, if you knew I could understand, you’d stop. I wasn’t eavesdropping on you, I never actually paid attention to what you were saying. I just…”

“You just?”

“…I like your voice.” He was scarlet to his ears.

Tom blinked and then lowered his wand, stepping back. “What are those?” he motioned to the map and the cloak as he put his wand away. “And where did you get them?”

“My dad gave them to me; he made the Marauder’s Map with my Godfather and some of his friends while they were in school and the invisibility cloak is a family heirloom. They used them to get up to a lot of trouble during their schooldays.” He said. “They called themselves the Marauders: Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs. I’m Prongslet and…well, I’m expected to start a new generation of Marauders so maybe…if you’d like to join…?”

“I have better things to do than run around the castle with you at night.” Tom snorted and turned away, starting towards the owlry doors. He paused at the last moment on the lip of the first stair. Harry watched him as he stood stalk still for a long moment, the moonlight spilling down from overhead drenching his hair in silver, and then he spoke. “Harrison,” reluctance almost dripped from his voice, “thanks.” He vanished down the stairs.

Alone in the owlry, Harry smiled.
When the white owl he didn’t recognize landed in front of him at the dining table with all the grace of a noble woman the Monday following Samhain Tom couldn’t help but be concerned. The beautiful snowy fixed him in a haughty amber gaze, stuck her leg out towards him and, after he’d removed the letter she carried, absconded with his bacon. The handwriting was immediately recognizable as belonging to his son but clearly penned with a shaking hand; concern flooding through him Tom ripped open the envelope so quickly that he almost tore the letter inside and hastily unfolded it.

“Darling,” both of his parents’ eyes were resting on him in concern, “what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, mother.” More shaky handwriting marred with so many ink splatters it was almost illegible. His son had obviously not waited even a moment to give the ink the chance to dry. And that meant whatever he’d written had to be urgent. “It’s from Junior.”

Grey eyes scanned the entirety of the letter. Once. Twice. Growling when he failed both times to make out what the near unintelligible scrawl was attempting to convey. He could only make out a few words and broken phrases. ‘Harrison’s owl’. ‘He overheard and warned me’. ‘Reminder’. ‘Custody’. ‘Plot’. And ‘Dumbledore’.

Everything clicked.

The letter erupted in dark red flames as every piece of glassware in the room exploded, peppering their surroundings with shards of crystal and china. The back of Tom’s chair hit the dining room floor with a sound like a gunshot as its occupant leapt to his feet, almost upsetting the entire table for good measure, and started to pace. Back and forth. Back and forth. Fists clenching and finger nails biting deep enough into the flesh of his palms to draw blood.

It felt like he was on fire. His blood was boiling. Skin hot and tight. Something desperate and animal inside him roared at the insult that the older man had dared to commit. The slight against him and his family that was even considering an attempt to mess with his clutch! Clutch? Son! He needed to keep his head on straight and not get swept away by whatever bestial thing had exploded awake inside him with enough force to move mountains. He’d be lost for certain if he didn’t. Would give in to the urge to rush to the castle and tear it down brick by brick until his nails were broken and his fingers bloody and he’d gotten to the man that would dare to threaten Junior. Would rip off his head. Break his body. Burn him into ashes.

If he was tossed into Azkaban for murder what would Junior do? He’d have his grandparents of course but it would still hurt him. But it was hard to fight against it. Impossible to reign himself in. He’d never, even once in his life, been anything close to this angry before.

He could finally feel his magic, boiling up from the same monstrous place as the fury and certain to cut itself off again the moment that his mood cooled. It whipped around him like coronal wind. Crackled over his skin like a pyroclastic flow roaring down the sides of a volcano. Intoxicating. Easy to sink into despite the blistering heat.

No! Focus! Don’t lose yourself to this because it isn’t going to fix anything! All it will do is make you lose him forever!

“Tom!” His father’s voice; it sounded like he’d been yelling his name for a while now. He hadn’t been able to hear over the thunderous rush of his blood in his ears. Tom jumped and looked up,
freezing in place mid-stride. “What’s wrong, Tom. What was that letter?”

“From Junior.” His voice didn’t sound right. Raspier. Sharp. If it unnerved his parents they did a good job of not showing it. The energy which had broken loose inside him boiled over again. Filled him from head to toe. Uncontainable. Steam. Magma. He resumed pacing with a low hiss of rage. “A warning. It was his roommate’s owl, leant to him because he’d already sent his along with a letter to let me know he’d gotten back safely. Harrison overheard Dumbledore talking to himself; he wants to turn Junior into some sort of monster! Wants to file a custody dispute on account of a ‘Muggle’ being unfit as a Magical Guardian and plans to have him sent back to that awful orphanage!” Another snarl broke through before he managed to voice the final bit of information. “And the worst part of it all is that that bloody bastard has every intent of using some sort of Hex of Compulsion to ‘remind me’ of just what circumstances led to Junior being born so that I wouldn’t make an effort at putting up a fight! Never mind that the Lordship Ring would have protected me, the fact that he’d even consider such a thing is inexcusable!”

“Is Tommy alright?”

“Shaken, but fine. Dumbledore wouldn’t dare to lift a finger to do anything to him while we’re standing in the way.” The speed of his pacing had increased. The room seemed to blur around him. Sweat from a combination of heat and exertion pasted his fringe to his brow. “This can’t stand. Something must be done. Within the next few days but preferably immediately. I don’t have the time to search for a mind healer abroad and sit through months of treatment. I have to reveal myself as the Lefay Lord now. And see about protections. Setting them up around the manor to make sure absolutely nothing underhanded can be done! Yes. That’s exactly what I’ll do.”

“Tom,” his father’s tone carried a clear warning “you’re not in any shape to be going anywhere. Not in this state. You look near deranged.”

“Deranged? He threatened my son!”

“Tom-!”

“There isn’t time for waiting!” He was out the door of the dining room a moment later, across the hall and pounding down the stairs. Eyes set on the door. He’d only paused long enough to grab the focus from the study and jam it into place on his finger, necessary as it was to summon the hellish bus which was his only option if he wanted to make it to the Ministry of Magic in a timely enough manner to spare his sanity. He didn’t need Wizarding attire. Didn’t have the time to change. A button up and slacks was what they’d get and have to deal with because he had more important matters to concern himself with at just that moment than formal decency thank you very much!

Reaching the fifth stair, he flung himself down the remainder of the staircase and lunged for the door. Snape had been just seconds shy of knocking when the front door of the manor was wrenched open with so much force that the hinges almost bent and he only narrowly managed to avoid being trampled by the figure that stampeded through it like a raging Colchis Bull. Even still he couldn’t evade the impact and had to dig his feet in against the old wooden planks of the manor’s porch to prevent himself from toppling, and ended up forcing the perpetrator to a stop as well.

Riddle, looking feral enough to rival a werewolf on a full moon and with his face set into an expression which could only be described as homicidal, snarled at him. Full out bared his teeth and
growled like an animal. Snape noticed with a shock of surprise that the man’s grey eyes were slit pupiled and boiled with the sort of rage which could only belong to something very dangerous and very threatened. The front of his expensive button down was drenched in sweat, the heat of his skin through the damp fabric almost enough to raise blisters on his hands, and when he spoke he didn’t sound like himself at all.

“Get out of my way!”

He’d come to deal with a man with potion damage, not whatever this was, but despite feeling as if he were attempting to fend off a raging Horntail with nothing but his bare hands Snape knew he couldn’t in good conscious allow Riddle to go tearing off to wherever he was headed and burn down a village because that was honestly what he looked about ready to do at that moment.

Riddle wasn’t that much taller than him but was considerably better built thanks to the laborious nature of his chosen hobby, and the rage behind him made the man almost as strong as an Abraxxian but somehow the raven managed to summon up the strength to push him back against the manor door which had banged shut in his wake. His back hit the wood with enough force to make it shudder on its frame and Tom snarled again but Snape acted faster. Summoning a Calming Draft from his potion’s kit he pounced, forcing the brunet’s chin up and his head back against the door before pouring the contents down his throat. Clenching his jaw shut and pinching his nose until his efforts to spit on instinct faltered and he swallowed.

When he released him, the taller man sagged down the door until he was sitting on the porch staring, dazed, up at him as his pupils slowly expanded back to their normal rounded state.

“You didn’t say anything about being a bloody Creature, Riddle!”

“Severus?” the raven almost felt sorry for how entirely off kilter the other man sounded. “What are you doing here?”

“I reconsidered your offer to hire me for the treatment you needed done, but be aware I’m neither a licensed mind healer nor cheap.”

“Name your price, I told you that last time. Money isn’t an issue.” After three attempts he managed to get to his feet but almost toppled over when he attempted to walk, catching himself against the nearby banister. “Any price.”

“And you need to be honest with me; no more withholding information. What sort of Creature are you?”

“Not a Creature.” He huffed, hobbling along the banister towards the porch stairs. “My ancestor just had a bender with Dragon’s blood. We can set an appointment by owl later; I need to get to the Ministry-.”

Snape grabbed the other man by the shoulder, easily able to restrain him now that whatever had caused his outburst had passed, taking with it most of his strength. “You’re in no state to be going anywhere. You can barely stand.”

He rounded on him then, almost pitching backwards onto the lawn, but through some miracle managed to stay upright. “Albus Dumbledore is trying to steal my son!”

What? Was this some product of exhaustion? Or maybe of the damage that the exposure to Amortentia had done to him? Was it real? If so, why? “You’re not in any state for this, Riddle.” He said it more firmly now; would get to the bottom of matters later. “Looking like you do now and
barely able to stand, all rushing to the Ministry will do is play into his hands. What you need to do is clean up and rest. I’ll be back in the evening to evaluate whether or not you’re well enough to undergo the treatment. If you are, we’ll go through the first round and then I’ll take you to the Ministry.”

“You’re going to help me?” Damn it all, did Riddle have to go and make puppy dog eyes? Did he even realize he was doing it?

“That’s what I said.” Snape drawled, averting his gaze to better ensure he remained unaffected.

“And there’ll be an added cost to that, I’d assume?”

“No,” the raven said with a sigh, still focused on the door over Tom’s left shoulder. “We’ll just consider it included.”

Because Lily would almost certainly have killed him otherwise.
The approach of twilight had stained the sky behind Riddle Manor a pale lilac color, the setting sun gilding the wispy clouds in gold. The building cut enough of a grand shape by day, but with the approach of night it managed even more so. The softness of the dying light lent it a timeless aspect which, though difficult to put his finger on, was nevertheless undeniably there. Distantly, Snape could hear the faint nickering of horses and smell sweet hay intermixed with late season flowers and evening dew echoing up with the wind from the stable at the bottom of the hill. The tails of his black robe fluttered around his feet as he mounted the wooden stairs of the porch and knocked on the door.

It was answered by the blonde servant who Severus vaguely recalled being named Adele. “Hello, Mr. Snape,” she said with the stiff sort of politeness which seemed to be typical of both the upper class and those who worked directly with them. At least the Riddle family’s hired help didn’t speak with the typical register of House Elves. Suddenly, assailed by the horrifying image of human-sized House Elves, the wizard had to restrain a grimace and a shudder. “You’re here to see Master Riddle?”

“I am,” he said, stepping past her into the house at the gestured invitation. The woman closed the door behind him, shutting out the chilling wind. “When I last saw him earlier this morning, I told him to rest. Has he done so?”

Adele nodded in response to his question, the motion carrying through most of her body and transforming into a stilted sort of half-bow. “Master Riddle was quite drained after his fit this morning and couldn’t make it up the stairs on his own. It’s rare that he allows me to lend him aid—skittish of women as he’s been left by past ordeals. I took him to his room; he’s been asleep for most of the day.”

That information wasn’t anything that came as a surprise: accidental magic on the scale which the man had exhibited wasn’t exactly the sort of thing which people their age could bounce back from like rubber. Hell, he doubted even someone with the boundless energy of a young child would have been able to recover.

And now he was envisioning a child sized Tom Riddle who somehow still managed to speak and act like an adult. Bloody hell, where had his typical mental control gone? And why did it have to pick up and leave now, when he needed it more than usual?

What had Lily said about Riddle’s son looking like him in miniature? Hopefully the real thing, when he inevitably ran into him, wouldn’t be anything like the image he’d managed to conjure.

“That’s unsurprising,” he said, “A fairly typical reaction to what’s happened.” Not that he could in any way consider what had happened to be ‘typical’. Sure even adults could lose control of their magic during periods of high emotion such as stress, especially so if they were untrained like Tom was, but the whole ‘dragon’s blood’ business, well…”not normal” would be putting it rather mildly indeed.
He was a Potion’s Master. Dragon’s blood was something which he worked with on a regular enough basis to know what it was, what its uses were, and wonder why the bleeding hell anyone—no matter how mad or desperate they might have been—would have thought putting such a substance into their mouths was a good idea; never mind swallowing enough of it to accumulate enough magic in their tissues to be able to pass it down through generations.

Why was it that he was always the one that found himself stumbling into such things?

“Master Riddle’s parents will be relieved to hear that; they’ve been quite worried since it happened,” she said, “Not only for Master Riddle but for Young Master Riddle as well. Their grandson had sent a letter from his boarding school, Hogwarts, I believe it was.”

“Hogwarts, yes. The greatest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world,” he said, somewhat proudly, “I went there myself.”

“Master Riddle nearly went mad looking for him, and finally managed to bring the Young Master home last summer. He’s a cynical and guarded boy, though sweet once you’ve won his trust, but doing so is hard going. I think he was abused, at that orphanage he came from,” Adele informed him, beginning to walk once more towards the sitting room Snape remembered from the last time he’d been in the manor. “I don’t know much about the matter, but from what I understand there’s a Professor at that school that wants to send the Young Master back. No one here wants that.”

She pushed the door to the sitting room open, stepping aside to allow him in.

“The Riddles aren’t the nicest people, and can be very difficult to deal with, but having a child in the house again has softened them a great deal. Please do what you can to help him.” That having been said, Adele turned back into the hallway. “I’ll retrieve Master Riddle and have him come down to speak with you. Please wait a few moments.”

She was gone before he could open his mouth to say anything. With nothing left to do but wait, Snape made his way over to the nearest piece of furniture, trying not to think of how Tom had lain across the very same couch which now stood kitty corner to him with so much effortless grace.

He was spared from dwelling on the matter further by the arrival of the man himself, though whether Riddle’s actual presence was more distracting or less so he couldn’t quite tell. Tom was still wearing the same clothing which he’d seen him in earlier, though they were now in a notable state of disarray, and the starched collar of his button up was crushed—looking a lot like crumpled paper. His chestnut curls were sticking up in all directions, looking more like a Fwooper’s nest than the well-tended crown he normally sported. His lower eyelids were slightly swollen from lingering exhaustion and his grey eyes were slightly glazed with the lack of focus which accompanied those who had come only recently awake.

“Severus.” Tom sounded tired too, his smile the sheepish one of someone who knew they could no longer avoid discussing something deeply uncomfortable to them. He looked less like a dragon and more like a deer in that moment: skittish and on high alert for signs of danger, ready to bolt at a moment’s notice as he picked his way across the room. He perched on the edge of the couch, spine taught as a drawn bow.

“Mr. Riddle?”

The brunet started slightly, his entire body cringing, and blinked at him. “I apologize, I…it’s difficult, Severus,” he said, “You told me earlier that you would need to know everything in order to help me. But…it’s difficult. Thinking about it. I wouldn’t change any of it since that would mean losing my son too, but…” a rictus, pained smile pulled at pale lips. “But you’re not here to listen to me bang on
about sentimental things.”

For the first time, the gravity of what the man in front of him must have gone through fully impressed itself upon Snape. “You don’t need to go into detail, Mr. Riddle,” he said, “But I need to understand what you’ve gone through if I’m going to stand a chance at fixing it.” The Potion’s Master was very much aware he didn’t exactly do ‘supportive’ very well, but the attempt he’d made seemed just enough to do the trick. Tom relaxed, though only by a small margin. His hands, clasped in his lap, were shaking.

“Merope gave me the love potion because she rightfully expected there’d be no other chance she’d ever make me fall for her. She took me away to London where we married and…” the admission of the act caught in his throat, as grey eyes looked away. “I don’t know how many times it took before I became a father. And I almost wish it had been force which she’d used instead of that damned potion. At least then I could have fought back. At least then…the knowledge I’d been enslaved made it worse somehow. It took me three years to be comfortable enough around my own mother that her being in the same room as I was didn’t send me into convulsions. I can still barely stand Adele. And in the outside world the gynophobia is crippling! I wish that I could give Junior a mother but that’s not even more foremost concern; Dumbledore has shown himself possessed of the desire to challenge my fitness as a parent and I fear my mental state won’t do me any favors.” Tom set his jaw. “I can’t lose my son. Not when I’ve only just gotten him back.”

Severus couldn’t help but fear the day the man’s son was taken if it ever did come to pass. He doubted that the resultant death toll would be anything short of biblical. “I’m never going to be able to relieve you of the gynophobia though with time it should lessen,” he said, “Amortentia damage will not be something which I can repair overnight, but the simple fact that you’re receiving aid will be enough of a defense on that front. I don’t think you have very much to worry about.”

Tom nodded, jaw still set and keeping his stormy eyes on the opposite wall.

“All that having been said, Mr. Riddle,” Snape said as he drew his wand from his sleeve, “I need to examine you. Use of the Mind Arts in treatments can be strenuous on the body of the patient receiving it. Your health needs to be able to withstand it.”

“And what does that entail? Breathing; heart rate; blood pressure; typical doctor’s visit type of deal?” In response to the other man’s affirmative nod, Tom unbuttoned his shirt so quickly that Severus could have been forgiven for mistaking the action as wandless magic, and flopped back onto the couch. He did an admirable job of pretending to be relaxed, but the tension in his limbs didn’t escape the raven. “If we’re really going to be heading to the Ministry this evening we’d best start as soon as possible.”

“Quite,” he said, doing his best not to give in to the sudden urge to stare as Tom draped his rumpled shirt carelessly over the arm of the couch. Tom Riddle half naked was a ruddy nightmare for his concentration and that fact alone struck the Potion’s Master as entirely bewildering. Highly annoyed as he was by the matter, Snape would have had to admit that he now understood what the Ravenclaw had meant when he’d insisted he was able to appreciate the beauty of another man in an entirely non-homosexual way if asked. Of course, that didn’t make him any more pleased to be in the situation. “Sit up, please.”

The Potion’s Master was very careful to strike a balance between being properly thorough and getting the matter over with as quickly as possible. Once finished, he informed the other man that he could now return himself to order and read over the narrow sheet which had sprung from the tip of his wand.

Beyond notations of a few past concussions and broken bones, no doubt all somehow related to his
hobby of working with one ton animals prone to being spooked with a fair amount of ease, the only notable problem listed was the damage he was there to fix. Snape dismissed the scroll and looked up, only to find grey eyes watching him attentively.

“What’s the verdict then?”

“Barring unforeseen circumstances there should be no reason as to why we’ll be unable to press forward with your treatment,” he said, “You’ve been keeping up with your dosage?”

“Of the Lyre Draft?” Tom questioned tilting his head to the side. “Once daily, as prescribed.”

“Have you taken it today?”

“This morning with breakfast, though I only barely managed to finish it before the post arrived,” he said, “We can continue?”

The Potion’s Master nodded. “If you would lie down and close your eyes, Mr. Riddle?”

“I thought I’d already told you not to call me ‘Mr. Riddle’; Mr. Riddle is my bloody father.” Tom huffed as he repositioned himself enough to comfortably lie down on the couch. The piece of furniture was a bit too small, and his feet stuck off the end.

Snape ignored his last comment, pointing his wand at the man’s forehead the moment he’d closed his eyes. “Legilimens.”

The room around him blurred and he was sucked forwards into the brunet’s surface memories. Flickers of images and emotions flooded passed at a mind numbing speed. Nothing more than flashes of color and sensation which scattered about like shards of stained glass. Snape disregarded all of them and, after a moment’s struggle, dove deeper into territory with which he was not in any way familiar. Though it was possible for him to use his ability in the Mind Arts to do what Tom had conscripted him for, he’d never done it before until now. All he’d ever used his abilities for was to know what those around him who could possibly be a threat to him were thinking.

The images slowed, thinned out and finally stopped—leaving him sinking further into darkness. Down towards the distant spark of light which lay ahead of him, orange in color and looking as if it lay at the bottom of a well. It seemed to take a small eternity to reach it, but when he finally did, the Potion’s Master found himself immediately blinded by the change in light. Once his eyes adjusted, he looked around.

The sky was orange and clouded with smoke. He was standing in the middle of what may once have been a horse paddock, but looked to have recently gone through a violent volcanic eruption. What little remained of the grass was grey with a thick coating of ash. A flow of cooling lava had devoured the majority of the field and curled atop it glaring at him with small coal-bright eyes perched atop a jagged muzzle full of teeth was…

Snape jerked back and almost fell, reaching on impulse for the wand which was no longer on him. Hissing loudly and flailing against the still molten ground, the dragon made a failed attempt to raise its head. Its scales were such a dark red that they looked almost black gleaming in the orange light. Realizing it couldn’t so much as lift its head, the beast coughed sparks from its smashed maw, catching some of the nearest blades of grass on fire, and stilled; its eyes never leaving him. Reassured that the thing couldn’t do much to harm him as long as he kept a good distance from its front end, Snape edged around the side of the creature and froze.

Along the left flank of the creature was a deep gash, jagged and painful and weeping blood in places.
The dragon hissed again, its body shuddering, and it made a second effort to shuffle about and keep him in sight. He hadn’t expected that the term ‘mental wound’ would turn out to be quite so literal. This would take quite a while to heal.

…Bloody hell that was an understatement! At least now he knew what he was dealing with.

It was only with great hesitance that he drew any closer to the beast than he already was, painfully aware of the rumbling growl the dragon was emitting, and of the heat of the barely hardened rock beneath his feet. When he rested his hand on the dragon’s side, the creature heaved. The torn muscle beneath the broken scales spasmed and the beast whined as it somehow found the strength to leap to its feet and snap at him, nearly goring him on the broken point of its right horn.

It collapsed almost instantly into an undignified heap, but still managed to send him a mutinous glare.

“Not today then, I suppose.” He had no training regarding how to deal with massive XXXXXX ranked creatures, but he was not about to allow himself to be bested by an overgrown lizard with a bad attitude. Almost as if it were able to sense what he was thinking the dragon made a rude noise and coughed more sparks in his direction. “You haven’t won, beast.”

Its response was another rude noise.

How did one go about gracefully extracting themselves from an encounter with an inflated reptile in which they hadn’t come out the victor, despite possessing a proportionately larger and more complicated brain? He wasn’t quite sure but at least the only one around to view his attempt with the overly smug beast.

Tom looked somewhat dazed when he opened his eyes again, stretching with the sharp popping sound of stiff joints. “I’d say that took about an hour,” he said, “Now that you know what you’re up against what do you think?”

“Your circumstances are…markedly unusual.” That was certainly one way to describe it. “I’ll need to do some additional reading before our next appointment in order to figure out how best to assist you with the matter at hand,” Snape said, “For now, you ought to concern yourself with getting ready to leave, Mr. Riddle. Once you’re done, meet me on the porch outside; I’ll take you to the Ministry.”
Once again, thanks to my beta Heckin_heck for looking over this chapter

Tom reappeared at last atop the manor’s grand staircase, dressed in fine muggle clothing worn under a dragon skin robe that brought out the color of his already striking eyes. The cut of the fabric was more than flattering, clinging to his figure in all the right places, and rippled imperiously behind him as he descended the stairs. From his walnut crown to the Lordship ring on his hand to the custom boots on his feet he looked, in every aspect necessary, like a proper Pureblood Lord.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting, Severus,” he said as he reached the bottom of the staircase with the dull thump of shod feet against carpet. “With everything that has happened since this morning the matter, I’m at loath to admit, had slipped my mind until only a few minutes ago. I became so embroiled in getting up in arms with the effort to protect Junior that I failed to write him back in an appropriately timely manner. With no real idea of how long it may take us to resolve things at the Ministry, I thought it was best that I took the time to pen a brief response to my son before we left. To stop him from worrying if nothing else.”

“It’s understandable,” Snape replied as the brunet closed the last few feet of distance between them. “You’re ready to leave?”

“I am,” he said, “Though if you could first explain to me what it is that we’ll be doing, precisely, so that I know to act accordingly when we arrive?”

“I’m going to take you to London through a method of magical transport known as Apparition—expect to find the experience uncomfortable. We’ll enter through the visitor’s entrance and once in the atrium will have to check in at the security desk where they’ll measure your…wand?”

Tom offered a seemingly self-conscious smile. “My magic and yours aren’t the same. It’s weaker, in many ways. Diffused, as I understand it, throughout my entire body rather than being concentrated in a solid core. I’m left unable to properly operate a wand.” Remembering the incident which had occurred with the bedside lamp when Junior had been showing him his wand, Tom shook his head. “Perhaps that’s for the best, all things considered.” When he held up his hand, the jointed claw gleamed in the foyer’s artificial light. “I’ll just have to present this and explain myself; I suspect I’ll be doing quite a lot of that tonight.”

There was little doubt of that considering what they were going to the Ministry to do. Lords didn’t suddenly reappear after centuries and register with the Wizengamot without notice. Especially not when the Lord in question was the head of a line like Lefay. “After we’ve been let through the security desk we’ll want to head to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement on Level 2 so that you can register yourself with the Wizengamot.”

“I should suspect a hullabaloo?”

“To put things mildly.” When the other man smiled the corners of his eyes creased. Snape promptly averted his gaze to the far wall behind Tom. “If you’re prepared to set out?”
Tom nodded and reached around him to open the front door. “Oh yes. No point in delaying any further; I’m in a proper state now and have my emotions properly under control, so you’ve no need to be concerned I’ll hurt anyone even if we do run into Dumbledore.” With the way his voice chilled Snape doubted that was true. He followed the other outside and down the steps of the porch. Once on they were on the grass, Tom turned back to him. “Shall we?”

The sooner the matter could be done and over with the better; a sentiment which seemed to be shared between them. Snape held out his arm. “Hold onto me; do not lose your grip.” The last thing he needed was to spend all night searching for the aristocrat after he’d ended up Merlin only knew where—potentially splinched.

Tom offered another too attractive smile as he stepped forward and wrapped warm hands around the raven’s forearm. He smelled like sweet hay, clean air and fire. “Tight enough?”

Snape twisted on the spot, and their surroundings vanished in a blur of color. The familiar sensation of apparition closed in around them, and a moment later he was treated to the sight of Riddle, looking quite shocked and rather green, careening into the side of the cherry red phone booth they’d appeared beside. His back and shoulders made contact with a clang of metal and glass.

“Bloody hell!” He cursed hoarsely, reaching up to push stray strands of dark hair out of his face. “I never thought I’d say this in a million years, but I prefer the Knight Bus!”

Snape allowed himself a brief snort of amusement before he opened the door of the phone booth and stepped inside. “Come on.”

“Have a call to make? You’d have been welcome to use the phone back at the manor.”

“Riddle, this is the visitor’s entrance.”

“A phone booth?” He’d been to St. Mungo’s so the concept of the entrance to a magical building being hidden behind the veneer of something basic, muggle and usually rundown wasn’t new to him. But at least with Purge and Dowse Ltd the means of entry, once one got over the shock of having to address a mannequin as if it were a secretary behind a receiving desk, had made sense. “The guest entrance to the headquarters of Britain’s magical government is a phone booth?”

Rather than answer, Snape seized the aristocrat by the front of his shirt and hauled him inside. “New to this world or not, acting like a child will not give the impression you’re hoping for. And it won’t be of any help against Dumbledore.”

“No need to act like I need time to ‘sober up’.” Even with a feral edge his grin still managed to look warm, and if anything that made it all the more terrifying. “Growing up in high society gives you the ability to switch your face as easily as putting on a mask—pulling on whatever best suits your ends in that moment. Having been a Slytherin, I’m sure you’ve some experience with the same?”

Snape grunted, much to the others amusement, and dialed 6244 into the keypad.

“‘Magic’.” Tom muttered from behind him, mirth coloring his voice. “Original. I bet this was the work of Gryffindors.”

As much trouble as he was, maybe the man wasn’t all bad.

No sooner had the automated voice coolly informed them “Welcome to the Ministry of Magic, please state your name and business”, did he hear a thump from just behind him, causing the booth to shake, followed by a brief period of desperate scrabbling at the now stuck door. When he turned to investigate the source of the noise he found Tom wedged into the far corner, wide eyed and looking
on the verge of passing out from fear. A moment of confusion was swiftly followed by a quiet curse: for a man suffering from severe gynophobia having an invisible woman suddenly start talking to you while you were trapped in a phone booth was probably the equivalent of a waking nightmare.

And they used the same recording in the lifts as well. Which, at this time of day, were likely to be crowded. …It was a good thing he always had his potion kit on him because Riddle was going to need a Calming Draught.

Pulling the appropriate bottle free and uncorking it Snape held it out to the quivering brunet with a sigh. “It’s a recording. Drink this and pull yourself together; I’ll put a Silencing Charm around you while I finish phoning us in.”

It seemed to take the other man a moment to process what he’d said, but once he had he reached out a shaking hand to take the bottle and knocked the contents back in one. After silencing the area around him Snape turned back to the phone.

“Severus Snape, Potion’s Master. Here to escort Tom Riddle who is here to register his status with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement’s Wizengamot Administrative Services.”

“Thank you,” the recording said, “Visitors, please take the badges and attach them to the front of your robes.”

With a loud clatter, the coin slot of the phone was filled with a pair of square silver badges. Snape picked both up and handed the one marked ‘Tom Riddle, Administrative Registration’ over to the other man. Although he was still a bit pale in the face, Tom had managed to pull himself together admirably well and fastened it to the lapels of his robes.

“Visitors to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the atrium.”

The floor beneath them shuddered and a moment later the phone booth began to sink below the ground. Soon enough, they’d been swallowed up in darkness.

“Riddle,” Snape said over the rattle of the moving booth after he’d removed the Silencing Charm. The other turned his head to look at him, eyes stained black by the shadows. “The Ministry’s lifts use the same recording as the visitor’s entrance and at this time of day are quite crowded. You need to remain calm; attempt to keep in mind that your phobia is by definition an irrational fear. No one in the Ministry of Magic is going to harm you.”

“I know it’s an irrational fear, Severus.” Tom’s voice was almost drowned out by the clattering booth; a chink of light appeared and began slowly climbing up their bodies. “But that doesn’t make it any less crippling.”

“The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant day.”

Tom sent the phone a final nervous glance before following Snape out of the booth and into the Ministry itself.

He’d seen Diagon Alley with its quirky shapes and bright colors, Gringotts with its marble and precious metals, the Goblin City with its towering spires encrusted in precious gems, and St. Mungo’s with its bizarre array of illnesses and maladies—but the atrium of the Ministry was truly something else. The floor was made up of dark polished wood and the domed ceiling was stained midnight blue, adorned with countless ever moving golden symbols. The walls to either side were paneled in the same wood as the floors and inset with gilded fireplaces: short queues of witches and
wizards had formed in front of some of them, waiting to use the Floo network to depart. In the center of the hall, towering high above the surging crowds of workers and visitors, was a golden statue. Tallest of all the cast figures was a wizard holding his wand straight in the air, and grouped around him, with the last three staring up adoringly, were a witch, a centaur, a house elf and a goblin.

A beautiful lie. He glared at the fountain as they passed it. Tom had read enough to know the truth about interspecies relations within the Wizarding world: non-humans were looked down on and their lot got worse with every year. Coins of all colors glittered in the water at the fountain’s foot.

“The Fountain of Magical Brethren.” Snape explained when he saw him looking. “The proceeds are all donated to St. Mungo’s.”

A set of golden gates at the hall’s far end concealed multiple lifts, all of which seemed to be running at their maximum capacity. The pair squeezed between workers holding towers of parchment and beaten boxes and headed for a desk marked ‘security’

It was immediately clear from the tone of voice with which the man in peacock blue robes who sat behind the desk spoke that he was of the belief he wasn’t paid enough to do his job. The visit took much longer than it should have on account of an increasingly more annoyed Tom having to explain precisely what a focus was approaching on five times. Once it was all over and they finally made it into the lifts, the brunet was too peeved to be anything more than vaguely skittish of the half-awake witch who’d been stuffed in along with them.

“Level 2, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters and Wizengamot Administration Services.”

The corridor into which they stepped was lined in doors. Windows were embedded every ten or so feet along the walls, spilling puddles of sunlight onto the floor while being utterly heedless both of the fact that it was currently night and that they were underground. Determining he was better off not questioning the matter, Tom didn’t mention it and followed his dour escort to the proper door.

The office of the Wizengamot Administrative Services looked so much like that of a typical muggle registrar that the effect was almost jarring. A frazzled looking man with his arms full of books and files appeared from behind one of the shelves forming the small library records which made up the back half of the room. He approached the desk which separated them.

“Welcome of the office of the Wizengamot Administrative Services. As the filing branch of both the Wizengamot and the DMLE at large we handle most things pertaining to legal registration and officiated documents.” The load in his arms hit the top of the desk with a thud and wheezed a small puff of dust. “What can I help you with tonight, gentlemen?”

Without prompting Tom stepped forward, shifting his expression into a business-like façade with such speed and smoothness that he had the Potion’s Master behind him rather reluctantly impressed. “Good evening. I’d hope to delay doing this a bit longer so that certain health issues could be better put to order but external forces have forced my hand. I’m here to register my status within the Wizengamot’s House of Lords.”

Though worn down from too much work a glimmer of interest flashed in the other’s brown eyes. He straightened up. “This doesn’t happen often but it’s not entirely unheard of either. There’s a procedure for it, at least.” A wave of his wand called over a small stack of papers which settled on the desk in front of them; from beneath the desk he produced a small box. “Sign, please.”

Opening the box revealed a sleek black quill without an inkwell anywhere to be found; his suspicions as to what it might have been were confirmed when it wrote in red ink and caused a sharp
burning sensation to flare against the back of his hand. Wincing and with the skin of the affected area red and tender by the time he was through Tom set the Blood Quill back in its box and pushed the stack of papers across the desk.

“Alright,” the wizard said, picking up the stack and rifling through them. “Now we have to just–” at that point he caught sight of the name he’d signed with and dropped the box with the quill into it back onto the desk. Pale in the face and with fearful eyes he opened his mouth to speak but failed to. When he tried again he managed to choke out “I-I’m going to need to s-see your Lordship ring.”

Flashing a smile which was really more of a smirk, Tom held up his hand, the white-gold dragon standing out in stark relief. “If that’s all?”

The man behind the desk looked on the brink of losing his feet. “A blood test will be necessary to verify–”

“Already done at Gringotts; it was filed months ago. Now that you’ve a reason to think to look I’m certain you’ll have no trouble finding it?”

“None, Sir. I’m sure I w-won’t. Your registration should be completed by the end of the week; an owl will be sent with confirmation. You’ll be able to join the Wizengamot when they begin their next session this coming year, Lord Riddle-Lefay.”

Tom nodded and stepped away from the desk. “Thank you.” He said. “I’ll be awaiting that owl eagerly.” As he exited the room again he couldn’t help but notice the large beetle crawling around on the room’s ceiling if only for the blinding green color of its shell. “We should stop by the Head of the DMLE’s office as well; if Dumbledore really is going to attempt to go through with filing a complaint about the precedent of a ‘muggle’ being the Magical Guardian of a wizarding child they’ll be in the best position to immediately shut him down.”

“Madam Bones?”

Snape watched Tom’s expression contort into a brief grimace before he sighed and said, “I can handle it, provided I’m not left alone and she remains on the other side of the room from me.” The Potion’s Master had to resist the urge to roll his eyes. “But first I have a question for you, Severus. I intend to send my son’s Transfiguration Professor a sternly worded letter in the morning post tomorrow—precisely how does one go about the creation of a Howler?”

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